The telling of stories

S.J. Friesen

"Is there anything of which it may be said, See this is new?" inquires the Preacher; and with him I have to conclude that in the field of storytelling theory at least, what can be said "hath been already of old time, which was before us."[1] Yet there is a great deal that can and should be said about storytelling, things that, like stories, should be repeated again and again, for they are keys to life. Storytelling is one of the richest acts of our human interchange. It is a phenomenon which occurs spontaneously, arising in all cultures, whether primitive or intellectually advanced.

This spontaneous appearance of storytelling wherever humans exist indicates that it is a branch or genre of communication which arises from our humanness. On closer examination, it appears to be a kind of entertainment. It is social (involving two or more people), and based on understanding between storyteller and listener, so it is a collaborative action, an exchange. It is used as a way of revealing the world to children and, among adults, of sharing what is often a unique perception of both the inner and the outer, physical, universe. Stories are used for enculturation, that is as a means of perpetuating a given status quo in a society, and at another level of teaching to instill principles of moral or philosophical self-government. In some cases, storytelling has been the sole form of education for whole populations.

An endeavour this basic to our human make-up, with application this varied and capable of expressing anything the widest imagination can conjure, rewards inspection with a rich yield of ideas. Unfortunately, these ideas are so fundamental to our sense of being that they immediately bring to mind the truisms of The Preacher, with the attendant danger that the familiarity of the ideas may prevent us from really looking at them or, putting it metaphorically (the language of story), the covering of common dust may rob us by disguising the real gold of which these ideas are made.

In order to begin to examine the act and experience of storytelling, it is worthwhile to establish why stories are told, or perhaps more to the point, why they are listened to. Once this is established the requirements of the experience become more apparent. The question "Why do we tell stories?" yields answers like "to teach," which is a use of the experience to achieve an end and not an innate characteristic of the experience. Actually, when we indulge in telling or listening to stories we are playing. It is not a serious thing. We live in an

age which takes itself very seriously, with a fast lane mentality that says anything worth getting paid for is worth doing. Now there are writers who do get paid a great deal of money for writing stories, but most writers and most verbal tellers are prompted, at least initially, by the sense of play. There's a five thousand year old answer to the question of whether such play is worthwhile amid this business of life. The Preacher says, "There is nothing better for them than that they should eat and drink, and that they should make their soul enjoy good in their labour."

For me, this is an excellent reason to tell and hear stories, for I believe that we should rejoice in life, and that we should do so together. We have built an efficient, comfortable way of life. We have freed ourselves of guilt at leaving home, at not pursuing the occupation of our fathers, and at moving our children to where the jobs are. But in doing this we have become lonely. Some of us, in the midst of family, are alone, unable to say what we feel. Separated, forced to be careful of strangers by the madness of our time, we have few ways of sharing the joy of life with others, but stories let us do that. Through a story, strangers communicate in an intimate, non-physical way. No one needs to fear saying too much for the words are a repeated formula. The story takes us each out of our own life, yet for a few moments as it moves between laughter and tears, thrills and fears, we become one with the people around us. This communication, between teller and hearer, hearer and hearer, writer and reader is in my belief the heart of the storytelling experience.

I think my love of storytelling and of reading stems from one particularly deep experience of each, of a sort which can probably be cited by every reader of this magazine. Though these are two separate experiences, both live in my memory in the same way, as a feeling of going far away into another place that was infinitely sweet and deeply peaceful. This for me is the feel of a good story whether written or spoken. It comes seldom; but it is worth a lifetime of reading, even if it comes only once or twice in that lifetime.

The storytelling incident involves my father; the joy of his attention, his time only for me, is forever a part of this story, though the special magic of *Rudolph the red nosed reindeer* has been felt by just about everyone who ever read or heard it. For me, that first magical telling was different than any reading or hearing since. I didn't hear my father's voice. The story unrolled before me. I knew Rudolph, wept with him, lifted high into the starry night with him as he led the sleigh, feeling the odd snowflake on my cheek. When the story ended, I was surprised to see the magazine in my father's hand. It was so ordinary. I would have thought that he held a jewelled box from which flew, not words, but pictures, places, experiences.

