We live in a media-saturated society that, on a surface level at least, increasingly defines individuals by their outer trappings: how they look, the goods they have, the stuff they can afford to buy, the toys they play with. We live in an era that rewards the quick fix, the easy answer, and the software solution; in a time when the words “long term,” “delayed gratification,” and “whatever is worth doing is worth doing well” are considered anachronistic at best and laughable at worst. Michael Millken goes to jail for a white collar crime and comes out a multimillionaire; honesty is cynically equated with stupidity, and ethics are situational and malleable. Nobody does anything for nothing, if you don’t take care of yourself no one else will, and it serves you right for being such a sentimental fool. The bottom line is all that matters, whether in budget or circulation figures—if you can’t measure it, it’s not valuable—and kids need to be paid off with bribes and incentives in order to participate in reading programs or other book-related activities. If they’re not, reading program participation figures will go down, circulation figures will plummet, and book-buying budgets will dwindle accordingly.

How’s that for a scenario? Nuclear winter is cozier.

I love books. I have always loved them. I have no memory of a time when I did not know how to read. My first memory of actually reading a book is the poems in *The Pocket Book of Verse*. I think it belonged to my older brother. “Tyger, tyger burning bright,/ in the forests of the night;/ what immortal hand or eye,/ could frame thy fearful symmetry?” (Blake Pl. 42). Or, “Take her up tenderly, lift her with care, fashioned so slenderly, young and so fair” (Hood 274). And, “Young Lochinvar is come out of the West,/ Through all the wide Border his steed was the best. . .” (Scott 130). Did I know what they meant? I didn’t have a clue. And it didn’t matter.

I inadvertently stumbled through the door of the public library and
found solace and sustenance—in silence, in books, in language. The public library was an incredible haven, a respite from a world where I had a sick father, an overworked mother, and no place I belonged. The Throgs Neck Branch of The New York Public Library was a converted storefront, with a children’s side and an adult side. It was warm, it smelled of books and dust and lemon wax, and there was always a place for me to sit. You could take out six books on a children’s card then; when you turned 13 you got an adult card, could check books out of the adult side, and could take as many as 12. I yearned to be 13.

There were storytimes at the library, but I never went to them. I would see the screen up in the corner of the children’s room, and hear the rise and fall of the storyteller’s voice, sometimes followed by the rising and falling of children’s voices—but I never went behind the screen.

Effie Power said in her book Library Service for Children that the primary purpose of all storytimes is to interpret literature for children and to inspire them to read it for themselves (217). I find that a difficult point to argue with. It is, perhaps, not the only reason for storytimes, but it is definitely up there with the top three. I, however, had a different source of inspiration.

There was a librarian at the Throgs Neck Branch—a formidable woman. She was tall, black, and imposing—or maybe I found her imposing because I was none of those things. She was stern—or maybe that was because I was young. I never knew her name, but she knew mine. Looking back on it from the perspective of a youth services librarian, I realize that she had a very odd way of doing reader advisory. I would come into the library to return my books and she would say “Good afternoon, Miss Del Negro.” I would mumble something completely unintelligible. She would examine the titles I had returned, and, not really looking at me, not really giving it too much visible attention, she would wave her hand toward a table in the children’s room and say, “There are some books over there you might like.” I always looked. And I always liked them. I had some strange idea about reading through all the fiction in alphabetical order. I made a pretty good dent in it. And then one day she came over to me and said, “I think you should look at these,” and she pointed me at the 398s, the folk and fairy tales. I read them all. Eleanor Farjeon, Andrew Lang, Joseph Jacobs, Harold Courlander. After the 398s came the 292s, myths and legends—Padraic Colum, Edith Hamilton—and I was thoroughly and firmly hooked. When I found out there were actually branch libraries—what a novel idea—and that I could get to them with a bus pass, I checked out the 398s and 292s in every branch library I could get to by bus or train. That was a pretty fair number of libraries. And a pretty fair number of 398s and 292s.

