FOREWORD

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 libraries will also find them thought-provoking and challenging.

The Mary Donaldson Fund, which finances the series, is supported yearly by the individual members of the Association, library boards, library associations, library trustees and friends of Mary Donaldson. With support such as this, the lectures have become a permanent and valuable part of the continued expansion of library services in Saskatchewan and a fitting tribute to Mary Donaldson's part in that growth.

This lecture by Janet Lunn is the twenty-seventh in the series.

For the Saskatchewan Library Association

Once There Was
and Once There Was Not

I did not know Mary Donaldson. All I know about her is what I have read in the forward to Survival of The Imagination, the Saskatchewan Library Association's publication of the first twenty-five lectures given in her name. She seems to have been a person willing to work long and hard for the love of, and the belief in, the importance of libraries to everyone in the province. Bless her. It is an honour to be speaking in her name.

When Wenda McArthur asked me if I would give this year's lecture she asked if I would talk about story. I think she asked because she knows me and knows how inextricably my life is wound around the belief in, the importance of libraries to everyone.

As for me, I agreed because I love librarians. I have two reasons. The first is that most of the librarians I know are as enamoured of what that means in terms of joy and reward, and in terms of frustration, anxiety, grief, and pain. This is an ordinary life.

But she is an extraordinary person who has led an extraordinary life. Janet Lunn is an outstanding writer. Her awards are numerous and therefore prove that. But all I had to do to know this was to read her books—Double Spell, The Root Cellar, Shadow in Hawthorne Bay, Amos's Sweater, Duck Cakes for Sale, to name a few. Whether writing rich fiction for young people, truly delightful picture books, or imaginative non-fiction, Janet is a painstakingly careful (slow, she will tell you) and inspiring writer.

Janet is an outstanding person—an over-achiever, you might say. She has been active in her profession, serving as President of the Writers Union of Canada at a time when much needed to be done, and sitting on the Board of the Children's Book Centre, as just two examples. She has been to innumerable conferences, given innumerable speeches, sat on innumerable committees and juries, and contributed to smaller and larger worlds in countless ways. There is so much that can be said about Janet, but what she has to say is what is important here. Please enjoy the Mary Donaldson Memorial Lecture, as given by the ordinary, and extraordinary, Janet Lunn.

Wenda McArthur
SLA Vice-President, 1993-94

INTRODUCTION

Story spans all ages, and perhaps it is fitting that, in this International Year of the Family, the Mary Donaldson lecturer, Janet Lunn, speaks to a topic that reaches everyone.

Janet Lunn is one of those wonderful human beings. To know her is to feel privileged. And Regina was privileged several years ago to have Janet as writer-in-residence at Regina Public Library.

Janet is an ordinary person and an extraordinary one. Janet has lived in an old farm house on Lake Ontario, near Hillier, since 1968. She has had a husband and children, grandchildren, cats, a job, a career—and probably even the chicken pox. She has good and caring friends and is a good and caring friend; she has colleagues in the many aspects of her life. We all know, then, what that means in terms of joy and reward, and in terms of frustration, anxiety, grief, and pain. This is an ordinary life.

But she is an extraordinary person who has led an extraordinary life. Janet Lunn is an outstanding writer. Her awards are numerous and therefore prove that. But all I had to do to know this was to read her books—Double Spell, The Root Cellar, Shadow in Hawthorne Bay, Amos's Sweater, Duck Cakes for Sale, to name a few. Whether writing rich fiction for young people, truly delightful picture books, or imaginative non-fiction, Janet is a painstakingly careful (slow, she will tell you) and inspiring writer.

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We love story, all of us, that world between worlds, suspended in time and place. I sometimes think we could be classified scientifically as the story-making species. We read. We listen avidly to ballads and poems and stories. We soak up all those predictable sitcoms on our TV sets. We cart home armloads of videos from the video-rental shops. And we have been doing it forever, loving story. In spite of all the old jokes, I feel sure that the oldest profession in the world is that of a story teller.

It’s the magic, the draw of that world between worlds, that suspension of the too-familiar reality.