The reading experience is also an early one, so early that I can remember the difficulty of sounding out some words and that some were simply unintelligible spaces made up of letters I couldn't even recognize. Although this was in pre-school days, the book was a real book, with no pictures and lots of pages

full of type. It was about a boy and a girl, and the impressive thing about it was the sense of sweetness and variety of the world they lived in, a world I entered with the first page and tried to stay in at the last. It was a book to go to during the day, a book to know was waiting with its magic until I could get back to it.

My theory is that this book was written with love; real, unintentional, unpushy love; the love that just is in one person and that enlivens anything that person does, whether he or she is aware of it or not. Wherever that book came from, it disappeared. I never got a chance to reread it, but it is in my hands today. It has been with me all my life.

These are the experiences on which I base my storytelling for children. I do not try to get them excited about my subject or to make them remember exactly what happened in the story. I try to allow them to relax in the hope that this will be their time to drift off into that place that makes one story sweeter than any other you've ever heard. This is what, in my lexicon, is called "storyland". It is the place Dorothy went when she followed the yellow brick road and met the cowardly lion, the rusty tin man and the floppy scarecrow. It's the place Alice fell into, and it can't be produced by sound effects or perfect animation or talking animals or flying horses, although all of these things are perfectly legitimate elements of any story. It isn't a visual place, but it feels like, it looks like the sets Georgiadis made for our *Nutcracker*.

Stories that don't have a storyland are those that talk across the heads of children, stories in which adults include references to things a child won't know about and which, for this reason, please some sense of the sardonic in the adult. Here, adults are taking an apprehended "children's language" and adding bits of adult cynicism or sarcasm to it, whereas in a storyland story adult experience of life is translated into pictures, places and things that will interest a child. You may say that the child could be too young to understand such adult concepts and you may be right, but those adult concepts are what give the story fibre, and mystery, and reality. If I were to say one thing that the great storytellers seem to have in common it is that they are honest in making a story, they speak the truth as they know it, because nothing else is worth listening to.

Other stories that don't go to storyland are those that require careful concentration in order to be understood. Lately, there is a delightful story being shown on television of just this sort. It is about a dog called "Whatamess" who gets "an idea (one of the two it has ever got)," and decides to be a "gooooood dog." I laugh with this story every time I watch it. I love the totally wrong track Whatamess gets onto and its supreme belief that it has indeed been a good dog and will be rewarded, coupled with its canny knowledge that it would not be wise to go back to the kitchen where the mess is just now. I love too the narration, which is given in that light, isn't-this-fun tone of which some Englishmen are capable. But Whatamess never takes me to storyland and I suspect no child will ever go there with him either. The story is rooted in com-

ment on domestic incident, not in the eternal verities of story.

A story can have messy modern dogs just as it can have flying horses and talking dogs and birds of the wrong colour and boys no bigger than my thumb, so long as it does not depend on them for its plot. The plot of the story must arise or relate to real human experience such as the way we feel too small to face some challenges, the way moving to a new place can introduce us to new experiences, and the way people who are or look different from us can enrich our lives as much as any talking animal. The plot of the story, particularly one that is told, must go in a straight and simple line from beginning to end, but the incidents and characters can be varied, frightening, magical, funny, unbelievable and complex, so long as they are the embroidery on a simple plot line.

Whereas in a written story the major ingredient is an atmosphere, perhaps caused by love within the writer, in a spoken story the major ingredient is the storyteller's voice and physical presence. A good story brings children into your arms and causes adults to shift closer in their chairs. Under the spell of a story, children will climb onto the back of your chair and sit on the floor leaning against your legs. This physical closeness is caused, surprisingly enough, by something which begins outside of the storyteller and the hearers, the story itself, which has often been "made up" by someone else. As the storyteller repeats the words, the story becomes a bridge between storyteller and hearers which causes or allows a communication to happen and which affects how the story is told. Dan Ben-Amos and Kenneth Goldstein have shown that a story told by the same storyteller took one and a half hours longer when told to a responsive adult audience than the same story took when told to an academic, unresponsive audience, (— not to suggest that academics are necessarily unresponsive!)[2] Folklorists have been recording this kind of phenomenon for years and I think it is the reason so many good stories start out as the spoken word and only later are written down. Storytelling, then, is an act of love on the part of the teller or writer and on the part of the hearer or reader.

