

# Paradoxes of storytelling in librarianship

**Dr. Kate McDowell**

School of Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

**Abstract:** Through an examination of the paradoxes of storytelling, we might reclaim the wisdom of library storytelling and thus inspire productive storytelling approaches and concepts for all areas of librarianship.

**Author Bio:** Kate McDowell has taught graduate-level storytelling seminars to aspiring professionals for the last ten years, and has served as the storytelling consultant for fundraising at the University of Illinois for three years. Her storytelling courses explore topics from folklore to digital storytelling, and her workshops teach storytelling thinking for many purposes, including fundraising, career preparation, business, and public service.

**Keywords:** *storytelling, library storytelling, library history, business storytelling*



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## Paradoxes of Storytelling in Librarianship

In the past decade, storytelling has become almost a buzzword in business settings, where the emphasis is on persuasion. Authors Annette Simmons, Stephen Denning, Paul Smith, and others have promoted the power of story to align leaders with followers and spring an organization into action. A few librarians have written about how these business storytelling ideas could be applied to the business of librarianship (Marek, 2011; Magnuson, 2016). What of the highly aesthetic, century-long tradition of storytelling within youth services librarianship? The task of captivating, entertaining, and enjoyably educating an audience of 90+ preschoolers and their caregivers requires quite a bit of persuasion. In a public library setting, where they are mostly free to leave at any point, the simple act of persuading the bouncing crowd to stay and pay attention would be daunting to most CEOs. When it comes to persuading listeners through story, we should not over-borrow from business and overlook our own storytelling tradition in librarianship. Library storytellers have practical knowledge of what neuroscience has begun to reveal: “human beings are hard-wired for story, and respond to it at a visceral level” (DeINegro, 2015, p. 5; Sturm, 1999; Haven, 2007).

What is storytelling? Doug Lipman describes storytelling as a triangle, a relationship between three entities: the storyteller, the story, and the audience. Despite the possibility of direct relationships between the teller-to-audience and teller-to-story, he notes that the relationship between the audience and the story is not entirely within the teller’s control. We tell a story, the audience hears a story, and we expect that the message delivered is the one received. And yet, we have all witnessed moments in which that which the teller said is not exactly that which the audience took away. “The circumstance that forces you to be humble is also what makes it so miraculous when you succeed” (Lipman, 1999, p. 18).

The long tradition of storytelling in youth librarianship is perhaps best characterized not by definitions, but rather by paradoxes. Parker Palmer and Brené Brown describe the value of paradoxes for their research, inspired by words from Carl Jung: “Only the paradox comes

anywhere near to comprehending the fullness of life” (Palmer, 2007, p. 65; Brown, 2017, p. 115). These paradoxes characterize the fullness of storytelling in the library tradition:

- Enchantment and Rigor
- Planning and Flexibility
- Aesthetic Power and Humility

The truths that these seeming contradictions evoke represent the professional wisdom of library storytelling, wisdom that should belong to all of librarianship.

### **Enchantment and Rigor**

There was enchantment at the birth of storytelling in librarianship. Marie Shedlock entranced children’s librarians collectively and made storytelling central to youth librarianship (Baker, 1977, p. 4-5; Miller, 2003, p. 222-223). She taught librarians how to think about a captivated audience: “We learn in time that want of expression on the faces of the audience and want of any kind of external response do not always mean either lack of interest or attention” (Shedlock, 1915, p. 13). Decades later, her practical wisdom has been affirmed by Brian Sturm’s research, which shows that brain activity during storytelling listening mimics trance states (Sturm, 1999). We can claim as our professional heritage both the practice and the research that established the enchantment of storytelling.

