

LYN STEYN
Head Librarian,
Fish Hoek Library



Story-tellers

Story-tellers weave magic worlds for all ages. Whether we listen, read or watch, the words and images whisk us away instantly from our reality to share someone else's experiences. Intrigued, we explore further and wander endlessly on a quest for more. We are forever and happily caught in the story-teller's web.

In the Sixties as in earlier times, expanding your mind was a common mantra, justifying the use of LSD and other hallucinogenic substances to open the 'doors of perception'. A far simpler trip can be taken by turning the pages of any book, either alone or guided by a story-teller. Stories told, read or imagined, are not tied to an era or dependent on culture or status or expensive equipment.

Through the ages, story-tellers have been fêted and medieval troubadours were welcomed at royal courts. The memories of one generation are passed on to the next to ensure the survival of heritage, of roots and common origins. From East to West, all peoples used stories in some form or other; and similar characters and devices occur and recur through mythologies to convey similar concepts or philosophies. Called Loki in one tale or Richus in another, a character can be identified across the world in many forms but always representing the same psyche, indicating our common resolution of fears or problems through myth and analogy, remarkably even amongst people with no proven contact with one another.

Stories help us explore our context, confront fear or bias, or celebrate differences and diversity. Oral, written or recorded history stimulates imagination, explores experiences of others, reaches understanding, empathy, and broadens horizons. I am sure no technical advances would have been made if inventors did not use imagination about how life could be different/better/easier.

Where I live and work, Ethelmay Gillard is the best-known story-teller in the community. She was the Fish Hoek librarian from 1954 until she retired in 1990. Twenty-one years later, she still figures in most of the library clientele's memory and conversation. Very few weeks go by without someone telling us how well they remember her story times and how her story-telling influenced them or their

children. The memories are bright and alive, and their faces reflect the pleasure and love felt in that moment and still coursing through their lives today.

I particularly enjoyed one reminiscence: Miss Gillard had a special 'story chair' from which she entertained the groups of children. A new mother arrived early one day and sat down in this chair; only to find an anxious little boy tugging at her skirt: 'Get up! Get up! You can't sit there,' he hissed urgently, 'that's Mrs God's chair'. He certainly had his priorities and no one was going to derail his story-time by usurping the most important seat in the room!

Her direct influence has reached many generations throughout her career. Indirectly, as role model to colleagues and through mentoring those of us fortunate to know her, Miss G will leave her mark on many future generations in our community. Here is a legacy to which we all can aspire – may you be inspired to try.