This communication between storyteller and hearer arises out of the spell of a story just as the spell of a good book transports the reader into a special place which I have termed storyland. It was this spell of a good book which first made me try to write. I wanted to enjoy that place often, but knew even at the first, wondrous reading experience how rare such books are, for in my short span of reading I had met only one. I thought by writing I could create that world at will and then others would have the same pleasure when they read the books.

In practice it was not that simple. I had no stories, it seemed, for when I sat down to write all the wonderful pictures in my head dried up. When I did manage to get down half a page or so in my laborious child's hand, that half page didn't have the magic of the book I had read. I didn't know then that I needed more of the language, but luckily this was added on in the coming

years as a matter of course. Something harder to attain, which a storyteller can only hope to have, is the spell. You can never be sure you've got it, even when writing at last becomes your magic carpet to a world that has sparkle and makes you feel more alive than you do when you are doing anything else at all.

I know that the spell I experienced is something readers feel only if they pick up the right book at the right time in their lives. The writer can put all the ingredients together, finding and mining all the riches available to humans in the hope of becoming a person whose writing has that dimension, but communication (storytelling) requires both sender and receiver. Something in the reader has to be ready and open to allow him or her to experience the spell. To complicate matters, the writer will never know if the universe the reader experiences (storyland) is the same one the writer experienced in getting the story down on paper or out in words. A reader may be touched, but the nature of the experience really can't be told. As has been noted by thinkers well before me, reality cannot be encompassed in words, which are only a poor reflection of the several dimensions of life. In this sense all writing, even documentary and news, is fiction.

Writing always seems to be harder work than telling a story. In telling, a story sometimes arrives full blown as though for that person, and sometimes it must be unravelled thread by thread, starting in the faith that it will continue. The hearers affect the story by prompting the teller to get on with it when there is a pause, by suggesting what might happen next, or by breaking in excitedly to underline something they like. When writing, the storyteller meets a less forceful audience; one which can be forgotten as the writer runs off at a tangent or overruns the reader's taste by expounding what is "good" for them. This is where re-writing comes in, and so the conscious creation of story enters the spontaneous experience, demanding ruthless honesty of the storyteller and compelling the humility of the ancient Egyptian who chipped these words into her tablet: "No limit may be set to art, neither is there any craftsman that is fully master of her craft."[3]

Having got caught up in all those profound thoughts, the most important thing right now seems to be to tell you about this morning. I got up late (for me) and made a pot of tea. On my way to the window to drink a cup I saw Katherine Paterson's *Gates of excellence,* [4] and picked it up for a moment. Several hours later, with pages of notes for this article in response to what she says, I realized that a day at the library was needed. Later sitting at the library, with Katherine Paterson and Sappho and Woody Allen around me, I realized that this is what reading and storytelling mean to me now — a strong communication through a learned language about literature, a delight in study that pleases my mind and involves me in an objective survey of the contents (and growth) of my heart and the beliefs I have apprehended about humanity, the world, why we are here and why I am. All of this is learned, developed,

because I liked stories as a child.

I see that the love of reading is different from the joy of literature. Literature makes me resonate with joy when I recognize in a book some truth I had uncomfortably thought still unstated. Like a child, I still believe anything I finally learn may be new to the world, until I see it in print. Literature answers my deep beliefs with the deep beliefs of others. Literature shows my tragedy to be indeed tragedy. Literature makes possible a global conversation across time. Literature would have been closed to me if books had been left closed in my childhood, if, in the beginning, there had not been a story worth fighting for through the maze of unfamiliar words.

