

Telling Stories, Changing Lives

Janet Alsup

Stories are powerful. We use them to share experience, understand our past, and plan our futures. We organize memories and remember events better because we can create and tell stories about them. We attend to stories to gather information, to feel pleasure, and to interact with others. In short, stories are an essential part of being human. This issue's theme is storytelling, and the books reviewed within explore how creating and consuming stories can change what people know, how they relate to others, and even how they understand themselves.

In the young adult novels reviewed in this issue, stories help young protagonists solve mysteries, understand family members, and explore the differences between fact and fiction. In *Dead End in Norvelt*, a young man learns to understand the importance of historical narratives and the storied lives of those who have left this world; in *You Have Seven Messages*, a young woman learns that stories can provide windows into the lives of loved ones that we might wish we hadn't opened; in *Through the Eyes of Rowan Pahi*, the protagonist creates a false narrative of self that seems to take on a life of its own.

The picture books in this issue offer equally provocative perspectives on the power of storytelling. *The Secret Box* depicts children learning history's stories through left artifacts. *Polka Dot Penguin Pottery* explores connections between writing stories and making art, and how both sometimes require creative leaps. Last, *Never Forgotten* and *These Hands* depict a father and grandfather telling poignant stories to their descendants, who now live in much different worlds.

Many psychologists, sociologists, and educators assert that personal narratives don't simply reflect who we are, they *make us* who we are. This belief is reflected in the work of psychologists and psychiatrists who have long used the case study or life history narrative to understand people's lives. Psychologist Jerome Bruner writes that people lead "storied lives." He defines narratives as essential to the making of the self (65). He goes so far as to say that if the human being wasn't able to make and tell stories that both identify the self as autonomous and link this self to a community in which he or she acts, the human being would lack a sense of selfhood altogether.

If these theories are true, stories and storytelling are much more than simple entertainment or a way to pass the time. Telling (and reading) stories becomes a way of understanding who we are, where we came from and where we are going. We hope our

reviews lead you and the young readers in your lives to experience new stories in such powerful ways.

Work Cited

Bruner, Jerome. *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.