

UKLA

An extract from *Short, sweet and potent: the appeal of short stories* by Teresa Cremin

Short stories have appeal for children because their message can be grasped relatively quickly. Yet, those who choose to explore the message are offered the same – and sometimes more – richness and variety as are found in longer works of fiction.

Short stories appear in a variety of formats from one-story hardback picturebooks to paperback anthologies (which may also be illustrated) of work by one or more writers. The stories are produced in a variety of ways, including translation from other languages and cultures. And although they may have illustrations, many rely wholly upon the power of the narrative to evoke images in our minds.

Short stories are written in a wide range of genres and include mystery, ghost, fantasy, school, and football stories as well as traditional tales, myths and legends and narratives. This diversity, along with their brevity, creates a rich array of tasty morsels for teachers and children to enjoy, and I believe these stories deserve a higher profile in the primary classroom.

In this article, I look at some of the ways in which short stories can contribute to English work, highlighting the integration of drama into such work. I also introduce some less well known short story collections.

Ideal for both study and enjoyment

Young people are rarely invited to write novels, and few will be lucky enough to experience the challenge of creating picturebooks; but they are frequently invited to write short stories, and reading and studying the genre offers supportive models for writing this kind of narrative.

Creatively examined, short stories can increase children's awareness of story structure, highlight the need for the skilful creation of characters, and demonstrate both the role of a story's setting and the critical importance of narrative action and tension. Different styles of short stories can be fruitfully compared to enable children to recognise the diversity that is possible and to expand their writing repertoire.

In contrast to working with a novel, short stories can reduce the pressure on teachers to get everyone to the end of a long narrative; and, by providing more time in which to explore a whole text, they allow for the integration of a wealth of speaking and listening activities. For example, a teacher guiding children towards writing their own short stories over a three-week learning journey based on such a story can afford to respond to the youngsters' unfolding interests and questions and let them take the initiative more as the class widens its knowledge and experience of the genre.

As regards encouraging reading as an enjoyable activity, quality short stories are ideal because they often can be read in one sitting or over a day, even in a busy timetable. They also make good resources for guided reading, offering satisfaction, pleasure and coherence. Finally, once one or two tales from a collection have been sampled and enjoyed, children may well be motivated to read the remaining stories in the anthology on their own.

An asset to the English curriculum

Short stories represent good value for money, with anthologies usually offering at least six narratives in one book. Children may be able to supplement the class collection with books from home, since illustrated anthologies sell well as presents. With a couple of packs of decent book plate stickers and a clear borrowing system, the short story book box can become a valuable resource both for whole classroom work and for independent reading.

There are plenty of opportunities – and considerable justification – for weaving them into the curriculum as part of themes about traditional stories, stories from a range of cultures or texts by significant children's authors. Many children's authors write both novels and short stories, and it can be fascinating to examine themes common both to writers' short stories and their novels, or to examine different writers' approaches to the short story genre. Some short story collections tend towards the autobiographical, which can enrich an author focus and can introduce their work to less experienced readers who may not have read their longer novels. Writers whose work might be approached like this include: Joan Aiken, Bernard Ashley, James Berry, Kevin Crossley Holland, Dick King Smith, Jan Mark, Geraldine McCaughrean and Philippa Pearce.

Using drama to explore short stories

Drama enables young learners to actively interrogate texts, exploring and making meaning as they take on roles and reach into the heart of the narrative. For example, in order to increase insight into a story and enrich inferential skills, drama

can be used to create characters and scenes not actually described by the writer. Drama can also provide contexts for writing-in-role, which often leads to particularly empathetic composition with a clearer than usual perspective.

By increasing both teacher and pupil involvement in an issue or theme, drama can be used throughout a learning journey, to help the class dig down into the substratum of a tale or tales. Drama activities used at the beginning, familiarisation, stage can help generate ideas about a story that later feed through into teacher-led whole-class work on constructing pieces of writing in the chosen short story genre. And at various points during the learning journey, drama conventions may be used to generate and shape ideas.

