

The Power of Story

Joy Cowley, Children's Author, Wellington, New Zealand

Editor's note:

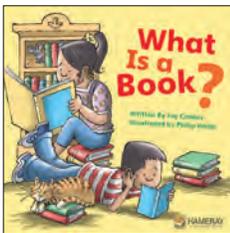
This article is based on Joy Cowley's keynote address at the 2015 National Reading Recovery & K-6 Literacy Conference in Columbus, OH. In honor of Reading Recovery's 30th Anniversary in North America, Joy has written another delightful story, What is a Book?

Following is Joy's foreword:

"Thirty years ago, New Zealander Dame Marie Clay took Reading Recovery to the United States, where it quickly became a home-grown product helping young readers at risk. To celebrate thirty years of child empowerment, it seems appropriate that another New Zealander who sees the United States as a second home should write a book for the 2015 National Reading Recovery and Literacy Conference. With award-winning illustrator Philip Webb and educational publisher Raymond



Yuen of Hameray, I am very happy to offer you What is a Book? The author's royalty is donated to the Reading Recovery Council of North America, whose work is above price."



On behalf of the editorial team of JRR and the members of RRCNA, we thank all involved for this generosity.

This is a wonderful celebration, dear friends, and it's a huge honor to be here with you all at this conference. I look out from this lectern and see the power of Reading Recovery® in front of me. You are the instruments of change for thousands of students. And if we could also gather in all those individuals whose lives you've changed, the crowd would fill this city. Many of those people are now parents themselves, and your influence is influencing a second generation. When you empower a child, that will be passed on and effectively you will be empowering that child's children. So, I say happy 30th birthday, Reading Recovery. Thank you for making a difference to the future of the world.

You and I know where all this began, don't we? She was my friend and yours, Marie Clay, a New Zealand educational lecturer and reading specialist who was a passionate advocate for children who were reluctant readers. Marie was a good friend and we had this joke amongst us that we never met in New Zealand; always we met in other countries. It would be in Singapore or Hong Kong, Australia, the United States more often than not, and always we would sit down, have a good old cup of tea and talk about children. And always it was about pleasurable learning and how pleasurable learning leads to pleasurable recall. I'll give you an example of that in my own life.

A couple of years ago, I was in Wellington city, running to catch a bus. I dropped my wallet on the pavement and didn't realize it was missing until I arrived home and found my husband, Terry, on the phone to someone at the Central Police Station. My wallet had been handed in at the lost and found office. I immediately went back to the city and encountered a serious young officer behind the lost property desk. "Are all the cards in this wallet yours?" he asked. "Yes," I replied, aware that there was a whole bunch, some shop and appointment cards, a few credit cards, all in my married name which is Coles. The officer thrust a pen and paper at me. "Please write your name here." I wrote C. J. Coles. His face tightened. "So they are not all yours!" he said. It was then I remembered a business card in my own name — J. Cowley. I explained this. "Not Joy Cowley!" he said. "Not the author!" I admitted that I was she. His expression changed and with a huge grin, he bounced up and down, chanting, "I'm the king

of the mountain! I'm the king of the mountain!" He then told me that had been his favorite book at school.

To see that stern police officer suddenly relive a happy moment of childhood reinforced for me the awareness that we learn everything in an emotional context, and that pleasurable learning leads to pleasurable recall. We can teach children to read and at the same time, hate reading, if the process is difficult and without meaning.

I sometimes tell children that when I was young, I thought that people aged like apples. The small green fruit grew larger, they ripened, then they got wrinkly and fell off the tree. But now I know we are not apples but onions. We put on the years in layers, sometimes literally, but always we keep that little green shoot of our beginnings. At any time, I am not only my current age but all the ages I have ever been, and with a little practice, it's not too difficult for the memory to probe and expose any year of my life back to about two and a half. A memory that can do that is an asset to an author, to a teacher, and to a parent. I can remember doing some sewing on the dining room table and listening to my children in the kitchen. Their conversation died and in the ensuing silence I called, "I told you not to eat those dried apricots." There was a small, mouse-like scuffle and then a shocked voice said, "How did you know?" How did I know? Easy. Garden of Eden stuff. In the kitchen there was only one tempting food that was forbidden. My reply was, "I have a good memory."

