

## Reviews

text it would need to be complemented with material that provides an evolutionary and contextual perspective, and with literature that examines recent developments in moral development research.

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ANNE M. TROUSDALE, SUE A WOESTHOFF, MARNI SCHWARTZ  
(EDITORS). *Give a Listen: Stories of storytelling in school*.  
*Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English (1994)*.  
*136 pp. \$12.95. ISBN 0-8141-1846-1.*

Preaching to the converted, I thought. Don't teachers already know about storytelling? I reluctantly began to read the collection of seventeen articles that make up this book.

In the first section, "In the Beginning: How storytellers get started," Smith tells how she uses storytelling to lead into daunting literary works. Using storytelling, literature becomes more accessible and humane – and the tellers derive such satisfaction from the telling.

Durand explains how she uses storytelling on class walks – students telling their own stories or continuing where another teller leaves off. In the classroom, art and puppets help fine-tune their imaginations, and students realize the impact they can have on an audience.

Mallan's classes discuss the story after the telling – how they feel, parts they enjoyed. She says successful stories raise questions, observations, and hypotheses which make the students more confident as storytellers and in themselves.

A cooperative venture where students participate in the story, is how Trousdale sees storytelling. Students are often asked to join the chorus or supply conversation. They examine each story for unpredictability, and try to understand it from the inside out. Again, the gain in self-confidence is mentioned.

Schwartz describes the use of the learning log in storytelling. After a story is told, students list key events, characters, landmarks, sensory details. By reading and choosing folk tales to tell, they feel more secure because this is a "safe place."

Family tales (verbal relaxation and narrative art) is Yukish's topic. This storytelling is fundamental and vital, children joining in with their own tales at an early age. It achieves a level of intimacy and interaction beyond that of reading aloud, giving experience with language, plus causing wonder and happiness.

The second section is "Making Connections: Discovering the power of storytelling in the classroom." Merrill advocates the use of storytelling in ESL classes, where immigrants have such rich histories, are in familiar territory with their own stories, and learn English from telling about their past experiences.

Kane uses storytelling in her freshman composition classes, emphasizing Gypsy Rose Lee's works, "Wow 'em in the beginning and leave 'em wanting more." Kane says we all have stories to tell, and must learn to adapt them to different audiences. She shares her life in stories for them, and expects them to do the same with her.

Andrew is the subject of Connelly's article – quiet, shy, illegible writer, social loner, "at risk." In a storytelling club, he finally tells a tall tale to the group. After this initial success (running parallel to a lackluster academic and social life) he tells more and more stories, which leads to a starring role in the school's talent show.

Lieberman approaches storytelling as a means to improving a “flat” written story. By telling the story orally, the writer can be asked by other students to supply more information or to clarify confusing points. This is a familiar setting, the writer does not feel uncomfortable, and in talking about his work, can greatly improve his next draft.

A research project is the topic of Romano’s article. The students are asked to research an era and to write a short fiction incorporating the facts. One student writes of Ellis Island in 1914 when her grandfather emigrated to America. Romano is quite moved by the results of this endeavour, calling it a “fictional dream.”

Lipke is full of praise for storytelling. It entertains, builds a community of sharing, builds self-esteem, gives new skills and enhances old ones, and helps understanding of oneself and others and their values and beliefs. It imprints it affects memory as no other kind of teaching does. It enhances listening and speaking skills, verbal development and self-confidence.

The third section, “Coming Together: Building a community of listeners and learners,” begins with Vilen’s telling of his students’ search for heroes in ordinary lives. Students interview relatives, read diaries and letters, and trace the traditional twelve-step path. By studying myths, they learn how to make their own myths about real people.

The dynamics of storytelling is the interest of Hamilton. He stresses the importance of good beginnings – how a few words can set a mood or theme, noting predictions – when they are correct or not, noting how experiences are based on prior experience. His students “listen to how they listen,” note how they read and what they bring to the text. Besides building a sense of community, it is also the basis of conversation about literature.

Conroy says that “it isn’t so much what you say as how you say it,” stressing that expression and inflections bring literature to life. He encourages creative writing – modern fairy tales, new points of view, and tall tales.

Sunstein talks about telling stories to her students, which she says defines, confirms, and evaluates the social construction of reality. Students enter a folk culture, deep in the tradition of their elders.

Murphy’s tale of Edmund, in a youth protection centre, is an article that lingers in my mind. A very quiet but obviously respected boy sits in her

storytelling class for days until finally speaking up – to tell the story of Rap, a drug dealer who accidentally causes the death of a little girl and then shoots and kills her brother. It is after this telling that other inmates cry, “Word up, Man,” meaning they agree with the speaker or his telling. And then a boy tells Murphy that the teller’s story is about Edmund himself. The reactions and actions of Murphy grip us in its telling – the true test of a well-told story.

Lately I have remembered summer evenings on the wide porch of my aunt’s boarding house, where as a child I sat spellbound while guests recited poetry and told stories in the dark. I remember from university days the hush as Robert Frost spoke to us in his crackly voice. I remember, a few years ago, Jackie Burroughs telling the story of Jane Bowles from Jane’s diary. Again, we were mesmerized. Recently I heard a storyteller telling the tale of a Quebecoise born in the 1880s, who fought for rights in the English workplace. But when an English Protestant proposed marriage, she refused, not daring to oppose her parents’ wishes. In spite of that, they shared their great love until he died in his seventies. Years later, she said, “I knew where he was every hour of the day.”

The storyteller’s story may soon be forgotten or may be remembered for years. Some of the stories in this book will not soon be forgotten. I am amazed at the many facets of storytelling which have been revealed by the enthusiastic teachers/authors of this book. It is to the credit of them and their editors that *Give a Listen* serves to stir our imagination, memories, and creative thinking. To them I say, “Word up, Man!”

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