

## Just Only Stories

William McGinley  
George Kamberelis

At the conclusion of *Farewell to Manzanar*, a book the school librarian read to nine-year-old Mari and several of her classmates, Mari talked about the experiences and struggles that other Japanese-Americans were forced to endure as a result of their imprisonment in internment camps during World War II. In particular, she drew a connection between her own life and the experiences of a young girl named Jeane whose father was “sent away to an internment camp like my great grandfather.”<sup>1</sup> Mari uses the story of hardship and separation that Jeane and her father experienced as a way of dramatizing and further understanding the difficulties that her own great grandfather may have encountered in such camps. In this sense, the story offered her a vehicle through which to understand and strengthen the nature of her relationship with her great grandfather and the difficulties he once endured. As she explained:

The story *Farewell to Manzanar* starts out with an adult and she comes to Manzanar, when, after the war is all over and everything and then she remembers the whole story about when she was a little girl and that and how her father was sent away to an internment camp like my great grandfather was, and didn't come back 'till about five months after the war. . . . I was thinking that one of my great grandparents was this man [in the story] who was very proud, and it was very hard for him to be locked up in this place, so it made him kind of crazy. . . . [And there was a little girl in the story] and I thought that I might be very much like that if I was in the war, 'cause she didn't understand you know, what was happening and why her father was sent away, and what they were going to, like a camp, or something like that. . . . Even though it is something that happened a long time ago, it was a big thing, and it was hard, and I wanted to know just how they got through it.<sup>2</sup>

Although it is clear that Mari enjoys reading and being read to, we find it difficult to review her comments without also thinking about some of the important ways

that these and perhaps other stories may have functioned in her life, as well as in the lives of other young readers. Certainly, our inclination to explore this dimension of children's story reading is not new. More than a decade has passed since Gordon Wells noted that stories remain “one of the child's most powerful ways of understanding; enlarging, and working on experience.”<sup>3</sup> However, he also noted that this aspect of children's reading is often viewed as secondary to the more “serious matter” of developing children's basic facility with language or their knowledge of a range of language-related skills believed to be prerequisites for simply learning how to read. As Patsy Cooper suggests in her book entitled *When Stories Come To School*, the vast majority of educators still seem to “lack confidence in the story experience itself” as an academically-worthy practice.<sup>4</sup>

A random perusal of a range of literacy-related articles published during the last decade reflects this lack of confidence and the tendency to use literature for nearly everything except for the kinds of personal, social, or political exploration it might afford. For the most part, authors of such articles have conceptualized and marketed stories as a kind of literary “handyman” capable of repairing all sorts of literacy-related problems from phonics to comprehension. What is discussed far less often is the kind of imaginative work that stories enable—the chances they give children, through the imagination of an author, to experience the lives of others, envision possible selves or possible worlds, explore moral issues of many kinds, and in general, see the world in ways that they perhaps could not have seen had they not read or been read to.

Although we do not disregard the importance of developing children's knowledge of written language and the relationships among letters, sounds, words, and meanings that are so important to becoming a proficient reader, we believe that such knowledge alone provides children with an inadequate lesson in the nature of literacy and the power of literature in their lives.<sup>5</sup> Doubtless, the act of reading stories in classrooms and libraries will continue to provide an important instructional context through which a wide range of language-related knowledge is transmitted to children. However, an equally fundamental part of both learning

how to read and learning how to live in the world is increasing children's knowledge of the many ways that reading stories may be instrumental in helping them make sense of the human experience and the world around them.

This is true, Alasdair MacIntyre tells us, because an individual's or child's understanding of the world is directly a function of the repertoire of stories that they have read, heard, and inherited. These stories, MacIntyre explains, constitute the "dramatic resources" that individuals use in constructing their own moralities and evaluating the moral lives of others. Therefore, depriving children of stories of social traditions, cultural histories, and moral life "leave[s] them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as well as in their words."<sup>6</sup> Although we refrain from scripting the words or actions of any young reader, we do believe that stories offer unique opportunities for imagining and examining many aspects of human life.

