

Research in Practice (ADAD5004)

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The contents of this writing is an explorative attempt to link together my three keywords of storytelling, child development and learning styles as well as any relevant philosophical practises in order to formulate a question for my independent research project. To help me to gain a well rounded approach to formulating my question I will also be researching the visual practises of artists such as Wanda Gag (storytelling), Helen Oxenbury (child development) and Richard Hamilton (learning styles). I will also be exploring any opposing opinions from creatives such as Roald Dahl in order to help me formulate a well considered question.

Storytelling

Humans are storytellers. Whether the stories are painted on walls, verbalised around a campfire, fairy tales or tales designed to invoke concepts of morality. You cannot dispute that storytelling is one of the most ancient of human customs. In many ways it is being forced to change so as to remain relevant as we move further into a technology dominated society and away from the written word. Modern computer games represent a new interactive way of telling stories and the recent innovation of Virtual Reality allows individuals a new way of experiencing fantasy. As Chris Crawford writes "The truth is that interactive storytelling is not an extension of or variation on any of these fields; it must be approached as something new and unique." (Crawford, 2012 p.11) At its heart storytelling continues to be a method by which the teller directs the thought process of the reader, listener, viewer or gamer.

Fairy tales prove to still be a primary form of introduction for children into this limitless world. Marina Warner writes "Behind the old who tell the stories lurk the children they once, were listening and with that fantasy there rises the memory of the

storyteller.”(Warner, 1994 p.252) The idea that parents want to pass on the stories that they loved and which sparked their own imagination onto their children, the ability that anyone can become a storyteller and that these stories are so timeless makes it apparent how as an artform storytelling has and will continue to last the test of time. This statement is no more true than when reflecting on fairy tales. Stories of princesses, gingerbread houses and magic have been passed between generations in various iterations, the stories and the methods utilised in conveying them, continuing to adapt and evolve.



Figure 1. Gág, Wanda (1938) *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Accessed 8th May 2021)

For example, in 1938 Wanda Gág illustrated and published her twist of The Brothers Grimm story *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, originally published over 100 years earlier. Gág's interpretation features intricate pen and ink drawings throughout, depicting scenes in black and white arguably helping the classic become more

immersive by the addition of illustrations. On the topic of Grimm's fairy tales Isabel dos Santos writes "They teach about life and death, solitude and social skills, forgiveness and endurance"(Dos Santos, 2014 p.2), the stories are a gateway into more mature themes but the light-hearted manner making them enjoyable to anyone. Figure 1 depicts snow white in her coffin in the forest looking peaceful, with woodland animals surrounding her and her prince emerging from the foliage. It can be said that this part of the story and this image are so important as they depict death to the audience not as a frightening concept. Wanda Gág has actively made an effort to depict an overall calming atmosphere, reaffirmed in her choice of a gently curved border.

