

# Story: Nurturing Reflection

Suzanne Newton

I write novels for young people.

Naturally, it makes me feel rather sad when teachers and librarians report that students today do not naturally gravitate toward fiction when choosing what they will read. My sadness does not stem so much from the notion that my book may not be read, however, as from my knowledge of what these students—and the adults they will become—are missing in terms of a resource for discovering meaning and purpose for their lives.

The now defunct newsweekly *The National Observer* featured an article some years ago on aging. The question the writer posed was, what are the prospects for our senior citizens to grow old with grace and dignity? The outlook, medically and economically, was optimistic. But, said the writer, where we have failed our senior citizens in this country is in not preparing them philosophically to accommodate to the notion of loss. We simply are not contemplative people. We put a great deal of stock in a person's ability to get and to spend, but very little on his/her ability to accommodate to a happy life.

It takes time and practice to become a reflective person. It is, in fact, the work of a lifetime, and must be an activity that is valued by the significant people in one's life. For the child, this is usually the parent or teacher. Too often, though, these adults are the very ones who unintentionally discourage children from "growing in wisdom" because they were not taught to value that part of themselves by the significant adults in their lives.

The question is, how do we break the cycle of indifference to reflection? It is my belief that one of the best ways to nurture reflectiveness in children is by providing continuous, intentional exposure to stories from an early age. I would suggest, too, that adults who did not learn to love books and reading when they were children are not necessarily beyond redemption. There is a way to draw them into story even now. If adults come to value stories for the pleasure and wisdom they afford, then there is greater hope that the children with whom they live and work will also love stories and will grow up to be contemplative people.

Roald Dahl, who has written many best-selling books for children, has this to say:

Childhood is the time when good habits are acquired and bad ones too. If a person can learn to love books during childhood, then that habit will probably endure through the rest of life and will give immeasurable pleasure and solace. The adult non-reader of novels is at a massive disadvantage, and many other conditions that we must all suffer sooner or later are made infinitely more bearable when the victim is an educated reader.<sup>1</sup>

Ask a child of four or five whether he or she wants to learn to read, and why, and you will probably get a shrug, a shy smile, and the soft words: "'cause I like stories!" as if that were the most obvious answer in the world.

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The whole purpose of education ought to be to help an individual live in the world *with meaning*. It isn't so much what a person knows, but how he/she uses what he/she knows in dealing with other humans, in understanding what he/she can do and why, in seeing himself/herself as one part of the story of humankind. What do we do to help people make sense of the myriad facts and experiences that bombard them every day of their lives? The key to that sort of education is in the child's words: "... I like stories!"

Bruno Bettelheim, in the introduction to *The Uses of Enchantment*, speaks of having discovered that when children were young it was literature that best conveyed and transmitted those things which teach a child that life is meaningful.

For a story to enrich a child's life it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect; and clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him.<sup>2</sup>

Bettelheim does not discount the need for a story first of all to arouse a child's curiosity and entertain him/her. That is, after all, the story's great power.

Everyone loves a story. It is most likely through story that we were first attracted to the printed word, even though first stories may have been told rather than read. The magnet that drew us was the words "Once upon a time ..." or their equivalent, and what kept us to the end was "... and then ...". At some level of our being we knew that every story had something to do with us, and that if we stayed with it, it would somehow reveal to us the unfolding mystery of ourselves.

A story is not just a series of incidents strung together (although beginning writers often seem to have that notion). Life, which the story imitates, is like that—full of seemingly unrelated events and circumstances that go nowhere and mean nothing.

Maybe.

The think is, we humans can hardly bear for it to mean Nothing, which is probably why story was invented. The difference between an incident and a story about it is the question What Does it Mean? And particularly, what does it signify for *me*, the listener or reader? Each of us is the lead character in a life story of our own telling. We look for mirrors of ourselves in other stories read, heard, or observed because we expect those stories to shed some light on the question.

