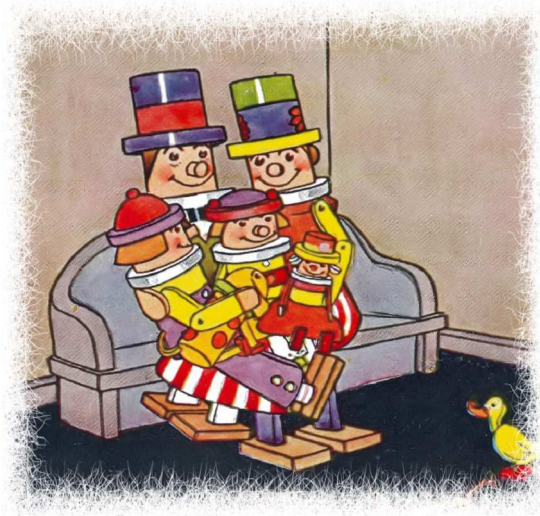




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STORIES TO TELL TO CHILDREN

Ellie Dixon



Based on an original text

by

Sarah Cone Bryant

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About Us

Scruffy's Bookshop is based in deepest rural Devon, England where Ellie Dixon lives with her dogs, Scruffy and Polly. Ellie has brought up her own daughter, and now spends her time restoring and editing vintage children's literature to appeal to today's kids. When not busy with her business, she can usually be found on the beach or getting involved with local community activities.



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SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR THE STORY-TELLER

For a complete practical and step-by-step easy to follow guide to becoming a great story teller, please refer to "How to tell Stories to Children," available from www.continue.to/storyteller

Meanwhile, the few hints and tips below are useful to anyone who tells stories to children.

Take your story seriously. No matter how riotously absurd it is, or how full of inane repetition, remember, if it is good enough to tell, it is a real story, and must be treated with respect. If you cannot feel so toward it, do not tell it. Have faith in the story, and in the attitude of the children toward it and you. If you fail in this, the immediate result will be a touch of embarrassment, which will be obvious to the children, affecting your manner unfavourably, and, probably, influencing your accuracy and imaginative vividness.

Perhaps I can make the point clearer by telling you about one of the girls in a class which was studying stories last winter;

A few members of the class had prepared the story of *The Fisherman and his Wife*. The first girl called on was evidently inclined to feel that it was rather a foolish story. She tried to tell it well, but there were parts of it which produced in her the embarrassment to which I have referred.

When she came to the rhyme,—

"O man of the sea, come, listen to me,
For Alice, my wife, the plague of my life,
Has sent me to beg a boon of thee,"

she said it rather rapidly. At the first repetition she said it still more rapidly; the next time she came to the jingle she said it so fast and so low that it was unintelligible; and the next recurrence was too much for her. With a blush and a hesitating smile she said, "And he said that same thing, you know!" Of course everybody laughed, and of course the thread of interest and illusion was hopelessly broken for everybody.

What she should have remembered is that the absurd rhyme gave great opportunity for expression, in its very repetition; each time that the fisherman came to the water's edge his chagrin and unwillingness were greater, and his summons to the magic fish mirrored his feeling. The jingle *is* foolish; that is a part of the charm. But if the person who tells it *feels* foolish, there is no charm at all! It is the same principle which applies to any assemblage: if the speaker has the air of finding what he has to say absurd or unworthy of effort, the audience naturally tends to follow his lead, and find it not worth listening to.



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So, don't forget, *take your story seriously*.

Next, "take your time." This suggestion needs explaining, perhaps. It does not mean license to dawdle. Nothing is much more annoying in a speaker than too great deliberateness or than hesitation of speech. But it means a quiet realisation of the fact that the floor is yours, everybody wants to hear you, there is time enough for every nuance of meaning, and no one will think the story too long. Never hurry. A business-like leisure is the true attitude of the story-teller.

This result is best achieved by concentrating one's attention on the episodes of the story. Pass lightly, and comparatively quickly, over the portions between actual episodes, but take all the time you need for the elaboration of those. And above all, do not *feel* hurried.

The next suggestion is extremely plain and practical, if not an all too obvious one. It is this: if all your preparation and confidence fails you at the crucial point, and your memory lets you down,—if, in short, you make a mistake regarding a detail of the story, *never admit it*.

If it was an unimportant detail which you got wrong, keep going, accepting whatever you said, and continuing with it. If you were unlucky enough to have left out a fact which was a necessary link in the chain, put it in, later, as skillfully as you can, and try to make it appear as though it's in the intended order; but never take the children behind the scenes, and let them hear the creaking of your mental machinery. You must be infallible.

You must be in the secret of the mystery, and your audience should have no creeping doubts as to your complete initiation into the secrets of the happenings you relate.

