

## 2006 Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecture by Dan Yashinsky

I'd like to thank the Saskatchewan Library Association for inviting me to give the 2006 Mary Elizabeth Donaldson Memorial Lecture. While I'm not a librarian, I am a librarian



groupie, and I hope that this will qualify me to contribute something to your work as librarians. I'm also the Toronto Public Library's first storyteller-in-residence, a position created by Ken Setterington, the Child and Youth Advocate at Toronto Public Library, and a fellow-believer in the value of storytelling.

This has been a dream job for me because I was, as a storyteller, raised by children's librarians in Toronto. I can truly say that 398.2 - Folk and Fairytales - is my address. Later in my lecture I will describe the experience of encountering one particular member of this formidable company of, at that time, women. I've been convinced since my early days as a storyteller that children's librarians were the most unflappable, hardest-working, best educated, most ferociously dedicated good time gals in the world; and I'd be pleased if some of my mentors and friends in library work - and the spirit of Mary Donaldson, too - would accept this lecture as a small way of honouring their great influence on my life.

I was once telling stories at a downtown arts centre when a restless group of kids stomped in. They were ten-year-olds from a Catholic school in a new housing development, and they came in munching potato chips and blowing bubble gum. One big boy with a cast on his arm had a well-practised burp. I could tell they weren't in a listening mood. Since it was close to Halloween I lit a candle, turned off the lights, and started telling ghost stories. It wasn't long before they were hooked. I was, after all, using the world's oldest method of crowd control: suspense. It worked for Scheherazade for a thousand and one Arabian nights, and sure enough it worked for me. At the end I told them the Golden Arm. You've probably heard versions of this spooky "jump" story at summer camp, or on a sleepover where the challenge was to terrify your friends out of their wits. A treacherous husband has stolen his dead wife's golden arm. He hides it under his pillow, and one night she comes looking for it. "What has become of your golden arm?" he asks shakily as she comes towards him. Then (and here the storyteller's voice becomes very

quiet) the ghost . . . reached . . . out . . . and . . . said . . . : "YOU'VE GOT IT!" At which point my thirty cool grade five students screamed and jumped into each others' laps. The tough kid with the cast - well, let's just say he found new respect for the oral tradition.

When the lights came on, the children lined up to leave, talking excitedly about their shocking experience. I noticed one girl standing quietly, holding something around her neck. I asked if she liked the stories and she said, "Oh yes - but when you told the last one I didn't jump."

"I noticed," I said. "How come?"

"Because when I knew it was going to be scary, I held the Blessed Virgin Mary." She showed me the amulet she was still holding. "You should get one, too."

"I'm not sure I should," I answered. "I'm Jewish."

"That's okay," she said sagely, "Get a Jewish one." I have often remembered the girl's good counsel. When you know something scary is coming you must find and hold onto your own source of reassurance and wisdom. You must have a steady beacon to guide you through perilous waters. My young friend had an amulet. What I hold to is the belief that knowing good stories by heart and telling them to a circle of listeners makes a haven for the human spirit.

Taking her wisdom as my cue, I'd like to talk about the power of oral stories, as we hear them both in everyday life and through the formal and traditional art of storytelling. I will trace for you some of my own journey as a storyteller, because it has been far more an education based on listening than on performing. In my experience, learning to listen has been the critical part in learning to tell stories. In fact, being shy and more or less terrified of public speaking, it was only when I realized that it isn't fair to only listen to good stories that I discovered the energy and passion to tell them myself. In the apt words of George and Helen Papashvily, in their wonderful book of Georgian stories Yes and No Stories, they say, to listen without telling is to enjoy the fruit without ever taking care of the tree. Even shy people can't shirk that kind of responsibility, even if it is a case of what Yeats called "the fascination of what is most difficult."

