

# Scheherazade's Children

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Keynote speech at the 4<sup>th</sup> ELIA Teachers' Academy  
NATFA, Sofia, July 2009

Preparing these reflections might have been easy - if only it had not been necessary to provide a title before I began to consider the subject. I found myself like every student writing his or her first film script, which is the sort of story-telling I teach around the world.

These student writers usually start with the title - like *Lonesome Road*, *Burning Heart in the Alley*, or *Alone on the Open Road* - with a story line that inevitably involves a 1963 drop head Cadillac, in an obscure homage to the early work of Wim Wenders. Then there is the inevitable "Where the Wind Blows" ..or those who think a mathematical enigma will guarantee profundity, so they go for something like *One Plus Three Equals Two* ...and so on. Any title that will sound good when he tells it to his girl friend in bed that night. Then of course he practises signing his autograph for when he wins a Most Promising Newcomer book award, or when his ( or her) film script wins an Oscar. And only then does he begin writing his story, and discovers it has nothing whatsoever to do with the title he has chosen.

My piece this evening inherited a title agreed in an exchange of e-mails and finally embedded in the ELIA conference website: SCHEHERAZADE'S CHILDREN, and thus committed, I will endeavour to touch upon it here and there as I proceed. I began by asking: What if there were no stories?

Poor Sherherazade... and all her descendants. There is a variation of her legend... which also comes from Arabia. A story-teller sat by the sea and told his stories. The sea came in to listen. And crept forward to hear him better. Then when he finished, the sea, satisfied, slid back to its depths. Every day this happened. One day, the story-teller was not there. The sea crept forward as usual and then even further forward until it covered the land. Only when the story -teller returned and began his stories again, did the sea retreat from its terrible flood.

Stories can calm the savage beast. Stories can bring understanding. So without stories we understand less. A world without stories....? Well, that is inconceivable -- at least to me...

It would mean that we would not be here today. So in a way, we are here to celebrate stories. Without stories, we would be wandering isolated and alone, with no way of communicating with each other, with no idea of how to function as social human beings, without style, grace, love or compassion. We would be helpless in the grip of those who merely theorize about life. Our capacity for memory would be redundant -- in fact even our dreams would be meaningless.

And where would we be then?

## Looking at dreams

Even writing this -- I am reminded of the American broadcaster, Studs Turkel. A great name, and a great story-teller. A man of the people who died aged 96 only last year. He was perhaps the greatest exponent ever of oral history. He described his working method as "allowing people to talk about what they do all day, and how they feel about what they do". Every weekday for sixty years he made a fifteen minute radio broadcast from New York. He was a master of simplicity-- his were the sort of stories that we all know, but rarely tell. The ones we hardly recognise as stories. Each day he simply told his listeners about someone he had met in the street. He was not interested in famous people, smug and satisfied with their status. Quite the reverse, he was interested in the ordinary, everyday people who were just getting by. The clay of any city.

And millions of their fellows listened. It became compulsive and addictive. Even New York taxi drivers, those most avaricious of people, turned off their meters, and pulled over to the kerb when Studs was talking. He was their own. Their guide to life as it is lived – without the frills of romance and literary pretension.

On one occasion, I heard him tell of going uptown Manhattan by bus to Harlem -- that slum zone of people best forgotten. He left the bus eventually, and walked even deeper to where the houses were bricked up -- to become, behind their facades, crack factories, and gang head quarters.

The shops had closed years ago, their windows now so filthy, it was almost impossible to see through the glass. Studs told us:

"I was nervous. I hadn't been up here for years. It looked like nobody had. Then I spotted an elderly woman, a big, black woman with worn but shining shoes, carrying a neat handbag. She

was standing looking in one of these dead, empty shop windows.

I was intrigued. I walked up to her and stood beside her. She did not move away. She did not even look at me. She was not afraid of the appearance of this stranger. Maybe there had been too many strangers in her life.

Then I had to ask her: "Tell me Ma'am, what are you looking at?"

She turned her eyes to mine. She sighed and said: 'Dreams. I'm just looking at dreams.'

Such simple words. And in her reply, she assured her own immortality. We don't know her. We will never meet her. But when Studs spoke of her, we could see her. And our emotions are touched. A character, the soul of any story had been created.

I read somewhere once that all of us are trapped in our own stories, even if only in our dreams. In dreams, we play several characters at the same time. We are one of them -- in him or her we speak or act directly, while we often eagerly await the answer or response of another person, unaware of the fact that it is we who also control his or her movements or speech, just as much as our own. We are the authors and performers of our own nightmares.

Luis Bunuel laid great store in dreams as source material for stories, and we know he and Jean-Claude Carriere used them as catalysts for their long, brilliant collaboration together. Personally, my dreams are so shameful and full of lust and other delicious weaknesses that I could never use them as source material. I am afraid of the raw honesty of my own dreams.

