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# STORY

**Still the Heart of  
Literacy Learning**

Foreword by Linda Rief



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## Introduction

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### Stories Make Us Human

*'Cause it's a long road to wisdom, but a short one to being ignored.*

–The Lumineers, “Flowers in Your Hair”

**W**e live in a world of stories. When I turn on my phone the first thing I see is a story – a picture of my two boys, Jack and Matthew, sitting on pumpkins one recent autumn day. I swipe my finger across the screen and click on the photo icon and I'm taken to hundreds if not thousands more stories. When I dip into Facebook (too many times a day some days) I do so because I'm drawn to stories. Each day heartfelt stories fill my news feed in the shape of photos, videos, hyperlinks and anecdotal tidbits. I've seen the stories of dozens of my friends' babies born, of their parents passing away, of the successes and failures in their work lives and personal lives, of the battles they engage in for their children and the children of others. Beyond words and images, I have access to all kinds of soundtracks that make me feel like my story is shared. At home and at work, I tune in to the streaming stories that sites like *Songza*, *Pandora* and *Spotify* provide me, allowing me to tailor my song choice to the story I want my day to unfold into. Whatever mood I'm in, whatever activities I'm doing, aha ... there's a soundtrack to match the story I'm living right now. And others are tapping into the same streaming stories simultaneously. Imagine that.

We live in a time where stories exist where they always have: inside the walls of our homes, outside our front doors, in our backyards, on our playgrounds, in the pages of books, in the brush strokes on canvas, in the imaginative play of children and in the lyrics and rhythms of songs. Yet, today we are

also free to tap into and curate stories in new ways. The premise of this book is that the free-flowing, streaming power of stories can be replicated or heightened in our classrooms.

As teachers, we have a lot of responsibilities. We greet students at the door with a smile. We write beautifully sequenced unit plans. We align our curriculum to the standards. We arm students with strategies to break the code of print. We support them with habits of good readers. We cultivate writers with care. We model. We guide. We watch. We listen. We respond. We read beautiful stories. We share our own. We create our own stories with them every day.

When I meet with teachers early in the school year and ask them “Tell me about your students”, I expect to hear about funny things that have happened so far in the year along with successful and less successful teaching moments, the stories their students have taken to and what kinds of stories they tell. These days I’m often met instead with a list of their students’ reading levels and concerns about how much lower the levels this year seem to be. This makes sense given the pressures teachers face to have students reach benchmarks by the end of the year. Because I am a literacy consultant, teachers instinctively and immediately share the reading level spread in their class as a call for help. I understand this. I empathise. I lie awake at night and strategise. Yet, I can’t help but problematise the framing of “Tell me about your students” with the automatic response of reading levels. Instead, tell me about the authors your students are drawn to. What stories had the class laughing out loud? What moments in stories made them all gasp or fight off tears or give high-fives to their neighbours on the carpet? Tell me about how Jack embodies the stories he loves, meshing fact and fiction following his TV idols Chris and Martin Kratt – better known as the Wild Kratts. Tell me about Lillie’s voracious story-writing, shown by the scraps of paper that collect in her pencil case. Tell me about breakthrough moments for students as writers and what inspired them to take to the page.

As a teacher, researcher and parent, I wanted to write this book to reclaim the central place of stories in our classrooms and our curriculum. As our classrooms and our society become increasingly diverse, I wanted to encourage teachers to look carefully and critically at the stories they share and whether they represent the children in their classrooms. I wanted to offer tools and invitations to centre both traditional and emerging forms of story as the heart of English classrooms. Finally, I wanted to help teachers to have the courage to place story at the centre of their teaching, to be fearless in their beliefs about story as the heart of literacy teaching and learning, and to be confident that when we allow ourselves and our students to express vulnerability – to feel things through story – we are creating pathways for learning.

Kate DiCamillo, the beloved author of *Because of Winn-Dixie* and the former US National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature, reminds us that “story is what makes us human” (Brown 2014). In an educational landscape that is undergoing sweeping changes, and where the daily pres-

sure can at times feel insurmountable, returning to story as the heart of our English classrooms can humanise our teaching. I believe in the power of inquiry, and this book is centred around questions that first guided my work as a primary school classroom teacher, then literacy specialist and coach, and now consultant and teacher of teachers: Whose stories count? Where do stories live? How can stories come to life? How do stories grow? How do we talk about stories? Bookends to these questions are statements, or calls to action: why stories matter, and why this work takes courage.