I'd like to begin by taking you to a summer camp where I worked in the early 1970s. It was a Family Services camp called Bolton Camp, and it was a place for the poorest children of Toronto. I learned my first great lesson about story-listening there, and it was also the beginning of the path that led me to Boys and Girls House library and my first encounter with

my beloved librarians. I got my job at Bolton Camp because a counsellor had run away. I was his replacement. I found out pretty quickly why he'd bolted. They had somehow managed to put all the wildest and weirdest kids in one cabin: mine. I could tell you many stories about their adventures, but I'll resist the temptation - endemic to anyone showing their home-videos and telling their life-stories - and I'm going to fast forward to one night when, not long after I began working there, we brought the eight-year-old boys up the hill to the campfire.

After we settled them down on their logs and with their marshmallow sticks, the counsellor in charge of the fire led us all in song. One of their favourites was about that great ship of doom, the Titanic:

O they built the ship Titanic  
To sail the ocean blue  
And they thought they had a ship  
The water couldn't go through,  
But the good Lord raised his hand  
Said, 'This ship will never land,'  
It was sad when the great ship went down.  
It was sad  
- So sad!  
It was sad  
- Too bad!  
It was sad when the great ship went down  
- To the bottom of the  
Husbands and wives, little children lost their lives  
It was sad when the great ship went down  
Kerplunk  
- It sunk  
What a lousy piece of junk  
- 'Cause the captain was drunk  
Glug, glug, glug...

When I looked around at my boys singing with utmost glee about the drowning children, women, men, and crew of the mighty and indestructible Titanic, it occurred to me they'd spent most of their young lives staring helplessly at the various icebergs approaching their own frail vessels.

After the songs were done, the counsellor took a long moment to fix the fire, placing a branch here, a log there. Then he stood quietly and gazed out over our heads to the trees that circled the clearing. Finally, he looked around the boys and said, "Ever hear of Old Man Bolton?"

There was nervous laughter from these first-time campers. They seemed to know they were about to be initiated into an ancient tradition.

"Well, they say he used to live around here. All of this land once belonged to him."

The boys peered out into the dark forest.

"His cabin was just up the hill, not far from where we're sitting right now. It burned down a long time ago - after it happened..."

"What happened?" asked one of my boys.

"He went crazy one day. Yes, Old Man Bolton took an axe and chopped everybody up into little, tiny pieces. The cabin burned down and just the foundations are left. Tomorrow I can take you on a hike up the hill and show you where the cabin once stood . . . Anyway, they say he cut his own foot with that axe, and when he limped off into the woods he left a trail of blood. The police showed up after awhile, and found what he'd done, but they never did find him. Old Man Bolton had simply vanished."

A long, thoughtful silence ensued.

Campers shifted on their logs, edging closer to the fire.

The forest beyond our circle of light seemed very, very dark. Another camper shakily put his hand up: "If they never found Old Man Bolton, where is he now?"

"Well," said the storyteller, "that's the strange thing about my story. You see, some people say he's still out there, wandering the hills with his hurt foot - and his axe."

"Hey," Frankie piped up - and I'll tell you more about this insolent, intrepid and skeptical boy in a moment - "is that story true?"

"Probably not," the counsellor said, "Nah, I don't think it's true. But there's just one thing . . ." The Bolton Camp yarnspinner took his time now - why rush a good punch line? - and stared for a long while at the sparks crackling up into the dark air. "Boys," he said, "if you're ever out in the woods at night, and you get lost, and it's very dark, and you're way out past the last cabins . . . and you hear a sound coming towards you, something like this," and he clumped back and forth in front of the fire, demonstrating exactly how an axe murderer might limp around in the forest, "even though it's probably not Old Man Bolton . . . my . . . one . . . piece . . . of . . . advice . . . is . . . run like hell!!!"

He screamed and leapt towards the children. They tumbled off their logs and lay gasping in the dirt.

We picked them up, dusted them off, sat them back down, put new marshmallows on their sticks, and tried to sing one last song: "Cumbayah, my Lord, cumbayah ...." Then we marched single file down the trail, back to the safety of their bunks. I should mention that a few years later the administration decided that the children, coming as they did from troubled homes, shouldn't be exposed to stories about this terrifying ogre of the forest, and so the counsellors were forbidden to tell the tales. I happen to think they were wrong to ban the story.

