

Why stories?

Hilary Cooper

During the Early Years and Foundation Stage children should listen to stories, ask how and why and talk about the past (DfE 2012). Young children are comfortable with stories. Through stories children extend their knowledge. They create new worlds through the powers of imagination. Stories allow children to move from the present into other worlds, to explore emotion, intention, behaviour, conflicts, loves, hatreds, loyalties and complex motives beyond their experience. Stories recount events in sequence, transmit information, and introduce new vocabulary. Stories help children to think critically, to question and discuss ideas which help them begin to understand the past.

- [Story telling: how can we imagine the past?](#) - Grant Bage

Which stories?

Fairy stories

Children need, eventually, to know that history is based on sources, traces of the past which remain, but first they must, gradually, cross the bridge between fantasy and reality. Because fairy stories are often not logical they help children to examine the relationship between fantasy and reality. One five-year-old, asked if he thought that *Jack and the Beanstalk* was a true story, said that the giant was not real because he knew there were no giants but he thought that Jack's mother was real, 'because my mum talks to me like that'! By the age of six, many children can be quite confident in sorting books into 'reality' and 'fantasy'. Fairy stories provide the opportunity to talk about motives, about good and evil and the behaviour of all sorts of different people, wise, foolish, good, evil, rich and poor.

And they are illustrated with pictures of past times: carriages, windmills, goose-girls, and castles...

- [Teaching history through the use of story: Working with early years' practitioners](#) - Paul Lunn and Alison Bishop

Different versions of fairy stories

There are many versions of fairy stories written for a modern audience. Can children understand that these are different versions of the same events, not different stories; for example *Little Red Riding Hood* told from the wolf's perspective (Shaskan, 2012) or the wolf's version of *The Three Little Pigs* (Trizidas and Oxenbury, 2003)? *The Barefoot Book of Fairy Tales* (Doyle, 2006) contains stories from around the world.

Myths, folk tales and legends

Myths are fictitious stories involving supernatural people, actions and events. Legends and folk tales are folk memories of events handed down orally.

When children begin to distinguish between what may be real and what may be fantasy in fairy stories they will relish a fresh challenge in understanding the dual role of fantasy and reality in myths, legends and folk tales because they are full of metaphor, symbol and imagery in which 'pretend' and reality interact. By questioning traditional stories children try to resolve issues, speculate and hypothesise about behaviour and beliefs. Myths and folk tales from Africa, the Caribbean, India and China encourage children to understand cultures, values and attitudes other than their own. Folk tales deal with values and beliefs, heroism, compassion, hopes and fears, jealousy, betrayal and rough justice in ways that young children can engage with. Children can compare different versions of the same tale.

- [Story, Myth and Legend: The story of Atalanta](#) - Hilary Cooper
- [Thinking through history](#) - Hilary Cooper

Fictional Stories about growth, change

Children can relate their own experiences to stories such as *When I was Little: a Four Year Old's Memoir of her Youth* (Curtis, 1995), *I'm a Big Brother* (Cole, 2010) or *Grandpa* (Birmingham, 2002). Such stories are a wonderful way of making children aware of changes over time in their own lives and families. (See 'Teaching history through the use of story' (Lunn and Bishop))

Oral stories

Asking older people to tell their own stories about when they were small, and about life before they were born, can illustrate time and change in personal ways accessible to the youngest children. Different grannies and granddads will tell their different stories, reflecting the rich variety of human experiences in a community. Or oral stories might be eye-witnesses' accounts of events.

- [Oral History: a powerful tool or a double-edged sword?](#) - Hilary Claire

Fictional stories about the past

These provide another opportunity for children to reason, based on their own experience and

knowledge. These five-year-olds are discussing *Bill and Pete go Down the Nile* (de Paolo, 1988). Aaron knew ‘the sphinx and the pyramids are true’ because he had seen them on television and in pictures. Theo agreed. He had learnt about them from his mum. So, as Ayodele concluded: ‘parts are about real things, but crocodiles and birds can’t talk’.

True historical stories

Is the story of Grace Darling true? Throughout the story these four-and five-year-olds rowed the boat, or made sound effects for the storm. Afterwards most of them said that they thought it was a true story, but had difficulty saying why. But Katie did not agree. She reasoned that ‘The fishermen wouldn’t have gone out in a storm. Nor would Grace. It was dangerous and her Daddy would have gone on his own. My Daddy wouldn’t take me out in a storm.’

- [How should we remember Rosa Parks?](#) - Hilary Claire
- [Putting the story back in history: Persephone](#) - Alf Wilkinson
- [In My View: Enjoying a good story](#) - Paul Bracey

Talking about stories

To engage children in discussing stories teachers need to ask questions, to allow children to express their different ideas, listen to each other and reflect and also to ask their own questions (see Table 1). It is not the accuracy of each child’s ideas that is important but the reasoning used to support them and maybe a change in thinking at the end of a discussion. The table shows examples of questions and of children’s answers.

If you want to see more from the Historical Association:

- [E-CPD Storytelling](#)

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Table 1: Storytelling and Discussion Key Stage 1 Exemplars: Columbus the Explorer; Magellan at Key Stage 1

Possible questions	Some responses from 4–5-year-olds
<p>How do you know if a story from a long time ago is true? Do you think this really happened? Why do you think that?</p>	<p>‘If I’ve heard of the people, like Robin Hood, I know it’s true. Also if people are wearing old clothes.’ ‘I’d know it was true if it’s about something I know – like dinosaurs.’ ‘You think if people can do things or not.’</p>
Time questions	
<p>Sequence: What do you think will happen next? What happened next? Who can tell me the story? Cause, effect: Why do you think that happened? Similarity, difference, then, now: Do we have these (do this, wear this) today? Why not? What do we have today instead?</p>	<p>Discussing a story about Princess Victoria Theo thought that ‘the king was old, like my granddad. He’s 70 and he’s got a stick.’ But he decided the king lived before his granddad because, ‘The coach is from the olden days, like in cowboys. I saw a coach like that on telly. You don’t get cowboys now – only on telly. They lived about 200 years ago. Also the globe in the picture is different from my teacher’s globe.’</p>
Vocabulary	
<p>What do you think this is? How do you know? Has anyone else ever seen one? Where? What do you think it is for? How do you think it works? Who do you think used it? Time language: Before, after, now, then, old, new Perhaps..probably...</p>	<p>Five-year-olds described, with relish, the pictures in a story about castles: ‘That’s a GARGOYLE; And that’s the PORTCULLIS.’</p> <p>Another group enjoyed explaining that Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle was a WASHERWOMAN and was an EXCELLENT CLEAR STARCHER.</p> <p>‘The sphinx is very old but it looks new because it has been cleaned. I saw a picture about it on tele.’</p>
Motives	
<p>Why do you think s/he did (said) this?</p>	<p>Discussing why Old Boney wanted to attack England (Garland, <i>Seeing Red</i>, 1996): ‘He wanted power; to be king of England, take land, make English soldiers fight for him, get hold of money.’</p>
Interpretations	
<p>Are these stories/ accounts, pictures the same? Why? Why not?</p>	<p>Oral history; WWI: Mrs W lived in London. Mrs I lived in rural Scotland, ‘They both lived in WWI. Why didn’t Mrs Wilkinson say all about the war like Mrs Isaacs did?’ ‘Because they both lived in different countries...’</p>