#### READING STORIES AND SAVING LIVES

In the closing pages of his essay, "The Story that Saved Life," Kim Stafford reminds us of the storied nature of our lives—the way narratives of human experience help to "rescue" and therefore save us, others, and our understanding of the world in which we live. The sort of "saving" Stafford describes isn't of the dramatic or heroic sort, but a kind of incremental recuperation or mending that often takes place without much notice in the course of daily life:

A story saves a life a little at a time by making us see and hear and taste our lives and dreams more deeply. A story does not rescue life at the end, heroically, but along the road, continually. I do not make the story; the story makes me.<sup>7</sup>

As Robert Coles so convincingly tells us, "the whole point is not 'solutions' or 'resolutions' but a broadening and even a heightening of our struggles—with new protagonists and antagonists introduced, with new sources of concern or apprehension, or hope, as one's mental life accommodates itself into a series of arrivals: guests who have a way of staying, but not necessarily staying put."<sup>8</sup> According to Coles, these "guests," or the characters whose intentions, motivations, and inner lives are made available to us through stories, provide the basis for helping readers of all ages to explore moral and ethical dilemmas or conflicts of many kinds from the behavior of classroom bullies to an understanding of human life and loss. Indeed, the act of listening, reading, or responding to the stories of others can have important consequences for the ways in which we think

about our own lives because the indirections and vicissitudes that inhabit a story and the lives of its characters become our own. Such power, Bruner has suggested, is at least partially dependent upon the quality of a given story. In other words, the plights of characters must be rendered in such a way that their lives and experiences can be "rewritten" through a child's own "play of imagination."<sup>9</sup>

So what sorts of life-informing and life-transforming possibilities does such a "play of imagination" afford when children are absorbed in a story, "caught in the feelings and the possibilities portrayed?"<sup>10</sup> What possibilities for resolving conflicts and understanding the perspectives of others are afforded by story reading and discussion? The stories our own work leads us to tell are about the kinds of possibilities we make available to children when they enter into engagements with stories. In this paper, we explore the meanings that one third-grade child named Tanya associated with story reading and its imaginative potential for interpreting personal and social issues in her world.

#### CHILDREN READING TEXT AND LIFE

Over the past several years, we have spent numerous hours on school playgrounds, on the floors of classrooms, in hallways, and in libraries, listening to children talk about a wide variety of books and stories. In sharing excerpts from students' written and spoken responses to literature, we hope to illustrate some of the ways that stories provided them with a uniquely powerful means through which they might explore and reflect upon experience.

We started our exploration into this topic several years ago at Francis Parkman, a Detroit elementary school, with Daniel Madigan and a teacher, Victoria Rybicki. As part of their participation in these unique programs, children were introduced to the idea that stories can be a means of personal, social, and political exploration and reflection—an imaginative vehicle for questioning and participating in the world. Tanya was one of several third and fourth-grade children with whom we spent time talking about reading and writing. Throughout the year she read several books that enabled her to reflect upon important personal experiences, as well as to understand relationships with several of her peers. *Lulu Goes to Witch School* was a favorite of Tanya's. The book is about the experiences of Lulu, a young girl who is picked on and ridiculed by a fellow student named Sandy. In discussing the book, Tanya drew a connection between Lulu's experience at school and her own efforts to develop new friendships:

Umm, it [the book] made me laugh, and it was talking about school and I liked how it began

where she was at school 'cause it was just like me when I went to school that first day, everybody picking on me. It brought back memories . . . when I was picking on people and people picked on me . . . .

When I first read the first part of the book, it was talking about Lulu going to witch school and I predict, I said in my mind that this might be how my life was when I first came to school. . . . And as I read on, it kept talking about how I was when I first came to school. And then it came to the part where Mary (a new student that just arrived in Tanya's class) came to school, and I started thinking on her [Mary]. And then it went on and on, and started, then we started being friends.<sup>11</sup>

*Lulu Goes to Witch School* offered Tanya a chance to reflect upon the moment when she and her friend, Mary, began to develop a meaningful friendship—one that helped both girls ease the uncertainty associated with their first days at a new school.

Tanya also used reading (and writing) as an imaginative vehicle for identifying and exploring possible selves, especially in relation to certain African American role models. She was particularly attracted to books about the lives of African American women, and, encouraged by her teacher, she read many such books during the school year. Among the most memorable for Tanya were biographies of Josephine Baker, Leontyne Price, Diana Ross, Sojourner Truth, Maya Angelou, and Harriet Tubman. In discussing her feelings about the book, *Diana Ross: Star-Supreme* by James Haskins, Tanya emphasized how the story had prompted her to reflect on her own life and to imagine possibilities for her future:

This book made me feel happy because I like the way she sings. . . . I think famous people were very special because, um, some famous people helped others be famous and some famous people just made me feel happy. . . . I like black singers or famous people because some blacks are, maybe I could understand blacks more than whites. Or different kinds of, um different kinds of people. . . . Like when I grow up, I'll probably be a singer or a preacher or somebody like Dr. Martin Luther King or Diana Ross. . . . I think it will be like something special in my life.<sup>12</sup>

Tanya also celebrated the independence and self-respect of African American women through her reading of *Ragtime Tumpie*, which documents the life of the successful female jazz dancer, Josephine Baker.