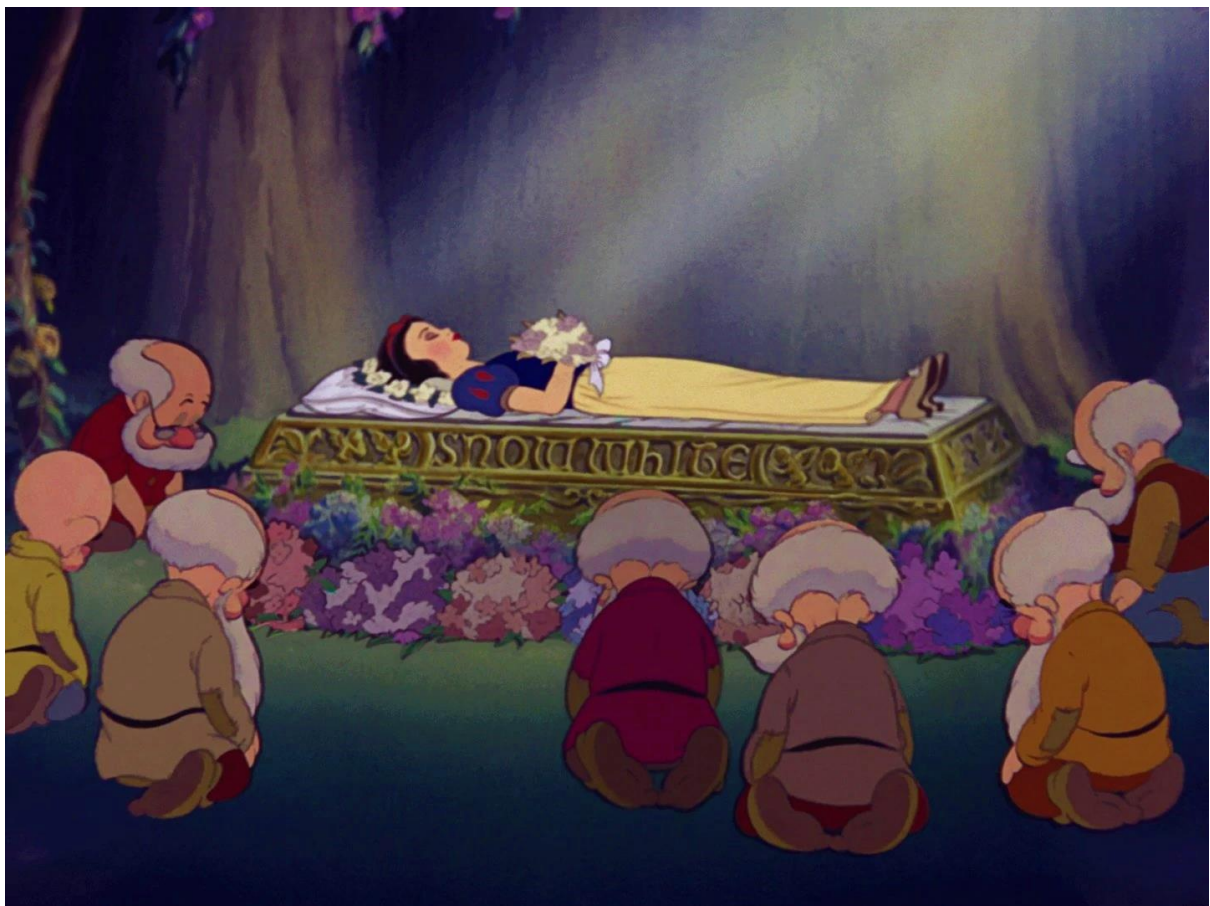


Figure 2: Walt Disney Studios *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*, Snow Whites Glass Coffin (1937)

Perhaps a better known interpretation of this classic fairy tale is in fact a year older than Wanda Gág's. First shown in 1937 is Walt Disney's Snow White also brought the Grimm story to life but again reworks elements to make it their own interpretation, adapting the original written format into a new media. The Disney interpretation famously features colour animation, songs, all elements that until this point had never been seen.

When comparing Figure 2 with Figure 1 you can see how identical scenes can be presented in different ways. The obvious difference is that Disney's depiction is in colour, but composition wise he has featured the dwarves with their heads bowed alluding to a feeling of sadness and mourning in comparison to Gág's interpretation which looks more hopeful. Cool toned colours such as blues and purples have also been used to add to the sombre atmosphere with the exception of the 'sunlight' breaking through over Snow White herself which may symbolise there still being hope and the happiness she brought.

However, it can be argued that reading a book or listening to a storyteller allows the audience greater opportunity to experience the story in their own unique interpretation, relying on their own imagination to a greater extent. This belief is common among storytelling purists. Roald Dahl was so passionate about this topic he even wrote a poem dedicated to deterring parents from letting their children watch television. First published as part of the story Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, "Television" was included in the 2003 anthology and states "IT ROTS THE SENSE IN THE HEAD! IT KILLS IMAGINATION DEAD!" Dahl makes his stance on television very clear. Proposing that where the written word nurtures and develops imagination and creativity, stories presented to them electronically do exactly the opposite causing the development of less creative individuals. Television programs, films and

games are heavily structured, presenting exactly the same story, in the same manner, in the same conditions at the same pace. Furthermore, it could be argued that developments like virtual reality are even worse as they regulate the experience to an even greater degree.