This is also hard work. Early children’s librarians underwent rigorous training for storytelling. They were expected to practice in front of mirrors (Shedlock, 1915, p. 144), to learn their stories aurally, or through imagery, but not to memorize the words - a feat that still troubles my beginning storytelling students. They must develop voices that would carry “laughter, wonder, astonishment, reverence” (Sawyer, 1962, p. 137). The outward welcome of the friendly children’s librarian belies this simple truth: they were hard on each other. From generation to generation, the training for storytelling encompassed ever increasing demands of “long contemplation,” (Sawyer, 1962, p. 142), cultural respect (Hearne, Cite, 1993; Hearne, Respect,

1993), and critical ability to select excellent stories (Greene, 1996, p. 57). As famed storyteller and advocate for the Black experience in children's books, Augusta Baker recalled: "It seems I did inservice for a thousand years before [Mary Gould Davis] thought I was capable of a full blown-program." That the esteemed Baker herself "had to work and wait" to be allowed to tell stories as a children's librarian is proof of the rigor of librarian storytellers (Smith, 1995, p. 296). New librarian storytellers can expect that rigorous work will be needed to develop their stories.

### **Planning and Flexibility**

Baker described another paradox: "The storytelling program must be carefully planned if it is to be successful. Flexibility and creativity are required" (Baker, 1977, p. 88). This juxtaposition of seemingly paradoxical elements is fundamental to the wisdom of professional children's librarians. Published story hour plans, which are vital technical manuals for children's librarianship, may seem cookie-cutter to an outsider. Planning is fundamental to librarianship, just as knowing your story cold is key to the seeming spontaneity of storytelling.

Any children's librarian worth her salt knows that we keep our plans flexible to connect with the audiences before us. Storytelling, as an art of complex presence and communication, is interruptible, more like a conversation than a concert. Children's librarians are used to navigating surprises in ways that librarians across our field would benefit from understanding. "Storytellers are often faced with situations where any right and reasonable choice must be abandoned on the moment, and something entirely foreign to the usual story-hour must be snatched for and used" (Sawyer, 1962, p. 158). At the same time, that nearness of storytelling to conversation means that the connection to the audience goes deep. "Storytelling at its best is mutual creation. Children listen and, out of the words they hear, create their own mental images; this opening of the mind's eye develops the imagination" (Baker, 1977, p. xii). Librarians' flexibility should be as evident as their work in strategic planning as in the story hour.

## **Aesthetic Power and Humility**

A compelling story is a thing of power. Think of young teens riveted by a ghost story around a campfire, or the whispers of gossip in the break room. Folklorist and acclaimed storyteller Betsy Hearne lauds the aesthetics of folkloric stories, with their “fast-moving, highly structured elemental plots” and “clearly delineated archetypal characters,” for allowing each listener “to glean different emotional, socio-cultural, intellectual, spiritual, and physical connections with a tale” (Hearne, 2011, p. 214). The aesthetic power of an awe-inspiring story holds us in its thrall. “To be able to create a story, to make it live during the moment of the telling, to arouse emotions - wonder, laughter, joy, amazement - this is the only goal a storyteller may have” (Sawyer, 1962 p. 148). The rewards can be great if we take time to translate our data into a compelling story.

Yet this power has its limits. The power of the librarian’s story is not to aggrandize the teller. “Remember, you are the instrument; the story is the main feature” (Bishop and Kimball, 2006). The emphasis is on “the story rather than upon the storyteller, who is, for the time being, simply a vehicle through which the beauty and wisdom and humor of the story comes to the listeners” (Baker, 1977, p. 58). Many a new librarian has taken comfort from this humble attitude, knowing that storytelling works in service of our patrons, our collections, and our communities. As librarians are increasingly called upon to justify their work, this paradoxically self-effacing approach has great potential to get our stories heard.

A truly persuasive story is one that is retold, spontaneously, by those who have heard it. Are leaders ever really leaders because of a single speech or story, or is it the reception and repetition of that message and meaning that bestows power from their followers, the audience? Embracing the paradoxes of enchantment with rigor, planning with flexibility, and aesthetic power with humility will make us more effective storytellers. Whatever the setting - boardroom, municipal government, or provost’s office - these tenets of storytelling can help us develop our

stories and our connection to key stakeholder audiences. In new librarianship, the best twenty-first century practices will draw on the wisdom of our own storytelling tradition.

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