



words
inflection
words
words
performance
sentence
paragraph

[ABOVE] STORYTELLERS RACHEL, CLARK & NOEL

COME GATHER 'ROUND FRIENDS AND I'LL TELL YOU A TALE... NANAIMO'S AROUND TOWN TELLERS

By David Morrison

One general recollection of my childhood is an obsession with a television show called *Jackanory*. Broadcast from 1965 to 1996 it became a beloved British institution, yet *Jackanory* is possibly the cheapest show the BBC has ever produced. Looking right at the viewer, an actor sat in an armchair, reading a story. Apart from the occasional supporting illustration appearing onscreen, this is all there was to it.

Genius in its unadorned simplicity, the obvious key to *Jackanory's* enduring appeal lay firmly in the power of storytelling. Millions of kids just like me religiously watched the show down those three decades, hanging on every word. In my case, however, it seems plausible that *Jackanory* hit the bullseye of its intended educational target by stimulating interest in language and narrative early, pointing the way to how I now make my living. *Jackanory*, I owe you one!

As the brilliant American creative writing instructor Robert McKee said, "Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact." An eloquently expressed sentiment, I feel – one with which Margaret Murphy of Nanaimo's Around Town Tellers (ATT) would wholeheartedly agree. For the sheer joy of it, she and a dedicated group of fellow storytelling enthusiasts, or 'tellers', gather at the city's Unitarian Fellowship Hall (595 Townsite Rd.) to tell stories to a rapt audience that love hearing them. It is a situation where the currency to which McKee refers serves to purchase a lot of fun and learning, memories and esprit de corps for everyone present.

Murphy has been a teller for many years, coming to it at the Storytellers School of Toronto (now called Storytelling Toronto).

When moving to Vancouver Island from Vancouver in 2004, she looked to continue pursuing her passion in Nanaimo, soon finding a group of likeminded individuals.

"There was an existing storytelling group then," she recalls. "They met at Bastion Books, but when the bookstore was sold the energy in the group also dissipated. I called a couple of the people that were involved, but they were very busy at the time. This was in the fall of 2006. So, Laurie Peck – who contacted me to say she was interested in looking at and developing story – and I decided to see if we could get something off the ground. Soon another woman named Janet Sexsmith came onboard and the three of us looked at possible venues and talked to a variety of people about getting storytelling going again. And we did! We

continued on page 36

started at Coyote's Café in January 2007, expecting a crowd of about fifty on our first night, but it was standing room only, so that was wonderful! It was really exciting and from there we started to gather a regular following."

From this promising beginning ATT became an increasingly hot ticket, demand for their evenings meaning the group had to begrudgingly leave Coyote's, a venue they loved, for the Unitarian Fellowship Hall in September 2009.

As for what to expect at these events, Murphy tells me that a typical ATT evening begins with welcoming audience members, then at around 7:30 the signal for the telling to begin is musically announced.

"We use a gathering song," she explains. "One of our tellers is Gerry Guiden, who is originally from Ireland, and he had an African gathering song that we loved so much we now use it as the opening. He would then introduce the hosts – we usually have two. The stories can be a mix of ghost

tales, tall tales, personal tales, travel tales and stories of the prairies, where some will sing or recite and share these incredible stories."

People kindly tell me that I'm a good, conversational writer, and also that I can spin a good yarn in social situations. Maybe so – thanks, folks – but as someone with acute stage fright, could I become a teller in front of a paying audience? In truth I don't really think I could pull it off, but whether they can or not Murphy is keen to meet anyone with an interest in story.

"If you said you'd like to join Around Town Tellers we'd welcome you because you'd be expressing an interest in, first of all, storytelling," she says. "If you were interested in exploring a particular area, we would encourage that. Whether you would try to share a story, ready to tell at the venue, or in one of our meetings, or in someone's home like a house concert, we would welcome that. We would love to have more tellers come forward! We really do encourage new voices, so there's a sign-up

sheet at our ticket table every month. People may think it's an established group so there's no room there, but there is and we welcome new people! The only requirement is that there is no reading!"

On December 10 at the usual venue ATT are staging their annual festive event: *Stories of the Season: A Christmas Carol*. Featuring Murphy and her husband, Noel Lewis-Watts, alongside tellers Peck, Guiden, Clark Clark and Sandy Cole, it promises to be very special. One particular reason is that the evening will feature full audience participation.

"We're very excited about it," enthuses Murphy. "The six tellers will share five stories within the carol. It's the traditional carol; we're using Dickens' traditional version, and we're adapting it for storytelling purposes. There will be a narrator who will help smooth both the stories and the audience participation. The audience will help with the sound effects! So as the chimes ring, or the chains clang, or the bells ring out or the footsteps come up the stairs, the audience will be cued by our beloved narrator, Noel, and he will hold up the signs to tell them what to do. It is very much an interactive piece!"

With the first decade of the 21st century wrapped up in this lovely manner, ATT moves into the second with an impressive programme of events confirmed through to the end of their season in June. January 14 brings *Tough Being a God/Goddess*, featuring a noted visiting teller that Murphy cannot say enough good things about.

"We are bringing in Jean Pierre Makosso, a beautiful teller who is originally from the Congo," she reveals. "He's an amazing storyteller, musician and singer, so this will be a wonderful celebration."

In 2001 Channel 4 in the UK conducted a poll of the Top 100 Greatest Kid's TV Shows, subsequently unveiling the results in a marathon TV special. While the admittedly classic but decidedly adult show, *The Simpsons*, unsurprisingly made # 1, and *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* – essentially a two-year run of animated commercials for the toys on which the show was based – hit # 10, thirty years of *Jackanory* could only elevate the show to a depressing # 63. But at the end of the day the power of good storytelling will always win out, because in 2006 *Jackanory* returned to British TV screens, format intact. Still airing today, it is inspiring a new generation and may well produce some future tellers, but that's a story that will be told another day. ~

For further information about Around Town Tellers, including details of their Christmas special and future presentations, please visit www.aroundtowntellers.com. Margaret Murphy can be contacted at (250) 729-9994 or storyshare@telus.net.

Qualicum Beach Bakery
Has made some changes!

We now offer our Customers a **Full European Deli** with all the favourites we all know & love.

We will offer fine quality deli cold cuts & cheese along with Homemade Bavarian Meatloaf, Homemade Sauerkraut, Homemade Spaetzle & a wide variety of salads etc. In addition we now carry a wide variety of Import items also.

We will continue with our wide variety of pastries, cakes & breads in addition to all the other changes. Come join us & see what we have to offer!!!

130 West 2nd Ave., Qualicum Beach, BC
(250) 752-6143