



Storytelling and the Story Hour

JEANNE B. HARDENDORFF

ARTICLES AND EDITORIALS appearing in professional journals during the last two years have raised searching questions about storytelling and what its role should be in the current library scene. This is a time of crisis: libraries are inundated by students pursuing facts and figures for school information; staffs are short; children's librarians are too few. There is a feeling that children have outgrown the need for the library story hour and that their tastes have become more sophisticated. Why, then, should children's librarians take valuable staff time to continue an outmoded tradition? Some believe that story hours are a carry-over from the past when children's librarians did not have as many demands upon their time, when the pace was more leisurely, and when there was more than ample time to perform the myriad duties which fell into their province.

It is apparent from articles and editorials that the terms *storytelling* and *story hour* have been confused. They are not to be used interchangeably. "Storytelling" may be done by a children's librarian—or by any other person, for that matter—in public libraries where no "story hour" exists as such. "Story hour" ordinarily designates a regularly scheduled period of activity which includes storytelling or storytelling combined with other activities. The regular practice of storytelling may entail the finding of staff, time, and space for scheduled story hours. However, the value of storytelling, which is the major concern of this paper, lies in its role, its rank, and its obligations in relation to the overall library service available to children.

In order to obtain background for this article, the author sent questionnaires to children's librarians in public libraries and to children's consultants in state libraries. These questionnaires were sent to libraries on the basis of geographic representation, size of system, Mrs. Hardendorff is Assistant to the Coordinator, Office of Work with Children, Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore, Maryland.

Storytelling and the Story Hour

and population served. Multibranch systems with many children's librarians, as well as smaller libraries serving their entire population from one central library, were included. Of the 55 libraries queried, 43 questionnaires were returned—a representation of 78 per cent.

The first half of the questionnaire dealt with storytelling for the six- to eleven-year-old child; the second half dealt with storytelling for the preschool child. In the main the following questions were asked:

Was storytelling a part of the programming as a regular activity?

Did the library have a storytelling specialist?

Had attendance at story hour dropped or risen over the last years?

Was there a correlation between population change and response to the story hour?

What was the attitude of the administrator?

Did the administrator have an understanding of the role and function of storytelling in library service to children?

What was the attitude of the head of children's work toward storytelling?

What were the attitudes of the children's librarians toward storytelling?

What was being done by libraries to train new staff members as storytellers?

Why was this training considered necessary?

What were the effects, if any, of the attitudes in agencies holding story hours in relation to the willingness of the children's librarians to conduct a program?

Did such attitudes affect the success or failure of a story hour program?

What was the attitude of the administrator towards pre-school story hours?

What had been the growth of pre-school story hour in the last five years?

Had there been a tendency to hold pre-school story hours if it was not possible to hold both the regular and the pre-school?

Only one out of the 43 libraries replying was without a storytelling program, and that one was in the midst of completing a new building which included a story hour room.

Reaffirmation of a strong belief in storytelling was paramount from the replies. Storytelling is still considered one of the first obligations in service to children. Report after report stressed that the success of the story hour depended upon the personality and enthusiasm, as well as the ability, of the storyteller.

The replies to the questionnaire were contrapuntal. If one said that story hours had maintained their greatest popularity in fairly stable, moderate-income communities where children were not engaged in many extra-curricular activities, the next report said that residents from new suburban areas and the upper-middle-class areas were the most avid supporters of story hours. If one report stated that the greatest attendance was in busy urban centers and in densely populated housing areas, another stated that children's librarians who worked in underprivileged areas found storytelling to be an essential part of their work. If one report said that attendance had decreased drastically during the past five years because of population changes, another said that the total average attendance remained the same. While one library reported its most popular story hour was in its most sophisticated neighborhood and attended by older children, another reported its most popular program was in nonsophisticated areas where home influence remained strong. Thus it went—one assessment balanced another.

A portion of the questionnaire posed the question of whether or not there was a correlation between the utilization of nonprofessional staff for storytelling and the trend of attendance. Again the replies balanced one another. One library reported that storytelling suffered when nonprofessional staff members were used, while another reported that there was no correlation between the use of nonprofessional staff or professional staff in the success of story hours. The variation existed on the basis of ability; a nonprofessional might be a better storyteller than a professional. One said that the maintaining of a story hour was definitely regulated by having a professional staff member who was also an experienced storyteller (lack of a trained person meant absence of a story hour), while the next reported that the nonprofessional's personality, warmth, and enthusiasm were paramount in sustaining the program.

