

## The changing role of story in Singapore – A storyteller reflects

*by Rosemarie Somaiah*

This presentation will provide a quick glimpse of the changing use of 'story' in engaging young children in Singapore in the last decade and more, using examples from story initiatives that the author has been involved in - as writer, performer and educator working outside, with and around the formal curriculum, as well as within the general community.

### **Ten years ago**

In 2004, when I was a storyteller at the Children's Discovery Gallery for 'Rivertales' at the then Singapore History Museum (SHM), children in Primary School bought the recommended textbooks and the related Activity Books for English Language learning in school. Although the textbooks contained a few simple folktales as well as extracts from fiction and non-fiction, few teachers - beyond marking the accompanying comprehension exercises for grammar, spelling, vocabulary and use of language - focused on the stories themselves, or used them in other ways. Fewer teachers still told stories orally in the classroom and most would have considered oral storytelling an unnecessary, or unapproved, diversion in the English language lesson because the 'measurables' were considered difficult to define or prove. The same teachers might have approved oral stories as appropriate enough for Civic and /or Moral Education classes but, as these subjects were not taken into account for assessment or grading in a highly competitive academic system, the general assumption, even amongst many parents, was that they were 'not really important' and therefore did not warrant serious attention.

Many teachers of English Language in Primary Schools at the time had not studied English Literature, as Literature was not a subject in the Primary School curriculum. In Secondary Schools, the Literature lessons included some basic exposure to poetry, prose, drama and a novel. Language and Literature were subjects kept apart and I have met a few teachers and students who did not see the relevance of using 'Literature' in 'Language' teaching. Similarly, I have met students whose well-meaning parents forbid their children to waste valuable time reading fiction, preferring them to work instead on 'assessment books' for Math, English, Science and Mother Tongue languages to improve their academic results.

In conversations about the topic, the individuals who were conscious of the power of 'story' and who spoke of having heard or used stories holistically and regularly through their own school-going years, as well as in their work as teachers, were those who taught or studied in what are generically referred to as 'mission schools' or schools that have religious or cultural affiliations of some kind. Mother Tongue teachers too sometimes used stories. It was assumed that, in the bi-lingual system, Mother Tongue lessons were to promote 'culture' as well as language-learning, a responsibility that was not expected of the English language classroom which, in the general opinion, was required to serve a purely functional role in providing students with skills that would lead to jobs and promote economic growth. For the same reason, Maths and Science were often considered the subjects to focus on, while English and Mother Tongue languages were to be assiduously worked on only to ensure good marks for clearly measurable academic success.

### **Seeds of change planted earlier (1999 – 2003)**

However, even then, there were several indicators of the renewed interest in the use of story and the seeds for this change, or re-growth of story in popular culture, had been planted earlier in different ways. My own awareness of this was in 1999, when the National Book Development Council of Singapore (NBDCS) organised a course for storytellers to re-introduce the idea of 'oral storytelling' in a society that seemed to have forgotten about its traditional uses. Apart from oral storytelling skills, the course included a segment on Children's Literature and an overview of some of the different traditions of 'oral storytelling' particularly in Asia, which were distinct and different from 'reading aloud.' The participants in the course were primarily librarians and educators promoting a more holistic style of literacy education outside the formal curriculum. A few would later develop their skills and become professional storytellers performing for all ages.

Several participants at the course that I attended in 2000 were also members of the Society for Reading and Literacy (SRL). The SRL, a volunteer organisation which had been around since 1985, had since its inception, regularly promoted reading aloud, children's literature, author visits and other such activities in scheduled public talks at libraries. At the time the term 'storytelling' was usually understood to mean reading aloud. Teachers and librarians who considered reading an essential tool in literacy, especially tended to favour the text over the oral form. However, with the setting up of The Storytellers Circle (STC) in 1999 as a special interest group under the SRL, more attention was given to 'oral storytelling' as a distinct art form within the SRL. The NBDCS and the National Library Board (NLB) continued to lead the charge for the wider acceptance of story both orally and in text, and festivals such as Asian Congress of Storytellers and the Asian Children's Festival and its variants became a staple in the storytellers' calendar with SRL members often serving as volunteers or presenters at such festivals.

Apart from being active in SRL and the STC, and participating in these festivals, I was at the time teaching in a small privately-run 'enrichment centre' which was one of the few such centres then that focused on teaching English in creative ways that included the use of games and lots of stories. The centre, whose clientele came from a middle-class neighbourhood was situated in what, in Singapore, is called 'the heartlands'. It ran its own small library with a wonderful selection of children's books. Building empathy and understanding of different points of view was an essential part of the teaching process and children were encouraged to listen, speak, think, read, write, explore and play with all aspects of story using various art forms. Having grown up outside Singapore in a less competitive environment with exposure to such ideas, I did not find the methods strange or unusual. I could also, at the same time, understand and appreciate the reasons, historical and cultural, for the different styles within education in different countries. Often the clientele at centres, such as the one I worked at, came from the two ends of the academic spectrum. The children were either doing so poorly at school that the parents were willing to try new ways to help their children, or the students were so bright, that regular school work did not seem to challenge them enough and therefore the parents sought extra support.