The idea of storytelling has also led to considerations of other words under the storytelling umbrella such as, storytellers, learning, fantasy, imagination and child development which I will endeavour to research in order to formulate a conclusive question throughout this proposal.

Child development

In *Hooked on Books* it is stated that “Three Quarters of adults say that reading improves their lives and the same percentage believes it helps to make them feel good” (Considine, 2017, p.26) but what are the mechanisms by which reading promotes mental wellbeing and development, specifically amongst children.

As children we are often told stories in order to aid our development, to provide us with an insight into right and wrong, good and bad, the difference between heroes and villains. In our early years we learn through observation and interaction. We put emphasis on stories to be an introduction to more mature themes such as death, diversity and overcoming obstacles. Whether we learn through these stories at home or in schools it is an invaluable resource in our early development.

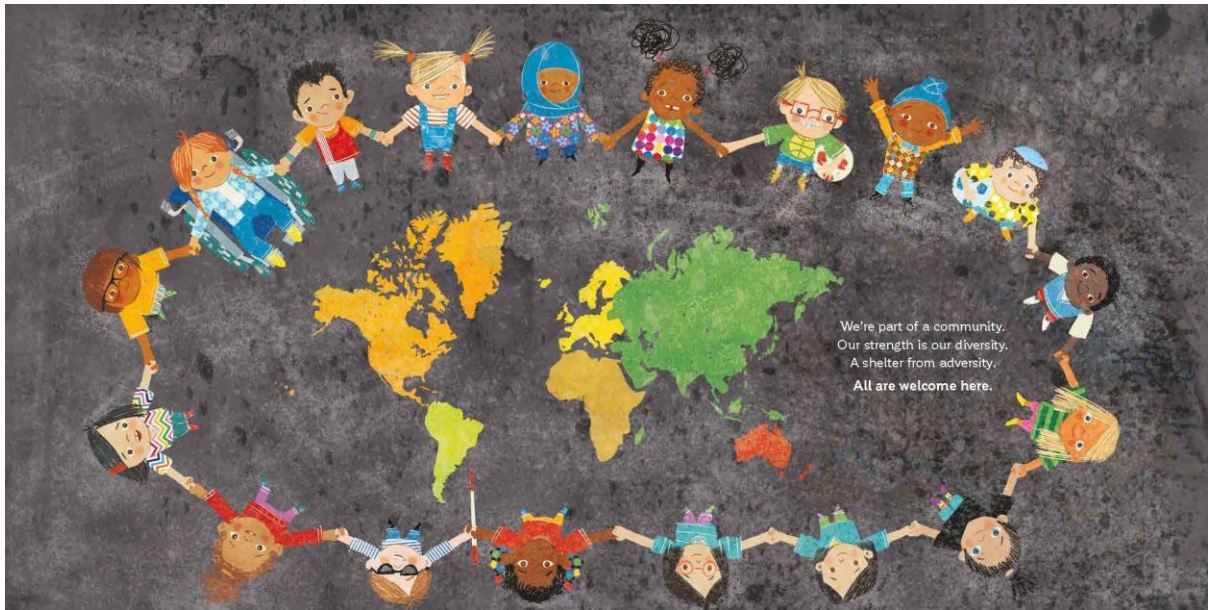


Figure 3: Penfold Alexandra *All Are Welcome* (2018)

All Are Welcome is a children's book written by Alexandra Penfold and illustrated by Suzanne Kaufman. It is a story about acceptance and embracing people's differences. The key theme of "All are welcome here" cements the idea of acceptance and tolerance with repetition of the phrase used to reinforce the message.