The results of the survey showed that the majority of administrators not only understood the role of storytelling but were also actively interested in maintaining story hours as a regular activity for children.

Why is storytelling considered within the province of library work

Storytelling and the Story Hour

with children? It is interesting to find this same question posed in 1899, for it was then that storytelling began as a systematic activity at the West End Branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. Regular story hours were started the same year at the Buffalo Public Library. According to Ruth Hill, "Marie Shedlock's coming to America in 1900 to give monologues and to tell Andersen's fairy tales had a far reaching effect. Libraries were ready for just the inspiration Miss Shedlock had to give, and for her practical instruction in the art of storytelling to students in training to become children's librarians."¹ The inclusion of story hours as part of the library program for children began to spread. Libraries in Boston, Chicago, New York City, and Cleveland all responded to the use of storytelling, especially as they saw its promise as a reading guidance tool. In 1910 reports on storytelling activities in various library systems were compiled by Anne Carroll Moore. Some of the remarks included in those 1910 reports have as much relevance today as they did when they were first compiled.

The answer to the question first asked and acted upon in 1899 was again answered in the *Children's Library Yearbook* of 1929: "Because of the joy it gives, storytelling is one of the most effective ways of quickening the powers of perception and of directing the interests of children. It is not strange then that the public library adopted it as an important activity in its work with children, and recognized in it an appealing and far-reaching method of presenting some of the great world literature to them."²

The introduction to a list of stories issued by the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh recalled in a short history of that first story hour for children nine years and older that "After a few months a change was seen in the children's reading."³ In 1910 the New York Public Library had this to say in its report: "Marked results of storytelling after three years are shown by a very great improvement in the character of the recreational reading done by the children and in their sense of pleasure in the children's room."⁴

And so it was that story hours were begun in public libraries. Children's librarians realized that children needed a wider knowledge of books and that, since children lacked the power of comparison and the ability to discriminate, storytelling was a strong tool for broadening their range and guiding them in their reading.

The first *Children's Library Yearbook* also stated, "There is no surer road to a child's heart than through the gateway of storytelling. This

road leads to mutual understanding and comradeship between the librarian and the child. How pleasant to find that both enjoy the same things! Now they belong to the same fraternity. In the minds of children confidence is established in the sympathy and judgment of their librarian.”⁵ The one aspect of service to children which remains constant and unvarying is the child himself. Children’s librarians today are as much aware of this as were the pioneers in the field. Those who work with children must prove to each child that they are worthy of receiving the child’s confidence and trust before they are able to establish rapport. It is in this respect that storytelling has proved invaluable. This winning of confidence is the crux of serving children in library work. The child, unlike the adult, will not voice his disappointment but will tolerate the librarian until rapport is re-established. It is perhaps this peculiarity which sets service to children apart from service to others of the library public.

Elizabeth Nesbitt in 1938 speaks in these terms in writing about storytelling:

Early in the days of library work with children, librarians realized their peculiar province was to educate children in the art of reading, a thing quite different from the act of reading, or from the hunting down of informative facts. The art of reading consists of the ability to read the literature of power with such sympathy and insight, that one is thereby educated for living. Its purpose is not an acquisition of factual knowledge, but an appreciation of intangible, imperishable verities, of the enriching experiences which men have struggled through centuries to express in literature. . . . It is because storytelling presents literature to the child and then withdraws from the scene, that I believe it to be one of the best ways of shortening the road to the art of reading. . . . It is the unique function of the library storyteller to use it [storytelling] in order to create a desire for the book.⁶

From the very beginning storytelling and the conducting of story hours was heralded as a reading guidance tool. Typical of the attitudes over the years concerning the role of storytelling in the library are Effie Power’s comments in *Library Service for Children*, 1930: “Since the primary purpose of all story hours is to interpret literature to children and to inspire them to read for themselves, the children’s librarian considers this contact with the children as most important”;⁷ or Ada Whitcomb’s statement in *Library Journal*, 1908: “It [story hour] should not be given because it is done in other libraries, but that children may be led to books.”⁸

Storytelling and the Story Hour

It has always been difficult to explain to non-storytellers, whether they be adult librarians or new children's librarians, what transpires between the storyteller and the children. The intangibles, nonmeasurable in circulation statistics, can be felt by the storyteller watching the children as they begin to feel at home in the children's room. On the children's part, it is knowing that what they may be unable to express is understood. A proprietary air prevails when children know they are understood. Many children ask for and proceed to borrow the books used in a story hour on the day the story hour is given. Some children must digest the impact of the story slowly and then come back later; even so, they do not always come back for the book used as the source at the story hour, but for allied reading material. The storyteller knows that results are not always instantaneous.