Obviously, there can be lapses of memory so complete, so all-embracing, that frank failure is the only outcome; but these are so few as not to need consideration, when dealing with so simple material as that of children's stories

Never let children know you've forgotten something. In the matter of a detail of action or description, how completely unimportant is accuracy, compared with the effect of smoothness and the enjoyment of the hearers. They will not remember the detail, for good or bad, nearly as long as they will remember the fact that you did not know it. So, for their sakes, as well as for the success of your story, cover your slips of memory, and pretend they don't exist.

And now I come to two points in method which have to do especially with humorous stories. The first is the power of initiating the appreciation of the joke. Every natural humorist does this by instinct, and the value of the power to a story-teller can hardly be overestimated. To initiate appreciation does not mean that one necessarily gives way to mirth, though even that is sometimes natural and effective; you will be anticipating the humorous climax, and subtly



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suggesting to the hearers that it will soon be "time to laugh." The suggestion usually comes in the form of facial expression, and in the tone. And children are so much simpler, and so much more accustomed to following another's lead than their elders, that the expression can be much more outright and unguarded than would be possible with a more mature audience.

Children like to feel the joke coming; they love the anticipation of a laugh, and they will begin to giggle, often, at your first unconscious suggestion of humour. If it isn't, they are sometimes afraid to follow their own instincts. Especially when you are facing an audience of grown people and children together, you will find that the children are very hesitant about starting to laugh. It is more difficult to make them forget their surroundings then, and more desirable to give them a happy lead. Often at the funniest point you will see some small listener trying extremely hard to hide the laughter which he or she thinks isn't appropriate. Let the children realise that it is "the thing" to laugh, and then everybody will!

Having made your audience laugh, it's important to give them enough time for the full enjoyment of the joke. Every vital point in a tale must be given a certain amount of time: by an anticipatory pause, by some form of vocal or repetitive emphasis, and by actual time. But even more than other tales does the funny story demand this. It cannot be funny without it.

There are two completely different kinds of story which are equally necessary for children, I believe, and which ought to be given in about the proportion of one to three, in favour of the second kind; I make the ratio uneven because the first kind is more dominating in its effect.

The first kind is the type of story which specifically teaches a certain ethical or moral lesson, in the form of a fable or an allegory. Have a look at the "Jolly Old Shadow Man" (www.continue.to/miniscruffies) which teaches the importance of good manners and consideration for others.

The second kind has no moral message and doesn't attempt to affect judgment or to pass on a standard. It simply presents a picture of life, usually in fable or poetic image, and says to the hearer, "These things are." The hearer, then, consciously or otherwise, passes judgment on the facts. His mind says, "These things are good"; or, "This was good, and that, bad"; or, "This thing is desirable," or the contrary.

The story of *The Little Jackal and the Alligator* later in this book is a good illustration of this kind of character-story. In the naïve form of a folk tale, it embodies the observations of a seeing eye, in a country and time when the little jackal and the great alligator were even more vivid images of certain human characters than they now are.



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Again and again, surely, the author or authors of the tales must have seen the weak, small, clever being triumph over the bulky, physically strong, but stupid adversary. Again and again they had laughed at the discomfiture of the latter, perhaps rejoicing in it the more because it removed fear from their own houses. And probably never had they concerned themselves particularly with the basic ethics of the struggle. It was simply one of the things they saw. It was life. So they made a picture of it.

I wish there were more of funny little tales in the world's literature, all ready, as this one is, for telling to the youngest of our listeners. But masterpieces are few in any line, and stories for telling are no exception.

Visit Scruffy's Bookshop www.scruffysbookshop.com for a good selection of stories both for telling and reading.

MISTAKES TO AVOID

A caution which directly concerns the art of story-telling itself, must be added here. There is a definite distinction between the arts of narration and dramatization which must never be overlooked. Do not, yourself, half tell and half act the story; and do not let the children do it.

It is done in very good schools, sometimes, because an enthusiasm for realistic and lively presentation momentarily obscures the faculty of discrimination. A much loved and respected teacher whom I recently listened to, and who will laugh if she recognizes herself here, offers a good "bad example" in this particular. She said to an attentive audience of students that she had at last, with much difficulty, brought herself to the point where she could forget herself in her story: where she could, for instance, hop, like the fox, when she told the story of the "sour grapes."

She said, "It was hard at first, but now it is a matter of course; *and the children do it too, when they tell the story.*" That was the pity! I saw it happen myself a little later.

The child who played fox began with a story: he said, "Once there was an old fox, and he saw some grapes"; then walked to the other side of the room, and looked at an imaginary vine, and said, "He wanted some; he thought they would taste good, so he jumped for them." At this point he did jump, like the fox; then he continued with his story, "but he couldn't get them." So he carried on, constantly switching between narrative and dramatization. This was enough to make you dizzy and totally distracted from his story.

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