But right now, I am going to ask you to do a memory probe. Go back through your onion layers to the green shoot of your beginnings. Go back to the time when the world was fresh and new. When a simple buttercup or dandelion was the most beautiful flower on the planet. When words had a magic that you could feel on your tongue. In fact, everything was magic. You made games and rituals out of your daily routine. Your porridge or pudding was an island surrounded by a milky sea and you were the giant who consumed it. The space under your bed was the hiding place of monsters. The bed itself was friendly, a land of hills and valleys and caves. Comforter country. Your treasure was stored in the secret place under your pillow. Remember those days? Then you will remember that this rich land of the imagination was also shaped by some book—or books—that you absolutely loved. That book was not simply information. Not just a story. It was a friend that entered your life. You knew it well. It had a certain feel. The pages had a smell you inhaled.

And although you had heard the story so many times that you knew what was on every page, you still had to have it again and again. You felt that the characters from the book inhabited your land. Sometimes you were the main character in the book. You dressed like that character. You put on the voice. You acted out your part with toys. Maybe you were the Grinch or Sam-I-Am with a plate of green eggs and ham. Perhaps you were Max dancing with the wild things, or Tinkerbell or Pooh or Tigger. You may have been sitting in a box as a nest, chanting, "I meant what I said and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful, one hundred per cent!" But I don't hear you chanting, "Run, Spot, run!"

The foundations of literacy are laid by entertainment. Story comes first. Magic. Marie Clay knew this. She knew that the power of the story came first, that spark of delight that fires the mind with enthusiasm.

That lengthy preamble brings us to a truth that should be obvious but it can get buried by our adult layers. The foundations of literacy are not laid by basals or phonics or any other method of teaching children to read. The foundations of literacy are laid by entertainment. Story comes first. Magic. Marie Clay knew this. She knew that the power of the story came first, that spark of delight that fires the mind with enthusiasm. The mind that has delighted with story is a mind receptive to learning. Then the skills are introduced within the context of meaning, according to the child's learning needs. But we cannot teach language skills to closed, confused, or indifferent minds. The structures of learning are built on the foundation of interest — in other words, we learn through pleasure.

There is a very good chance that if I ask you to detail what you did on a routine evening one day last month, you will not be able to tell me. The details will have blurred in your memory. But, perhaps last year you went out to a dinner party and had a fabulous time. Now, a year later, you can not only remember who was there and what they were wearing, you probably remember every

dish that was served. So what made one date forgettable yet the other unforgettable? The same principle that brings a child alive to the *Very Hungry Caterpillar* but not to Dick and Jane or “can the man fan Dan.”

What, then, are the components of a good story?

Component Number One: Entertainment

I say that entertainment comes first. But what kind of entertainment do I mean? There is always available entertainment that will appeal to the simpler animal instincts — stories and films which cater to aggressive tendencies in young children who are learning to control their emotions. There are macho hero tales that reinforce the child’s “me first” attitudes. Stories which, in some way, condone prejudice. We need to be aware of entertainments that do not help children to grow in character. In a classroom discussion some boys told me about a video game in which the good guys killed all the bad guys. “Why?” I asked. “Because they were evil,” a boy replied. I asked, “Which were you? The good guys or the bad guys?” They were all the good guys. So I asked them if they had noticed that when we talked about good guys and bad guys, that we were always good and other people were evil. “Why do you think this is?” I asked. They didn’t know. So then I asked, “What do you suppose those other people think about us?” Again, there was a silence, but this time a thoughtful one, and then the subject was changed.

So yes, children do get a lot of entertainment of this kind, especially on TV and in video games, and I don’t think they do much harm as long as there is guidance and children are taught to see beyond stereotypes.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is the plethora of children’s message stories written by well-meaning authors who want all children to grow up more virtuous than their generation. You know the kind of stories I mean. They are about children who make noble sacrifices, children who are good and kind and helpful and truthful and honest, etc., etc., etc. Adults can find that sort of sermon boring. So can children. The sentiments are worthy, but are they housed in an entertaining story which belongs to the child’s world?