Many of these boys had already met Old Man Bolton in their homes, neighbourhoods, schools. He was the drunk who beat up their mama, or the bureaucrat who decided they couldn't get welfare that month, or the pimp at the corner, or the ongoing horror of a life lived in the shadow of hunger. Hearing a story about Old Man Bolton meant they were no longer alone. When you name evil you begin to conquer it. Besides, although scary, don't forget that the ghost was coming to them in the form of a story and in the voice of a counsellor who could also make them laugh, sing, and talk. Old Man Bolton may be strong and wild, but the circle of listeners and storytellers was even stronger.

Many years later, I realized that Old Man Bolton was, in fact, one of the oldest spirits in the world. The Greeks called this wild one of the woods Pan. In Trinidad he's known as Papa Bois. Up north, they call him Windigo. We were telling myth without realizing it, and the boys felt a kind of awe in their very bones.

This was the heaviest real-life magic I'd ever seen. These boys sitting so rapt around the campfire were the same bunch who liked to run through the camp, playing pranks, bashing each other (rarely - I was strict about that), farting as noisily and often as possible, and generally earning their reputation for being the camp's most extravagant lords of misrule. Yet when the storytelling began they became utterly quiet and well-behaved. Even after marching trepidaciously back to their cabin they kept their mood of awe and even reverence. By some mysterious power the storyteller was able to transform my wild pack of campers into a community of listeners Homer himself would have been proud to play for. Every one of them had been labelled by teachers and social workers as having "severe attention deficits" and "unmanageable behaviour". Yet when the stories began, I watched them relax and breathe more deeply, their eyes shining with joyful - and sometimes fearful - anticipation. I longed to understand the secret of this astonishing art.

"Many of these boys had already met Old Man Bolton in their homes, neighbourhoods, schools...."

Even before coming to camp I had travelled via books to the storyteller's shire. I had had a great Chaucer teacher in college. Professor Marvin Mudrick read the Middle English of the Canterbury Tales aloud in his Philadelphia Jewish accent, and led us into a world where everybody - or at least pilgrims sharing the road to Canterbury - could be counted on to have a remarkable story to relate. I was so inspired that many years later, I memorized the Miller's Tale. It was probably the most useful thing I've ever done. You can't imagine how good it is to have 600 lines of rhyming Middle English couplets in your head, especially when you're driving through Toronto rush hour or going to the dentist or facing emergencies where it's hard to hold on to your *joie de vivre*. All you have to do is get to the scene where the fair Alisoun has persuaded the

rather vain Absolon to kiss her in the dark as she hangs her derriere out the window - *Abak he sterte, and thoughte it was amiss, for wel he wiste a womman hath no berde; he felt a thyng all*

*rough and longe yhered, and seyde "Fie, alas what have I do?" "Tee hee," quod she, and clapte the window to - and your own troubles seem less daunting. Falling in love with Chaucer, I then read the other great medieval story collections, Boccaccio's Decameron and One Thousand and One Arabian Nights. Each collection reflected its own culture, but shared a common vision of stories being rooted in oral communication. In Boccaccio, the stories are told by young survivors of the Black Death. In the Arabian Nights, the stories are told by Scheherazade. In a cross-cultural leap, I also found myself reading my way through the Icelandic sagas. Then I discovered epic.*

During my last year at the College of Creative Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, I lived in the world of the Iliad and the Odyssey. In all of these books and studies, the storyteller seemed like a wonderfully romantic figure from bygone days. The idea that bards like Homer once travelled the countryside, finding a welcome in every royal couldn't (and probably every roadside wineshop, too), carrying epics they knew entirely by heart - it all seemed tremendously noble and compelling and impossibly remote for a suburban kid who grew up in the 1950s a member of the first television generation. I spent my childhood watching Batman, not hearing bards chant epic or troubadours recite courtly romances. I never dreamed that the storytelling tradition might be alive and well in my own society. Yet here at a summer camp for kids from Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods the art of storytelling still burned as brightly as the fire we encircled.