No storyteller can be sure of creating the multi-facetted joy which is the spell of story, but every teller can be certain of preventing it by trying to teach or manipulate the audience. Stories which try to teach are, as a genre, one of my particular peeves. Arnold Arnold (surely a pseudonym) labels this genre "the manipulative school of child literature," and traces its movement from the last century's moral tale to the present-day psychologically manipulative tale such as the "little train" which always wins over the "big train".[5] It seems to me that manipulation eliminates the possibility of magic in the lives of others by insisting that they follow your own path — no surprises there. Arnold, a man after my own heart, calls these old moral stories "heavy fisted rectitude," but manages to present some of the classic children's stories in much more interesting language and detail than the simple, empty versions we have now. For this alone, his book is worth looking up.

I don't believe you can teach with stories because people read what they want to read, not what you've written. Homer wrote (or told) an epic that showed the shame of war. In Homer's battles the strong, mature heroes slaughter only idealistic boys, and when these heroes are unable to avoid meeting each other on the battlefield, they turn and run, as when Hector and Achilles chase each other around the walls of Troy.[6] These famed characters have the rhetoric of heroes, the actions of killers. Homer is very clear on this, but generations of readers revel only in the exhileration of a borrowed bravery, the glow of the rhetoric of war; enjoying the heroic descriptions of the great men, they miss the fact that those who die are untried, unmuscled boys.

Rhetoric and action are at odds from time to time in Shakespeare as well, and here again it is not uncommon for readers to take the rhetoric and discard the action. Consider the "to thine own self be true" speech in *Hamlet.*[7] So fine is the sound of these words, so profoundly practical is the advice on how to live, that it is easy to forget that Shakespeare put this speech into the mouth of the sneaking Polonius, who the next time we see him, is arranging to have his son followed and, spied upon, and his reputation sullied. Yet his speech, divorced from its context, is so popular as to be known in households where Shakespeare has never been read.

My eyes were first opened to this phenomenon when I wrote a rough draft

of a piece intended to show that women have inherent in their nature certain strengths which are different from those of men, but no less vital. The action took place on a battlefield which was never described. When I showed the draft to a friend, however, she said "You've made the battle too exciting." I hadn't given any detail about the fighting. My friend had fleshed out the setting in her imagination until she saw a battle where there was none.

As you may have noticed, I do not hold the enjoyment of story to be the preserve of children, nor are they my only audience. I tell stories to adults all the time, but with adults subterfuge is necessary. You have to pretend you're just having a conversation or relating some detail they need to know, whereas with children you can be blatantly truthful and say, "Would you like to hear a story?" With a child you can use the traditional beginning, "Once upon a time, and it was neither my time nor your time but it was somebody's time," but adults will seldom sit still for the traditional folklorists' opening even when it is tailored to North America, "My dear listeners! May you be free from all worries. I hope you always carry the sultan's firman in your pocket. May our story tonight be told forever. I don't eat plain bread no matter how long I remain hungry..."[8]

Otherwise, there is to me no difference between adults and children. I have to work just as hard with children as with adults to snare them into my story and to make them forget for a moment to be smart or sophisticated or impatient or unbelieving. How this is done depends on the listener, but whatever method I use, I try not to make any promises, such as "I know a story you will like." Promises create expectations, which raise barriers; whereas storytelling involves for me a desire to make contact with the listeners which makes me forget myself and seek to catch them, like butterfly netting. My closest adult friend could recognize in my voice when I was in the mood to entertain. Because she loved listening, she created in me a sense of humour of which I am usually unaware. Incidents I hadn't known were funny became hilarious as I related them to her, and we "fell out laughing," as another story-swapping friend likes to say.

Language, vernacular or formal, is a crucial element of story. I do not scale down or alter my language for children, and in this I find myself in the company of several of our best writers. John Braine says, "Good writing can be understood and enjoyed even when words are used which aren't known to the general public. As long as you, the writer, know what they mean, the public will know".[9] It seems to me we should have stories which include words children probably won't know at an early age. To learn the words, a child must be exposed to them, and good language gives a story a complexity which captures the imagination. Besides, there is little fun in a story that doesn't introduce you to ideas and words you didn't know before. Half the fun of a story is stretching to meet it.