Misinterpretation of storytelling and story hours which prevailed when storytelling first began in libraries and continues in some quarters today is typified by John Cotton Dana's remarks in an article published in *Public Libraries*, 1908, in which he set forth reasons for not having storytelling as part of a library program:

Storytelling to groups of young children is now popular among librarians. The art is practiced chiefly by women. No doubt one reason for its popularity is that it gives those who practice it the pleasure of the teacher, the orator and the exhorter. It must be a delight to have the opportunity to hold the attention of a group of children; to see their eyes sparkle as the story unwinds itself; to feel that you are giving the little people high pleasure, and at the same time are improving their language, their morals, their dramatic sense, their power of attention and their knowledge of the world's literary masterpieces. . . . The assistant entertains once or twice each week a group of forty or fifty children. . . . To prepare for this half-hour of the relatively trivial instruction of a few children in the higher life, the library must secure a room and pay for its care, a room if it be obtained and used at all could be used for more profitable purposes; and the performer must study her art and must, if she is not a conceited duffer, prepare herself for her part for the day at a very considerable cost of time and energy.⁹

Administrators still raise similar questions today, particularly the one about the time needed to prepare for a story hour. What Effie Power stated in her chapter on reading guidance in *Library Service for Children* contains a basic principle which applies not only to the learning of a cycle story but to all storytelling as well. The preparation for one story which may require thirty minutes for telling may

require ten or twelve hours of preparation if the storyteller is preparing it for the first time. This is not a waste of time for any library, large or small. After a background is acquired and a repertoire is begun, it takes less time to prepare other stories. As Miss Power aptly said, ". . . the children's librarian who does not know great world literature intimately, lacks the foundation required to evaluate books for children."¹⁰ Storytelling necessarily demands a great deal of reading in order to find a story which fits the teller as well as to provide background and language, and in so doing, to cultivate and deepen the teller's appreciation of literary values. Storytelling has a value beyond that of its function as a reading guidance tool for children: it leads the storyteller into keener awareness of the infinite possibilities which lie in all works of literary merit. Administrators who are inclined to think of story hours in terms of staff time involved and the loss of service to the general public might well consider what could be lost in quality of service if storytelling were to be discouraged.

A fallacy—one might say a myth—has persisted that storytelling and the conducting of story hours were done with great ease and the full cooperation of all staff 20 to 30 years ago. Reports and surveys of storytelling indicate that since its inception "Much has been done under the most discouraging conditions."¹¹ Ruth Hill wrote in a *Library Journal* in 1940, "While practically all have recognized that regular story hours would be the perfect arrangement, inadequate appropriations and limited space have presented almost unsurmountable obstacles to the ideal state. Almost, I say, for many, convinced that the dropping of story hours would be the failure to meet one of the children's librarian's greatest obligations, have managed through careful planning and some personal sacrifice to carry on story-telling in spite of difficulties."¹²

A study from the Queens Borough Public Library bears out that what was true in 1940 is still true today. Convinced of the worth of story hours, many libraries continue them—using specialists, some conducting only summer story hour programs, others for special occasions. A regular weekly story hour, in every agency, conducted by a skilled storyteller has been the goal or ideal since story hours were first begun. None of the articles has ever said at any time that 100 per cent of all libraries across the nation have had such programs. Where storytelling has been truly meaningful to both the storyteller and to children and has thereby produced an activity of value for the library, the tradition has been continued.

