

Over the wall ...

Alan Maley has us all sitting comfortably.

Humans are storytelling animals. Without our stories we are nothing. The whole texture of personality is woven with stories – stories we hear, stories we tell others about ourselves, stories we tell ourselves about who we are. Eavesdrop on any conversation and you will surely hear the exchange of personal narratives interspersed with anecdotes, jokes and reports of other people's stories. So in this article I have chosen some of the many books growing out of the rich loam of stories – each with a slightly different take on the subject.

World Tales

Idries Shah's *World Tales* is a fabulous collection of folk stories from all over the world. Shah was struck by the fact that the same basic story can be found in cultures which are geographically widely separated, and by the way the same stories go underground, only to emerge again later in slightly different clothing in another part of the world. As he states in the introduction to the book: 'There is an almost uncanny persistence and durability in the tale which cannot be accounted for in the present state of knowledge.' In this collection there are versions of 67 stories. Each has a brief introductory section, indicating where other versions are to be

found. For example, *The Three Caskets* (which crops up in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*) is found in the *Gesta Romanum*, the 13th-century collection of stories drawing on biblical, talmudic, koranic, Persian, Buddhist and many other earlier sources. The collection also includes versions of *Cinderella* (345 versions identified to date), *Puss in Boots*, *The Emperor's New Clothes*, *Dick Whittington's Cat* and many others which may be less familiar.

story the giant does not know. The result is an interlocking texture of stories from many of the world's traditions, including the Panchatantra, the Djuha/Nasruddin stories, the Brothers Grimm, Aesop and many more. As we would expect from such an accomplished poet, Patten retells the stories through the mouths of his young dreamers with lyrical verve, and adds his own touches and twists to familiar tales. The night comes to an end and the children return to their waking

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The Story Giant

In *The Story Giant*, poet Brian Patten tells the story of a giant who knows all the stories ever told, except one. He is desperate to find this story to prevent himself from dying and his castle from falling into ruins. He magics four children from different parts of the world and different backgrounds into a shared dream in his castle. Together, they begin to tell stories in an effort to find the one

lives. The story which the giant did not know has not been found and the giant dies. It is only the following night, when the children dream themselves together again, that they realise that they are themselves the story the giant did not know – the story is how they came together to try to save him. And as they tell each other this story, the giant and his castle are resurrected. The giant's earlier words come true: 'The light of imagination transcends decay.' A lovely book, for children of all ages.

Too Good to be True: Urban Legends

Jan Brunvand's collection of urban myths is entertaining enough in itself. In recent years there has been quite a vogue for urban myths – unlikely stories passed on from a friend of a friend of a friend ('No, really. It really happened.'). What is still more interesting about this collection of over 200 modern-day myths is that they, too, like Shah's stories, crop up in different versions all over the place. The urban legends collected here have been grouped into 23 loosely thematic sections. For example, *Jumping to Conclusions* (*The fart in the dark*, *The solid cement Cadillac*, etc) and *Creepy Contaminations* (*The mouse in the coke*, *Alligators in the sewers*, etc). For each legend there is reference to the background and sources, insofar as they are known, and a few variants. Many of them will be familiar, but all are interesting as examples of the phenomenon of the cultural diaspora of narratives.

The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories

As its title suggests, this book is an exploration of the common features of all stories. Christopher Booker argues that any story will deploy one or more of seven templates and that there are no others available. The seven basic plots are as follows:

- **The Quest:** The hero goes in search of something and meets difficulties along the way. Example: *The Lord of the Rings*
- **Voyage and Return:** The hero embarks on a journey to another world and returns successfully. Example: *Alice in Wonderland*
- **Rebirth:** The hero is under a spell which has to be broken, usually by an act of selfless love. Examples: *Beauty and the Beast*, *A Christmas Carol*, *Sleeping Beauty*
- **Comedy:** Characters are in a state of confusion which is played out to a resolution. Examples: *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- **Tragedy:** The hero unwittingly makes a decision or carries out an action which brings about his own downfall. Examples: *Oedipus the King*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*

- **Overcoming the Monster:** The hero must overcome an evil creature. Examples: *Dracula*, *Jaws*
- **Rags to Riches:** The poor hero becomes rich and successful. Example: *Great Expectations*, *Cinderella*

In Part One, there is a remarkably detailed discussion of hundreds of storylines. It also includes the analysis of stories into the elements that make them up, carrying on work done earlier by the Russian structuralist, Propp (1968). Part Two looks at the convention of the happy ending and the subconscious needs which it serves. In Part Three, Booker looks at the way the universal plots have been subverted in the last 200 years by the emergence of the novel and the development of psychological theories. The final part looks in depth at why we tell stories and how they minister to a basic human need. This is a truly masterly treatment of story, with an astounding range of material analysed in a readable way.

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On Stories

Richard Kearney's *On Stories* is a more demanding, intellectual account of story and its key role in human consciousness. In Part 1, *Where do stories come from?* he introduces the idea that story and history are two sides of the same coin. To some extent stories embody reality, and history is a kind of fictional account of the past. This is a theme which runs through the book. So in Part 2, *Three Case Histories*, he examines Joyce's Stephen Daedalus, the case of Freud's Dora and the case of Schindler. All three bear on the issues of truth and fiction, and on whether there are some things which simply cannot be voiced because they are unspeakable. In Part 3, he deals with the *National Narratives* of Rome, Britain (and Ireland) and America. We are left with the uneasy sensation that nations tell their stories as history, making themselves believe in make-believe. In Part 4, *Narrative Matters*, he offers an insightful discussion of Aristotle's analysis of narrative: Plot (Mythos), Re-creation (Mimesis), Release (Catharsis), Wisdom (Phronesis) and Ethics (Ethos). Basically, he is arguing against post-modern ideas that the story is dead.

As he concludes, 'There will always be someone there to say "tell me a story", and someone there to respond. Were this not so, we would no longer be fully human.'

This is not an easy read, but I found it rewarded the effort needed to come to grips with it.



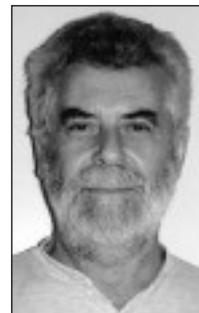
In the introduction, I emphasised the centrality of stories to being human. As teachers, we should surely pay heed to this. There is no better way to get the attention of a class than to tell a story. And there are useful books to help us on our way: Ruth Wajnryb's *Stories*, Eric Taylor's *Using Folktales*, John Morgan and Mario Rinvoluceri's *Once Upon a Time* and, of course, Andrew Wright's *Storytelling with Children*. Every time we meet a new class, a new story begins. So let's enjoy it!

Featured books

Booker, C *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories* Continuum 2004
Brunvand, J *Too Good to be True: Urban Legends* W W Norton and Co 1999
Kearney, R *On Stories* Routledge 2002
Patten, B *The Story Giant* HarperCollins 2001
Shah, I *World Tales* Octagon Press 1991

Other titles

Morgan, J and Rinvoluceri, M *Once Upon a Time* CUP 1983
Propp, V *The Morphology of the Folk Tale* University of Texas Press 1968
Taylor, E *Using Folktales* CUP 2000
Wajnryb, R *Stories* CUP 2003
Wright, A *Storytelling With Children* OUP 2008



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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