There’s something else, though, that might be even more basic to us and that’s the shape of the story, its structure. Structure is what I spend a great deal of time on when I teach writing. Students always groan (they want to start with long, descriptive passages). But structure matters.

A few weeks ago I was listening to Shelagh Rogers interview a British psychiatrist and musician on the CBC’s stereo program The Arts Tonight. He was talking about the music of Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina and the affect his music has on the right brain. There is, according to studies that have been done, a physiological effect, a calming from the arrangement of the notes of consonant music, particularly the music of Palestrina and other like sixteenth-century composers. I believe, although I don’t know of any studies to prove it, that the shape of a classical story, the beginning-middle-end shape articulated by Aristotle more than two thousand years ago, also has a physiological effect. How could it not? It is the shape of our days, of our most profound experiences, of our lives. A story without that form may please us in many ways but it leaves us restless, unsatisfied. As I said, there are no studies to prove this but I believe it.

But this underlying form is not the first thing we look for in a story. It is not what attracts us. No, the first attraction is that escape into other worlds. What inexpressible pleasure it is to lose one’s self in a thorough-going mystery, a warm and sexy love story, a terrifying horror story or a wild adventure. For an hour or so we can lead those other glamorous, exciting lives, be those beautiful, strong, fearless people.

While escape is only the first need story fills, it is not to be overlooked or despised, as it so often is. It brings comfort and healing. Richard Kennedy, a British illustrator, told me once that an ex-soldier told him that he and his huddles had carried a copy of Eleanor Farjeon’s book, Martin Pippen in the Apple Orchard (which Kennedy had illustrated) all through the second world war. They had wanted to remember that, somewhere—somewhere else—there was a world full of beauty and warmth. I have heard, too, of soldiers who could not be parted from their copies of Antoine de Saint Exupery’s The Little Prince. Escape. Comfort.

And healing. Story heals. Years ago I met a librarian whose work was in a children’s hospital. She discovered, to her astonishment, that she had brought a small child out of a near-catatonic state with repeated readings of Maurice Sendak’s story, Where The Wild Things Are. Since then I have talked with many nurses who tell me they have sometimes had greater success with stories than with counselling with spiritually and emotionally wounded children.

Robert Coles makes the same observation in his book The Call of Stories. Dr. Coles is a psychiatrist (as well as being the author of over forty books). He writes about his work with patients in mental hospitals and with children and adolescents in inner-city schools. “Where the need for healing is greatest often story is the only answer,” he says.

In my own life, not only in times of trauma but in times of being heart-sickened by the horrors of our human world, I turn to the myths, the fairy tales and to the children’s stories I love best. I read Frances Hodgson Burnett’s The Secret Garden probably once every year. It renewes me.

In the months before he died, when my husband was very ill, I read us a story aloud every night. A very ill person can deal with the profound but not with the complex. So the stones were children’s stories: Charlotte’s Web which Richard had never read (because of my love affair with children’s literature I was the one who had usually read to the children once they were past the nursery age), Winnie The Pooh (which
we had all loved together), the children's stories of Jane Gardam and Patricia Wrightson (which were not yet published when our children were young). In spite of the illness, these were good times, healing times, for both of us, times I am not likely ever to forget.

I find it interesting that the stories that heal are most often not the ones earnest writers and teachers think they will be. Most children, most people, who are confused and hurt by death or separation in their families do not want stories about death or separation—at least not the obvious ones written to help them deal with what has happened. They want wonderful, magical stories that will transport them to those other, more beautiful worlds and send them back, not only refreshed but enriched, having been touched by life's deepest truths. For it is in the fairy tales and the myths—those stories of enchantment now so readily reviled for their violence and their sexism—where the eternal truths are kept. And all the world's finest novels, for adults and for children, draw on the myths' essential conflicts, and the characters Karl Jung calls archetypes, for their inspiration.

There is though, a dark side to the power story has for healing. (Is there ever a bright without a dark side of anything?) The power of story to transport us to that magic world between worlds has also the power to keep us there. Those intense daydreams from which stories spring bear the snow queen's seductive power and that of the fairy who did not get invited to the christening.