In her journal, Tanya focused on Baker's determination to become a professional dancer despite the opinions of those who thought she was not capable of reaching such a goal:

This book is about a girl who wanted to be a female dancer but a man said she couldn't because she was too little. But she kept saying she wasn't too little to dance until he let her dance on stage. . . . I think Josephine Baker was a great dancer in her days. Two thumbs up for Josephine.<sup>13</sup>

In examining Tanya's writing and listening to her talk, we learned that reading and writing about the lives of notable African Americans, especially African American women, enabled her to rearticulate some of her own life experiences and social codes. In this process, we think she deepened her understanding of certain life situations (e.g., poverty and ridicule) and certain human dispositions (e.g., self-respect and resoluteness).

But Tanya also explored possible selves, celebrated particular role models, and constructed her own literate values, moral codes, and everyday practices through the stories, essays, and poems that she wrote. As she did through acts of reading, Tanya used writing to reciprocally articulate certain dimensions of her own life with her understanding of the lives and issues of people about which she wrote. This process was made transparent to me when Tanya discussed her poem, "Harriet Tubman."

Brave was her name.  
A slave and also a slave hero.  
She took her people to  
Canada to let them be free  
and have freedom. Girl didn't  
come in this world to be  
no slave. She freed more  
than a hundred people.  
Grandma Moses they called  
her, but she did not  
come in this world to be  
no slave.<sup>14</sup>

In later comments, Tanya helped us to understand how writing the poem about Harriet Tubman had provided her with a way to affirm her own developing identity as a writer, as well as a way to celebrate the life of an African American woman whose courage and kindness she greatly admired and sought to emulate:

When I grow up, I tell my teacher and my mother and my father that when I grow up I want

to be a Black poetess or a story writer or a writer to write about Black history people from the past Harriet Tubman was one of the people who lived long ago, not long ago, but kind of long, far ago. Um, I think she was a nice person 'cause she helped a lot of people, and she just didn't go on and find the way to be free by herself and stay in Canada just to free herself. She freed a lot of people. . . . When I wrote it I felt like I was right there, when she was freeing her people, and I was one of the people that she freed, and I was thanking her so much.<sup>15</sup>

Imagining herself as a celebrated writer was also a common theme within many of Tanya's entries in her reading-response journal. In particular, she continually reiterated her desire to one day write a book of poetry. For example, in response to a book of poems by African American authors entitled *Honey, I Love and Other Tales*, Tanya wrote in her reading-response journal, "I think this is a good book because their telling me about black poetry that I never heard before. I think one day I'll write a book like this one or something like it." 16

Implicit in Tanya's desire to become a "preacher" or a "Black poetess" was an abiding concern with developing ethical postures in and through her reading and writing. Especially interesting was her sense of the power of both speech and writing to affirm her own developing moral sensibilities. Also evident were the possibilities for social reform that she connected with becoming a professional author, the result of having experienced the power of writing in her classroom.

We think that reading and writing provided Tanya with a discursive arena for exploration and growth. Her reading often served as a vehicle for reflecting upon past experiences, as well as a way to reconsider important social relationships such as peer friendships. She also explored possible selves through reading and writing about the lives of particular African American leaders, especially famous African American women. Finally, her motivations for becoming a writer were closely related to her developing ethical sensibilities.

#### CLOSING REMARKS

In his autobiography entitled *The Words*, Jean-Paul Sartre remarked that human beings are always tellers of stories. To know this, as Jerome Bruner reminds us, is to know the drama of stories that life imitates—to take note of the storied nature of our lives and the ways we use narrative to compose or even "save" our selves. 17 This is the kind of composing that even the most reluctant reader or writer among us cannot avoid, for as Wayne Booth explains, anyone who engages in honest

introspection knows that, "we live much of our lives through images derived in part from stories of ourselves and others in the world both real and fictional."<sup>18</sup>

Certainly, as this essay makes clear, there is no shortage of theoretical voices ready and willing to outline any number of academic arguments attesting to the profound influence that stories of all kinds may have on lives. Put plainly, stories matter. That said, what do the spoken and written words of Tanya have to offer those of us who read to young children or those whose responsibility it is to encourage children to read stories, poems, novels, or plays?