As shown above, Suzanne Kaufman's illustrations often depict the children close to one another showing acceptance without barriers. Figure 3 is an excellent example of how to illustrate acceptance as it shows children of various backgrounds holding hands with one another standing together in unity. The illustration depicts children of various ethnicities and religions, as well as portraying those with disabilities visually strengthening the key message of the book. A 2016 study of representation in children's literature (particularly the representation of disabled children) found that children who "...identified with the characters, explored issues of fairness and equity, and learned to take an advocacy stance..." (Wilkins et al. 2016, p.3). This research has numerous practical implications for writers and illustrators alike. It means that if

they illustrate a wide variety of characters all interacting with each other it is likely there will be a character that children from a range of backgrounds could identify with. Leading to them more easily adopting the presented views of those characters. Books like *All Are Welcome* an invaluable resource in teaching children about equality and helping children avoid outdated prejudice.

Although this work will undoubtedly help shape our society into one containing less prejudice and misconception it is worth mentioning the counter argument that children are being fed information by writers and illustrators deliberately attempting to adjust their views through carefully targeted manipulation. Children are not getting a chance to formulate their own opinions without knowledge that the purpose of the book they are reading is doing just that. In the above examples the writers had obvious good intentions. However, it would become abhorrent if the author were to utilise the same techniques to promote unjust beliefs such as propaganda, extremism or misguided political ideals.

Telling stories helps children to understand themselves as well as others. Children can reflect on stories to help aid them in daunting situations and to overcome challenges.

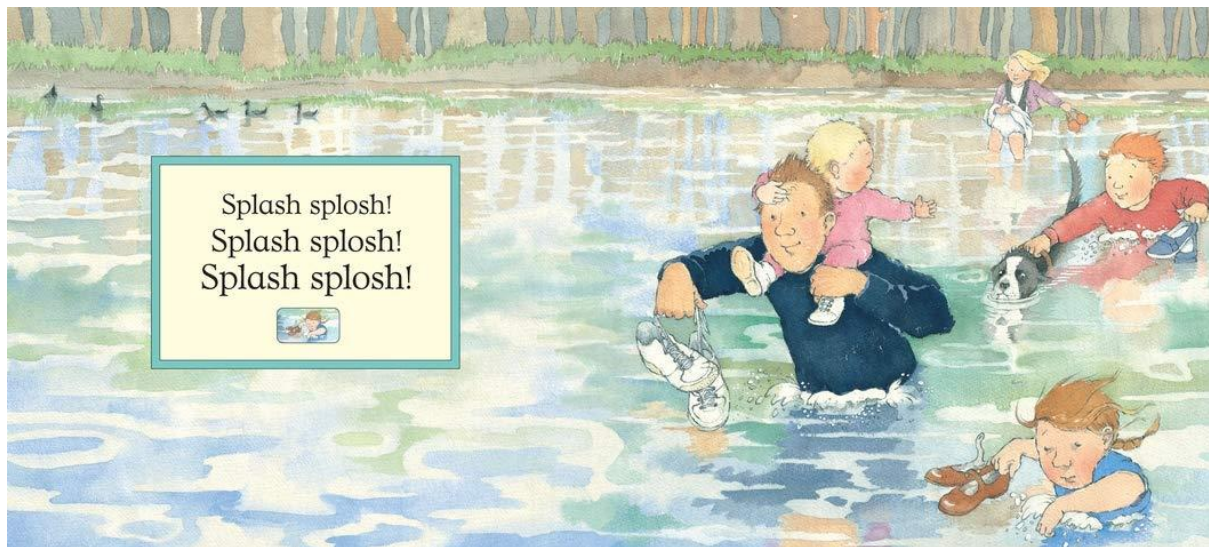


Figure 4: Rosen Michael *We're going on a bear hunt* (1989)

The popular book by Michael Rosen demonstrates well that if the first attempt to navigate a problem ends in failure that there are other ways in which it can be overcome. First published in 1989 it is frequently used in classrooms and in households alike. The family depicted in the book have to endure a variety of obstacles in order to reach their destination and it encourages children to say out loud what they cannot do and suggests a possible answer to the problem.