## **Arthur and the badger**

I prefer the stories that are the fruits of my own experience and my own observation. Dreaming, awake in the daytime, is my single most favourite occupation, perhaps because unlike at night, I can still have some measure of control over my day dreams. What a desert we would inhabit, if we did not have these stories. Most of the true wisdom we have, we have received from stories, and most of the wisdom we claim as our own, we pass on as stories.

In trying to focus on this subject 'Why are Stories so important' I have to turn to stories themselves. Before it was hijacked and destroyed by the Disney Corporation, The Jungle Book by Rudyard Kipling was required reading - at least for English-speaking children. In it the young boy Mowgli is taught an understanding of the natural world by meeting and learning from the animals of the forest. In following his adventures, generations of young readers also learned the finest virtues.

This device of creating a world where the animals can speak and teach us a thing or two, was later taken by a writer, T.H. White in a great book called The Sword in the Stone. It tells the story of the training of the legendary King Arthur, who came to embody the purest qualities of chivalry. As a young man he seizes the great sword Excalibur which is embedded in a big block of stone. It had always been said that whoever could pull the sword free would become King.

This story of Arthur, Excalibur and the Knights of the Round Table is an enduring part of English mythology. Probably this is because we have specialized in a real world dysfunctional monarchy for a couple of hundred years. Not even importing German blood stock 150 years ago has helped this miserable family. But the British love the concept of monarchy. And Arthur is their model.

T.H. White took this legend, and concentrated on how the boy Arthur was prepared for his future role. To help him, he had the wise magician - Merlin. Merlin decided that Arthur would learn best from the birds and the beasts and the fish. He took him in turn to meet them all, and all of them taught him their special skills -- vision, the ability to see and think ahead, came from the eagle. The otter taught him to swim, how sensible use of water resources secures our survival. He learned the virtues of personal courage from another. Then he learned to contemplate from another and so on. Finally young Arthur said to Merlin: "What do all these bits of knowledge add up to?"

"Ah ha," said Merlin, "Now you are thinking. This is good. We should get someone to sum up for you."

They went to see Badger, who lived in a damp little house dug out of a bank of the river. Merlin's magic shrank Arthur to size and they entered the muddy tunnel leading to Badger's house. Badger was surprised to see them. But he did his best not to show it. There he was -- all furry, and wearing a little

black jacket which had turned a bit green because of the damp. He wore a small pair of gold rimmed reading glasses, and was in the process of rearranging all his books with the tallest books on the left and the shortest on the right. He sat them down in a pair of damp armchairs, and hurried out to prepare some coffee. When they were all settled in front of a big fire, Badger asked them why they had come.

"It's young Arthur," explained Merlin. "He's going to become King, and if he is to be a good leader he has to know a lot. I'm his tutor. We've talked to all the creatures. Each has contributed a small piece of knowledge -- now the boy wants to know what it all means. Where does he fit? How does it all work together?"

"Oh yes," said Badger, "I see what you mean. The big picture. Well I might be able to help. I've been thinking about it for a long time. I even made some notes - a sort of dissertation. Let me see if I can find it..."

He scumbled around and eventually found his thick manuscript under a pile of books on the floor. It was old and dirty, and torn at the edges. It had clearly been read and re-read many times. Badger picked it up and shuffled it. He adjusted his glasses on the end of his nose. He coughed, and cleared his throat. Then he read the title - "Why the Universe? The Meaning of Life."

Then he went terribly red, blushing with embarrassment. "You must understand," he said, "this is only the first draft..."

Each of us who writes or tells stories knows how he feels. Every student who ever tells me : "Its only my first draft..." knows why I smile.

That book is a gentle story, weaving a rich tapestry of ideas and notions about human values and virtues. Millions of children have been introduced to the concepts of power and responsibility, of courage and compassion, and of self- awareness through its interlocking stories. But Badger is my favourite, because I know how easy it is to be overwhelmed by ideas, and to lose the essential scale and perspective that an effective story needs. Think of Studs Turkel.

Badger, too, was defeated by the title of his essay. But that is literature. Reality can be even more extreme.

Some time ago, a friend of mine living in Berlin asked me to find a book which he last read in the 1950s. I agreed to help because of the book's title: "What is Life?"

I know a bibliotective in Britain -- a man who can track down almost any book. I suggested to him that it might be a joke played on me by my friend. Surely no one would ever chose such a pretentious title?

It is like the child who was set an essay topic in class: "What is God?" He thought for a time, then he wrote: God is a purple lump. Which I guess is as good a description as any other.

Anyway, my book detective assured me that the book - by Erwin Schroedinger - a physicist philosopher - was not a joke, but a serious attempt to provide a rationale for the question posed by the title. It had been out of print for nearly half a century. But he found me a copy. I read it before I sent it to Berlin.