Eileen Colwell once said that “the child’s imagination must be stimulated from an early age if she is to develop as a person; without it she is
locked into a narrow environment bounded by what she is able to see and touch" (4). In a converted storefront in the Bronx, I found not just a world, but a galaxy; not just a galaxy, but universes too numerous to count, but still close enough to touch. Years later I found myself in graduate library school, another inadvertent stumble, planning on specializing in academic libraries. I got an assistantship in the department, and met the second librarian that shaped my life. Margaret Poarch had been an army librarian before becoming a professor of children's literature. She was from the American South—two of her favorite phrases were "My country tis of thee!" and, "Honey, don't get me started." My job as Margaret's assistant consisted, among other, less important things, of pulling books for her classes. I pulled truckloads of them. And every time I did, I would say, "Gee, Margaret, I remember this book—I read it when I was a kid." After about three weeks of this, Margaret finally turned to me and said "Honey, you don't want to be an academic librarian. Academic libraries are borin'. You are a children's librarian, through and through." My fate was sealed in that tiny office in the Genesee Valley. In a way, it was very like that old library storefront—it was small, crowded, and full of books; it smelled of dust and lemon wax, and there was always someplace for me to sit, even when I had to move a stack of books off a chair in order to do it. It was Margaret who first introduced me to storytelling, and it was Margaret who told me it was the story that mattered, not the teller. "Know the story," she said. "If you know the story well enough, the rest will take care of itself. It's the story that matters, not the teller." That phrase has stayed with me all these years. It shaped the librarian, storyteller, and reviewer I was to become.

The philosophy of youth services in libraries was shaped by professional women with visionary ideals. A key element in that philosophy, a constant throughout a hundred years of public library history, was the notion that youth services in libraries existed in order to connect children to books, to the very best literature the profession could offer them. Carolyn Hewins, Anne Carroll Moore, Minerva Saunders, Effie Lee Power: we are, many of us, ignorant of their names and sometimes we forget their vision as well. Their vision included the awakening of the desire for knowledge in children who have little or no such stimulation in their personal lives; providing a connection, a bridge to powerful and beautiful literature and language; and fostering a life-long love of reading. This was both a professional and moral vision, a vision with focus and impact. Andrew Carnegie thought of the public library as the poor man's university; author Mollie Hunter once said "If you can read, you can educate yourself" (75). She also said "If" is a little word with a very big meaning" (80).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, the percentage of illiterate adults in the United States is on the rise. Public libraries and youth services in particular lack support (if they are not under downright
attack) from fiscally prudent if short-sighted private individuals and government agencies. The quest for equal access to educational opportunity for all children travels a long and tortuous route, with obstacles in the shape of monolithic bureaucracies, hostile challenges, ignorance, and greed. Any quest worthy of the name requires a heroic figure, a hero, to meet and overcome all obstacles.

The hero. That’s you. Children’s librarians, I mean. I’ve seen heroic deeds and miraculous accomplishments in the smallest storefronts. I’ve seen children’s librarians coax non-readers into the world of books. I’ve seen smiling calm in the face of a roomful of adolescents bursting at the seams with an energy I only vaguely remember. I’ve seen libraries moved, rooms rearranged, computers installed, and new skills learned and acquired at lightning speed. I’ve seen quality services maintained in spite of budget and staff cuts that would cripple any corporate organization. I’ve seen literature-based programs created from tissue and glitter, story and song. I’ve seen children’s rooms turned into rainforests with green construction paper and safety scissors. I’ve seen children’s librarians stand their ground when a book is challenged, when a gang member gets belligerent, when their budget and staff are threatened.

In folktales, the hero seldom accomplishes much by herself. There is always some convenient animal helper, magical old man, or mystical wise woman to help the hero out of wells, up glass mountains, or into towers with no doors.

It’s true for children’s librarians as well. The best of us realize that we accomplish little on our own, that everything we do is connected to everything else. Whether we are talking about the volunteer who cuts out nametags in the thematically appropriate shape for storytime, the clerk who patiently explains for the two-hundredth time how a child gets her first library card, the page who actually displays books with attractive covers instead of the ones that just got back from the bindery—the library is a story within which all the characters are connected by blood, coincidence, or circumstance.

**WE HAVE SEEN THE POWER**

Ideally, every child you help has a supportive adult, a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, standing behind him/her. And each of those adults is a possible ally in your journey to connect children and books, children and story. They are the magical helpers in your quest to communicate the importance of children, children’s books, and storytelling to the unknowing in your community. Everybody knows somebody else, and that somebody else may be the person you need to know to more effectively deliver library services to children.