It is this power that frightened so many parents during the height of the Dungeons-and-Dragons craze. I know two people who have spent years more in dreams than out of them (one was having an affair with Napoleon for three years, I have never been sure where the other one was). But what are daydreams, after all, but stories we tell ourselves?

Our ancestors had their own slant on this. In myth and legend, the world between worlds is often equated with faerie, defined as a "state of enchantment." Remember Tamlin, the old Scottish tale in which the queen of elfland took the boy Tamlin while he slept? For all but seven years she kept him. In seven years he would be hers forever (the spell in the old tales was always seven years). But just before the seven years would be over, the Earl of March's brave daughter stood firm against all the queen's terrifying spells and rescued him.

Those of us who write fiction know the queen of elfland all too well. It's a precarious tightrope we walk, the one stretched between this world and that. How real that world can become, and how unreal this one—and, maybe what's worse, how readily the two can become indistinguishable.

All the same, within that world, that wonderful, dangerous world, there is such treasure. We define ourselves by story. We do not exist, we do not know ourselves or the world we live in without it. How often have you put down a book in which the author has just expressed an understanding about the human condition and said to yourselves, "I knew that. Of course I knew it, I just didn't know I knew it." It is a confirmed insight—and how we all look for confirmation of our observations and insights.

Writers and artists have the job of showing us who we are. And it's not an easy job. For one thing the writer/artist is not always conscious of what he/she actually does know or see. Someone, I can't remember who, said once, "How do I know what I'm going to say until I've said it." How true that is of writers so much of the time! The writer has only the drive (compulsion is more like it) to tell a certain story—and quite often hasn't even the vaguest notion of why that particular story is so compelling or what it means once it's written. In fact, the story may mean something quite different to everyone who reads it. I have to tell a joke here that I've told before when I've made this point. (Please forgive me, those of you who have heard it but the point seems such an important one and the joke is so appropriate.)

A man goes to see a psychiatrist because he is troubled. The psychiatrist shows his new patient a series of twelve Rorschach blots. The man examines the first one and says "Well, this one is about sex." At the sight of the second one,
he says, "This one is certainly about sex." He looks at the third and says "Sex, again, for sure." He says the same about the fourth and so on to all twelve.

"I think," says the psychiatrist, "that you have a fixation about sex."

"Well," says the patient indignant, "they're your dirty pictures."

What’s important here is that the story one person writes is not always the one another person reads. And that’s okay. I have a pet theory which those of you who already knew my joke have also heard me expound (how I hate speaking to an audience at least half of which I have already spoken to). My theory is that the history of the world is really the telling of one long tale, the recounting, if you like, of one millennia-long conversation.

I think it works rather like the game where one person starts a story and passes it to the person sitting in the next seat. That person passes it to the next who passes it to the next and so on. In the game the players sit in a circle and the fun is to see how closely the tale that reaches the last player resembles the one that was told by the first. Usually not at all; even the names of the characters have been changed. Some people don’t speak clearly, some don’t hear clearly, some aren’t listening well, some can’t resist decorating the story.

In C.S. Lewis’s essay, *Fem-Seed and Elephants*, he says that every new generation of scholars seems to have to uncover the new “true” meaning of Plato’s words, of Shakespeare’s, of the words in the New Testament. Each generation takes from what it reads, exactly what it wants to.

And that’s how it goes with fiction. We take a story and make of it what we will or what we need. I have more than once been told by readers that I haven’t gotten my characters’ descriptions right (always by adults; children are more inventive, they tell me what should have happened in the story—or what should happen next). And isn’t history like this too?

Somewhere in the barely-post-Roman years in British history there lived a splendid man—a chieftain? A king? A warrior?—someone who pulled together the disparate (and desperate) leftover Romans and the native Celtic Britons to stave off the invading Saxons. Some say they managed seventy years. Some say twenty. Either number is amazing. No one knows anymore, for sure, what this hero’s name was or the details of those years but for centuries tales were told and told again in castle halls and around camp and hearth fires. In time they became tangled with the old Cymri tales of gods and goddesses. Some of them travelled to that part of France that became known as Brittany because so many British sought refuge there from the Saxons.