Admittedly, those of us who write fiction for young people are story-biased because we write for an audience which loves stories unabashedly and, in fact, puts it before all other considerations. By contrast the trend in serious adult literature has been away from the story. As significant literature has abandoned the straightforward story, it has left what I shall call the "formula genre" to do the job—gothics, historical romances, westerns, science fiction, mysteries, and

detective tales. Adults who might want stories and significance are left with slim pickings. It appears that in our day children's literature may become the last stronghold of the art of storytelling.<sup>3</sup>

I think perhaps many adults have discounted "Children's Literature" as too facile, too enjoyable, and unlikely to deal with meaningful themes. Therefore it must be somehow frivolous and superficial, not worth the time it takes to read it—except, of course, for children. I would like to suggest that this is not a second-rate body of literature written for lesser people. There is a great deal for all of us to learn—and relearn—from children's books. It is possible to enable both children and adults, through the use of contemporary children's books and the more familiar traditional stories, to become wiser, more reflective persons.

A recurring theme to be found in children's books, for example, is the struggle between Light and Dark, Good and Evil. The books that deal with this theme are amazingly popular. Among the most often read authors are C. S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Susan Cooper, Lloyd Alexander, and Madeleine L'Engle.

Susan Cooper has written a series of five books called *The Dark Is Rising*, one of which—*The Grey King*—won the Newbery Medal.

Which is more powerful, Light or Dark? It is life's deepest question. At the root of the question is the fear that perhaps neither is more powerful—that ultimately it is a standoff, and that Fate may put you in a time or place when one or the other of these powers is on the ascendant. In Cooper's books the quest of the three children and their strange Great Uncle Merriman is to keep the Dark from rising. Only the Old Ones, who are of the Light, are able to call up the forces that push back the Dark. But the Dark is always there, no matter how far to the edge of the universe it may be pushed. It will not go away.

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That is a good thing for children and adults alike to know, and it is what these books teach. The readers, who are now mostly children but who will someday be adults, have the option to choose to be on the side of Light rather than on the side of Dark.

The last of the books, *Silver On the Tree*, tells about the Lost King, a Maker who crafted beautiful things for the Light. But when he had created the magnificent sword Eirias, he became fearful that his talent was all gone, or that the sword was less than what he had hoped it to be, and so he isolated himself from all memory and all association with his people to live in fear and pain. Cooper here is describing the terrible anxiety that rises with the urge to create—the anxiety that drives one to postpone, to fritter, not to attempt at all. It is, as she says, one of the weapons of the Dark. This book tells its readers that our creative powers are what keep the Dark from rising. It is the bit of the Creator that holds back the Dark for as long as one single mind is free, working, wondering, questing.

One of the major contributions that children's books make to their audience, then, is to remind them that although we live against a dark backdrop, there are Light Bearers in the world, and that they themselves can be Light

Bearers—those who bring laughter and enlightenment, share burdens, lift loads, fight evil, value the good, and struggle to hold onto their “differentness” and honor it in others.

“There is nothing new under the sun,” says the writer of Ecclesiastes, and certainly where the human story is concerned that is true. There is no situation or problem involving people that has not been told or written in a story somewhere, sometime. One of the chief advantages, then, of using story is to keep us from having to re-invent the wheel. We can use the stories of others to help us in our own problem-solving. Fiction, fables, parables, movies, drama, folktales, myths, legends—all of these are chronicles of persons thinking and acting their way through life situations, making decisions, and living with the consequences of those decisions. We have the advantage, through story, of living other lives, and of participating in their decision-making process. We are able to accept or reject particular solutions for our own life situations without having to go through the battering trial-and-error experience. In any case, no matter what our choices, we are armed with the wisdom of other lives.

I believe that story-consciousness helps to develop a person’s imagination, so that he/she can make most efficient use of past experiences—their own and others—to understand the present and to direct the future. People whose imagination is poorly developed have short memories and little foresight. They continue to repeat their mistakes, and are constantly surprised and disillusioned when they come up at the same dead end again and again.

A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end—a frame or limit that enables us to look it over. Within that frame the problem or situation becomes manageable, somewhat like putting a piece of embroidery in a hoop. An effective antidote to despair is the certainty that problems do have endings, and that they are more effectively dealt with when one has them in clear focus. This is an especially important aspect of story for children. Their problem-solving ability can be enhanced if they are given stories that involve life-situations typical of the ones they have to deal with, whether those stories be part of the Hobans’ “Frances” series or Grimm’s Fairy Tales (yes, children do live among giants whose behavior is often inconsistent, and whose ways are inscrutable).