Everything about that fire pleased and thrilled me: the clearing in the woods, the children's intent faces, the teller's voice carrying clearly over the simmer and spark of the fire. A window of time seemed to open, and I realized that this was the same fire around which the human race had gathered since our earliest days, listening for wisdom and entertainment. By such fires Native elders conjured the creation of the world, hunters told spear stories, Irish shanachies spun long wondertales, African griots chanted ancestral history, Homer sang of the king of Ithaca's long journey, caravan travellers shared desert yarns, grannies told folktales, children's librarians did story-hours by candle-light. The story-fire was the oldest fire in the world. As I sat by the fire I remembered a moment from the *Odyssey*. At a feast in King Alkinoos' hall on the island of Phaiakia, Odysseus praises the art of the royal bard, Demodokos:

Alkinoos, King and admiration of men,  
how beautiful this is, to hear a minstrel  
gifted as yours; a god he might be, singing!  
There is no boon in life more sweet, I say,  
than when a summer joy holds all the realm,  
and banqueters sit listening to a harper  
in a great hall, by rows of tables heaped  
with bread and roast meat, while a steward goes  
to dip up wine and brim your cups again.  
Here is the flower of life, it seems to me!  
(Fitzgerald trans.)

We were eating toasted marshmallows instead of royal wine and meat, and our bottoms were falling asleep on hard logs instead of the queen's soft cushions. Still, the same summer joy held our realm, although its borders covered only a few hills thirty miles northwest of Toronto, and its citizens were a couple of dozen scruffy boys from the inner city and their teenage counsellors. This was as close to the "flower of life" as I had ever come. I decided that despite being shy, tongue-tied, stage-frightened, and forgetful, I had to master this art.

I started by reading stories aloud to my boys. On my days off I'd drive back to Toronto and head for Boys and Girls House Library, which used to be at St. George and College (it's gone now, like Old Man Bolton's cabin and the camp itself - just the foundations remain). 398.2 - the Folk and Fairytales section of the library - was my stomping-ground. I plunged into the stacks with indiscriminate delight, hunting and gathering stories because I liked the colour of the book cover, or the country the tales came from, or the name of the writer. I feasted on folktales. Every week I'd bring back a stack of books, and read them to the guys after their night-time snacks.

The time finally came for my debut performance, the night I was going to tell a story instead of read it aloud. I'd picked a

Russian wondertale about Prince Ivan and the Firebird, learned it by heart, and now I was ready to start my storytelling career. I settled the boys in their bunks, lit a candle, and began: "Once upon a time there was a king and a queen and they had three sons."

So far so good, I thought - I can do this! Just then, Frankie - the boy I mentioned earlier, who happened to be the camp psychopath, a true leader gone absolutely rotten, and undoubtedly now either serving time in Kingston Pen or running for his third term in federal parliament; just then, as I said, Frankie blew a loud and hearty mouth-fart. The boys cracked up, and my story was derailed. I was pretty cross but I tried to stay calm. There's a school of child psychology that suggests when a kid misbehaves you should ignore the misbehaviour and it will go away. So I decided to carry on despite Frankie's rude interruption.

"The king and queen had three sons. The first two were very proud and clever, but the third son was lazy and good-for-nothing and his name was Prince -"

Frankie's fart was even louder the second time.

I felt cold fury. To hell with books about child psychology. This was a showdown. I stopped telling the story, walked over to his bunk (an upper bunk), and looked at Frankie who lay grinning impudently at me. I spoke to him very slowly and very clearly and never stopped staring at him while I spoke: "If - you - do - that - one - more - time - I - am - going - to - kick - your - little - butt - out - of - this - cabin." I wish I'd remembered that children, especially ones like Frankie, are filled with a great natural curiosity. They'd rather suffer the consequence than never know whether you're serious or not.

I walked back to my chair and continued:

"The prince's name was Ivan, and he was always getting into trouble around the palace. Instead of working, he liked to lie around under an apple tree in the royal garden. One day their father the king went blind and called his three sons. 'My boys,' he said, 'it is up to you to find a cure for my blindness. Go far away to a land I've never seen and bring back something you find there. You'll know what it is when you find it. That will be my medicine.' The two elder brothers rode off, proudly and cleverly, but Ivan just went out to the garden to have a nap under his favourite fruit tree. And when he fell asleep he had a dream, and in the dream he heard a voice, and the voice told him: . . .'"