Over the centuries, bards and troubadours told the tales. The tales grew, they changed and, in the twelfth century, they were written down as the romances of King Arthur and his Knights of The Round Table.

Once written down, of course, the romances got into the hands of scholars. Now, no matter how story tellers mine those old tales for new and fresh versions, there are scholars to nail them for authenticity—or lack thereof. And, of course, even the scholars disagree, so Arthur, his knights and Guinevere, his lady, still belong to any who care to pick up their stories—and to tell as they like.

So important are the King Arthur romances, they have come to be called, "the matter of Britain" as *Le Chanson de Roland* is the matter of France and *The Kalevala* defines the Finns. There are places all over England, Wales and Scotland where Arthur is said to have held court. His ideals are claimed by all. And so "This England, this scepter’d isle" existed long before Shakespeare wrote that line. It was already Arthur’s.

History grows, changes, heroes are idolized, debunked, idolized once again, the facts and fictions of their deeds intermingling. Probably it matters not one whit. What is important is the truth at the core of them.

As individuals, from the time we are very small, we learn who we are, what family we belong to from the stories our elders tell. I know, for instance, because of hearing about it so often, that my German great-great-grandfather worked on
the making of the Erie Canal in upstate New York, made his way to Milwaukee. became a businessman and, eventually, sat in the new Wisconsin legislature. (What the family lore does not say is why, in an old Milwaukee newspaper article I read when I was looking up my venerable ancestor, it says he had to deny so hotly that he owned a brothel.) I know a lot about those nineteenth-century immigrant German ancestors, what they ate (and didn't they just!), how they dressed, even the rather boring jokes they loved best. My sister and I are writing a family history for our children and while, of course we won't actually make anything up, I expect we will tell the things we find most interesting (about the brothel, for sure). As I expect the things my mother and father found most interesting (or suitable) were told to us.

Canadian children's writer Paul Yee says this same thing to children in schools and libraries he visits. "Stories tell us who are and how to deal with it," he says. Paul, a Chinese-Canadian is doing his best—and a very good best it is—to add his perspective to our view of ourselves as Canadians.

I'd like to talk about us, the Canadian family, and our stories for a few minutes. Maybe we, in Canada, are too newly a people and perhaps the age of instant communication is too soon upon us for us to ever develop a mythology of our own. The Americans managed it by having a revolution early on—and following it only two generations later with a civil war (there's nothing like a war for building myths—and legends). But now, no sooner are noble deeds done or even suggested than they are hastily debunked. Not for us even a no-good prince like Charles Edward Stuart to write romantic, heartbreaking songs about two hundred years after a lost war. Isaac Brock didn't get a song. Stan Rogers wrote one about Col. John MacDonnell who really did scale those heights but not many of us Canadians have shed tears over him or even heard of him. No, a people's mythology may be seeded in battles and such, but it grows slowly out of many stories and fragments of stories, often told, half-remembered and built on over time.

It isn't likely that an overwhelming Asian-and-European immigrant population like ours will build a mythology from the Iroquois Corn God or the Haida Raven legends. We who have come from "away" have brought our own folk and fairy tales with us. But they are imports. They don't fit here and when we tell them we always tell them about those places we have left behind.

If we are to build a mythology I suspect its foundations will be the stories about those tough old coureurs des bois who paddled and portaged their canoes from the shores of the St. Lawrence to Great Slave Lake, about the hardships of the Loyalist ancestors of my Lake-Ontario-country neighbors, about your prairie pioneers in their cold, wet, soddy huts: heroes, anti-heroes like John A. Macdonald whom we all love so dearly to deride and Louis Riel who lost his battle and Terry Fox who lost his and won one for the rest of us.

A few years ago - quite a few years ago, now—I was on a train in England travelling through Sussex from South Hampton up to London. I was thinking about Rosemary Sutcliff, Rudyard Kipling, Eleanor Farjeon, all those writers who have written so eloquently about the Sussex Downs and caused everyone who's read their words to love that South-England countryside so much.