In one chapter he suggests that each of us is a unit made up of the sum total of our memory and experience, quite distinct from that of any other person. This is what we really mean when each of us describes ourselves as "I". If a hypnotist, or an accident or illness or a failed experiment succeeded entirely in blotting out all our earlier memories, we would find that we had not been killed, but we would have lost our own unique quality of "I".

## **Why are stories important?**

That is at least a partial answer to the question: why are stories important?

Those of us who tell stories or want to tell stories -- and that must surely include just about everyone in this room -- do so because we want to assert and reaffirm that quality of "I". But I do not mean a form of self promotion or self-centred ego tripping. Stories are doomed to failure if there is a significant gap between the teller and the audience. The teller must be equal to, but not overtly superior to his or her audience. It is a partnership. A sharing of the moment.

The other night on television, on CNN, there was a publicity slot - I have forgotten the product already. But the opening line said: "No two sets of eyes see the same world."

Stories grow out of that singular vision -- a view of human relationships, of human behaviour that is

observed and interpreted through that vision and then offered back -- not as a faithful reproduction, but as having passed through a personal filter before becoming a shared vision. Thomas Mann told an American interviewer once that he wrote stories to make order out of the chaos of everyday life. And he is right.

Story-tellers tidy up the real world. They take elements, often years or decades apart, and fit them together to finish a puzzle that had lain unresolved for maybe half a lifetime. But there are other reasons why stories are so vital to us all. They preserve family or tribal history -- they try to render the unknown familiar or at least, less frightening.

It has been said that story-telling is the second oldest occupation of humankind. There is evidence of that dating back at least 60,000 years. I have often wondered how those stories, told by firelight in the caves and shelters of Neolithic times would sound today. I think they would be pretty impressive, even by our more sophisticated and formalised standards. Can we guess at the subjects? Of course we can. Those incredible cave paintings are full of action, tension and excitement....Someone once said they were the world's first comic strips. But they are more than that. They also suggest that their stories were based on experience.. Every time we, as teachers tell our students: Write about what you know.. we should remember the example of the cave painters.

Ad Lib: The hunter story.. Those artist/narrators were our forefathers -- and it is their stories and all the others that have followed for thousands of years that bind us all together.

So that is another answer to the question: Why do we tell stories? To share a unique experience..to make sense of our known world. To explain the unknown..To identify what we see as the mysteries of our universe. That is why the example of T.H. White's Badger is so useful.

The British poet, John Donne once wrote: "No man is an island unto himself." Stories unite people. Stories remind us of the shared experience. You could say that those of us who tell stories spend our lives swimming between islands.

## **The secret of a great story**

Fifty years ago, a great British socialist and politician, Nye Bevan said: "The human race wants only three things – sex, drugs and fairy stories." That is a fairly ruthless and cynical observation, but half a century later, I guess there is still some truth in it. Of course, half a century ago, the drugs he referred to were cigarettes and beer. The fairy stories were his way of saying cheap accessible entertainment. Only sex remains an unchanging preoccupation and desire.

Here is a better way of putting it: Bushman Xhabbo, a leader of the Kalahari people in Africa, once told author and traveller, Laurens van der Post: "A story is like the wind. It may come from a far-off place, but we feel it."

The secret of a great story is revealed when the teller or writer achieves a thin pure line - uncomplicated, direct, with every component assembled with the appearance of simplicity. Let us not pretend this is easy -- it requires a compassionate eye, a feeling for humanity, a sense of form and structure which is perhaps better called 'a coherent order'. All in the search for a calculated emotional response from the recipient.. .the audience. Without an audience, a story has no significance, no reason for its existence.

It is a killer question for students, to ask them, "To whom are you speaking?"

Too often, we, as teachers, forget to ask this question. We have a lot to answer for – not all of it good practice.

More than fifty years ago, the American writer Flannery O'Connor gave a lecture to the Confederation of Southern Women Writers. It is so important that it is now banned in many parts of America. She observed that even then there was a remarkable growth in classes for creative writing. She said: It seems that any damn fool can get into these places and emerge as a competent writer. I think that our culture is going to sink under the weight of competence. We do not need competence. Competence barely scratches the surface of our national awareness. Story-telling has always seemed to me to be a matter of what you tell – not of how faithfully you adhere to conventions of form and structure. An

effective story told well is a personal encounter with the story-teller.

I recall once, when I was teaching a Cuba, a student came to me with a story idea. "My story is about a young man who starts happy, becomes sad, then commits suicide."

I said: "So, where's the story?"

He paused for a moment, then smiled and said: "I guess its somewhere in between."

I've often recalled his words as I work with students who have what passes for a story all neatly divided up into scenes and acts, and character arcs, but which does not have a path towards understanding something of the human condition. The problem is that we find it easier to deal with form and structure, rather than content. I presume that we are going to spend part of this conference considering just this crucial question.