"PPPHHAAFFFFTTTT!" Frankie struck a third time.

What do you do at a moment like that? I know now, thirty years later, the best thing is to continue telling your story, and trust that the audience will eventually settle down. I could have told the story sitting close to his bunk, and probably quelled the rebellion before it started. I could have joined the boys in laughing at the mouth-fart instead of taking offense, perhaps even made it part of the story: "Prince Ivan liked to sit under an apple tree in the royal garden daydreaming and practising irritating and unpleasant sounds that drove everybody crazy . . ." There are many things an experienced yarnspinner would have in their toolbag for just this kind of situation. At the time, I knew none of them.

What I did know was that this was my world storytelling



premiere, and a little, punkass camper had just sabotaged my beautiful fairytale. I was royally pissed off. I jumped up, turned on the light and went straight to his bunk. I yanked him out of bed in his pyjamas, opened the cabin door, and deposited him on the step outside. So much for Padraic Colum's suggestion, in his lovely book *Storytelling New and Old*, that "the mood of a story that is told to children should be one of kindness." Then I locked the door, turned off the light, and continued telling the story of Prince Ivan and the Firebird to my now even-more-attentive audience. There were many incredible adventures as Prince Ivan, with the help of a magic horse, found the golden feather of a firebird, battled dragons, married the firebird maiden, and cured his dad's blindness. (The version I tell now comes from Charles Downing's Armenian Folktales and Fables). I told every detail to the very end, accompanied by Frankie's frantic banging on the door as he shouted, "Let me in! Old Man Bolton's gonna get me!"

When the story ended, there was a long silence. Some of the boys had fallen asleep during my telling (I've learned since that this can be a tribute to a storyteller's soothing voice, if not to his or her ability to create breathless suspense). One

boy climbed out of his bunk and unlocked the door. I didn't stop him. Frankie trudged in quietly, climbed up to his bunk, and soon my eight young boys were breathing gently in the summer night.

Why did the Muse send this Frankie, my boy-shaped dragon, to block my path on my very first attempt to become her apprentice? I think she was trying to initiate a newcomer into the deepest secret of the teller's art: the listener is the hero of the story. A tale about Prince Ivan, or Jack, or Cinderella, must have room in it for the real Jacks and ash-girls in the audience. Ever since that summer, whenever I meet an audience I try to remember that the hero of my story may be sitting right in front of me. He or she is the one who is labelled a slow learner, the goofy kid, the child at risk of dropping out. For this listener, the story is much more than an entertaining stream of words. They are listening because they desperately want to have a story of their own, one that can include even their wild passions, terrors, frantic misbehaviours, and possibilities of change. My troublemaking camper had no polite and civil way to let the storyteller know of his ferocious need - farts were the best he could do as he sought admittance to a world where apple trees can speak in your dreams and good-for-nothings can discover golden feathers. Ever since then I always look for the Frankie in every group where I'm telling stories. I still owe the greatest of all listeners his fairytale.

It was after that summer that I found myself back at Boys and Girls House, asking the librarians - who were now used to the sight of a somewhat dishevelled young man loaded with stacks of fairytales - if they knew of any storytellers I could meet. They all told me to call Alice Kane; and so one day I gathered my courage and made the most important phone call of my life. I introduced myself and explained all in a rush that I had spent the summer working as a camp counsellor and that I had tried storytelling and that it was the hardest thing I've ever done but I wanted to do it for a living, and did she know anybody who would be willing to teach me how to be a storyteller? It wasn't very eloquent, but it was all true. There was a pause at the end of the phone-line. Then she said, in a voice that had a hint of iron challenge and that still carried the cadence of a northern Irish childhood: "You're not an actor are you?"

