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SHORT STORIES USE THEM TO DIVERSIFY AND INDIVIDUALIZE READING PROGRAMS

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In the past two years there seems to be an increasing number of anthologies of short stories published for the juvenile reading audience. The short story as a distinct literary genre is not new. As a matter of record the short story came into being during the nineteenth century when such writers as Sir Walter Scott, Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, O. Henry, Maupassant, and Chekhov consciously formulated it as an art form. Few of us have not read stories by one or more of these creative writers. There may well be a proliferation of short stories written by contemporary writers but not all of them are well written. A short story is not merely a short novel. I have identified some anthologies which I have judged to contain short stories that evidence three major criteria for this genre: there is a definite formal development and a firmness in construction; there is a unity in plot, effect, theme, character, tone and mood and the nature of the character(s) is revealed *through* a series of actions or responses to a situation *rather than as a result* of actions and under the impact of events.

Short stories may be used to great advantage to realize important objectives of reading programs and literature programs in contemporary elementary and secondary schools. They are excellent for reading aloud to pupils of any age at any grade level. Such reading aloud sessions would provide relaxing and satisfying literary experiences. They might be used for realizing such objectives as developing critical listening skills; providing a "core" or common basis for developing group discussion skills (especially with children in a group varying in reading achievement); motivating children to read, compare and contrast other stories that are written in the same style, on similar topics or express comparable themes. They might be viewed as "samples" of what is available as full-length novels by the same

author or are about comparable themes, topics or moods.

MODERN FAIRY TALES: Some of the most popular short stories are written in the style of the folk tale or fairy tale and appeal to an audience within a wide age-range and of mixed tastes. The stories written in this style are *especially suited for telling* because they are told in simple terms and simple language with only enough description to set the scene or to give atmosphere. It is quite common for writers of this kind of short story to include an unusual twist or a surprise ending in order to add interest. The modern fairy tales created by Richard Hughes which appear in *The Wonder Dog* were actually conceived as he faced a live audience of children and do indeed evidence the spontaneity and vitality of the spoken word so necessary to the traditional folk and fairy tales. Children from ages eight through twelve or thirteen years of age would be left quite moved, I think, with his stories about the wonder dog who could do arithmetic and geography lessons, play the piano ("The Wonder Dog"), or the lonely and bored five year old girl who travelled by slipping along the wire of the phone to the home of the person who rang her up on the telephone ("Telephone Travel") or the store where dolls can buy children ("Gertrude's Child").

Lee Bennett Hopkins offers children nine through twelve years of age a fascinating collection of modern and very old fantasy short stories (and poems) in *Monsters, Ghoulies and Creepy Creatures*. He warns the readers or listeners of his tales that some of the creatures in this book might give them a gentle scare and that some will make them laugh. He also says that regardless of how clever the creatures are "human beings are almost always smarter" and they can use their brainpower to win over "the most fiend-

ish plan by the most scheming creature.” Reassuring concepts to offer reader of stories like these! In addition to the stories that Lee Bennett Hopkins wrote, there are those written by Natalie Babbitt, George Mendoza, Dean Hughes, Felice Holman and Nanine Valen.

A set of three books containing refreshingly unique, slightly cynical modern fairy tales are those by John Gardner, namely, *Dragon, Dragon and Other Tales, Gudgekin, the Thistle Girl and Other Tales* and *The King of the Humming Birds*. Gardner is a master at innovating form within the confines of a genre and in his fanciful short stories he introduces his young readers to off beat heroes, heroines and villains. His attitude is that of the cynic, his humor that of wry wit; both good and evil come out as victors. Always one gets some insight into the human condition by reading and thinking about his stories.

REALITIES OF LIFE: Many of the short stories dramatize the realities of life or examine a “slice of life.” It is not the intention of these writers to merely record incidents or anecdotes. Contrary-wise, they have consciously and skillfully structured a piece of narrative art. One of the most accomplished writers of short stories in this category is Nicholasa Mohr, author of two fine collections entitled *El Bronx Remembered* and *In Nueva York*. The stories in these books are intensely personal impressionistic portrayals of individuals in a Puerto Rican community in New York. The attitude that prevails in all of her stories is that of hope and positive thinking. She emphasizes that it is the human spirit that gives them the strength to cope with and overcome the grimness, the tragedies, the trials with which life confronts them. Such personalities as Old Mary, William Horacio Colon, Herman Aviles, Don Oswaldo or Dona Nereida, individuals who are the unforgettable characters in her beautifully written stories serve as powerful testimonials to the Puerto Rican culture.

