

## History of Storytelling

From The Basics of Storytelling by Dr. Michael Lockett (2007)

Storytelling has been around for thousands of years. Yet most storytellers do not know much of the history of how storytelling began. While talking to her audiences, mostly librarians and library storytellers, Ruth Sawyer said, "I know of no other group of artists, be they painters, architects, or composers, who have not gone into their own pasts, keen to gather all that had a bearing on their art." She wrote, "I have found too few storytellers in this country (America) who have looked beyond the hand that compiled or wrote their favorite collection of stories for them." (The Way of the Storyteller, 1945)

We are only learning in recent years how far back storytelling goes. A discovery by a group of children in the Pyrenees Mountains in 1940 called attention to drawings of extinct animals in the Lascaux Caves. Over 2000 figures, (mostly animals) were painted by some primitive people. While many animals in the paintings cannot be identified, over 900 animals that appear in the drawings can be recognized, including deer, cattle, bison, birds, bears and even one rhinoceros. In addition, the drawing of one human appears on the cave walls. Scientists and folklorists who reviewed these paintings say that one particular composition has all the elements of a narrative (a story) in it. Carbon dating places the drawings somewhere between 15000 and 13000 B.C. It is believed that the cave was used for the performance of hunting and magical rituals. Whatever its purpose, it serves as evidence that stories and storytelling have been around for a long long time!

Historic evidence of early storytelling comes from ancient Mesopotamia. The stories were about the epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian king who was reported to live in about 3000 B.C. Stories of Gilgamesh were passed down by word of mouth and likely went through many versions until the story was printed on clay and fired in about 700 B.C. Stories of Gilgamesh were also reported to be carved onto stone pillars where all could read them. I have to also believe that people also told the tales, thus keeping storytelling alive in ancient Mesopotamia. It may be interesting to those who are familiar with the Old Testament stories in the Bible that the stories of Gilgamesh included a creation story in a garden much like the one described in the Book of Genesis and even a flood story – both predating the time when the Old Testament was written down.

One of the oldest surviving records of storytelling was written on the Westcar Papyrus of the Egyptians. Through ancient Egyptian records, we know that three sons of Khufu (Cheops), the great Pyramid builder, entertained their father with stories. It is generally believed that this took place sometime between 2000-1300 BC. The writings show that one son told a tale of magic, another of the deeds of Khufu's forefathers and another told a contemporary tale. This is proof that storytelling existed at that time. It supports the belief that storytelling was used for entertainment as well as for communication and religious purposes.

We know that storytelling was prevalent in African history as well. Though the Greeks claim the stories of Aesop as their own, it is believed that Aesop originally came from Egypt, Ethiopia or some other area in North Africa or one of the islands near Africa in the Mediterranean Sea. Aesop was a slave who was best known for telling stories and fables that had been handed down through generations and for creating

fables of his own that have lived until modern times. While Aesop was reported to have lived about 550 BC, his stories were not written down until 300-250 BC.

Storytelling helped adults pass on wisdom, knowledge, and culture through the generations before they were finally printed in written form. A good example of the passing of stories through the generations can be shown by Homer's epics. Originally told by Homer about 1200 BC – the stories were passed on and on until about 700 BC when the ancient Greeks first developed their written language. This serves as proof that stories live on through re-telling. Modern storytellers still tell Homer's stories of the Iliad and the Odyssey.

The same pattern can be seen in China and in India where ancient stories appeared in written form years after they were originally created. “Storytelling was one of the many arts of the Yu, the entertainers at the feudal courts, during the Zhou Dynasty (1122-256 BC).” (The Oral Tradition of Yangzhou Storytelling, 1996) This was documented in sources linking storytelling in China back before the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD). I found it interesting to learn that storytellers often performed in the marketplace or bazaar. One source stated that the Pingtan performers depended on their mouths to eat, meaning that they were paid for their stories. In telling Buddhist epics in China and in southeastern Asia, their storytelling included pinghua – storytelling or narration without music; and tanci – narration with music. Stories were often told in narrative passages with breaks of music, humor, and poetry. In the olden days a story could take as long as three months to tell – with an hour session each day.