They are lovely, those soft, deep rolling hills but, as I was looking at them with such pleasure that day, the thought came to me that those hills were no more beautiful than, maybe not even as beautiful as, the Murray Hills that lie just north of where I live in Eastern Ontario. "It's only," I thought, "that our hills haven't been celebrated for over a thousand years." Then I thought of Al Purdy's poem "The Country North of Belleville":

A country of quiescence and still distance
a lean land...
where a man might have some
opinion of what beauty
is and none deny him
for rules...
I whispered, "Thanks, Al," and promptly thought of Wilfred Campbell's
Along the line of smoky hills
The crimson forest stands...

Lines that come rushing to my mind every year when our maples turn red. Then I thought of W. O. Mitchell's, Margaret Laurence's and Sinclair Ross's prairie stories. I have to tell you what a Regina man once told me. He said that As for Me and My House was the best book he'd ever read but it was so depressing that he thought, if he ever had to read it again, he'd sit in the bath tub and slit his wrists.

Since that day in England long ago, there has been so much more writing in this country, writing that is about us and our land. Think of the writing of Alistair McLeod, Jack Hodgins, Kevin Major, Merna Summers to mention only the smallest handful and think of the songs of Stan Rogers and James Keelaghan. Our writers have been accused—especially by Canadian critics—of writing too much about the land. But, then, we have so much of it. And, if ever there were a people shaped by the land they live in, we are that people.

I think that what I loved best discovering while I was working on The Story of Canada was that fact. The land and how we Canadians feel about it is one of the things that distinguishes us from Americans. While Americans love their land, I'm sure (how could I not be? As a one-time Vermonter I know that it is true in at least one part of the U.S.) they are held together by an idea, an ideal. Not us. We are held together by the land, by the Arctic hanging over us. As "a nation of immigrants" we are still learning how to live in this land, still trying to be comfortable here (even while we do our utmost to exploit it out of existence).

We are ready to be a people. I know we are. When I was out across the country promoting The Story of Canada I met, over and over again, people who with tears in their eyes, thanked me for writing the book. They bought two and three copies at a time—for themselves, their children, their grandchildren, and for Canadian children living in other countries. It wasn't because they all thought it was a brilliant book; they hadn't read it yet. They only knew they wanted it for their children.

I cannot begin to tell you, too, how much I loved gathering the stories for that book—and how I loved wrangling with Christopher Moore over which stories we'd tell and which we'd leave out. (I don't think Chris, being an historian, always trusted my attraction to the embellishment of a story.)

Stories like the ones we used, historical ones in which writers try to stick to the facts as they know them, do not, on their own, create a nation's mythology. Nor does poetry like Purdy's or Campbell's or literature like the novels of Mitchell or McLeod. But those stories, poems, songs, novels are mixing with the more casual stories being told in bars and around kitchen tables. They are a beginning and they are making a small chapter in the world story, a chapter about us. They are giving us the power to know ourselves, to become a family.

There was a time in my life when I doubted the value of my writing stories. It wasn't that I doubted the value of stories although doubt, once begun, has a way of taking over the psyche. It was my writing them. The last of my children had gone out into the world to seek his fortune and my mothering job had come to an end.

During all the years of working at that job I had never, for a single moment, doubted the value of doing it. I had daily, sometimes hourly, doubted my ability to manage it but never the value of the work.

Then, suddenly, there I was. The writing I had been squeezing into the nooks and crannies of my days was staring me in the face and I was frightened. It seemed so selfish to be sitting at my typewriter making a life's work of my daydreams. The nearby village had a meals-on-wheels program, the hospital needed volunteers, the local branch of my chosen political party needed help. Or, I could get a paying job. I could get a job as an editor.

Logic struck. If it was okay to earn money helping other writers with their stories—and not all of them could be
geniuses either—what made it so selfish to write my own? So I set to it.