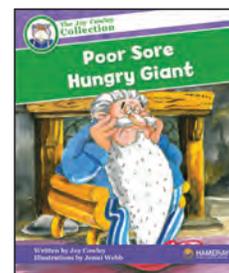
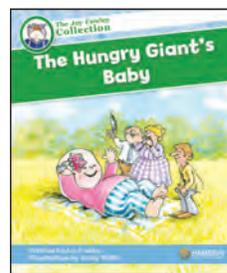
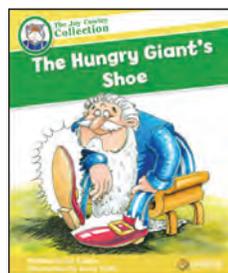
Think of the loyalty of *Horton the Elephant*, the patience and persistence in *Green Eggs and Ham*, the conquering of fear in *Where the Wild Things Are*. A book has entertainment that is character building but not preachy. The message is in the entertainment.

Component Number Two: Child-centered Content

A good book is child-centered. It affirms and nurtures the child. Many of those dull message stories I mentioned demand that the child sacrifices himself for the greater good. That’s an adult message. Only a fully developed ego can sacrifice itself. Social responsibility is the product of a mature individual and it comes from good self-esteem. To the young child who may or may not have adequate parenting, a story that affirms and nurtures is a gift of love in that child’s life.

There are many children’s picture books that are not child-friendly. They are written from an adult viewpoint and while adults might appreciate them, they do nothing to enhance a child’s self-esteem. These are the stories that get laughs from children’s mistakes, stories that have

Young and old readers love learning about familiar characters. Joy Cowley has extended the story of The Hungry Giant to continue the fun with books like the ones shown here.



adults solving children's problems, stories that try to make children conform to a world of adult values. In other words, stories that see children as adult investment and not as authentic people in themselves. I can't show you examples because that would be unfair to well-meaning authors who simply lack awareness. But you know the kind of stories I mean.

Books that are child-centred honor and value the reader as a worthy person in her own right. They do not portray children as adult investment or as objects of fun. I mentioned that child-centered books are a gift of love in that child's life. But that doesn't mean love from a sentimental adult point of view. There are books in which adult characters tell children how much they love them, while at the same time they show the children as powerless.

A good book has magic — magical story, delicious language. Right there at the beginning of the story is the baited hook that grabs the reader. When we were children, we loved those books. They were our friends that we read over and over again.

Children usually identify with the smallest character in a book. If the story is about a child and a cat, the reader will want to focus on the cat. If it's about a cat and a mouse, the reader will want the mouse to be the winner. Small needs to win and the small character in a book should always empower the reader. This can be done in several ways.

In my books I try to always make "small" the winner. In *The Hungry Giant*, who is the winner? Little bees. The giant's a bully. That book might seem a little violent to adults, but all children have at some stage known what it is to be bullied and that's the appeal of that giant. He gets his comeuppance from the smallest characters in the

book, the bees. Small is the problem solver. We see that in the best loved books and folk tales. The small one is wise. The small one is powerful. Small is allowed to make mistakes with the understanding that this is a way of learning. That is so for big people, too. As the artist Pablo Picasso said, "I tried things I couldn't do, and that is how I did them."

Component Number Three: Magic

A good book has magic — magical story, delicious language. Right there at the beginning of the story is the baited hook that grabs the reader. When we were children, we loved those books. They were our friends that we read over and over again. We can identify with children today who want to hug a book, take it home, and sleep with it under the pillow. But we also know that there is some not-so-good early reading material that is being given to children. Many children are given meaningless drills as an introduction to reading. Why are we still doing this? That system has never worked. It won't work now. Children readily learn language skills, including the sound of letters and chunks, when there is a meaningful context. By meaningful we understand that the context not only makes sense, it engages, it entertains, and it creates positive emotions.