And what about the child who doesn’t have a supportive adult? The child who has no advocate? Well, we change roles within the story then.
We shape-shift, if you will, from hero to convenient helper. Magic man or wise woman, we are there to open the door to books and story for those children who cannot easily access what we can provide. In order to serve them effectively, it becomes necessary for us to unite with all those “everybodies” who know somebody else, to work with parents and teachers, daycare centers and preschools, health care and other community agencies.

I am familiar with the sinking feeling that providing access to literature and story for all the youth in your community is an overwhelming task—the dragon is too fierce, the spell too strong, the wizard too powerful to be conquered by . . . what? A children’s librarian disguised as a hero? Most of us did not become involved in children’s services because it was going to be politically hazardous and fraught with difficult financial issues. Most of us became involved in children’s work because we had an affinity for children, and for children’s books. Ah, the books . . . “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo, lying on the hearth before the fireplace” (Alcott 3). “We eat our night meal by candle-light, the four of us. Sarah has brought candles from town. And nasturtium seeds for her garden, and a book of songs for us to sing. . . . Soon there will be a wedding” (McLaughlin 58). “With a quick glance back Fox dashed toward the woods. ‘The hound knows who I am!’ he shouted. ‘But I’m not worried. I sure can out-smart and out-run one of Mr. J.W. McCutchin’s miserable mutts any old time of the day, because like I told you, I am a fox!’ ‘I know,’ said Flossie. ‘I know’” (McKissack). The books, remember? Reading as its own reward? (Oh, look, she’s back on topic . . . )

I would like to present you with a radical notion. These two affinities—our affinity for children and our affinity for children’s books—are our strongest traits, the magic cloak, the seven-league boots, the water of life that will help us succeed in our quest to connect children and books, children and story.

What is it that makes the public library unique? What is it that makes us different from any other community agency? Understanding that libraries are more than books, as the professional literature is so fond of pointing out, I am standing here now to say to you that it is books that make us unique, and in the end, it is our knowledge of those books and our ability to connect them with readers that make us effective. The problem of illiteracy in the United States is no secret. We are faced with the dumbing down of everything from signage that uses symbolic pictograms to cash registers that use pictures of food instead of numbers.

How did this happen? What caused it? Who is to blame? Electronic media? Television? Computers? The Internet? As responsible adults in a responsible profession, we let it happen. And we are all to blame. We abdicated our responsibility to our clients and our collections the first time we kept silent when someone spoke denigratingly about “kiddie lit”
and storytimes—"Oh, isn't that cute. You read books to children (or yourself) all day." We abdicated our responsibility the first time we said, "Oh, it doesn't matter what they read as long as they read something." We abdicated our responsibility when we decided learning a story was too much trouble, we'd show a movie instead.

Now, there's a digression waiting to happen. A century of storytelling in the library oral tradition is our heritage as youth services librarians. This heritage includes literary tales memorized with love and care; personal tales from our own lives; folktales from oral and written sources; and anything that promotes a love of language and an appreciation of the power of the written and spoken word. Many librarians started collecting, promoting, and telling traditional stories because they heard a storyteller, felt a connection to the tale and the telling, and wanted to be a part of a remarkably resilient tradition. We know that using stories with children has a number of benefits, from the practical increase of attention spans to the lyrical soaring of the soul that occurs when art is experienced. We select books and tell stories in libraries for many reasons: to build bridges between children and books, between childhood and adulthood, between language and reading, between one culture and another. In the tradition of the library professionals who have gone before us, we tell stories to keep the art of library storytelling alive.

Why do we do it? We have seen the power and authority of storytelling work its magic on the most reluctant listeners. The library literature on the promotion and use of traditional literature is based on the underlying certainty that stories will lead children to books, and that books will lead children to richer, fuller lives. Storytelling gives us heroes—not robotic transformers and metamorphosing rangers but heroes and heroines who win with wit against the powerful, with humor against the self-satisfied, and with generosity of heart against evil self-interest. Storytelling creates a community of listeners out of a group divided by age, gender, race, and economics. Promoting and telling tales from many cultures raises awareness of those cultures, and promotes pride in the cultural heritage of individual listeners. Telling tales from many cultures provides listeners with a common culture, a unity created from the diversity of many. The answer to the question "where can I find more stories?" is—books. End of digression.