Me, an actor? Absolutely not. At twenty-two I hadn't even learned to play myself, let alone any other role. I answered: "No." Then I made bold and asked her, "Why?"

In a soft, clear voice she replied, "Because actors can't tell stories. An actor puts himself between the story and the listener. A storyteller has to let the story through directly."

I've thought about her Zen-like statement ever since. It reminds me of Homer's invocation at the beginning of the *Odyssey*: Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story....(Fitzgerald tr.) It is a good paradox, one to haunt a young artist in any discipline. I've been pondering it ever since. I don't think she was criticizing theatre in any way. I think Alice was trying to say that a storyteller's job is to animate a mind-movie for the listener. And it's true that after I've heard a good story, I often can't tell you afterwards what the storyteller was wearing, or how they used or didn't use their hands, or anything else. What I see during the telling and what I remember afterwards is the story that unfolded in my own imagination as the teller took me into his or her reverie. The truth of this approach is reflected in a lovely Tanzanian story opening. The teller says, "I came and I saw." The audience chants back: "See so that we may see."

I spent the next thirty years following Alice Kane around, having innumerable cups of cappuccino in our favourite cafe; hearing her stream of commentary, anecdote, and, yes, gossip as I drove her around town; most of all, listening to her telling wondertales and reflecting on the power of her astonishing art. I think the greatest thing I learned from her - and



it is something I've found in many of the traditional storytellers I've met - is the belief that stories can open paths that would otherwise remain impregnable. In her book *The Dreamer Awakes*, she describes how she was contemplating the precarious and troubling state of the world one day, and wondering what she, as a storyteller, could do to make a difference. Then she remembered her own wondertales, where the hero, often a poor and unregarded boy or girl, must earn "a talisman, a little twisted stick, a sword of power, a dead mother's blessing." Armed with this token of new power, these unlikely heroes are able to accomplish world-changing deeds. Alice Kane decided that she, too, possessed such a talisman, and it was made of all the stories she knew by heart: "The whole background of story and song poured down upon us by those who have gone before. It is reassurance and courage, a great shining that transforms dark truth into victory." Storytelling itself is - or can be - a tool for mending broken worlds.

Why do oral stories have such powers of transformation? Why are we story-tropic creatures, turning to narrative like sunflowers turn to the light? I will end with one more story. My partner was once putting our first-born child to bed. He was about three-years-old, and he liked to postpone sleep for as long as possible (this hasn't changed much now that he's a teenager). In a monotonous murmur she began to tell

him the most soporific yarn she could make up. It was a very, very, very repetitive story about how all the animals in the barnyard were going to sleep: "Once upon a time it was bedtime in the barnyard and the piggies were getting sleepy . . . and the ducklings were getting sleepy . . . and the ponies were getting sleepy . . . and the little chicks were getting sleepy . . ." Our son had almost succumbed to its sleep-inducing spell when he managed to murmur from his pillow: "Then suddenly they heard footsteps!" The story picked up from there, and he sat up to listen.

Even at three he knew that something was missing from his mother's stream of words. The story-part wasn't there, that moment of transformation that leaves everything different in the imaginary world of the tale. My Romanian grandmother used to begin her fairy tales with a traditional opening: "Once something happened. If it hadn't happened, how I could tell you about it!" Our son sensed that there didn't seem to be a something about to happen at the heart of the story. Without this moment of change and revelation, the words remain only a dull sequence of talk. An Armenian saying distinguishes between listening to a story's language and understanding what it has to say: Three apples fell from heaven - one for the storyteller, one for the listener, and one for the one who heard.

I once heard American storyteller Donald Davis explain to an audience in Montreal: "As a storyteller, I only give you the words. It's how you hear those words that turns them into a story." This is listening with a mind to remember, where the listener knows that one day they may pass the tale on in their turn. Walter Benjamin, whose essay on storytelling in his book *Illuminations* is one of the best things ever written on this art, writes, that a story's counsel is not revealed as the answer to a question, but rather as "a proposal concerning the continuation of a story which is just unfolding. To seek this counsel one would first have to be able to tell the story." The story speaks to you, in other words, only when you are willing to lend it your own voice.