I began to work more formally with 'story' in 2000 when I was first engaged by the Singapore History Museum at Stamford Road, not as a docent or volunteer, but as a storyteller to write, create and tell stories orally within the Children's Discover Gallery when group bookings came in. From 2003-2006, while the building underwent extensive renovations, the 'Rivertales' Exhibition at Riverside Point

helped to maintain the presence of the museum in the public consciousness. Here I retold traditional folktales, or shared original stories that I had created for the museum based on the gallery's handling collection, to an audience that came from kindergartens, school groups, families and the general public.

In 2002 and 2003, on behalf of the SRL, I presented a talk titled 'Why Tell Stories' which focused on oral storytelling in Queenstown Library and Bukit Batok Community Library respectively. This talk was to help parents and teachers rediscover the power of stories within education in reading, literacy and oral fluency as well as other aspects of life such as family bonding, character and values building. In addition I began to provide storytelling sessions to a couple of private kindergartens on a weekly basis.

### **Story in leadership and governance**

I was also alert to the use of story in other areas. For example, on 4 August 2002, I was delighted when the local newspaper, The Straits Times featured the then Minister for the Arts and Information David Lim sharing an excerpt from *Heart Work*, a book chronicling the experiences of the Economic Development Board's pioneers in drawing investments into Singapore. It described how and why he shared a story orally in a critical business meeting with an international client:

It was the principle I wanted to defend. But how could I do that, faced against the most formidable of negotiators who had been trained to turn over spreadsheets like a chess master who could play 40 boards simultaneously and blindfolded? I decided to play for time... Tell a story. Use metaphors to say what could not be said directly. Use the time that it takes to flesh out the story to hold back the pressure and to put yourself on an equal footing with the other side. Use the power in the moral of the story to underscore the principles that would otherwise sound plain and platitudinous. (Lim, David. *Heart Work*, 2002)

This provided a glimpse of the growing and conscious use of story for adults within the higher levels of government and other corporate organisations. One of the most noted earlier examples of this was the creation of the Merlion, Singapore's national icon, something that has been called 'deliberate myth-making'. It showed that even in situations when the numbers and figures could be displayed in spreadsheets, story could still play a very significant role. Small groups within large corporate bodies were beginning to consider storytelling in Knowledge Management as well, so that by the time the annual storytelling festival grew into the popular Singapore Storytelling Festival many years later, the NBDCS would invite experts in 'organisational and corporate storytelling' to Singapore.

### **Back to the future! (2004-2013)**

In 2004 SRL storytellers were taking part, for the third time, in NLB's celebration of 'Great Singapore Stories' which had started in 2002 as part of its annual Asian Children's Festival, telling stories to children in various places as well as on the mass rapid transit (MRT) trains. This was still a relatively a new development and, despite the challenges of the unusual environment, there was so much excitement about the storytelling on the trains that SMRT, the organisation that runs the trains,

decided to have a separate mid-year event called 'Tales on SMRT Trains' as part of its own community outreach which it has run, in one way or another, from 2005.

In June 2004, on behalf of SRL, I presented a talk, 'Reading Aloud – The Whys and Hows', at Toa Payoh Community Library. For this talk, I chose to display and share children's books, primarily fiction. This was to enable those still lacking confidence in oral storytelling to use the widely available resources of good stories in children's books. In 2004, again on behalf of SRL, I presented the 'Why Tell Stories', this time to parents in a Primary School. In 2004, 2005 and 2006, I produced public performances called 'New and Old, Read and Told' at which SRL members presented stories to the public.

### **Increasing use of story in education today**

A decade ago in schools, children who arrived on site before the official time were often required to bring storybooks and sit quietly in the school hall in what was termed 'Silent Reading'. This continues to this day. However, the SRL promoted Reading Aloud as well, for a variety of reasons such as to build oral fluency in English as well as presentation skills. These initiatives were often linked to efforts such as the official, 'Speak Good English Movement'. In 2006, the Ministry of Education (MOE) invited schools, in phases, to pilot a new programme called STELLAR or Strategies for English Language Learning And Reading. In this connection, on behalf of SRL, I was invited to present a talk on storytelling and reading aloud to Primary 1 and Primary P2 teachers in Nov 2006. The STELLAR programme, which became available to all Primary schools in 2010, uses Children's Literature as well as texts written for the use of the children in shared and supported reading in class. Teachers are trained in all the strategies, including the use of story. The MOE collaborates with the NLB to provide additional recommendation lists and resources, including age-appropriate books of fiction and non-fiction. Asian Storytelling Network (ASN), the storytelling company that I run, has also worked with some schools to help integrate storytelling within this programme. Apart from training volunteers for its 'kidREAD' programme, ASN also works with NLB in promoting stories as part of its 'Read! Singapore' initiative that encourages the reading of Literature purely for pleasure.