We abdicated our professional responsibility when we became too involved with non-literature based programming, dog-and-pony shows for the sake of the numbers, flash and dash for the sake of a newspaper article; when we replaced storytelling with videos; when we became too busy or too tired to keep up with the literature.

Keep up with the literature. This is the pivotal issue in library services for children. You cannot effectively utilize your collection unless you know what's in it. You cannot effectively do reader advisory unless you know
what is in your collection. You cannot effectively do juvenile reference unless you know what is in your collection. You cannot effectively direct other adults who work with children to the resources and materials they require unless you know your collection. You cannot effectively defend your book budget unless you know your collection. How do you know your collection? Big surprise. You read it. All of it. I know, there's no way. But try anyway. Read all the picture books. Read as much fiction as you can. Skim the non-fiction—table of contents, photos, index. You cannot defend your collection if you do not know what's in it, and you cannot know what's in it if you don't read it. Knowledge of children's literature, its history and content, is critical when formulating a collection development policy. It is also critical in giving you a sound basis for selection. No one has so much money in their book budget that they can afford to buy mediocre materials, and there is a lot of mediocrity out there. Buy multiple copies of quality, don't waste your money on mediocrity. How do you know what constitutes quality material? Read reviews, read journal articles, read the books—and then use them with children.

When people come to us, to children's librarians, they expect us to know—the books, the children, and the ways to connect them. When daycare centers, schools, and other community agencies come to us, they want the knowledge and expertise they expect professional children's librarians to have, what books work with kids, and why. Parents come in and want to know how they can help their children become readers. Teachers come in and want books for a specific curriculum unit. Homeschoolers come in and want classic titles that reflect a certain value system. Children come in and want a good book, a funny book, a mystery, or a book "like the one I read last time." You can serve them because you know the books and can talk about them in a knowledgeable fashion that inspires confidence in your selection and belief in your professional integrity.

Our second strength is our affinity for children. We like them. All of them, even the ones that drive us crazy. I always thought that what made youth service librarians so effective with children is that we are probably the only people they know who don't want anything from them. We're not their parents, so we have few expectations about their personalities or interests. We're not their teachers, so we don't pressure them about grades. We're not their coaches, so athletic prowess or lack thereof is not an issue for us. We're not their peers, so whether they are part of the right crowd is of little concern to us. We take them as they come, and as long as they are not defacing library property or engaging in obviously destructive behavior, we take them as they are. Our only concern is to connect them to the books and materials they need, the books that will help them write a paper, develop a self-concept, and formulate a world view that is bigger than their backyard, their street, their side of the road.

Children need access to libraries and information, to the knowledge
and enjoyment they can provide, and we are the ones who give it to them. But despite our best intentions, it seems we are sometimes less able than we should be to communicate our place in the big picture to the community at large. How do we reach the people we need to reach in order to confirm our place in the policy-making arena? Significant, lasting change comes from the grassroots level, and grassroots change comes from networking. Being a good children’s librarian gives you an instant opening with your most natural allies—the parents of the children you serve. Put up your tent and pound your drum. Every child who has a positive library and book-related experience has a message for the adults around him; every adult you convince about the importance of connecting children and books is a missionary for your cause. Push the books. Base your programming on the literature. Talk about the importance of books and reading. Turn your library into a place where reading, readers, and books are valued. Challenge your service area to become a reading community, a place where reading, readers, and books are valued. Make it a team effort. Do not waste your time on programming or events that do not promote your collection and the other resources you offer. Do literature-based programs and coordinate literature-based events that focus on the goal of creating a reading community.

**GETTING THE JOB DONE**

I know what you’re thinking. It’s too much. The hero cannot possibly sort millet seed from sand. It’s too big. The giant has seven heads and the hero only one. We can’t do it. One cannot carry water in a sieve.