I frequently quote from Samson Raphaelson, the playwright and author of *The Jazz Singer*. In the 1940s, he taught for a semester at the University of Illinois. It was a course in creative writing called "The Human Nature of Playwriting". It was later published as a book – which is ranked high in university libraries as the most stolen book, year upon year. He began his first lecture with this piece of advice:

"A good writer need not be a wise man, any more than a wise man is necessarily a writer."

I would go further, or put it another way. A writer dazzled by his or her own superior intelligence will never be a story-teller. There has to be a burning NEED to tell stories deep inside the writer. It might hurt, it might humiliate, but one thing is certain, it must have resonance for the reader or listener. Story telling is an act of honesty, and of courage – not a peacock display of ego.

Every student of creative writing should be required to read Eugene O'Neil's his masterpiece play, "Long Day's Journey Into Night." In one scene in that play, there is a confrontation between Tyrone, the bullying actor father and his estranged son, the consumptive and lonely Edmund. Edmund, who dreams of being a writer one day, tries to describe his life as a crewman aboard a sailing ship. His father listens. In spite of himself, he is impressed by his son's vivid description. He tells him: "There's the makings of a poet in you all right."

Edmund, seeking to reach out to his father with feelings he has never been able to express before, says: "The makings of a poet. No, ... I couldn't touch what I tried to tell you just now. I just stammered. That's the best I'll ever do... Well it will be faithful realism at least. Stammering is the native eloquence of us fog people..."

How I wish I could persuade my students here, there and everywhere, that stammering is OK. Struggling to speak with your own voice, to tell, to get it right, is the truly great battle -- the only one I consider worth fighting. Fight to find your own voice, your native eloquence, and you will walk from the fog into the crisp, clear sunlight of articulation and a true understanding of the world. Only then will you have something original that you can share with others - your audience.

## **King Strawberry Head**

Of course this can easily be dismissed as a sort of romanticism. The hero's journey of the story-teller. God knows there are enough hacks writing books about that. But story-telling has another side. This is more private. And I usually don't talk about it.

When all else fails, everyone is seduced by a story well told. It is the most wicked weapon in the armoury of the seducer. I hit upon this years ago. I was never an object of desire. The closest I ever got to a stud was when I considered having my nose pierced. But I also try to avoid pain. It hurts. But while my friends pumped and preened their adolescent bodies in order to dazzle the opposite sex, I polished little stories that seemed to achieve roughly the same result... and I could do it sitting down. At the risk of being misunderstood, I would recount one example.

When I taught in New York, I had a class in story-telling -- called The Narrative Tradition. One of these sessions each week included some students who were members of the university's football team. These were formidable young men. They were so over-developed that they occupied two seats each. They came to class, each carrying two-litre malted milk shake and a box of donuts. They consumed thousands

of calories while I tried to trace links between early cave dwellers and their narrative paintings, the itinerant story-tellers of Madras and the legends that occur and re-occur in so many regions of the world. They sat and sucked their milk shakes and were grateful that the class did not seem to involve too much work. These were easy credits.

After a few sessions, I was desperate to get them involved. So I hit upon a strategy.

I began one lecture by telling them the story of King Strawberry Head. This is the typical fairy story of a wicked king who taxes his people so that they are poor and miserable. One day a strange man arrives in town. He is playing a flute, while carrying on his head a wooden tray piled with the most delicious strawberries you have ever seen. The King cannot resist them. He orders that the young man hand them over. The King eats the lot, then refuses to pay for them. What is the point of being a king if you have to pay?

The young man tries to insist. Then he gives up, and just walks away. But as he does so, he plays a strange tune on his flute. When the king wakes up the next morning, he discovers to his horror that his head has turned into a huge red strawberry. In shame, he becomes a prisoner in his own palace.

In class, getting this far took me about 45 minutes. But I stopped there.

I said to the students: "You know the sort of thing. The traditional format of the moral tale. We'll take a break, and meet up again next week."

None of the muscle bound college jocks moved. One of them said: "Hold on a moment. What do you think you are doing? You can't just stop... What happened to King Strawberry Head?"

I told them: "You make my point. Great stories make us want to know what happens next. And when we find out, we are richer for the experience of knowing."

Incidentally, that class was converted. They followed me like bodyguards. We were an odd group. So long as I kept telling stories, they were my faithful allies.

I am still hostage to the fortune of the story-teller. And rightly so. Even at my advanced age it is great to come here and to meet so many teachers who, I can only assume, want to encourage more young people who have stories to tell..., to clear a path for those who want to find their own way in the narrative tradition.

It reminds me that stories are, quite simply, the only reason for my existence here or anywhere. For those of us who tell stories, they are life itself. And life is the stuff of stories.