Every person’s life is a story. Each person’s life is part of a larger story as well—a cultural story, for instance, which takes into account ancestry, place of birth, values of family and community, religion, and numerous other factors. Besides that, each life is also part of a universal story. In thousands of years human beings have changed very little in their reactions and responses to particular situations. They relate to each other in pretty much the same ways, too. There is a kind of comfort in knowing that although you are unique, you are not unlike all the other people who have ever lived, and that many of the problems you face are the same problems all people have coped with since the beginning. Thus story-consciousness provides a much needed objectivity that keeps a person from feeling unduly sorry for himself/herself, or from thinking that life hasn’t been fair, or that no one else has ever experienced worse troubles since time began.

An objective view is not a detached view. To be detached is to be separated, aloof, disconnected, perhaps indifferent. The objective person remains involved, yet has an over-the-long-haul view that makes allowances for



good and bad times and doesn't waste precious energy on bitterness. A sense of humor is a sign of a healthy objectivity, and I find that the humor in children's literature is very sophisticated in that sense. It isn't harsh, cynical, or cruel. It often contains gentle satire or spoof; it may tease, but it doesn't condemn. What is wonderful about the humor in children's stories is the delight of recognition. Always the reader is laughing *with* the characters, not *at* them—a compatriot and not an alien.

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Living vicariously through story can help us understand what it is like to walk in another's moccasins, even someone who we think is very different from ourselves. Being confined to the body we happen to be born with can have the effect of narrowing our perspective if we are not careful. It can also make us fearful of all those who are not "like us." In handling relationships with skill and understanding the chiefest of gifts is the ability to intuit where the other person is. Empathy comes with our willingness to risk recognizing ourselves in another, and recognizing them in us. Experiencing the stories of others is a way of becoming a bigger person, more sensitive and less easily threatened by differentness.

With all of the obvious pleasures and advantages of story-reading, one would think it would be a favorite national pastime, but such is not the case. There are plenty of people who can read, but who don't like to. What it boils down to, I think, is that reading has never been particularly pleasurable for them. Somewhere in the beginning, someone failed to show them the Fun of it all, and Fun is the first requirement children place upon any activity they willingly choose to engage in. It has been my observation that those who do love to read participate in the story actively. They become as immersed in it as they do in jumprope or playing house, or in a hard game of basketball. They literally become the people they are reading about for the duration of the story. This very involvement is the Fun of it all, and it is this total identification with the characters and situations that makes it possible for people to use story lives to obtain some perspective on their "real" lives.

The inability to read well or critically is a common problem, and those who teach literature in high school and college are often frustrated in their attempts to help students find meanings and insights in great literary works. Perhaps it is a case of expecting someone to run before he/she has learned to crawl. I would suggest that what may be needed in the college or high school curriculum is a prerequisite in children's literature: not a traditional Kiddie Lit course that surveys the field of children's books, but a seminar that guides students in reflective thinking, using as a medium significant contemporary and traditional stories for young people. The straightforwardness and accessibility of these stories would make it possible for individuals to enter an experience and then draw back to think about its meaning for them in a way that other types of literature may not allow. It may also be a way to return reading to the list of enjoyable activities.

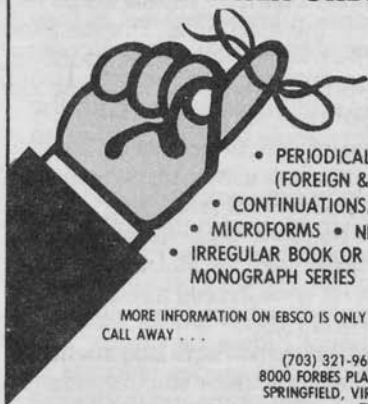
I would like to suggest that perhaps adults who did not learn to love books when they were children are not necessarily beyond redemption—there is a way to draw them into the pleasure of story even now. And if the adults of our society come to value stories for the pleasure and wisdom they afford, then there is greater hope that children of succeeding generations will also love stories and grow up to be contemplative people.

*Suzanne Newton is an award winning novelist who lives in Raleigh*

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Roald Dahl, "Writing Children's Books," *The Writer* (Aug. 1976): pp. 18-19.
2. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Knopf, 1977): p. 5.
3. Jane Yolen, "Storytelling: The Oldest and Newest Art," *The Writer* (Dec. 1978): pp. 13-15.

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