There is a difference, or I am making one here, between trying to teach and

sharing knowledge. I think particularly of Helen Cresswell's books, which speak as often and as familiarly about Shakespeare's characters as they do about sisters, brothers, mothers, fathers, and family dogs. Cresswell's antidotal Bagthorpe books are as much fun for an adult to read as for a child, without talking over the heads of the young readers. C.S. Lewis said something about a book now worth reading at fifty not being worth it at ten.[10] I call on him as my expert witness in this case on the off chance anyone reading *CCL* might not yet know the Bagthorpes, or have seen their qualities of antidote for children who find themselves growing up ordinary in apparently exceptional families.

Continuing to split this hair, in saying that Helen Cresswell shares her knowledge by letting Shakespeare's plays be as much a part of her world as birthday dinners, and that she transmits her wisdom by showing other sides to a situation which may face a child, I am saying that she is not trying to teach because she has let her story be more important than any of the reasons for telling it. A storyteller like Jean Little, working in the same way, moves her story from the transmission of wisdom into the realm of healing.

When Jean Little has the young man, Rudi, in *Listen for the singing*[11] go into despair after his blinding, she is speaking from experience and I, as an adult, go to her to find out how to deal with my own entrapment. A child will go to her for the story and, as a side effect, learn that it is possible to be cut off from the world and that the only person who can do anything about such a situation is the person who is in the trap. For the child, Rudi's experience is an opportunity to learn more about Anna's experience now that she, the main character, has recovered enough to be articulate. For Jean Little, I suspect, Rudi is one more piece in the complex jig-saw of plotting that allows the storyteller to underline Anna's experience of fighting her way into communication with the world without becoming maudlin. Rudi offers the additional advantage of allowing Anna to speak about her perceptions during the time she was unable to communicate and to describe the trap from within.

By the time we watch Anna trying to save Rudi we care deeply about Anna's well-being and pay careful attention to the mechanics of Rudi's suffering. In this way, Little explores her own experience of overcoming physical disability while making it representative of the obstacles, sensory or psychological, which keep many apparently whole people cut off from the world. Her careful plotting is matched and made fruitful by an absolute absence of self-righteousness.

Teaching and manipulation kill the life or spell in a story by putting the story second, by making it a tool, something you can make by adding two plus two and getting four instead of the magnificent 1,000 that a real story adds up to. "Real literature," says Evgeny Zamyatin with wonderful Russian overstatement, "can be created only by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics, not by diligent and trustworthy functionaries."[12]

Zamyatin sees that madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers, rebels and sceptics have something in common. They have all stepped beyond the pale, beyond

the socially acceptable, and risked pain, rejection, suffering and, for all they know, annihilation in order to seek something which seems true to them. To say why we are attracted to their work we must say why we ride roller coasters, jump out of airplanes, climb mountains. It makes us feel more alive. That shot of adrenalin, the moment of safety, the thrill of knowing we dared, this is what attracts us to the story and it is the life of the story. When the writer or teller lives or has lived close to the edge, has risked all and found the way through, and then is able to risk again the chance of our rejection in sharing this moment of energy, thrill and vulnerability with us, we feel it and we share it. Whatever pain we may later experience in growing up to this experience gained from another, we usually count worth the cost.

The writing and telling of stories has, for me, a much more profound significance than the pleasure and surcease I have described so far. Katherine Paterson deals with reasons to follow this calling in a troubled world. She says "To give the children of the world the words they need is, in a real sense, to give them life and growth and refreshment." In my understanding this is to give them the possibility of expressing their feelings and needs in such a way as to become more alive, to grow and to be refreshed. In her later discussion of this question, Paterson has, I feel, expressed one of the underlying causes of the state of our world now: the isolation which leads to rape and killing. She uses the phrase "the rage of those starving for words."[13]

Jacques Barzun, one of the inspired thinkers of our time, defines the modern ego as "that mixture of sentimental and covert aggression inspired by wounded love," and quotes Stendhal's comment "Cruelty is only an ailing affection."[14] Acting independently of each other, and separated by the space of years, Paterson, Barzun and Stendhal draw for us a picture of an individual human being, frustrated by the inability to put into words his or her needs and desires, lashing out in rage at the world and whatever is in it. In short, they give us a picture of the human being of the 80's, whom we meet in newspaper, video and song. Lack of language is not the only cause for the state of the world today, but it is a part that those among us who are writers and tellers can address and on which we can have some effect.