Planning learning journeys on the short story

The long term outcome of a learning journey on a short story or stories will often be for children to write their own. Other specific reading, spoken language or writing objectives can be selected from national curriculum programmes of study. When drama is employed as the pre-eminent pedagogy in a unit of work, the learning intentions will still need to be identified at the outset, but the journey travelled will tend to be more responsive to the children's needs and interests expressed along the way. This enables the critical features of creative learning, such as collaborative thinking, taking risks with ideas, autonomy and responsibility for learning, to be shared. For the teacher, many decisions and much of the instruction involved will depend on the exploration undertaken and the ideas which the class generate with their improvisations.

Working through a learning journey towards producing a piece of composition allows time for children to engage fully with a range of activities which lead towards purposeful writing. It also enables teachers to lead by framing and inspiring as well as by following the children and sensitively shaping the unfolding exploration of a story or stories with them. Such learning journeys ensure that assessment for learning is integral in the work undertaken.

An author focus: Michael Morpurgo

As such a well-loved writer, Michael Morpurgo makes an excellent subject for an author focus, and his short story collections *White Horse of Zennor*, *From Hereabout Hill* and *Muck and Magic*, are excellent sources for such a study. In his dedication, introductions and forewords to those collections, Morpurgo reveals his personal connection to some of the places and characters that feature in the stories. His partly autobiographical tale 'My Father is a Polar Bear' is a marvellous vignette and makes an interesting partner to his 'For Carlos: A Letter From Your

Father' which he contributed to *Lines in the Sand*, and anthology of prose, poems and artwork on the theme of war and peace edited by Mary Hoffman and Rhiannon Lassiter. (2) The latter tale is, in essence, a letter received by Carlos on his tenth birthday which was written by his Argentinian dad before he died in the battle of the Falklands War. Both are examples of moving experiences and would prompt personal stories and connections to other tales written by this sensitive and skilful writer.

Many of the collections listed below are by one author and are rich in stories that can be used for author studies. All the short stories are suitable for older junior and some for early secondary readers.

Animal fables

Into the Jungle: Stories for Mowgli by Katherine Rundell

Just So Stories by Rudyard Kipling

How the Whale Became by Ted Hughes

A touch of humour

The Bucket: Memories of an Inattentive Childhood by Alan Ahlberg

Give Peas a Chance by Morris Gleitzman

The Witch in the Broom Cupboard by Pierre Gripari

Dragons at Crumbling Castle by Terry Pratchett

Collections to interest everyone

Centuries of Stories edited by Wendy Cooling

Short! by Kevin Crossley-Holland

Short Too! By Kevin Crossley-Holland

Mystery and Mayhem edited by Katherine Woodfine

Family stories

The Serial Garden by Joan Aiken

The Julian Stories by Ann Cameron

People – in all their diversity

Half a Creature from the Sea: a Life in Stories by David Almond

Blue Moon Day by Anne Fine

Flying Lessons edited by Ellen Oh

Make More Noise edited by Sally Nicholls

Traditional tales

The Secret of the Purple Lake by Yaba Badoe

Tales from Old Ireland by Malachy Doyle

Fairy Tales by Terry Jones

Fables by Arnold Lobel

Straw into Gold by Hilary McKay

Grimm Tales by Philip Pullman

Tales from India by Bali Rai

'Scary' stories

Unreal! by Paul Jennings

13 Unpredictable Tales by Paul Jennings

Uncle Montague's Tales of Terror by Chris Priestley

Tales of Terror from the Tunnel's Mouth by Chris Priestley

Tales of adventure

Quest edited by Daniel Hahn

Survivors by David Long

Heroes by David Long

Pirates 'n' Pistols by Chris Mould

Winter stories

Winter Magic edited by Abi Elphinstone

Fire and Ice: Stories of Winter from Around the World by Lari Don

Stories of magic

Greatest Magical Stories collected by Michael Morpurgo

Magical Myths and Legends collected by Michael Morpurgo

The Tales of Beedle the Bard by J.K. Rowling

Notes

1. First published in *The Primary English Magazine*, June 2005 and updated in May 2020.
2. This collection is sadly not now in print, but Michael Morpurgo's story is available on: https://archive.org/stream/351773-letter-for-carlos-by-michael-morpurgo-short-story/351773-letter-for-carlos-by-michael-morpurgo-short-story_djvu.txt (Accessed 9th May, 2020)