Storytelling and the Story Hour

Storytelling requires a storyteller. In evaluating the recent trends in story hours and storytelling, it might be well to reassess what makes a storyteller. As Mary Gould Davis said in her introduction to the *Arabian Nights*, "It takes two things to make a storyteller; a knowledge of literature and a complete command of one's own resources as its interpreter."¹³ Storytelling requires of the storyteller interest and enthusiasm for the literature worthy of presentation. It demands preparation through careful study and hard work. Storytelling then requires practice among children—taking the failures along with the successes. It would be easy to hide behind a statement often heard: "Storytellers are born not made." Experienced storytellers know that effective storytelling results when the challenge and the work which storytelling has to offer are met.

The developing of a storytelling ear—that ability to recognize even as one reads a particular story as one's own—does not come overnight. It is through much reading, through trial and error and repeated tellings of the story to different groups of children, that the nuances are finally developed which create a living thing from the printed word.

Storytellers are developed as well as born with the gift. Knowing this, large library systems hold in-service training programs, in an attempt to bridge the gap caused by so few storytelling courses being offered in library schools. Many children's librarians who have entered the field in the last five years have had storytelling only as part of a children's literature class. There are a few library schools which offer a separate course in storytelling, but no school offers a complete year's study. One graduate library school offers storytelling under the course name "Oral Narration Resources and Techniques."¹⁴ The description of the class does not use the word storytelling but the term "oral presentation." This de-emphasis of the importance of storytelling as a basic part of the training of a children's librarian was protested by many of the librarians who answered the present questionnaire. In 1940 Ruth Hill was overly optimistic in her hopes that "Slowly but surely, the universities and training schools that do not include it now will recognize its place."¹⁵

Library schools are faced with a dilemma! Classes must cover more and more subject matter to expose all students to the ever-widening scope of library service. On the other hand, the curriculum of any school, whether it be a library school or elementary school, reflects to a certain degree what is expected of its graduates. It behooves those

in the field of library service to children to let the library schools know that storytelling is still vital to any curriculum devised for children's librarians.

Preschool story hours are a comparatively new facet of library work with children. A search through library literature reveals that neither a definitive article nor manual giving a history or special techniques of the preschool story hour has been written.

In the late thirties and early forties, children's librarians began to see the need of having a program geared to the preschool child. They were convinced that the introduction of books—good books—into a child's early life was important. The goals of the preschool story hours are to introduce the best in children's literature and art to the young child, to provide an opportunity to develop the skills of looking and listening, and to acquire the knowledge of how to select books for home reading. Preschool story hours also offer to parents, as well as to children, an introduction to the services of the public library and thereby help to establish the library as an integral part of their lives.

The interpretation of what constitutes a preschool story hour varies widely. Some libraries have a picture book story hour; some follow the tradition of telling stories simple and direct enough for the nursery age child, while others use creative dramatics in their preschool story hour.

Preschool story hours have not been as universally adopted as one would think. Answers to the questionnaires sent out indicate that there are many librarians who hesitate to attempt working with the preschool child. Others, challenged by the problems offered by this age child—the short attention span, the process of learning to listen without interruption, the exuberance or extreme shyness—find in this activity a most rewarding aspect of service to children. Some libraries reported that staff members who have been reluctant to conduct the more formal story hour for older children are willing to take on a preschool story hour, feeling that the presentation of the picture book is easier and less time-consuming in preparation, and that small children are less critical than older children.

While some libraries have had programs for the three- to five-year-old child since the late thirties, other libraries have just begun to institute programs within the last two or three years. Systems which have had a long established story hour program for older children and have recently begun a program for the preschooler do not usually have the system-wide coverage that they have for regular story hours.

Storytelling and the Story Hour

In at least one system adult branch librarians conduct the preschool story hours; in other systems the adult librarians have not encouraged their children's librarians to have such a program because they have not wanted to work with parents. On the other hand, some libraries have found that preschool story hours bring parents as well as children to the library and have seized upon this opportunity to broaden their contacts in the community by having a program for the parents while the children are in story hour. Some librarians encourage parents to remain in the background during story hour time, believing that what is offered through storytelling is beneficial to both the parent and the library. Others feel that parents hamper the program and therefore discourage their attendance. Of course, to some administrators where the traditional story hour has been looked upon as mere entertainment, the preschool story hour is considered so much frill. The disparity evidenced by the reports indicates a pressing need for a manual on the preschool story hour, which would clearly define its goals, purposes, and functions.

