

Once Upon A Time.....Storytelling for the very young.

I'll never forget Mem Fox telling 'The Little Match Girl' to a group of librarians and teachers in Darwin early on in my storytelling career. I remember the tears in my eyes, the sadness, and the lump in my throat; she had us all there, eating out of the palm of her hand. Not a loud theatrical Mem but rather a quiet reflective Mem in keeping with the emotions of the story. What power, what a storyteller!

But more than that, there was one thing in particular that has always stayed with me. Mem has a tremendous appreciation and passion for stories, language and literacy. Telling stories, she explained is like the pouring forth of precious jewels, each delicious word to be savoured, to be handed to children with love, respect, passion and reverence.

Fifteen years on, with countless pre school storytimes under my belt I too have a passionate belief in the importance of developing in children a love of language and literature. I still thrill to the eager up-turned faces that look at me adoringly. I always know when I've told stories to a child, even if I don't remember their face. They look at me like we are old friends, like we've shared adventures together.

But of all the age groups, preschoolers are probably the trickiest, the most intense, the most constant. There is no chance to relax into a long story. Preschool sessions necessarily move along at a fast pace, moving from rhyme to story to song. Preschoolers have no qualms about showing you their cut finger in the middle of the story, or telling you their cat's name or what they had for breakfast. It's hard work

However, telling preschoolers stories and creating a love for the magic and music of words is probably one of our most important jobs.

Fifteen years on, I have learnt many tricks and developed a quiet confidence in my abilities and the stories I have chosen to work with. This article purports to share some of these with you.

Nothing can beat experience when it comes to the art of storytelling but some guidelines to start you on the path.

I have always found it easier to work with themes with pre-school storytimes, be it as simple as food, the wind, animals or bathtime, it helps me to focus the session and find material from the excellent plethora of stories, songs and rhymes available. The trick is to work up a package that incorporates a range of material.

Let me give you some examples.

Ann Pellowski in her excellent book *The Story Vine* has a simple version of How the Years were named for the Animals. A beautiful old Chinese story that starts with the Buddha sitting under his sacred Bodhi Tree

Let's take this as a starting point for exploring Pre-School Storytelling I saw Pellowski tell this story using twelve tiny animal figurines. At the time I couldn't find any myself so I cut out and pasted the animals in the story on to black cardboard. They were big and bold and young children quickly got the idea to name the animals with me as the story progressed.

First year, the rat, second year the ox, third the tiger, fourth the rabbit, fifth the dragon and so on.

Let's start with the year of the rat. First some nursery rhymes, 'Hickory Dickory Dock, the mouse ran up the clock.' Okay everyone arms up nice and straight so we can watch your little mice run up them. With these developing listeners it is a good idea to involve them with action rhymes, get them to join in in a focused way. In my time in libraries Elisabeth Matterson's *This Little Puffin* was always in my reference collection, it was a well-organised great source for nursery rhymes and appropriate actions.

With this early age group I invariably use lots of props. 'I've brought some visitors to meet you today, they're very small and very shy and frightened of cats. Can you guess what they are?' 'Out of my pocket I produce two little mice, (available from pet shops as toys for cats). 'These are my friends Tom Thumb and Hunka Munka, they want to do a little poem with you. Now because you haven't got any mice, maybe you'd like to pretend with me. Put your hand out flat and pretend it's a nest and use your pointer and middle finger of the other hand as mice.' Now: Two little mice sat down to spin Pussy passed by, and popped his head in What are you doing my little men? We're weaving coats for gentlemen. Can I come in and bight off the thread? No, no Pussy, You'd bight off our heads.

I'll then repeat this through the session. This poem then naturally leads to a longer story, *Two Bad Little Mice* by Beatrix Potter.

All of this takes about twenty minutes, quite long enough for beginning listeners. If your pre-schoolers are well trained and it's later in the year you could extend it by searching for related stories. Working in a library I was always on the lookout for new material but if you don't try looking for a reference book titled 'Subject Access to Picture Books,' this could save you hours of perusing the shelves.