Shadowplays (storytelling with the use of paper puppets) in India have long been based on stories from Hindu epics about the god Rama. The favorite stories were included in the Ramayana which was first written in Sanskrit about 1500 BC. The epic story was based on a series of about 25,000 couplets credited to the Indian Poet Valmiki about 1500 BC that were turned into story form by performers. Storytellers told the Ramayana all throughout southeastern Asia. More relevant to modern storytellers are the tales of the Panchatantra, a collection of five books filled with stories that were written and told by Vishnu Sarma as around 300 BC. The stories of the Panchatantra are animal fables told in narrative and in poetry. These stories were reported to have been written as a means of educating the three sons of a Brahmin on how to deal with people in life. Each story has a moral and a theme dealing with topics such as love and hatred, compassion and wit, selfless courage and base cowardice, generosity and meanness and more.

Storytelling even held an important role in the Americas. Like every part of the world, America had its creation stories, flood stories, tales of heroic deeds and all kinds of sacrifices. Records of most of the stories in the Americas were considered pagan by Jesuit priests who came to what was often called “the New World.” In their efforts to convert the natives of Central America and South America to Christianity, priests burned all perishable documents and broke up the stones that recorded other stories. Despite this, North American storytelling was preserved through oral stories told at pow-wows and over campfires. The storyteller still holds an important place in the culture of Native Americans.

I have adapted a story from 763 AD that was retold in Religious Education through Storytelling (Cather, 1925) to summarize why storytelling has been important throughout history and why it should remain important in the future. I call the tale, “The Gift of Stories – The Caliph of Baghdad” as it had no name in its original form. I have told this story to teachers and parents, and now I tell it to everyone who wishes to learn to tell stories by reading this book.

**The Gift of Stories - The Caliph of Bagdad**  
As Retold by Dr. Mike Lockett, The Normal Storyteller

*Many Centuries ago, a banquet was held in the palace of the Caliph of Bagdad to celebrate the birth of a new son. As was the custom, leaders and men of high station came from all across the land to present gifts and enjoy the feast provided by the Caliph. Each brought a costly gift, except for one very wise sage named Mehelled Abi. Abi came to the feast empty-handed.*

*Each guest paraded in elegance before the Caliph to present his gift. Fine clothes, jewels and gold were given in abundance. As each gift was received with a smile from the Caliph, the givers turned and gave a frown as they watched the sage standing at the end of the line with no gift to give.*

*“He has no gift to give,” they began to whisper among each other. “He has no gift to give the new prince.”*

*At last the sage came before the Caliph, and the room grew silent as all wished to hear what words he shared with their ruler. “Fine raiment, jewels and gold the prince has received, and may he be blessed by many more gifts as he grows to manhood. But, I bring the most precious gift of all. I bring the gift of “Stories.” Laughter broke out in the room until the Caliph held up his hand to silence everyone and let the sage continue.*

*“From the time that your son is able to understand my words,” said the sage, “I will come to the palace every day and tell him stories. The tales I tell him, both true and fanciful, will make him wise and righteous as he grows in wisdom through my words. When the day comes, my Caliph, that you can rule no longer, your son will sit above your people as their chief. He will be just and merciful, and all of Arabia will rejoice in his leadership.”*

*Mehelled Abi kept his word. From the time the young prince could speak and understand words, the child, who was named Haroun-al-Rashid, was tutored daily by the wise old man and told stories from all around the world - tales both true and fanciful. He learned of wise men and fools; of science and nature. He learned about all religions of the world and more. When the time came for him to rule as Caliph, he extended the borders of his empire from the Byzantine Empire in the West to China in the East. He ruled with wisdom like few other men possessed.*

*Haroun (called Aaron by westerners) is still known as “Aaron the Upright,” “Aaron the Just” and “Aaron the Rightly Guided.” Bagdad grew in power. Art and music flourished, as did the art of storytelling. Some say that the Book 1001 Arabian Nights was stimulated by the rule of this Caliph - all because of the gift of stories.*

*One of the best gifts history has given to us is to teach us that storytelling is important. Children are blessed when we take time to tell them stories, starting as soon as they are born, and certainly no later than when they are old enough to understand the spoken word. Stories can indeed make our world a better place in which to live. May the world become a better place because of the gift of the stories that you tell to young and old alike!*