For centuries, researchers have been able to study dead brain tissue. It is only since the advent of microchip technology that scientists have been able to study live brain function. The results of this research have been around long enough to be common knowledge among publishers and educators. We are hot-wired for pleasure, and we learn most efficiently and effectively through pleasure.

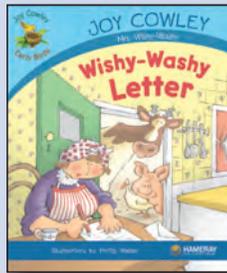
Teachers who work with children every day, in a child-centered way, don't need scientific evidence. You have all seen how children open up like flowers to learning through the magic of meaningful story. My heart feels very full as I leave here today. I take back with me so many memories of such warmth and positive feelings about the future. Thank you for the way you are shaping it.

Joy Looks at Books Children Love to Read

So, what are the books you loved as a child? I'm sure those books were not works of instruction. They didn't preach. They didn't talk down to you. You remember them with pleasure because pleasurable experience means pleasurable recall. So, what was it about those

books that you enjoyed? They came alive inside you. They made you feel part of a story. Somehow the book was a friend that stayed with you. It empowered you in a special way. For example...

Wishy-Washy Letter is about a word that has two meanings. Sometimes children get confused about words that have two meanings, but this can be made into a joke.



Mrs. Wishy-Washy said my letter needs a stamp.

"We can fix that," said the cow to the duck.

The duck flew up and got the letter.

The cow stamped on it.

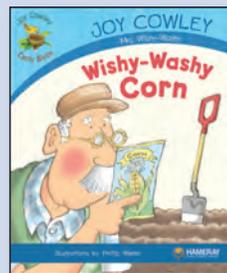
The pig stamped on the letter.

Then the duck went stamp, stamp, stamp.

"Mud," cried Mrs. Wishy-Washy. "Who put mud on my letter?"

I tried not to explain away jokes. Children are smart at picking up illustration cues and I just let them work out the joke.

Here's another from the Wishy-Washy books: *Wishy-Washy Corn*.



Mr. Wishy-Washy planted some corn seeds.

The corn seeds grew into corn plants.

Corn plants grew and grew and grew.

"Corn," said the cow.

"Corn," said the pig.

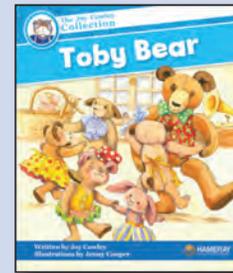
"Lovely corn," said the duck.

Mr. Wishy-Washy said to Mrs. Wishy-Washy, "Come and see my corn."

"What corn?" said Mrs. Wishy-Washy.

And of course, the children know what happened.

The last series is about my visit to a Teddy Bear museum. It had a wonderful arrangement of all ages and types and I decided to do a series about Teddy Bear and different characters. And this is about *Toby Bear*. Because all children know Teddy Bears. It was dance night at the Teddy Bear museum.



The music box was playing and old Toby Bear wanted to dance. Oops. Toby bumped Ruby Bear who fell over. "You are clumsy, Toby," said Ruby Bear. "You are too clumsy to dance."

"Sorry," said Toby. "Let me let you up."

You may notice something about Toby. He's only got one eye.

The music was fast, old Toby Bear still wanted to dance. Bump.

This time Toby bumped Fred Bear. Fred Bear bumped Ruby Bear. Ruby Bear bumped Bobby Bear. Over they went.

Soon there was a heap of Teddy Bears on the floor.

"Why are you so clumsy?" Ruby Bear cried.

"I can't see," said Toby Bear. "Today I lost one of my eyes."

"Oh, poor Toby," everyone said.

The bears looked and looked for Toby's lost eye, but it was not there.

Ruby Bear said, "I have a gold button on my gold jacket. Will that do for an eye?"

"It will be better than nothing," said old Toby Bear.

"Stay still!" said Ruby "and I'll sew it on,"

"Amazing!" cried Toby Bear. "Now, I can see you all and you all look like gold."