Let's pick some more animals from our Chinese Years, say the Rooster and the Dragon, my Chinese animal and my daughters respectively. I love telling this story and children seem to really concentrate on it. The Rooster and the Heavenly Dragon, can be found in a Multicultural collection by Margaret Read MacDonald.

'Once, the rooster had beautiful golden horns on the top of his head. And so it goes....

In my hometown of Daylesford, in country Victoria I earn my bread and butter money at a shop called 'Dragons and Dreaming.' Three metres of scaly red dragon wrap itself around the wall protecting a small cave where I tell stories. Naturally I've got a lot of Dragon Lore. You must hunt out Jack Prelutsky's book of dragon poems *The Dragons are Singing Tonight*, the title poem is sensational, I love sharing beautiful rhythmic poetry like this. Would you believe I've even adapted P.D. Eastman's classic *Are you my Mother*, to 'Are yee me kinfolk.' I gathered all the props from my children's toys together with a handsome green Sri Lankian Dragon puppet I had. It's like this: Mother dragon goes off to look for food. While she's gone her baby in its egg is washed down into a deep dark lake. Claws start scratching and the baby dragon emerges to look for his mother. He finds out he's not a fish that has scales like him and he's not a reptile with claws like his, not a bird that can fly or a fire that burns. He wanders back to his nest and his mother finds him. How deliciously satisfying for a child, to be back home with his mother who loves him. I've even got a version featuring Dinosaurs!

Year of the snake leads me to several other favourite books, poems and stories. Once again I recommend Ann Pelowski's *The Story Vine*, this time for its string tricks. I had the great fortune to meet Ann and collected a few of her stories and tricks. I have employed poetic license and changed her snake into Goriella the Rainbow serpent; I also do the mosquito trick.

While on an aboriginal theme, I have also adapted an action rhyme Pellowski illustrates in her book. My niece Esther was called Muk Muk by the aboriginal people of central Australia, where she was born because of her big round eyes like an owl. The actions are in the book but this is how I tell it, once children have guessed that Muk Muk is an aboriginal word for Owl.

Muk Muk sat in the branch of a tree,  
As quiet as quiet can be. It was night  
And her eyes were open like this  
She looked all around Not a thing did she see  
Two mice started creeping up the trunk  
of the tree And they stopped below the branch  
To see what they could see  
The solemn old owl said "Twooit Twoooh  
Up jumped the mice and down they flew.

I always have great fun with another aboriginal story that of Tiddalik the giant frog that drinks up all of the water. I have a big green balloon that I blow up as Tiddalick drinks up all the water and gets fatter and fatter and bigger and bigger. I love children's nervous trepidation, will it or won't it burst?

I tell the version from the ABC book *Favourite Playschool Stories* or maybe it's in the collection *More Favourite Playschool Stories*, whatever, I recommend you get them both. Likewise the *Playschool Useful Book* is a must for those interested in developing pre-school themes.

A list could go on and on about the stories, poems and rhymes that have become like old friends but I should conclude with some practical aspects of Pre-school storytelling.

Interruptions; I'm afraid these will always happen no matter how experienced you are or how well you know your stories. Don't let it phase you! Don't ignore the child or they'll keep badgering but a firm 'you can tell me after the story' will help. We are training these young people in their listening skills so we need to be pro-active. A couple of favourite lines that always work for me are:

'You know how I can tell children are ready for a story?, there sitting up nice and straight and looking at me.' "Oh dear, I can't go on, somebody's talking and that will spoil the story for everyone else," then you eyeball the yapper.

The stories you choose will stay in your repertoire for a long time so make sure they are stories you love. To hark back to Mem, you need to be passionate about your choices.

Keep your storytime moving along, include a range of material and vary the length of pieces you present. Children learning language love repetition so make sure you include old favourites Like the *Gingerbread Boy*, or the *Hobyahs*, invite the children to join in this structured way. Beware of opened-ended questions with the very young, their minds could be wandering anywhere and you may not get the response you had hoped for.

Finally to finish a quote from another favourite storyteller of mine, Patricia Scott from Tasmania (who has won the Dromkeen medal for her contribution to children's literature) 'Like your story, know your story. Relax and enjoy the telling.'