Chapter 1, “Why Stories Matter”, will provide some context on the powerful ways that stories can transform our classrooms and our students. Chapter 2, “Whose Stories Count?” takes an in-depth look at honouring students’ identities and interests through story selection, with a particular emphasis on closing the diversity gap in our classroom text selections. Chapter 3, “Where Do Stories Live?” looks at literature, poetry, music, art, multimedia and play as sources for stories, concluding with considerations for building thematic and multicultural text sets. Chapter 4, “How Can Stories Come to Life?” discusses the methods we use and how to make them stronger. Chapter 5, “How Do We Build Stories?” provides a new way of thinking about our student writers as architects building on the stories they love. Chapter 6, “How Do We Talk About Stories?” is designed to support you with examples and tools for engaging students in complex conversations about the stories they read, view, compose and experience in life. Chapter 7, “Why This Work Takes Courage”, is written to empower you to take action in your own classroom, making the reading, writing and sharing of stories the heart of your teaching and your students’ learning. There has never been a more important time for children to become storytellers, and there have never been so many ways for them to share their stories.

## Chapter 1

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### Why Stories Matter

*After nourishment, shelter, and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world.*

–Philip Pullman

**A**s someone who has the privilege of being a small part of many different schools, I tend to immediately notice school spaces that are centred on story. I hear teachers sharing their own stories and wonderings, students leaning in to well-chosen read-alouds, a culture of story being built. I also tend to immediately notice school spaces devoid of story. In these spaces I see students disconnected, doodling away, hands down, voices missing. In all these classrooms, I see well-intentioned teachers, but along the way some classrooms have lost story as their core and have replaced it with an overemphasis on skill or strategy. In this chapter, I want to remind us why stories matter, what they give us as teachers and what they give our students that nothing else can.

### What Stories Give Us

There are stories we hear that we remember forever. There are stories we tell ourselves that we know are not true. There are stories we wish we did not remember. There are stories that bring us closer to others and stories that drive us apart. Is there any greater human invention than the all-powerful story? In my work as a classroom teacher, literacy specialist, teacher of teachers and consultant, I have found that above all, stories have the power to give us *mirrors* and *windows* as readers, *inky courage* as writers and *wide-awakeness* as speakers, listeners and participants in the world. In this section, I

use these concepts to explore the powerful ways stories nurture us and help our students to grow as readers, writers and young people. Kathy Short (2013) calls story “the landscape of knowing”. Story moves us, informs us, confirms or expands our memories and identities, and calls us to action.

## Mirrors and Windows

Some of the biggest questions that we spend a lifetime trying to answer include *Who am I?* and *Where am I from?* When we dig into stories we seek answers to these lifelong questions and in many ways pose further questions about the world and our place in it: Who do I believe I can be? Where are others from? Is this story my story? Is it someone else’s? On my bookshelf at home, I have a treasured copy of *Little Women* (Alcott 1880) beautifully bound and made with paper with crinkled edges to make it look antique. As a girl, I loved entering the worlds of Jo, Beth, Amy and Meg March. I found myself drawn to their stories when I was searching for the girl I wanted to be. Also on my bookshelf is a copy of *Bringing Up Bebe: One American Mother Discovers the Wisdom of French Parenting* by Pamela Druckerman (2014). I devoured this book as a new mother, wondering what kind of parent I wanted to be. As the author shared her story, her voice urged me to value play and the countless ways our children strive to be independent. I marked up passages, read and reread. I embodied what it means to read closely – parenthood was on the line! I was finding my voice as a mother through the voice of Druckerman.