Storytelling has proved its value over the years. Library systems which once were able to have a regular weekly story hour in every agency have had to adapt to the shortage of staff, to the conversion of areas set aside for story hour room to other purposes, and to the shortening of the story hour season. Smaller libraries, unable to offer as many story hours as the larger systems, have conducted story hours on a seasonal basis. Where the children's staff has been predominantly nonprofessional, workshops for volunteers in the community to learn the art of storytelling have been conducted by a trained children's librarian. These volunteers, schooled to carry on the tradition, have kept storytelling alive in the children's library program. Workshops have also been held under the sponsorship of state library agencies which reported that many of those who signed up, somewhat fearful of what was expected of them, finished the course not only enthusiastic, but also willing to continue doing work on their own in order to become accomplished storytellers. This was true for new, inexperienced library personnel as well as for lay volunteers from the community.

The proportion of larger libraries holding story hours has remained fairly constant. In *A Survey of Libraries in the United States* conducted by the American Library Association in 1927, it was reported that story hours were held in 79 per cent of the large libraries.¹⁶ A survey made by the Queens Borough Public Library in 1961 reported

“over 77 per cent of the 36 systems queried were still carrying on these programs.”¹⁷ Where some libraries have had to curtail story hour programs, others have been able to initiate them. Some librarians have reported that the age of children attending story hours has dropped to ten years, while others reported an upswing in the support of their story hours by children through the junior high school age.

The disquiet which seems to permeate the literature and the discussions among children's librarians reminds one of Gimli's remark in *Two Towers* as he and Aragon rush to the rescue of the Hobbits, “we shall be of no use to them, except to sit down beside them and show our friendship by starving together.”¹⁸ However, reports show that storytelling as well as the holding of story hours is far from being at a starvation point. Those who believe in the worth of storytelling will not have to show their friendship by starving together for the lack of storytelling. Storytelling imparts to the beginning and experienced storyteller alike clearer and deeper insight into the power of stories. It is still the children's librarians who must lead, in spite of the rush of children to absorb more and more information, and who must remain calm and resolute in the direction of library service to children.

References

1. Hill, Ruth A. “Story-telling Around the World: A Symposium. Part 1: United States,” *Library Journal*, 65:285-289, April 1, 1940.
2. American Library Association. *Children's Library Yearbook*. Compiled by the Committee on Library Work with Children of the American Library Association. Chicago, American Library Association, 1929, Vol. 1, p. 32.
3. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. “A List of Good Stories to Tell to Children Under Twelve Years of Age.” Pittsburgh, Carnegie Library, 1906, p. 3.
4. Moore, Anne Carroll. “Report of the Committee on Storytelling.” In Alice I. Hazeltine, *Library Work with Children*. New York, H. W. Wilson Company, 1917, pp. 297-315.
5. American Library Association, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
6. Nesbitt, Elizabeth. “The Shortening of the Road,” *Library Journal*, 63:834-835, Nov. 1938.
7. Power, Effie L. *Library Service for Children*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1930.
8. Whitcomb, Ada. “Children's Hour” Excerpts from a speech given at the twelfth annual meeting of the Illinois Library Association, Galesburg, Illinois, October 12, 1908, *Library Journal*, 33:451-452, Nov. 1908.
9. Dana, John Cotton. “Story-telling in Libraries,” *Public Libraries*, 13:349-350, Nov. 1908.
10. Power, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

Storytelling and the Story Hour

11. Clarke, Elizabeth Porter. "Story-telling, Reading Aloud and Other Special Features of Work in Children's Rooms," *Library Journal*, 27:189-190, April 1902.
12. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 286.
13. Davis, Mary Gould. "Foreword." In Andrew Lang, ed., *Arabian Nights*. New York and London, Longmans, Green and Company, 1946, p. viii.
14. Columbia University. *Bulletin* (School of Library Service, Series 59, Number 5). New York, Columbia University, Jan. 31, 1959, p. 13.
15. Hill, *op. cit.*, p. 289.
16. American Library Association. *A Survey of Libraries in the United States*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1927, Vol. 3, p. 44.
17. Sheehan, Ethna, and Bentley, Martha C. "A Public Library Reassesses Storytelling," *Illinois Libraries*, 44:653-657, Dec. 1962.
18. Tolkien, J. R. R. *The Two Towers*. Boston, Houghton Mifflin Company [n.d.], p. 94.