



Book Review

Review of *Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians*

Victor Dominguez Baeza, *Oklahoma State University*

ABSTRACT

Review of *Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians*, edited by Maria Barefoot, Sara Parme, and Elin Woods.

Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries. 166 pp. ISBN: 978-0-8389-3860-7 \$56

KEYWORDS

storytelling, library instruction, library services, cultural considerations

SUGGESTED CITATION

Baeza, V. (2022). [Review of the book *Once upon a time in the academic library: Storytelling skills for librarians*, by M. Barefoot, S. Parme, and E. Woods (Eds.)]. *Journal of New Librarianship*, 7(2), 1–3. <https://doi.org/10.33011/newlibs/12/1>

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.



Stories are an integral part of the human experience and people have been using stories to remember, teach, and entertain since before the written word. Whether we are teaching, helping, reminiscing, sharing, or simply talking to ourselves, stories are probably part of that experience. Librarians, for instance, use storytelling to relate to their audiences and to help keep them engaged. Storytelling enhances communication and can assist in understanding. Something shared in story form helps stimulate the brain, prompting the listener to try to find similarities with their own life experiences, or allowing them to experience something new. This is the promise of storytelling, which is why being intentional about it can make it an exceptional and powerful tool. To utilize storytelling effectively, according to editors Maria Barefoot, Sara Parme, and Elin Woods, “librarians must be able to apply the art behind it, understand the educational theories that support it, and communicate these stories clearly to a variety of audiences” (p. 5). Some of us are better skilled at storytelling than others, and this is where *Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library: Storytelling Skills for Librarians* can be an excellent resource.

Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library is a collection of chapters, most of which contain a Creative Commons license, written by practitioners and following a standard structure. Each chapter contains seven sections: an introduction, a storytelling goal, audience, delivery, theory, cultural considerations, and a practical example. The structure helps ensure that each chapter has similar elements even when the topics are different. Although the urge may be to gravitate to the practical examples, which are extremely helpful and informative, readers should not overlook the sections on cultural considerations. This is where the authors address how they did or did not use stories outside of their own experiences. Here the authors had “an opportunity to think about including aspects of social justice within their already existing work to share with readers” (p. 13). In a way, these sections serve as a lesson within the lessons, giving the reader insight into the social justice successes and failures of the authors as they designed and implemented their use of storytelling.

The chapter introductions in *Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library* are in themselves valuable, as here the authors were able to use storytelling to introduce their material. The story elements contained in the chapter introductions allow the reader to find similarities to their own lives and relate to the author’s situation and setting. Many of the stories involve elements that will be familiar to most, especially those who conduct library instruction. Some will be less familiar, helping readers to recognize the motivation and context involved within the example.

The book includes an in-depth introduction, written by the editors, which discusses the historical and theoretical roots of storytelling as well as the social justice applications of it. Here the editors explore two traditional library spheres where storytelling is applied, children’s programming and information literacy instruction. Yet, the introduction also looks at the broader applications of “storytelling as communication, which librarians have begun to employ

in the areas of reference, outreach, management, and assessment” (p. 3). Among the many available techniques, including using anecdotes or metaphors and employing case studies and active learning, the editors explain that to use them to full effect librarians need to use real people with real needs or problems. Even more importantly, the editors suggest, the stories should contain and share the emotional aspects of the situations. In this way, storytelling can demonstrate to patrons that they are not alone, and acknowledges that their struggles are real and valid.

Each chapter author addresses the cultural considerations of their work, and the editors cover this concept thoroughly within the book’s introduction. They present the idea of the usage bias of majoritarian stories that can “distort and silence the experiences of people of color” (p. 15). The editors explain that librarians need to be careful, and intentional, about the stories used to make sure they include counter-stories based on real people. In this way, librarians can “reframe the narrative around the library as a place where all may feel welcome” (p. 17). The editors ask readers to take an honest look at themselves in order to identify their own biases. Because “while librarians should share their personal stories and make connections, they should also hold space for their more marginalized peers and their students” (p. 17).

Once Upon a Time in the Academic Library is a good source for practical ideas and examples that can be adapted for different needs. The book provides motivation for incorporating storytelling into many facets of academic librarianship and encourages a closer look at the ways in which storytelling has and can be used. The chapters are thematically grouped around the areas of the Information Literacy Classroom, the Stacks, and the Physical and Virtual Library Spaces, and work well together. The book also contains extensive endnotes and references throughout for those wishing to do more in-depth investigation on the topics discussed. Although created for the academic librarian, the book will prove to be a useful resource for anyone in a library setting wishing to incorporate or improve their use of storytelling.