

# Story reading

**Jeremy Clarke** writes about the simple pleasure of reading and listening to stories and how this can encourage children's enjoyment of books.



**W**hy do you read novels? Apart from necessity, why do you read stories you don't have to? It is probably the same reason why young children are drawn towards an adult who begins to read a story out loud or why, when reading a novel you can suddenly find yourself reaching out for that cup of tea you made only to find it stone cold, as you have lost all sense of time. We read to become absorbed into a story, to experience an emotional reaction to what is happening on the pages. We read to gain a deeper understanding of other people, places and events – essentially we read to experience life beyond our own. So why read to children? Does the story of a cow that has lost her friends benefit a child in the same way our adult lives are enriched by reading? Maybe, but it is hard to say. What I can say though, is that this story brings joy which can be outwardly seen, and a life with joy is infinitely more enriched than a life without.

Being read to by a skilled, enthusiastic or emotionally close adult can be incredibly rewarding for a child, but it is the story that is key, as this is the reason an older child will continue to read to themselves. This is why I would argue that reading stories should primarily be for pleasure, and not to learn to decode or blend sounds. Of course, a child reading alone will come across new words and need to work out what they are for the text to make sense to them, but to retain the magic of storytelling there is no need to continually step out of the story to explain how a word is put together. I have found with children I have taught in school, and with my own children at home, that when they are expending all their mental energies on working out what the words say on a page there is often little or no understanding of the story that is taking place. It is as if they are reading the list of ingredients, but have no idea of the taste of the meal created. When storytelling and reading for pleasure, it is all about the taste.

A good storyteller can bring texts alive for a child and nurture their interest in books. Someone who shows a love and enthusiasm for a story will pass on the feeling that a book can enrich a life, and be of emotional benefit. Of course a child will not analyse it in such a way, they will hopefully see that listening to stories is enjoyable, and so reading stories (when able to do so) will also be enjoyable. The joy of reading is something to be passed on and shared. This is why it should

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be done by the people who are most important to the child – the parents, close relations, siblings and teachers. For the youngest infants, just listening to someone close to them talking will develop their own language skills. The changing rhythm and pace of storytelling will become ingrained and familiar to them, allowing the easier following of the content as they grow.

Bedtime is an excellent opportunity for both storytelling and reading for a child, providing all of the elements required for deep immersion. There is a great degree of comfort (especially if you are the one in bed), hopefully it will be quiet and free from disturbance and the pace of the day is slowing. These combine to enable the child to relax into listening to the story, or to happily spend their time reading alone. Of course, bedtime is not the only time when stories can be read – but it is often the most peaceful. If you can find time during day that is equally free from disturbance then there is nothing wrong with that. As a teacher I often read stories to small groups or even individuals in busy classrooms, and on reflection the most effective way of getting the most from the moment was to completely commit. Being able to block out everything else going on and give 100% to the storytelling is key.

Something else to consider for the older child (and in this

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context I would say those around ten or over) is parallel reading. This is where you both read the same book and talk about it afterwards (or even at points during the story). Much like an adult book group, but in the home or school environment it allows the child to ask questions about the plot, and to explore the ideas raised by the story in an emotionally safe place.

How you tell a story can vary depending on the age of the child and the style of book you are reading. Something with a great deal of freedom would be a picture book with very few or no words. Here the focus is what you can see in the images, and to a certain extent this is guided by what you feel is of interest to the story or the child you are reading to. A good example of this type of text is *Hug* by Jez Alborough, a story of a chimp who loses its Mum and is helped by a variety of jungle animals in being reunited with her. The only words used are 'hug' (repeatedly), 'Mum' and 'Bobo'. It is possible to just read the words and let the child build the story using the images, but as a storyteller you can embellish this with as many or few details of your own. It is perfectly possible to tell stories from just pictures, and when the child comes to do this

themselves they are in the position of knowing there is no right or wrong story to be told. In some ways this is very enabling for the child, allowing them to take risks with their own imagination, to push boundaries and explore new ideas.

It could be argued that words can be quite limiting when it comes to storytelling (as opposed to reading) and it is important that you as the orator are quite capable of adding to the text. Embellishing the plot, exaggerating actions and reactions and developing what characters say can add a huge amount to the experience of the listener and give fuel to the imagination. It can also be used to make the setting or context of the story more familiar to the child. Changing the name of a town or street, or introducing characters or events that are known to the child can both make it clear that you are creating a story and involve the child in the joy of its creation.

Sometimes I find a story contains situations, vocabulary or events that may be new and unknown to the listener. This requires a decision – do you continue, unsure if the child understands what is being described, or do you stop and explain – risking the break in concentration and immersion in the story? It often depends on how critical the 'unknown' is in the story as a whole. Asking questions at the end of the story or chapter can allow time to explain new words or ideas without disrupting the flow, although sometimes the child is quite happy to ask you as you are reading. Of course once they are reading alone the embellishment must come from their own imagination – but the experience of adding to stories, of explaining events and having questions asked can only help this develop.

Something that I have noticed with my own son as he has got older (he is now twelve) is that his own reading habits have changed. He has an increased interest in graphic novels, happily reading and re-reading these on an almost continuous basis. The UK market for graphic novels has increased hugely in the last ten years, and it is worth noting that they are not all comic book superheroes. The first graphic novel he read was *Stormbreaker* by Anthony Horowitz, the award winning children's author (he also writes for adults). My son had also read the 'normal' book, so I asked what the differences were. He found the graphic novel was "quicker" and had more action, but in terms of the story they were the same. This made me think about how comics and graphic novels can be seen sometimes as a less worthy text, or not suitable for serious reading. With the graphic novel the images instantly give the setting, the physical descriptions, time and movement. Who speaks is clear, and thoughts are easily relayed. These factors do add up to a book that is quicker to 'get in to', and generally this is where boys lose interest – when the reward does not equal the effort. With a graphic novel the reward comes quickly, and the story can be enjoyed. And after all, when listening or reading, that is what matters most.