Dr Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) used the terms *mirror* and *window* books to describe how we both see ourselves and see others when we read literature. The girls in *Little Women* and the voice of Pamela Druckerman helped me see myself and learn from the experiences of others. As white, middle-class boys in suburban America, my sons often find mirrors in the books they read: they find their life experiences reflected in the social context of the stories and see children who look like them in the illustrations. Children from dominant social groups have always found mirrors in books. Yet for many children, books do not offer mirrors where their life story is shared. In my graduate school courses, I often have students in their 20s and 30s who share with me that they never saw themselves in a book until university. In an interview for the blog site *Mr. Schu Reads*, 2015 Newbery Medal winner Kwame Alexander used the term *literacy lifeline* to describe the impact he hoped his book *The Crossover* (2014) and the twelve-year-old African-American, basketball-loving main character, Josh, had on readers. When discussing what the Newbery meant to him as a writer he stated, “I think it means that my daughter, and your son, and all of our children will have widespread access to, and maybe even find themselves inside what many reviewers and librarians have called an ‘accessible literary tale’” (Schumacher 2015).

Our classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of race, class, religion, language, and family and home life, not just in urban regions but throughout suburbs as well. In 2014, Amer-

ican classrooms had a milestone moment – the overall number of Latino, African American, Native American and Asian students in public kindergarten to Year 12 classrooms was projected to exceed the number of non-Hispanic white students. The US National Center for Education Statistics (2014) projected a new collective majority of students of colour at 50.3% of the nation’s student population, and the new majority is expected to grow. But classroom libraries and the texts we centre in our classrooms do not reflect this great diversity. Not yet. The multicultural children’s book press Lee and Low Books has conducted a series of studies on the diversity gap in the US, including a study of children’s books. According to their research using census data and the Cooperative Children’s Book Center’s statistics, the population has continued to become increasingly diverse, but the number of children’s books that centre characters from diverse backgrounds has not changed much in the last 20 years (see Figure 1.1).

This raises significant questions for all of us who want to centre stories in ways that will provide both mirrors and windows for all of the students in our classrooms. Students from dominant social groups need to learn about life experiences different from their own, and children from minority social groups must see their stories reflected on the page. The year 2014 can give us some hope. Perhaps we are on our way to recognising society’s diversity in children’s and young adult literature. We see some change reflected in Kwame Alexander’s *The Crossover* (2014) winning the Newbery Award and Jacqueline Woodson winning the National Book Award, a Newbery Honor and the Coretta Scott King Award for *Brown Girl Dreaming* (2014).

So, how do we provide mirror and window books for all of our students? We begin by taking an inventory of our classroom libraries and the books we read aloud throughout the year. Not only should we be looking for greater balance between fiction and nonfiction, more imperatively, we need to be looking for books that provide both mirrors and windows for students from all backgrounds. When we see ourselves in stories we feel like we belong and we often gain courage to take on our own obstacles in life. When we see others’ life experiences we gain inspiration and often build an ethic of understanding.

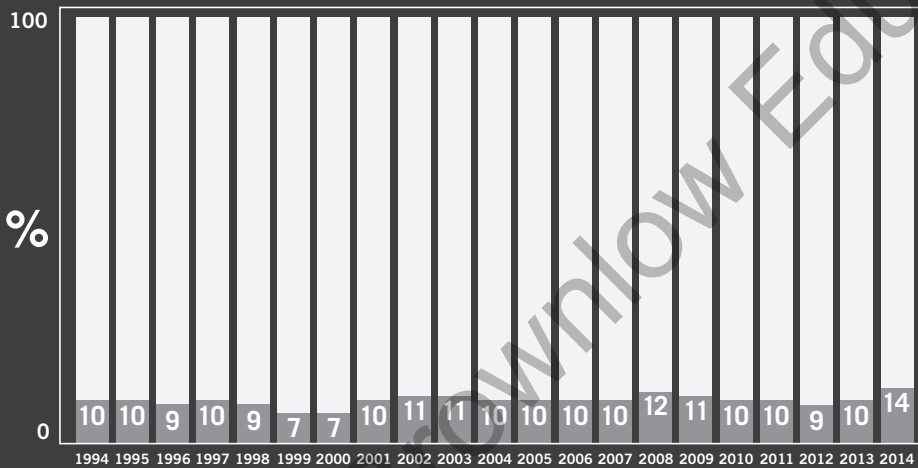
And, of course, most of the best stories provide mirrors and windows simultaneously. As Rudine Sims Bishop (1990) wrote, “When lighting conditions are just right ... a window can also become a mirror” (ix). When I read *Charlotte’s Web* (White 1952) aloud with students in New York City I hope they experience both mirror and window moments. They look through a window when they gain knowledge of Fern’s life on a farm. And my hope is that they see themselves or the people they want to be when she stands up for what she believes in and says in defence of Wilbur “This is the most terrible case of injustice I ever heard of” (3). When I choose to read aloud from *Charlotte’s Web* I think about Fern’s strengths and about other characters who share her quest for justice and