It was around that time that I ran into a colossal bit of luck. The British mythologist Dr. Katherine Briggs was to be in Toronto to give a lecture and her British publisher (a friend of mine) asked me if I'd be willing to take her to lunch during her visit. Would it?

We had our lunch—this is a bit of a digression but I must tell you what this amazing eighty-year-old woman looked like. She was a woman of average height and weight—not distinguishable there, I suppose, but she was sporting a rather dashing cape. The shape I remember because it swirled when she twirled but the colour I don't remember at all. I think it is because of her shoes and her hat. They were bright purple. The shoes were suede, low-heeled but elegant, and the hat was like an English-Civil-War-Cavalier hat, large brimmed, dipping way down on one side with a great plume curling around the brim. Under that brim, wisps of white hair showed and a pair of very lively blue eyes.

Lucky me. After our lunch (which Dr. Briggs insisted on paying for) she turned to me and said, "Now, my dear, where shall we go to talk?" I couldn't believe my good fortune. I took her to a lounge where she drank gin and tonic all afternoon and talked about stories and told stories. I remember a great deal of what Dr. Briggs said to me that afternoon but one story I took to my heart.

During the Second World War, at the time of the London Blitz, Katherine Briggs, then a middle-aged woman, was one of a pair operating an all-night tea kiosk. She told me that the firefighters would stumble in on towards dawn, weary and heart-sick from what they had been dealing with all night. They would lean across the counter tiredly for a mug of tea and always, someone would say, "Give us a story, Kate."

"Give us a story," it always makes me want to cry. It says to me and I hope it says to you—that, when all is said and done, we can all say, give us a story, and feel a little better about everything. I've never again worried about spending my life writing, telling or editing stories.

To end with I have a story for you about the value of story. This Scottish tale Why Everyone Should Be Able To Tell A Story is told in the words of John Lorne Campbell, story collector, story-teller and Laird of Canna.

Once there was a Uistman who was travelling home, at the time when the passage wasn't as easy as it is today. In those days travellers used to come by the Isle of Skye, crossing the sea from Dunvegan to Lochmaddy. This man had been away working at the harvest on the mainland. He was walking through Skye on his way home, and at nightfall he came to a house, and thought he would stay there till morning, as he had a long way to go. He went in, and I'm sure he was made welcome by the man of the house, who asked him if he had any tales or stories. He replied that he had never known any.

"It's very strange you can't tell a story," said his host. "I'm sure you've heard plenty."

"I can't remember one," said the Uistman.

His host himself was telling stories all night, to pass the night, until it was time to go to bed. When they went to bed, the Uistman was given the closet inside the front door to sleep in. What was there hanging in the closet but the carcass of a sheep! The Uistman hadn't been long in bed when he heard the door being opened, and two men came in and took away the sheep.

The Uistman said to himself that it would be very unfortunate for him to let those fellows take the sheep away, for the people of the house would think that he had taken it away himself. He went after the thieves, and he had gone some way after them when one of them noticed him, and said to the other:

"Look at that fellow coming after us to betray us: let's go back and catch him and do away with him."

They turned back, and the Uistman made off as fast as he could to get back to the house. But they got between him and the house. The Uistman kept going, until he heard the
sound of a big river, which he then made for. In his panic he went into the river, and the stream took him away. He was likely to be drowned. But he got a hold of a branch of a tree that was growing on the bank of the river, and clung to it. He was too frightened to move; he heard the two men going back and forth along the banks of the river, throwing stones wherever the trees cast their shade; and the stones were going past him.

He remained there until dawn. It was a frosty night, and when he tried to get out of the river, he couldn't do it. He tried to shout, but he couldn't shout either. At last he managed to utter one shout, and made a leap; and he woke up, and found himself on the floor beside the bed, holding on to the bedclothes with both hands. His host had been casting spells on him during the night! In the morning when they were at breakfast his host said:

"Well, I'm sure that wherever you are tonight, you'll have a story to tell, though you hadn't one last night."

That's what happened to the man who couldn't tell a story; everyone should be able to tell a tale or a story to help pass the night!

I agree. Thank you.