



The WordchipperSM

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The power of stories

Stephen Edwin King, an American author whose books have sold over 350 million copies and who has received every major writing award, was inspired to a career in storytelling by the stories he heard as a child. He recalls, below, a book by C. S. Lewis called “The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe” (Wardrobe is an Englishism for closet):

I still remember the one moment that stood out for me: in the story the kids are playing hide-and-go-seek and I was familiar with that game. This girl, Lucy, goes into a closet and it seems to her to be very deep, a very deep closet. She's pushing through the coats—you know that dry smell of mothballs and that sort of slick feel of fur coats—and she looks down and the boards are gone and it's white down there, and she reaches down and touches it and it's cold. That minute, when the board turns to snow, I thought, that's it! That's what I want to do. It's got to be something like that. That point when the writer or the film maker is able to take the reader over that line, to me, is a fine thing. For me, it's always a fine place to go.

King writes about other memories from his formative years and the ideas and thoughts that led him down a pathway to becoming one of the world's most popular writers of fiction in his book *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* (Scribner, 2000). So much of what motivated him was the amazing power of stories.

With our own kids and, later, as two of our older grandchildren, Kjerstin and Kayli, were growing up, they always loved it when I read them a story or, better yet, when I *told* them a story, a yarn I made up as I went along. I'm doing this today with our youngest grandchild, Olivia, as are her parents. Watch a child's eyes when you look at them and ask, “Would you like me to tell you a story?” As the story progresses, you see their eyes getting bigger and you can almost watch their open minds at work, following every detail. If you're reading a story the child is familiar with, heaven forbid if you skip over a page or miss some important detail.

With all the electronic choices kids and their parents have today, a friend of mine from Minnesota has come up with a participatory video that builds excitement for reading. According to the program's author, Kady Martin, stories are told on the video that “encourage active children to get up and join in with the storytellers in the program.” Kids can use this video to encourage older children to write their own stories and then perform them for a classroom of younger children.

Kady is a storyteller with over 30 years' experience; an author of several books for children and adults. If you're a teacher or parent interested in trying something new to spark interest in reading and the power of stories, contact Kady at this email address: kady_martin@yahoo.com. She'll be glad to provide you with more information about the program and the modest cost involved.

The late Gilbert Albert Highet, a Scottish-American classicist, academic, writer, intellectual, critic and literary historian, once said: “Books are not lumps of lifeless paper but minds alive on the shelves. From each of them goes out its own voice and just as the touch of a button on your stereo set will fill the room with music, so by taking down one of these volumes, and opening it, one can call into range the voice of a man far distant in time and space, and hear him speaking to us, mind to mind, heart to heart.”

Here's another thought on the long term *value* of books and reading:

I remember being back in a dark hallway when I was about nine—I'm going to try to say this without crying—and my mother threw the door open and grabbed a book out of my hand and said, “You're nothing but a something, something bookworm. Get your butt outside! You think you're better than the other kids!” I was treated as though something was wrong with me because I wanted to read all the time.

So remembers Oprah Winfrey, one of the world's highest paid talk show hosts, entrepreneur, media producer and founder of a book club that has resulted in the sales of millions of books. The quotation is from an interview in *Life* magazine, quoted in “How Reading Changed My Life,” a book by American author and columnist Anna Quindlen.

I'll leave you with this thought, a principle I've found true in my own life and career. I've shared it on more than one occasion with college students and new grads: *Your library card is far more valuable than your Visa.*