Two anthologies of short stories that appear on the surface completely different from each other are in actuality quite comparable. Both Issac Bashevis Singer and Roald Dahl have revealed some autobiographical insights about themselves in their collections of original short stories. In *Naftali the Storyteller*

and *His Horse, Sus* one finds nine unusual stories. In the one entitled “Growing Up” Mr. Singer offers the reader a glimpse of the duties, pressures and burdens faced by a writer and publisher. In the title story he emphasizes that reading brings one unpredictable pleasures and that whoever has “eyes that see and ears that hear can absorb enough stories to last a life time to tell to his children and to his grandchildren.” The short stories that are included in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More* permit one to glimpse at Mr. Dahl’s beginnings as a writer as well as other aspects of his life. Both authors provide a generous amount of wit and wisdom, fascinating and unforgettable characters.

The three short stories of three children that are in *The Key* by Florence Parry Heide depict them coping with life’s problems that are too big for them and from which they cannot escape. These are thoroughly debilitating and all to real accounts of a boy who knows only the squalor of a single room on a drab city street, another boy of the slums who is unaware that life offers anything other than stealing and hiding from others or a girl whose life is surrounded by a mother who wants only to forget what has happened to her and a sister who is severely retarded. The three children in Heide’s stories do not escape from their physical and psychological prisons and one wonders if they will survive. The stories that Pulitzer prize winner Gurney Williams III tells in *True Escape and Survival Stories* contain seven accounts of how “ordinary people” were forced to take extraordinary measures to escape captivity or natural disaster. Williams tells how victims of a plane crash survived seventy days in the Andes Mountains, how miners trapped a mile underground after a shaft collapsed managed to stay alive, how the astronauts of Apollo 13 narrowly escaped death when their oxygen system failed. Of particular importance is the section in which the author gives his readers information on special survival techniques in many kinds of environments - frozen wastelands, deserts, prisons, and forests. *True Escape and Survival Stories* is an easy to read, high interest book and would be enjoyed by children ten to fifteen years of age.

Of interest to children ages six to ten are the easy-to-read accounts of amazing

feats of dogs in the book entitled *Seven True Dog Stories* written by Margaret Davidson and illustrated with black and white line and wash paintings by Suzanne Suba. In addition to the stories of the marvelous accomplishments of a dog who was a detective and one who was a thief, a dog who saved other dogs and one who saved people, a blind dog and a dog who traveled thousands of miles (From Wolcott, Indiana to a city near Portland, Oregon) to be united with the family he loved, the author offers in the introduction an array of facts about dogs and the different "jobs" they have performed over the centuries.

FANCIFUL STORIES: A high percentage of the anthologies of short stories published currently seem to fall in the broad category of fantasy. They pertain to aspects of the occult and the supernatural as well as the symbolic and mythic stories. Many of them are science fiction and science fantasy stories. (Readers of juvenile novels will note that this prevalence of stories about the paranormal is found in the contemporary juvenile novels, too.) But let us see what the short stories in the realm of fantasy are like.

Science fiction and science fantasy are very much available in short story collections and significant percentage of those which I read make considerable demands on children's scientific knowledge and awareness. In these short stories the advances and consequences of the scientific technology and cybernetics are portrayed to the point of possibility as well as to the point of impossibility. Oftentimes they are written in a convincing documentary style with a generous amount of scientific jargon and fact plus enough strangeness to please the reader. They are characterized by a sense of excitement and urgency; seldom does the reader fail to get involved in adventure but not to the extent that s/he would fail to recognize the author's purpose for telling such a tale. Like the science fiction and science fantasy novels, many of these short stories explore social questions in the contemporary world. There are any number of cautionary tales, that is, they contain sermons, tracts, warnings; they bemoan the fouling of the atmosphere, polluting the seas and so on. They offer timely warnings against the destruction of the environment and the needless

