

# ENGLISH TEACHING *Confessional*

Daniel Xerri believes we should find a place for storytelling.

While browsing the poetry section of the Harbor Book Co, a bookshop on the island of Bainbridge in Puget Sound, USA, I happened upon Simon Armitage's *Walking Home*, an account of how the poet sustained his two-week-long trek along the Pennine Way in northern England by doing a poetry reading every evening. I had wanted to read this book for some time, but owing to the distractions provided by so many other books, I had not yet managed to get my hands on a copy. So when I came across it in Bainbridge while on a day trip from Seattle, I started reading it straightaway.

The bookshop was immersed in silence, and I thought I was the only customer until I became aware of a woman's soft voice in the adjoining children's section, which happened to be at the very back of the shop. Looking up from my book, I saw a woman seated on a tiny chair with a young girl at her feet listening to her

*A Story Place* by Nancy Thorne Chambers



Photos by Daniel Xerri

read. As I peered through the doorway, they seemed unaware of my voyeuristic presence. A sense of *déjà vu* overwhelmed me as I remembered witnessing a similar scene whilst taking the London Underground to Heathrow Airport a few years back: I was once again mesmerised by the simple act of an adult reading to a child.

## Evoking memories

Pretending to read Armitage's travelogue, for a while I listened to the woman telling a story to the child before I proceeded to the till and purchased the book. While walking down the main road in the direction of the harbour, I realised that the scene had captivated me so much because I could identify with it completely. As a child, I was lucky enough to benefit from the experience of having a mother who enjoyed reading stories to me and my siblings. I consider this to have been highly influential in forming me into a lifelong reader, making me a lover of the

imaginative world evoked by stories, and developing me into an autonomous reader whose main motivation to read has always been an intrinsic one.

After a few metres, I reached the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, which was exhibiting the work of a number of local artists. As if through serendipity, one of the first pieces I saw on display was a life-size sculptural tableau representing a young girl sitting on a tree stump surrounded by 30 animals, seemingly straight out of a Beatrix Potter book. The animals – some of them elaborately dressed – included a bear, a fox and a raccoon. All of them were listening raptly as the girl read them a story. Storybooks stood in a pile at the centre of the eight-by-ten-foot platform covered with moss.

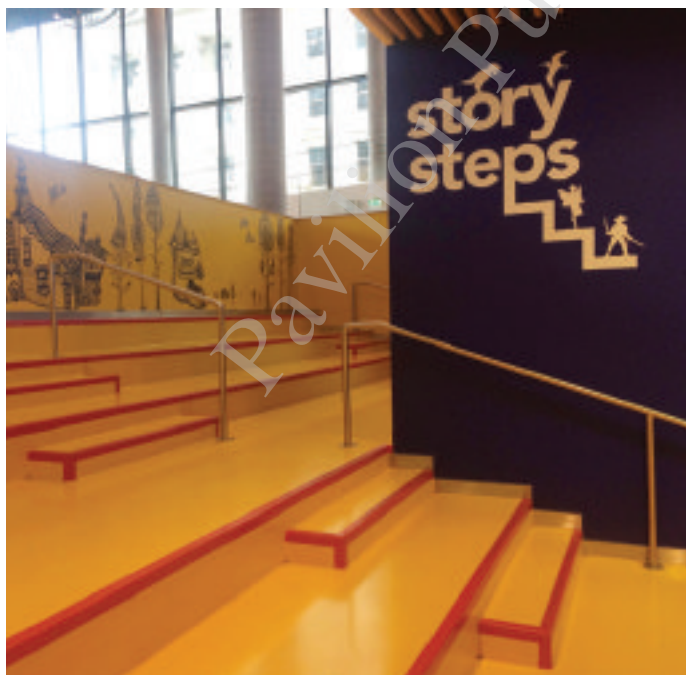
Examining this ceramic sculpture (Nancy Thorne Chambers's *A Story Place*), I felt as if the child I had seen earlier in the bookshop had suddenly walked into a forest and tamed the beasts by means of narrative. The child who had enjoyed being read to had transformed herself into a performer for the creatures in her imagination. The animals were discovering the magic of stories, just as the girl had – thanks to the woman in the shop.

The sculpture bowled me over because it seemed to be an analogy for how the act of reading to children transforms them into avid readers, who will, in turn, feel encouraged to share the wonders of the imagination with others.

## Assuaging grief

On her website ([www.astoryplace.com/travel](http://www.astoryplace.com/travel)) Thorne Chambers describes how, at the age of three, she was suddenly taken away from her birth family, and storybooks became a source of comfort. As she explains, '*Colourful pictures of fanciful animals, and characters I yearned to know, came to life through my own fantasies and dialogue*'.

The sculpture was created as a reaction to the death of the artist's daughter. However, instead of representing the grief she must have felt as a bereaved mother, Thorne Chambers chose to



The Story Steps at the Library of Birmingham

produce an astounding affirmation of how powerful storytelling can be in cultivating children's imagination. In fact, she asks: '*In this tableau the young girl is empowered by her ability to read to others, yet with advancing technologies will story time and reading aloud become obsolete? Are storybooks an endangered species as are some animal species? How do we learn new lessons along the way if not by listening to our children?*'

## Passing on passion

In this spirit, a couple of weeks later, while attending the 2016 IATEFL conference in the UK, I visited the Library of Birmingham, and it was heartening to see children and adults sitting on the Story Steps in the Children's Library, a place where they can both read and be read to.

As Michelle Commeyras, Betty Bisplinghoff and Jennifer Olson report, research indicates that teachers who share their enthusiasm for reading are highly likely to inspire young learners to develop a similar passion for the written word. If teachers wish to enable children to discover the joys of reading, they should position themselves as readers who teach. Richard Day and Julian Bamford concur, asserting that by acting as role models, teachers help young learners to perceive reading as a means of revelling in the wonders of the imagination, rather than regarding it simply as a learning task. One of the best ways of instilling in young learners a passion for reading is through storytelling. By being told stories, young learners come to associate reading with pleasure, and they are thus much more likely to become independent readers.



Storytelling is an integral way of encouraging children to foster a love for reading. And with the right kind of attitude on the part of teachers, the classroom can be the ideal story place. ■

Commeyras, M, Bisplinghoff, B S and Olson, J *Teachers as Readers* International Reading Association 2003

Day, R R and Bamford, J *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* CUP 1998



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## ENGLISH TEACHING *Confessional*

*English Teaching Confessional* is a series in which teachers describe a pivotal moment in their careers. This could be something that happened, someone they met, something that was said or something they read that steered them in a new direction. Do you have a story to share about how you became the professional English teacher that you are today?

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