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Editor

Book Links: Connecting Books, Libraries and Classrooms

Book Linking to Story

We all have stories. For most of us, they start with family stories, oft told and fancifully embroidered. I grew up in a large, loud family where there were stories, but there were also “holes” where stories should have been. Things never talked about, around which stories couldn’t grow. It bothered me. There were no stories about my father’s side of the family, because some long-ago falling out with his brother closed down all conduits to stories, even the ones from his childhood before the breach. It caused him to devalue the power and need for story. When my father’s sister, the only relative we maintained contact with—and only because she wouldn’t let us lose the stories—came to visit and shared her lore, my father left the room.

Though my mother always referred to my father’s love of history, I rarely saw him read; he often criticized me or my sisters for “wasting time” reading when we could be doing something “useful.” The rest of us were and are a family of readers, passing books back and forth, sharing stories from school and bridge club. One person’s interest linked to a related book that then dovetailed with another title, seemingly unrelated to the first impulse to “read up.” Little did I know that this mesh of oral and written stories was really basic training for my future profession.

There were other kinds of “holes” in the fabric of our stories, too—frayed edges around what were perceived to be our “family matters.” That they were not to be shared was implicit, but these memories were frequently off limits for discussion even in the family. Many years later, I understand a bit better. Reading Frank McCourt’s *Angela’s Ashes*, I started to realize you can’t stop story; you can only postpone it for a generation. Then the stories will out, producing not only readers and tellers, but writers, educators, passionate advocates for story. We’re all seeking to fill in the holes in our personal and our cultural histories through stories: written stories, told stories, stories in books, movies, even on the Web.

Of course, many of the stories and books I've always gravitated to have centered on the kinds of secrets that so long frustrated me. Secrets within families, governments, cultures, textbook accounts of history; secrets in our own psyches and souls. Whether poetry, mystery, memoir, biography, or autobiography, stories and books usually come down to telling secrets. And children love secrets, for to the youngest the world is full of them. Before adults successfully conspire to turn the thrill of discovery into work, children love to learn because it means deciphering coded messages, knowing the secrets the adults know. Children love to share their secrets, too, to tell the stories they are learning. You can only imagine how much I worried my "keep it close to your chest" parents when I would go visiting in the neighborhood. Like most children, I was a storyteller, and what I knew, I told. Not always appropriate behavior, but very helpful in learning to appreciate and even shape—and surely embellish—a good story.

The need to know and the need to tell drives storytelling, drives learning and fuels understanding. Whether formal or informal, oral or written, stories tell children they are included in the community. Books share with children the rich juicy secrets of life.

Working with articles for *Book Links* often feels like weaving on a loom. A nonfiction book for middle-grade students, *The Dead Sea Scrolls* by Ilene Cooper, the author of many fiction and nonfiction books for children and the Children's Books Editor for *Booklist*, was the focus of a feature article (Cooper, "Dead Sea"). The author describes her fascination with the complex history and significance of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Her desire to tell the story of the scrolls in a way that children could not only understand but find as exciting and intriguing as a mystery or thriller led her to connections with books about archaeology, religion, the history and politics of the Middle East, and even computers, since technology made possible the ultimate reconstruction of the holes in the scrolls' secrets. In the article, Cooper uses the same connecting strands she used in writing *The Dead Sea Scrolls* to link it to books on those subjects for children. When an author shares the threads of facts and ideas that they untangled and wove into a gripping story, children appreciate the texture of that tapestry of story and, hopefully, will be motivated to weave their own stories.

From the earliest years, our lives are filled with story threads. Some of the first stories children learn and hear, the traditional folktales of their particular culture, form the canvas into which other story threads are interwoven. George Shannon shows how one such tale has been the thematic fabric over which other tales have been stitched in an article entitled "The Pied Piper's New Melodies: Folktale Variations." The basic story elements of the Pied Piper have been adapted to suit various genres, settings, social issues, plot twists, and parodies in a range of books, plays, and short stories for adults and young adults, as well as for very young children. The original tale becomes a coded language through which

new understanding comes to light. As the article shows, using the "key" of this tale that children know well can be a way to help them appreciate differences in form and structure in various literary genres, in cultural references in other media, and in everyday language. Looking closely at how stories borrow from one another and elaborate on themes builds an appreciation for the ways in which "stories beget stories."

