

Tell Me a Story



Writing is an art that is perhaps ten thousand years old, but the art of storytelling is much, much older. Humans have been telling stories from the very beginning – perhaps from before there was anyone who we would recognise as human.

The number of stories that were ever told is far beyond counting: those that are preserved in books are merely the fossilised remains of a tiny fraction.

I have become acutely aware of this since the pandemic through online storytelling sessions in Ballyeamon Barn hosted by Liz Weir, and learning how to tell myself. This has given me the opportunity to listen and learn from far-distant tellers who I might otherwise never hope to meet in person, and have them hear and respond to my own stories. Yet there is as much difference even between telling on Zoom and telling live as there is between reading and telling on Zoom.

Feedback is even more immediate. You quickly learn to tailor both the story chosen and the manner of its telling to the audience before you. Some audiences will have ears for what you intended to say, some will not. You have limited time, five or ten minutes at most, so you have to keep it simple. If they miss something important they cannot stop and go back for it – you must do that for them. That is why traditional folk tales are so simple and direct. Their complexity lies in repetition, and the variation of familiar form. Each story, they say, has a beginning, a muddle and an end. The job of the muddle, once the beginning has been told, is to come to a satisfying end – one that seems somehow both surprising and inevitable.

It's easy to get caught up in trying to remember the exact words, especially if you have an academic background, but there is no canonical version. No story need ever be told exactly the same way each time. In the retelling of a tale there is a constant natural selection going on – the words and phrases that are most easily recalled – whether because they are most familiar or because they are most strikingly apt – are the ones that will be heard and remembered. So, although stories are endlessly varied, the same plots and motifs constantly recur. All tellers have their particular favourites, and

old friends may turn up unexpectedly in the tales of very different cultures. Each brings its own flavour: whether Irish or African, Yiddish, Arab, Indian or Native American, because each teller interprets according to their own social priorities. Sharing stories helps to make the strange seem familiar, and the familiar strange.

Folk tales are simple by nature. They may often seem simple-minded. Their essence can be stated in a couple of sentences. Take for example the little-known Grimm Brother's tale *Bearskin*. A poor soldier makes a bargain with the Devil: in exchange for unlimited gold, he must wear only a bearskin and not wash for seven years. It ends in an act of charity, love and marriage. In between is a muddle that I could never make anything of. Perhaps that is why it is so unpopular. When I heard Shane Ibbs tell the tale, I did not recognise it at first. It felt more like Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*. Yet, as the familiar scenes unfolded, I saw how he had made something different of it – a fable of a soldier with PTSD, of finding the humanity in someone who was quite literally brutalised.

Whether that was the original true meaning of the tale is unimportant. Such tales mean whatever they mean for their tellers and hearers. The teller should always credit their source, if they can, but each makes it their own. So. Choose a tale that speaks to you. Listen to it. Ask it questions. Make friends with it. Introduce it to new customs, people and places until you find where it will thrive. Tell it, make it your own, listen to the questions that come back. Decide how and whether to answer them, and tell it again. See where it leads you.

By then you may feel the need to write it down, to make sure all the pieces fit together. You may have the beginnings of a novel.

Jenny Brien

Image: *The Boyhood of Raleigh* by Millais