Well, many hands make light work, the hero has a magic sword, and doing whatever is necessary to get the job done is the definition of a professional. Keep the idea of the library connecting children to books and stories at the forefront of community events. Be aware. Be responsive. Love the children, the books, the stories, your work. Know the whys and wherefores of what you do—why story times? why toddler programs? why book talks? why storytelling? why outreach? We must tell the story of the importance of connecting children and books. We must communicate the importance of positive interaction with books and print. We must communicate and nurture the spirit of discovery, the joy in story, and the intellectual curiosity that turns children into self-aware, powerful adult seekers of knowledge, on-line, off-line, and every place else.

Am I advocating a return to dusty storefronts with crowded shelves, a smell of lemon wax, and no opacs or PCs? As much as I might be sentimentally attached to the notion, I am not. I am very fond of computers. I would not give up my word processing program for love or money, and I am infinitely thrilled by *The Bulletin* Web site and the opportunities that it provides. I think cruising the information highway (remember that phrase? now relegated to yesterday’s info-byte junkpile) is very handy for lots of
stuff, but as a friend of mine once told me when I was learning to drive in Chicago, never get emotionally involved with traffic.

The professional literature, the journals, the newspapers, are full of articles about technology and its impact; school and public library administrators are frantically pouring hundreds of thousands of dollars into technology in a futile effort to be on the cutting edge; and computerized reading programs that give points for books read are dangerously close to becoming selection tools instead of motivational tools. We have high government officials who think we should pay kids a dollar or two for every book they read, parents who think reading certificates aren’t enough of a reward for participating in the summer reading program, and school administrators who don’t see the value of a well-equipped, on-site media-center. What’s a librarian to do?

Smile. Be enthusiastic. Be informed. Pick up a book, and make them an offer they can’t refuse. “In the light of the moon, a little egg lay on a leaf. One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and—pop!—out of the egg came a tiny and very hungry caterpillar” (Carle). “My great-great-great-grandmother did great things. Elizabeth lived during the Revolutionary War, but she did not fight in it” (Heare). “The first week of August hangs at the very top of summer, the top of the live-long year, like the highest seat of a Ferris wheel when it pauses in its turning” (Babbitt 3).

Tell them a story. “Once there was and twice there wasn’t,” or “Most folks don’t know it but the animals didn’t always live on earth. Way back before ‘In the beginning’ and ‘Once upon a time,’ they lived next door to the moon” (Lester 1). Or, “When wishes were horses and beggars could ride, in a stone castle by the sea there lived a rich laird” (Del Negro), or “Once there lived a woman who had a son, a boy so round and fat, and so fond of good things to eat that everyone called him Buttercup” (Sierra and Kaminski 54).

Never underestimate the power of a story. Ruth Sawyer—one of those professional women with vision that we don’t talk about nearly enough—tells in The Way of the Storyteller about an encounter she had with a child and a story. Sawyer was 16 and visiting Boston with her parents. She was babysitting for the seven-year-old daughter of their hosts. In the daytime all was well, but when night fell the child became frightened and uneasy until all the lamps were lit. At bedtime, she would not go to bed until Sawyer promised to stay with her and keep a light burning. Sawyer offered a story. The child resisted—she hated stories as much as she hated the dark, especially stories with witches, giants, and ogres in them. “How about fairies?” Sawyer asked. “They’re elegant.” Then she told the story of the boy who gathered herbs by moonlight so his mother would be healed. “It will sound better if I put out the light.” She told the story three times. The next night it was the same, and the next, until “dark came gently, with it the stars, the call of the screech owl, and all the little sounds of
earth that came with spring. Together we felt the comfortable darkness fold us in." Years later Sawyer met the young girl in a cafeteria. Each was unsure of the other's identity at first, until the girl, now an eighth-grader, cried out: "I know who you are! You're the girl who made me like the dark" (Sawyer 83-84).

I think sometimes we have lost our focus, our sense of our profession's history and philosophy. It helps to return to that basic but irreplaceable premise: the right book for the right child at the right time. It helps to develop something of an attitude, as well. My friend Michael, a former children's librarian, had it down cold. When asked by a well-meaning but apparently uninformed parent what the reward was for reading a book in the summer reading program, Michael, a most elegant dresser, would let his reading glasses slide down to the end of his nose, peer disdainfully over them, and reply precisely and succinctly: "Madam, reading is its own reward."

Ruth Sawyer would have approved.

WORKS CITED