squandering of irreplaceable natural resources. The eight stories in *The Infinite Web* collected by Robert Silverberg offer the reader more than somber vignettes; they are more than an assembling of harangues. Instead, they warn the reader and guide him or her toward a broader and deeper understanding about processes and the relationship of environmental problems; they emphasize the fact that one must protect the ecology by conserving the environment. These are exciting stories that will delight and instruct the reader. Long after the stories have been read and the book has been put back on the shelf, the reader will ponder over the theme that prevails in each story: "All acts, no matter how trivial, have consequences. All things are tied together in one infinite web of cause and effect." Stories by such well-known writers as James Tiptree, Arthur Clark, Robert Silverberg are included in this book.

The first American Indian to become a successful science fiction writer, Craig Strete made use of his Amerind heritage when creating his brand of science fiction which appears in *The Bleeding Man*. His stories offer a blend of wry humor, folk wisdom, Indian lore and legend and some thought-provoking prophecies. One reads of "wombcops" plugged into computer consoles which monitor near-empty city streets, lone individuals confront worlds turned shockingly cold and impersonal, and the dead walk the earth to speak to us, to guide us to face the phantasmagoric.

Stories of the occult and supernatural, those which ascribe to the activity of the spirits, divine or demonic, local or personal are very much available in the anthologies. They pertain to the inexplicable movements of objects in poltergeist outbreaks - now renamed by some in less emotive terms "recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis"! There are several noteworthy anthologies of short stories in this vein. Philippa Pearce wrote ten original stories for *The Shadow Cage*. All of these stories are about the powers of ordinary incidents and objects of daily life, each story creates a feeling of forboding and offers chilling surprises to young readers. The eleven original stories that Seon Manley wrote for *The Ghost in the Far Garden* are based on authentic backgrounds. They resulted from her interest in antiquarian books and Celtic folklore as well as her contacts with

ethnic community groups. Seon Manley and her sister Gogo Lewis have compiled at least eleven anthologies of fanciful stories about ghosts, witchcraft, and the supernatural. Their two most recent publications are entitled *Ghostly Gentlewomen; Two Centuries of Spectral Stories by the Gentle Sex* and *Masters of Shades and Shadows*. The first named book contains some superb, lasting stories which were written by women and are about such topics as a romance that death could not terminate, the power of a mother's love from beyond the grave, a tale of a phantom dog and a ghostly couple very much in love who inhabit the room and environs of the house they lived in when they were alive. The second book contains sixteen ghost stories by well-known and respected writers and are presented chronologically so as to offer a sampling of "the best" ghost stories from four eras: those by the early 19th century masters like Dickens, Poe and LeFanu; those by the Victorian women ghost writers like Rhoda Broughton and Mary Wilkens Freeman; those of the Edwardian era like Walter de la Mare, O. Henry and through the twentieth century with the works of such contemporary writers as Shirley Jackson, Ray Bradbury and Daphne de Maurien.

Ten witty and eerie tales of peddlers and parsons and seafarers that Marilynne K. Roach selected for *Encounters with the Invisible World* are based on traditional New England legends.

Ghost stories are often time warp stories and Ruth Ainsworth has written eleven original stories of this type for *The Phantom Carousel*. Ms. Ainsworth's stories feature children who have vivid and unusual encounters with the past. In one story a carousel horse carries its rider into a world of happiness and new ambition. In another a family is plagued by the antics of four walking sticks which belonged to four unhappy young brothers all of whom are now deceased and who inhabited the home many years past. These and other stories in this fine collection will arouse sincere and intense emotional responses, be they sympathy, imaginativeness or curiosity.

CONCLUSIONS

One can find anthologies of well written short stories on almost any topic, expressing a great variety of themes and messages. They are written in styles and

at readability levels that would appeal to young people in the elementary school and in the secondary school. They can be read aloud or silently within a short period of time (around fifteen or twenty minutes) and are a fine source for helping one realize a variety of worthwhile objectives in the reading and literature program.

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