Another cause of this "ailing affection" is our spiritual heritage, the accumulated result of refusing over centuries to acknowledge the part of our lives which we cannot reach with the mind. A third cause is our body, which as Plato says "disposes us that we cannot think wisely at all, never a whit. Nay, all wars, factions, and fighting have not other origin than this same body and its lusts."[15] When Katherine Paterson states her beliefs that writing can teach her young readers to "see the nature of the game we are all engaged in so that they may make purposeful moves," she and I part, ever so slightly, company, for I know with Plato that when one is young one cannot comprehend the possibility of making lasting mistakes.

The young always think they can do it right. When you are young, it is not

possible to dance and be purposeful, although you can dance and be tragic. When you are young, sorrows are fleeting things, mistakes are momentary pauses in the flight to fulfillment, and you are just checking the water with a toe rather than jumping in. When you are young, the capacity for knowing that you must make purposeful moves is immediate, the ability for making them is still being formed; just as earlier in life the ability to manipulate a pencil lagged behind the recognition that a letter must be formed in a particular way.

Because of this, I do not believe that writers can teach young people anything. I believe we can offer young people the only thing we can offer people of any age: a sense of being loved, a voice that mirrors their feelings and says the things they would say if they could sort out the need to do so from the confusing panorama of their lives, and sometimes, this spell, this wonderland I've been talking about, a momentary respite from the daily pain.

This is nourishment, and it works both ways. If you ask me what telling stories does for me I would say it is this one thing, that the times when I have had the courage to be (as Paterson puts it) a bridge across the chasms of time and culture and differences between people, and the times other people have opened up their own "treasure-hoard" to tell me a story, these times have made me know that I have in me an energy or a strength that can be given to a suffering fellow human.

There is, as the Preacher says, no end to the making of many books, yet however sophisticated may be the theories that we use to describe the process, a storyteller is still a "natural", a person just being what she is. If I look at the storytellers that make up my universe, e.e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, Jean Little, Katherine Paterson, John Braine, Mordecai Richler, Homer, Brendan Behan's cousin, I see that each one's instrument is just his or her self. Some, like Homer, are made of a material so resounding, that the voice lives on down the centuries through translations and misinterpretations. Some, like cummings, have a hundred strings, and the music is so plentiful and so varied they need only allow the sound to come out. I speak here of cummings as a verbal storyteller, as he would hold his friends spellbound all evening over dinner with stories, poetry, songs, jokes and playlets. This natural outpouring was the genius of the storyteller, which cummings distilled into the formal music of his poems. Some, like Braine and Paterson, have a calling that sets them to work in discipline to achieve the resonance of truth-in-life in their stories.

However the story comes, it is only as large, as deep and as many-toned as the teller. This is why there is no need to worry whether a good story has a moral or tackles something about life or reflects truth with a capital T; for the story reflects what the storyteller is, no matter what the person sets out to do. In the oral telling, the story can also reflect what the listener is.

Now, you may wonder why Brendan Behan's cousin was included in my list of storytellers. I heard him "in concert" one evening. It was on the westbound platform of the Toronto subway at Bloor, around 5.45 one winter afternoon

this year. The platform was crowded with the last of the rush hour, a tired, disinterested crowd. From far down the other end of the platform I could hear a male voice raised in talk and song. It was moving closer slowly, but instead of turning quietly to stone in the Torontonian manner, people were smiling and turning towards the voice, even bunching up around him. Seeing this, I knew that coming towards me on the dusty grey tile was no ordinary drunk; this was a Storyteller.

The train was delayed just long enough for him to make it to the car I entered. I got on quickly and sat down, looking to see where the *rara avis* had perched. He had not yet chosen his seat, but stood with his head crowding the roof of the car and his shoulders filling the width of the door, steadying himself against the poles, holding forth to the car at large. He was watchful, possibly not as drunk as he seemed, and as I looked, he caught me.

