

PLEASE DADDY, PLEASE MOMMY, TELL US A STORY

By Fred Hobbs

A casual trip through the thicket of information now found on the computer provides a plethora of quotes extolling the virtues of storytelling and storytellers. Here are just a few: "Stories live in your blood and bones, follow the seasons and light the candles on the darkest night; every storyteller knows that he or she is also a teacher." That thought is from a surprising source, not Mark Twain or Dostoyevsky, but Patti Davis, Ronald and Nancy Reagan's daughter.

A more scholarly approach in praise of stories and those who tell them comes from Robert McKee, a creative writing instructor noted for his popular story seminars at the University of Southern California. McKee says "Stories are the creative conversion of life itself into a more powerful, clearer, more meaningful experience. They are the currency of human contact."

Here's a little true story about storytellers. Once upon a time, long ago, there lived in a cozy, mortgaged cottage in Denver's Park Hill a young couple, Mary Ellen and Fred. They had three children, "Chip", Jenny and Freddie. Every night at bedtime, these devoted parents alternated as storytellers (more accurately story readers.) Now, they didn't give much thought to the deep meaning of the importance of storytellers. And sometimes they weren't too keen about these end-of-the-day rituals. They just wanted to relax, talk and maybe "veg" a bit after his tiring day in the workplace and her even more taxing time fixing meals, riding herd on the trio of tots, cleaning, shopping and...well, all mothers know that endless daily routine.

But, when the kids were finally out of the tub and in their PJs and, with a favorite book in hand approached with a plaintive "Please Daddy, read us a story", that's when it was impossible not to appreciate that "clear and meaningful experience."

"The Three Little Pigs" was a favorite of Daddy's. He especially loved to read out loud the evil wolf's threat to "huff and puff and blow your house down." Daddy could do a pretty convincing "huff" and at least a passable "puff" in his best guttural wolf tone. Chip, the oldest, liked the action-oriented tales such as "Jack and the Beanstock." He would get a little wide-eyed when Daddy boomed out in a "giant" voice: "Fee-fi-fo-fum! I smell the blood of an Englishman. Be he live or be he dead, I'll grind his bones to make my bread!"

No matter how many times he heard the story, Chip was visibly relieved when he heard that Jack's mom took the axe, chopped down the beanstock and dispatched the evil giant. Jenny, thoroughly feminine, preferred "Cinderella." Mommy often played the part. Freddie was too young to absorb the plot details in the story lines, but seemed to enjoy just cuddling up next to Mommy or Daddy and hearing the stories before he generally nodded off to sleep.

In today's era of "political correctness" and modern concepts of child rearing those classic tales still being told back in the 1960s now have largely disappeared as part of the bed-time ritual. Too much gore in the beanstock tale; no fair dissing Cinderella's shrewish stepmother and her ugly daughters. Readings such as "Goodnight Moon" are more appropriate. And, with video and miraculous hand-held electronic devices available, the little ones can see and hear animated depictions by professional story-tellers...without parental performances.

Yet, it's nice to think that in at least some households, moppets in their jammies still can be heard pleading: "Please daddy, please mommy, (or maybe grammy or grampa), read us a story."