# THE DIVERSITY GAP IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

21 YEARS ★ 1994 – 2014

PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS BY AND/OR ABOUT PEOPLE OF COLOR

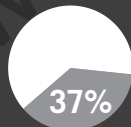


**37%** OF THE US POPULATION ARE PEOPLE OF COLOR **10%** OF CHILDREN'S BOOKS IN THE PAST 18 YEARS CONTAIN MULTICULTURAL CONTENT

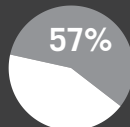
DESPITE THE BEST EFFORTS OF LEE & LOW BOOKS AND OTHER PUBLISHERS AND IMPRINTS THAT FOCUS ON MULTICULTURAL THEMES, THE NUMBER OF BOOKS THAT CONTAIN DIVERSITY HAS NOT GROWN.

### MINORITY % OF US POPULATION

**2012**  
116.2M



**2060**  
241.3M  
PROJECTED



### DID YOU KNOW?

THE US IS PROJECTED TO BECOME A MAJORITY-MINORITY NATION IN 2043.



ABOUT EVERYONE • FOR EVERYONE for more conversations on diversity, visit **LEE & LOW BOOKS** [blog.leeandlow.com](http://blog.leeandlow.com)

\*Children's Books by and about People of Color Published in the United States. Statistics gathered by the Cooperative Children's Book Center, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. CCBC. <http://www.education.wisc.edu/ccbc/books/color/>  
 \*\*U.S. Census Bureau Projections Show a Diverse Society, One With Diversity Rather a Half Century from Now. "United States Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Commerce, December 12, 2012. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/imm/immigration/pdf/diversity/12-243.pdf>  
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Figure 1.1 The Diversity Gap in Children's Books, compiled by Lee and Low Books

her raw courage, and I build text sets that give students mirror and window possibilities. Fern shares her strengths with many other fictional characters, including the children in C. S. Lewis’s (1950) *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, who take on the White Witch to reclaim Narnia; Grace in Mary Hoffman’s (1991) *Amazing Grace*, who auditions for Peter Pan, overcoming racial and social expectations; the boy in Ken Mochizuki’s (1993) *Baseball Saved Us*, who steps up to the plate to counter the internment camp guards who glare at him from towers; and August, who braves school and the world, in R. J. Palacio’s *Wonder* (2012). When I read across these stories I build in more mirror and window possibilities, considering the ways characters give us a parallel universe to place ourselves in. There are also many biographies, or life stories, that I turn to that represent courage with characters from diverse cultural and social backgrounds. They include *Sixteen Years in Sixteen Seconds: The Sammy Lee Story* by Paula Yoo (2005), about the first Asian-American gold medallist, who was banned from pools due to discrimination, and *Silent Star: The Story of Deaf Major Leaguer William Hoy* by Bill Wise and Adam Gustavson (2012), about a baseball player who made history but certainly faced resistance and stigma. There are countless stories, fictional and biographical, that offer our students mirror and window moments, where especially children from non-dominant cultural backgrounds can see themselves represented and where all children can draw strength and reflect on their own experiences.

### Inky Courage

The life questions *Who am I?* and *Where am I from?* often guide our reading lives and the selections we make as readers. They are also some of the most important reasons why we write – to share who we are and where we are from with others. The writer Brenda Miller (2011) used the term *inky courage* in her essay on the value and importance of form in writing. I use the term more liberally as a way of thinking about the courage one draws upon simply to make a mark on the page. In an article I co-wrote with my friend, colleague and confidant, Suzanne Farrell Smith, about the power of memoir, we draw comparisons between the inky courage we engage in as writers and the memories many of us have of the first time we performed a “trust fall”. We wrote,

*Surrounded by summer camp buddies or fellow classmates on an orientation trip, we volunteered to stand stiff, close our eyes, cross our arms in front of our hard-beating hearts, and fall back. We wondered: What if they can’t catch me? Worse, what if they won’t? When we are at our most vulnerable, we most need to trust those around us.* (Cunningham and Smith 2013, 132)