Now, enjoying the stories of a born entertainer in his cups is one thing, being made a partner is quite another, and I glanced away to notice that the only empty seat in the car was next to me.

"How many in this car are French?" he bellowed, looking at the seat beside me.

I am not usually attractive to men in the subway, but I can always count on looking good to a drunk. I was dying to really listen, to watch the sparkle and hear the witticisms which the people around him were so obviously enjoying, but I dared not, a straight look would be all the encouragement he needed.

"You've got five minutes to decide if you want to be French or English," he yelled, "We're taking this train to Montreal or Sudbury."

From the corner of my eye I could see he was wearing a good leather jacket and jeans which had a visible layer of dirt on the front of the legs. He was in good enough repair to indicate that he was not a full time bum, just an occasional drinker. The huge shoulders swayed a little more purposefully in my direction and the humourous eyes had a hunter's keenness, though the glance he flicked towards me was brief. It is hard to take up two seats when you really need to do so. My coat and purse, normally a problem to gather up into one seat width, seemed glued to me. I flung out my arm hoping to imperceptibly encroach on that seat. My coat didn't move. The seat gaped beside me.

By now the train had stopped again and a small pool of people stood at the doorway assessing how much bother the drunk would be. A pleasant-looking man, kindly and obviously sober, seemed to offer to take the seat I had been trying to conceal. I twinkled at him and even as he sat down, leaned forward to enjoy the patter going on at the other end of the car.

"Do you know Brendan Behan?" asked my seatmate.

"Well, his work," I said, thinking about frying pans and fires.

"That's his cousin," said the man. "When he gets like this I follow him around so he doesn't get into trouble until he lets me take him home."

Some say the Irish are blessed, some say they have a touch of the other world in them and that's why they must, every so often, take what liquid measures

they can to gain surcease from this painful world. I believe the second may be true of the tall man, and that someone from over there was sent along to make sure he comes to no harm.

Now, believe me if you will, deny me if you won't, but that's the story of how I met a man who may or may not be Brendan Behan's cousin and a real-life guardian angel, all on the same winter afternoon.

Well, I started out thinking there wasn't much to say about storytelling, but now I've done I find I've said quite a lot. May the sun always shine on you. May you never go to bed without a good wish. May you always have plenty and never need to regret. May the good luck of stories be always with you.

NOTES

[1] Ecclesiastes (The Preacher) Old Testament, King James version of the Bible.
[2] Dan Ben-Amos, Kenneth Goldstein. *Folklore: performance and communication,* Paris, Mouton, 1975.
[3] Egyptian hieroglyph.
[4] Katherine Paterson, *Gates of excellence. Elsevier, N.Y. 1981. This book figures prominently in my view of storytelling.*
[5] *Arnold Arnold. Pictures and stories from forgotten children's books.* N.Y.: Dover, 1969.
[6] Homer. *The Iliad.* E.V. Rieu, trans. Harmoandsworth: Penguin, 1956. pp. 400 ff.
[7] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet.* I. iii. 59-81.
[8] Dan Ben-Amos, *Folklore.*
[9] John Brain, *Writing a novel.* Methuen, 1974. Eng. p. 109.
[10] Helen Cresswell, *Absolute zero.* London: Faber, 1978.
[11] "On Stories," *Of other worlds, essays and stories;* C.S. Lewis, ed. Walter Hooper. N.Y.: Harcourt Brace, 1975. "No book is worth reading at the age of 10 which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of 50 — except of course books of information."
[12] Jean Little, *Listen for the singing.* Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1977.
[13] Quotation of Evgeny Zamyatin as found in *Funk & Wagnall's Guide to Modern World Literature.*
[14] p. 6, 7.
[15] Jacques Barzun, *The energies of art: studies of authors classic and modern.* N.Y.: Harper & Bros., 1975.
[16] Plato, "Phaedo" 66. *The spirit of man: an anthology in English and French* trans. Robert Bridges. U.S. Century Bookbinde, 1983.

Sofiah Friesen *is an author and storyteller. She has reviewed adult and children's literature for the Edmonton Journal, poetry for various periodicals, and is the creator and performer of the television series, "Tell me a story."*