Helen Oxenbury illustrated the book and her use of vibrant colours, as shown in Figure 4, are prominent throughout. The picture above depicts the family, after exhausting other options, wading their way through a river, after not being able to go over or under it. Although initially they wanted to avoid doing this, the fact the characters are shown with smiles on their faces means they have succeeded, while the use of bright colour cements the fact that the overall atmosphere is a happy one.

The author utilises lots of different literary techniques such as onomatopoeias and repetition in order to engage the audience. Storytellers often encourage children to join in saying or even singing the words repeated to help engaged their

communication skills as well as assisting in the memorisation of key messages. The ability to use interaction in this book make *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* a highly effective book for all types of learners, auditory, visual and (with props) kinaesthetic. Which again leads me onto my last word learning styles.

Learning Styles

People have a preference towards different learning styles. Meaning it is hard to generalise or decide on a cohesive learning approach that will work for everybody, such an approach does not exist. Although there are probably numerous subcategories, three main learning types have been identified Auditory (individuals who learn better when topic are reinforced by sound) , Visual (an individual who learns the best through observation) and Kinaesthetic (learners who are most successful when moving, feeling and interacting).

Better knowledge and understanding of the variety between learners has led to a vast change in the way that modern classrooms work. Gone are the days when children had to silently read the book in front of them and be expected to assimilate the information "... many faculty members have used other more interactive teaching styles to supplement or replace the lecture method" (Miller, 2017 p.1). This is because our knowledge concerning cognitions, how we remember and store information, has changed to accept that there are multiple learning styles and ways that human brains process information. When we are younger, we are encouraged to engage multiple senses in tasks such as reading and storytelling. Multisensory books (also known as Touch and feel books) allow young children to feel as well and

look and hear. Many learning opportunities are content to engage only one of our senses; reading textbooks in classrooms, seeing historical pieces in museums or looking around galleries where the phrase “look but don’t touch” still appear to be the mantra.

Tate sensorium was an exhibition running from 26 August – 4 October 2015 with “The aim of this project was to design an art experience that involved all the traditional five human senses” in order to create a more immersive gallery experience for all, and allow audiences to feel more connected to the work surrounding them and create a narrative to accompany the image. Encouraging viewers to get close to the art and embrace all the sensory information offered to them.

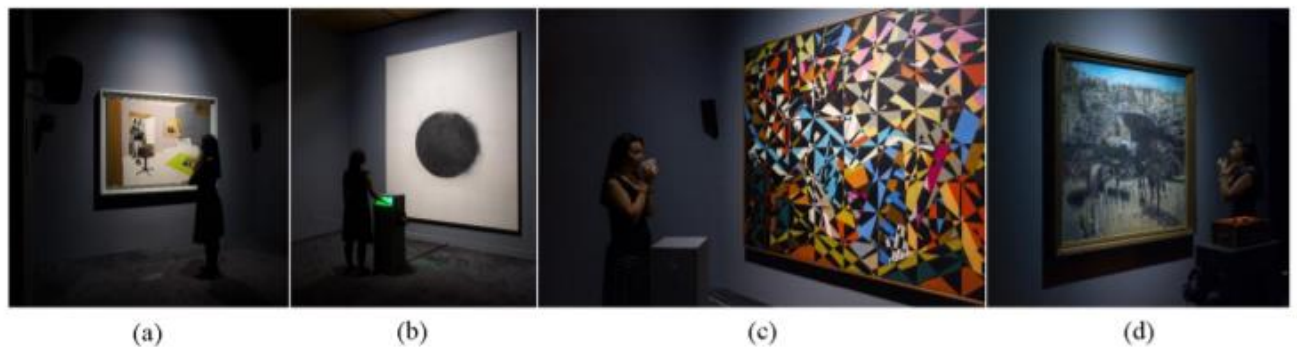


Figure 5: The four paintings showing their multisensory components included at the Tate Sensorium (a) *interior II* by Richard Hamilton. (b) *Full stop* by John Latham. (c) *in the Hold* by David Bomberg. (d) *Figure in Landscape* by Francis Bacon. Photos: Tate

In each of the rooms the audience was encouraged to interact with the artwork which surrounded them. Detailed thought was put into the curation of the exhibition as there were concerns over potential sensory overload and each painting was placed

in a room of its own. Individual pieces were also assigned a leading sense along with a less intrusive secondary sense so there was not too much sensory noise.