Martin Buber, in *The Legend of the Baal-Shem*, a book about Hasidic storytelling, describes a scene where the Baal Shem Tov tells stories to people in a marketplace. As they gather around him, each finds their own story within his complex and intricately woven narrative. Buber states: "[I]t was no report of distant times and places that the story told; under the touch of its words, the secret melody of each person was awakened . . ." This is an apt image to end with. This way of describing the already-mysterious phenomenon of story-listening seems wonderfully accurate. With oral stories, it seems to me, we are always listening for a kind of "secret

melody" - that is, a distillation and expression of our own experience - our lives reflected back to us with new understanding.

In Kit Pearson's book *The Sky Is Falling*, there's a lovely example of how a girl hears her secret melody in a fairytale told by a librarian you may recognize. A sister and brother are evacuated from the blitz in London. They turn up in Toronto. The little boy is so young that the memory of his home and parents fades as he is adopted by a Canadian family. The sister is just old enough to be keenly aware of her homesickness, of her huge responsibility towards her little brother, of the distances they've traveled, and of the terrible danger their parents are still in back in England. One day the children - who haven't been settled yet - are taken to Hart House to hear a storyteller. Although the teller isn't named in the book, some of you may recognize Alice Kane in this description. A small woman with very bright eyes sat on a low stool in front of the fireplace, watching them calmly.

"And now, I want to tell you the story of Alenoushka and her brother." Her tone had become sad and solemn and the rollicking atmosphere changed to hushed expectancy. "Once upon a time there were two orphan children, a little boy and a little girl. Their father and mother were dead and they were all alone. The little boy was called Ivanoushka and the little girl's name was Alenoushka. They set out together to walk through the whole of the great wide world. It was a long journey they set out on, and they did not think of any end to it, but only of moving on and on..."

The back of Norah's neck prickled. She was pulled into the story as if by a magnet and she became Alenoushka, trying to stop her little brother from drinking water from the hoofprints of animals, and desperate when he did and turned into a little lamb....

O brother Ivanoushka  
A heavy stone is round my throat  
Silken grass grows through my fingers  
Yellow sand lies on my breast.

Norah didn't realize her eyes had welled with tears until one rolled down her cheek. The story ended happily. Alenoushka was rescued from a witch's spell, and when she threw her arms around the lamb he became her brother once more. ...

The haunting voice stopped and the room was still. Norah's body was loose and relaxed. She felt the rough rug under her legs and Gavin's warm thigh pressing against hers. The librarian stood up and left the room without acknowledging them or saying goodbye. It was as if the stories had used her to tell themselves. The children got up quietly and went in to lunch.

It is a striking image of telling and listening. The story, complex and moving, seems to have room in it for even Norah's grief for her parents and bittersweet feelings towards her little brother. In *The Lord of the Rings*, a skeptical rider questions Aragorn about the existence of hobbits - "Halflings," laughed the rider ... "Halflings! But they are only a little people in old songs and children's tales out of the North. Do we walk in legends or on the green earth in the daylight?" - Aragorn replies: "A man may do both ... for not we, but those who come after will make the legends of our time. The green earth, say you? That is a mighty matter of legend, though you tread it under the light of day." It isn't so much that Norah the young refugee becomes Alenoushka the fairytale orphan as that the world of the story and the world she herself inhabits draw near, the borders open, and the deepest truths and possibilities of the two worlds begin to dance together. This is the secret of the storyteller's art and the storyteller's greatest purpose: to remind us that we have the power to live on this green earth by daylight and by story-light. It is why we must - as parents, teachers, librarians, storytellers - keep the storyfire burning.

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The Saskatchewan Library Association established the Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecture Series in May 1967 to honour the memory of Mary Donaldson, who served Saskatchewan as an outstanding Provincial Librarian from 1951 until her death in 1966. The lectures are given annually by leaders in the field of library science or closely related fields. While the lectures are designed primarily for librarians in the province, they are open to the public in the belief that library trustees and friends of the libraries will also find them thought-provoking and challenging.