The use of story is also considered valuable with the renewed interest and emphasis on Citizenship, Character and Values Education (CCVE), as well as National Education (NE) which are to be seeded through the entire curriculum. A key component of NE is the focus of racial and religious harmony as well as the acceptance of diversity in Singapore. In addition, individual schools now also focus on proudly declared School Values. As schools work harder to incorporate different student learning styles and abilities and customise their lessons for students from varied backgrounds, they also recognise the need for teachers and counsellors to deal with personal issues such as bullying and peer pressure. Under ASN, I continue to promote the use of storytelling in these important aspects of education. My book, *The Never Mind Girl and other stories* presents some of these issues in stories to trigger discussion about them.

However, even in the differentiated educational environment today there are still many very successful enrichment centres that focus on teaching language purely with worksheets that can be graded for grammar, comprehension and spelling and composition writing. Teachers in such centres that I have spoken to explain that, despite their own convictions, parental expectations and the need to immediately 'show' what the lesson was about forces them to use these more easily quantifiable

methods for regular classes. They reserve the storytelling and drama for just after the exams or use them as treats during the holidays, and often only for the lower classes.

### **Story in popular culture today**

Today festivals such as the Singapore International Storytelling Festival (SISF), the Asian Festival of Children's Content (AFCC) and the Singapore Writers Festival (SWF) continue to celebrate oral storytelling as well as classic and contemporary storybooks, cultivating the ground for local and international audiences. In general, while there is still the perception in some circles that storytelling is meant primarily for education and children, members of STC and the Storytelling Association often present oral storytelling performances purely for adults; children are not admitted to these sessions. This brings the added recognition to the important role that story can play in the life of adults and makes it more acceptable for children to be allowed to experience the art form because it is something of value.

The flowering of the Arts Sector in the last decade has also seen artists of all sorts including dramatists, dancers, musicians, visual and comic artists, animators, singers, authors, poets and storytellers working in different ways, often with other organisations, to engage and involve the larger community. Organisations such as the earlier Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports (MCYS), the National Heritage Board (NHB) and National Arts Council (NAC) have helped to promote greater understanding of the power of story for all ages and to provide more diverse perspectives to the official Singapore story. For example, in 2005, 2006 and 2007, I was tasked by MCYS, on behalf of the Inter-Religious Harmony Circle, with editing the books, *Colours of Harmony*, *Colours of Love* and *A Giving Heart*. These books feature stories from the different religions in Singapore in order to promote religious harmony. In 2008, 2010 and 2011, MCYS commissioned ASN to deliver oral storytelling sessions based on the books *Stories from MJ's Classroom* to promote the four main principle of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 2012, the Preservation of Monuments Board (PMB), under the NHB, produced a children's book, *The Fearless Twins and the Magical Kaleido - A Narrow Escape* which links information on the monuments with a narrative to engage the children and ASN was engaged to promote the book through oral storytelling sessions at various venues. The NAC continues to provide funding and other support for artists from various disciplines. Under NAC's Arts Education Programme, ASN delivers several subsidised storytelling workshops and performances to schools within the formal system. NAC has also, on occasion, supported my visits to overseas festivals to share stories from Singapore.

In recent months there is evidence of the increasing use of story. An article in 'Top of the News' of The Straits Times on 12<sup>th</sup> Feb 2013 was headlined, 'Wooing the story with fairytale spin' and reported that a group of final-year communication studies students had "rewritten 15 popular stories, giving them a witty spin about fertility and encouraging Singaporeans to start a family." Another article on 14 Feb 2013, in the same newspaper, this time in the 'Living' section, is titled 'Making up stories about ourselves'. In it the writer reminds us of the need for critical evaluation of the stories we hear as well as the stories we tell. He speaks of how we reinvent the past and reflects, like any good storyteller: "Many people have a tendency to mythologise their lives; to cast themselves as the heroes of their own life stories." On 19 Feb 2013, yet another article in the 'Life! Arts' section was titled, 'Telling stories keeps history alive - Verbal recounts of events one has lived through bring the past to life.' Sharing an anecdote from her life, the writer Corrie Tan states:

It reminds me why the oral tradition is so important... somehow, hidden in all of us is the ability to remember where we have come from. To make sure that even if every trace of our physical heritage disappears, we will still have our stories to hold on to.

In Mar 2013, I was interviewed about the resurgence of storytelling and one of the questions I was asked was. "Do you think this trend will continue?"

## Conclusion

Do I think the use of story will run its course? Clearly, the links between fact and fiction, truth and story, belief and credibility can sometimes be serious or strained. The merits of Literature as a subject are once again being hotly debated in the local papers, in online forums, within the local community and in Parliament. In the flood of stories sweeping Singapore today, those familiar with the pros and cons of storytelling may argue that figures and words might be used to tell any story. Therefore, while a skilful storyteller might convince a gullible or willing audience, those more sceptical might, in the end, choose to believe just what they want to. What I believe is that belief and scepticism are part of the human story just as commitment and idealism are too. We do have a choice. In my opinion, the way we can navigate through all the stories we hear is to learn to understand, appreciate and critically evaluate the stories - to find our own truths within them.

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