Figure 6: Hamilton Richard (1964) *Interior II*

Interior II (1964) utilises a photograph of a woman presumably from the 1940's in a vibrant and colourful room which juxtaposes the greyscale image of the woman. The figure herself looks longingly at the viewer and is depicted unbuttoning her coat to create the impression of coming home. This feeling is exacerbated in the Sensorium exhibition by the complementary use of the other senses, in this case sounds and smells. These other senses were introduced by a group of creatives many working for Flying Object (a studio in London). The sounds were introduced via four speakers in the room and were designed to create an air of familiarity and of auditory cues that the observer could associate with, being sounds commonly found in and around the

home. The scents in the room were as follows; spicy carnation fragrances which were commonly used in the 1940s typically in hairsprays, solvents and glue aromas which linked into the construction depicted in the back of the room and the smell of cleaning products which created a feeling of being in a kitchen environment.

Overall, this piece is a prime example at how playing on the senses could lead to a successful experience which could resonate with a wider variety of individuals and would also affect what they each took from it; auditory learners might remember the sounds, visual learners might remember the image itself and kinaesthetic may remember the act of walking into the room and the different aromas.

This piece also demonstrates yet another possibility in the world of storytelling. The aromas and sounds would help the viewer use their imagination to create a story for themselves about the woman and the house 'Was it hers?', 'Why are they there?', 'Who is she?'. The use of familiar sounds would also help children to identify that this was a home and spur their imagination, it may allow them greater enjoyment when looking at art as it triggers a feeling of familiarity with them. Which leads me to the questions 'Why do we not present art like this more often?' and 'why don't we utilise the other senses to bring more people to galleries?'

Concluding my exploration into my three key words of Storytelling, Development and Learner types has led me to deeper questioning regarding the connections that storytelling has to many different avenues of our lives. Over time we have underestimated its potential even though it can be speculated that it has been around for as long as we have. Through this proposal it has become apparent that there will always be sceptics and those who disagree with various avenues of

storytelling but do not consider how these possibilities could benefit others or the transformation storytelling has already gone through. Looking at the older iterations of storytelling such as cave paintings and seeing how it has progressed to be something as complex as virtual reality is something that would deeply interest me looking forward to the third year. Also acknowledging why, it is necessary for it to change not just benefitting a modern society but also allowing it to become a more inclusive resource for all people. This has finally led into the question for my dissertation - 'How has storytelling evolved over time and how have these developments affected the experience of the target audience?'

Figures

Figure 1: Gág,, Wanda (1938) *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* Available at: <http://www.vintagechildrensbooksmykidloves.com/2009/06/snow-white-and-seven-dwarfs.html> [Accessed 10th May 2021]

Figure 2: *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) Directed by David Hand (supervising)

William Cottrell, Wilfred Jackson, Larry Morey, Perce Pearce and Ben Sharpsteen.
[Oil based image on glass] United States. Walt Disney Productions

Figure 3: Kaufman, Suzan (illustrator) Penfold, Alexandra *All Are Welcome* London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC pp 14-15 illus.

Figure 4: Oxenbury, Helen (illustrator) Rosen, Michael (Author) *We're Going on a Bear Hunt* London: Walker Books. pp.7-8 illus.

Figure 5: *Tate Sensorium* (2015) [Exhibition]. Tate Britain, London. 26 August – 4 October 2015.

Figure 6: Hamilton, Richard *Interior II* (1964) [Oil paint, cellulose paint and printed paper on board 1219 × 1626mm] Tate Collection, Not on display. Available at

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