Many of the most ancient myths and folktales were attempts to explain the natural world around us. Children do this instinctively, and we can build on their understandings of the physical world by pairing their observations of science concepts with folktales, picture books, nonfiction, and poetry that explore similar principles from a literary point of view, enriching both experiences. Judy Sima's article, "Story-Enhancing Your Science Lessons," includes suggestions for expanding the impact of science, such as reading Joseph Bruchac's retelling of "Turtle's Race with Bear" in *Iroquois Stories: Heroes and Heroines, Monsters and Magic* to dramatize an experiment with the surface tension of solids and liquid (47). In the story, Turtle wins the race across a frozen pond with the help of relatives who poke their heads up through holes in the ice.

Children do need and want to know about the world, and stories that connect to their lives help them to learn and to care. Eliza Dresang, an associate professor in the School of Information Studies at Florida State University, in her article, "Developing Student Voices on the Internet," explores some of the many Web sites on which children and young adults are speaking out about what matters to them, finding their voices in response to global events and using those true voices to tell their stories. This article connects some of those sites with recent books for young people that also reflect children's voices and experiences. Among the books included are *The Palm of My Heart: Poetry by African American Children*, edited by Davida Adedjouma and gloriously illustrated by Gregory Christie, who received a Coretta Scott King Illustrator Honor Award for this book. That title is an excellent example of how cultural understanding, sharing of secrets, and a foundation for building community can all be fostered through reading, as both the art and poetry of *Palm of My Heart* are imbued with respect—respect for the teller, respect for the listener, respect for the story. A Web site that resonates with this book is *KidsCom*, whose "Make New Friends" page features "graffiti walls" on which kids of various ages can add their thoughts, creating poetry, more story, more secrets to be shared and understood.

Another way to nurture understanding about the world and about shared experiences and different heritages is by giving children access to accurate, realistic stories from and about a variety of cultures other than their own. Consistently encouraging children to read about other cultures helps them to break down artificial barriers and to gain compassion and understanding for all people as individuals, rather than drawing

artificial borders between “us” and “others.” The International Board on Books for Young People does an inspiring job of turning good books for children into bridges spanning chasms between peoples. “The World of IBBY,” by Amy Kellman, provides a list of excellent books for children of all ages that reflect some aspects of the cultures of nations that have IBBY sections.

Linking the stories in books to what children are learning and what they need to know about the world lets the secrets out and turns facts into story—compelling, exciting, living story. Short books of historical fiction for students from kindergarten through the middle grades have the muscle to arouse self-professed nonreaders to the power of story (Sullivan). Some are in picture book format, but with the involving plots and believable characters that older children, as well as young readers, will connect with; others are compact novels that will whet children’s appetites for this genre and encourage them to try longer, more intricately plotted works.

Author Deborah Hopkinson, on writing about creating her picture book *Birdie’s Lighthouse*, follows the same tack of viewing history as compelling story and offers practical examples of ways to open those stories to children, using every tool at our and their disposal (“Shining Light”). Birdie tells her story through a journal kept during the year her family lives on Turtle Island, where her father, and later Birdie herself, keeps the lighthouse beaming brightly. Hopkinson found books and Internet sites dealing with lighthouses, weather predictions and storms, and journal writing—all important elements in Birdie’s story—that teachers and librarians can use to link children to Birdie’s experiences and the real period and situation in which they are set.

Bringing stories to children and expanding the story’s secret by opening doors to other secrets and new information are what teaching and librarianship are all about. Facts and chronologies begin to make sense, they become something to care about, when readers hear, see, and empathize with human beings much like those who made those events history. Family stories can give new meaning to history and historical fiction can inform family stories. Those oft-heard tales of great-greats echo with new importance when a child reads a gripping story of that ancestor’s time and place, whether it is an immigration story or one of wartime life in the States or in Europe.

Books provide connections to distant occurrences, whether those occurrences are distant to readers’ physical location or their emotional space; connections through books allow readers to empathize with characters, to superimpose human faces and feelings onto events that may be outside their personal experiences. These bridges of books act as links between the author and the reader, characters and the reader, ideas and the reader. The power of these links, and our commitment to making them, cannot be overestimated.

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