Our hope is that her words serve as a kind of youthful translation of the theoretical notions that preceded them—that Tanya's account of stories acts as a living and breathing paraphrase of something many of us who have become readers know to be true about literature and reading. This is knowledge that is beyond the capacity of the academic language of educational theory, school reform, curriculum standards, or standardized testing to adequately describe or represent. The sort of understanding we refer to achieves its clarity and vitality in Tanya's translations and our willingness to take her words and the reading words of other children to heart.

In presenting Tanya's spoken and written words, we are reminded of a song entitled "Scrapyard Lullaby" by the Texas-born singer-songwriter Chris Whitley. Filled with references to worn-out machinery, rusted car parts, anvils, and broken hood ornaments, Whitley seems to be describing his own musical processes along with what appears to be the source of material and inspiration for his lullabys:

I'm down in any junk on a darkened day  
searchin' through the prizes others throw away.  
Like a walking translation on a street of lies,  
Singing these scrapyard lullabys.<sup>19</sup>

Arguably, Whitley is also singing about how we see the world—what we notice in the objects, and perhaps in the people, who inhabit our lives. As it concerns Tanya and other young readers and writers, we think that his words might serve as a kind of poetic reminder to all of us who have the privilege of participating in the literate worlds of young children. This sort of reminder is necessary if we are to ever understand, as Whitley tells us, "what it takes to see, the gold from the alchemy."<sup>20</sup>

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup>"Mari." Interview with William McGinley. (Boulder, CO, 1993).

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Wells, Gordon. *The Meaning Makers: Children Learning Language and Using Language to Learn* (NH: Heinemann, 1986), 203.

<sup>4</sup>Cooper, Patsy. *When Stories Come to School: Telling, Writing, and Performing Stories in the Early Childhood Classroom*. (Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 1993), 47.

<sup>5</sup>Willinsky, John. *The Triumph of Literature and the Fate of Literacy: English in the Secondary School Curriculum* (New York, NY: Teacher College Press, 1991), 6.

<sup>6</sup>MacIntyre, Alaisdair. *After Virtue*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 201.

<sup>7</sup>Stafford, Kim. "The Story that Saved Life." (In C. Witherell & N. Noddings (Eds.), *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991), 28.

<sup>8</sup>Coles, Robert. *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*. (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 129.

<sup>9</sup>Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 35.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>"Tanya." Interview with William McGinley. (Detroit, MI, 1990).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>"Tanya." "Harriet Tubman." (Detroit, MI, 1990).

<sup>15</sup>"Tanya." Interview with William McGinley. (Detroit, MI, 1990).

<sup>16</sup>"Tanya." Journal entry. (Detroit, MI, 1990).

<sup>17</sup>Bruner, Jerome. *Acts of Meaning*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 24.

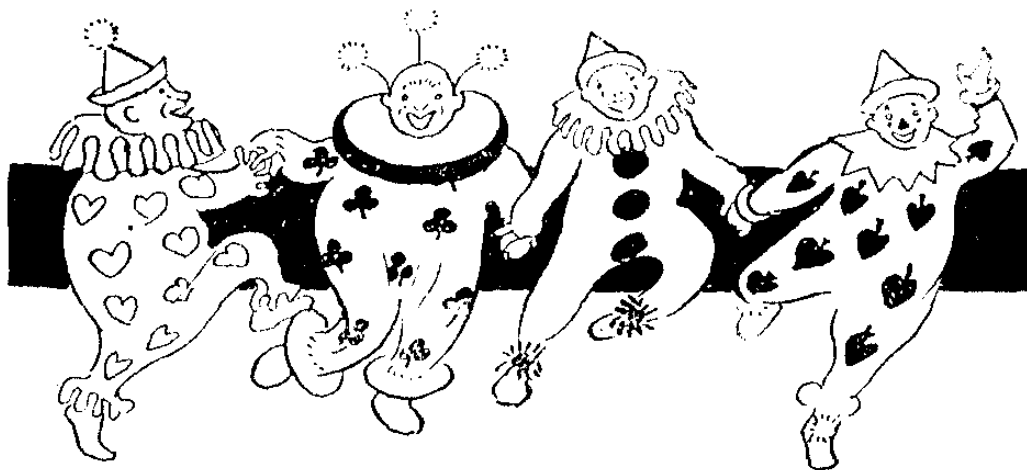
<sup>18</sup>Booth, Wayne C. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 228.

<sup>19</sup>Whitley, Chris. "Dirt Floor." *Dirt Floor*. Messenger Records, Inc., 1998.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

CAL

*William McGinley is Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Colorado-Boulder. George Kamberelis is Associate Professor at the University at Albany-SUNY Albany, NY.*



*Illustration from "2002: Childlife One Hundred Years from Now."*