

Storytelling With Donna Washington

Before and After the Assembly

Storytelling Guide for High Schools

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Biography

Donna L. Washington was born October 6, 1967 in Colorado Springs, Colorado to Sgt. Don Washington and his wife Gwendolyn. Growing up as an Army brat meant Donna lived in Colorado, Texas, Georgia, Germany, Korea, Indiana, Japan, Oklahoma, Indiana, and Virginia before she graduated from High School. She has visited almost every state in the union except Alaska. The Washington Family has seven children. Anney, Don, Donna, Joseph, Darren, Milton, and Duyen.

In 1989 Donna graduated from Northwestern University with a Bachelor's of Science in Speech. She remained in Evanston, Il for seven years after graduation. She toured to Brussels with the Chicago Children's Theatre and did a few other shows in the area before becoming a full time professional storyteller.

Donna travels the world telling stories, and has been featured at hundreds of storytelling festivals all over the country, including the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesboro, TN. She has won Gold Parent's Choice Awards, Silver Parent's Choice Awards, Children's Music Web Awards, IParenting Excellence in Media Awards, National Association of Parenting Awards, and Storytelling World Awards for her nine recordings of stories.

Donna is also a published author. Her credits include many articles for magazines and books about storytelling as well as some picture books. Her titles include: A Big Spooky House, A Pride of African Tales, The Story of Kwanzaa, Li'l Rabbit's kwanzaa, and Boo Stew which will be out at a future date.

These days, Donna lives in Durham, NC with her husband David and their two cats Love Bug, and Flash.

A Brief History of Storytelling

Human beings in some parts of the world have encouraged literacy as a widely practiced public skill for about a century. In America, about 32 million adults cannot read. That is close to fourteen percent of the adult population. Reading is not an innate skill for human beings, and in order to do it, the brain must borrow space from different areas to cobble together the functions to master the ability. Humans have been writing for about seven thousand years. The first type of writing we find is called cuneiform (cue-na-i-form), and arose in Mesopotamia. Most of the populace did not use Cuneiform. It was the province of a small number of priests and merchants. Scientists calculate that people have been speaking for over one hundred thousand years. Emerging research suggests that human beings have been telling stories longer than they've been talking to each other! The brain started making stories before it had a way to communicate them orally. Our first communal language was most likely gesture and pictures. In order to communicate in any cohesive manner, the brain has to be able to organize thoughts into a structure that allows them to be presented intelligibly. Neuroscientists are now saying that structural organization is in the form of story.

Storytelling is at the heart of all communication between human beings whether it be dance, theatre, rituals, religion, music, politics, or just everyday life. The ability to shape ideas into comprehensive narrative so that they move the listener or persuade an audience is a power that can be used to change lives for good or ill. The stories from religious texts are meant to inspire us to lead more conscientious lives. The stories from the theatre run the gamut from the entertainment of Broadway musicals like *Wicked*, to calls for social action from the traveling groups like Bread and Puppets, or comments on civilization itself like Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. Storytelling

has been shaping the course of humanity for centuries. In many cases, he or she who tells the best tales...wins.

Raconteurs (ra-con-tours) lived in medieval Europe and they were hired to entertain at feasts and festivals. We use the word to this day to describe anyone who is good at telling stories using wit and anecdotes. European Troubadours (true-buh-dores) traveled the land and told stories with music. Irish and English Bards used stringed instruments like harps and lutes as they went across the land singing their stories for food and shelter. The most honored storytellers in every country would be able to find a place at the courts of kings, nobility, and rich merchants. They were given wealth and status for singing the praises and telling the stories of their patrons. Rulers had stories of their exploits and goodness composed so that their glory would live long after they'd passed into history. Bards were also hired to sing of the wickedness and evil of a kingdom's enemies.

Historically, those in power have always known that stories could change how nations looked at themselves. Strong narratives can move entire countries to act. People enjoy being part of the story, and they often buy wholesale what they are hearing. A good example of persuasive storytelling can be seen in American politics. Each of our political parties works hard to sell the American public the story of America as they see it. People identify with the narratives, and choose to buy into the story that they feel best fits the future of our country.

We no longer have bards roaming the land shaping political messages. We have the television, internet and radio for that. You can turn on the talking heads at any hour of the day and hear them spew out their attitudes, opinions and messages about the world as we find it. The biggest thing that politicians, corporations, and organizations of

all kinds are worried about is ‘controlling the narrative’. They are worried about how the story is going to be told. One of the masters of manipulating the story of society was a fellow named Joseph Goebbels.

Joseph Goebbels (1897 – 1945) was a master of propaganda. He was in charge of crafting and disseminating the story that fueled Nazi Germany during World War II. If you ever ask yourself how an entire population can be talked into doing or believing something horrific or destructive, you need look no further than those who sell carefully crafted propaganda. This type of storytelling can be used to turn people against each other or to make a really bad idea seem like a good one. A good propaganda artist knows how to twist and turn a narrative until it becomes a story that inspires people, and makes them want to be part of a hopeful movement even though the thing they are joining might be dark and scary.

Not all modern uses of storytelling are terrifying. Stories can also be used to heal old wounds or build bridges. Uplifting stories are often to be found in the religious philosophies of the world. Parables are a very specific type of story designed to urge the listener to think deeply about life and consider the choices they are making. Fables are also a type of tale employed to both entertain and instruct. Teachers of all cultures use stories to help youngsters learn the rules about the societies into which they have been born. A long time ago, you could figure out where someone was born by listening to the stories they heard as children. These days, you can pop down to your local public library, go onto youtube, or find a storyteller.

Anansi, Coyote, Little Red Hen, Reynard, Pedro, Babba Yagga, Jack, Sedna, Rumpelstilskin, The Ugly Duckling, Little Red Riding Hood...how many of those did you recognize? How many of their stories do you know? These are just some of the

characters that people the folktales of the world. Storytellers are always looking for tales. Even so, not all storytellers tell fables, parables, beast fables (stories where animals are personified), epics or fiction whether historical or otherwise, or personal narratives. Some storytellers are expected to be the record keepers of the culture.

In Africa storytellers are traditionally treated with great respect. Some are called Griots (gree-oes). Griots play instruments, sing and tell stories. They travel and share the news between villages. They are sometimes responsible for knowing the entire family history of particular tribes. In this instance, storytelling is not only used to share information between groups who are widely separated without reliable ways of communication, but to entertain and bring some fun into an existence that can be labor intensive and difficult.

Being able to trace ones family through storytelling has always been important in different parts of the world. In America today, people spend money and time tracking down the scraps of their past and learning as much about them as possible. This pursuit of the story of who we are is not limited to personal curiosity. The United States government creates teams of people to go out and record the stories of people who lived through difficult times. There was a project to record the stories of the last of the men and women who'd been slaves before their stories were lost. There was a project to record the traditional stories of Appalachia. We've launched projects to record forms of traditional music that were being lost or traditions that were in decline. The stories of how all of these things shaped our country and our current culture have been captured and saved for anyone willing to explore them.

In today's parlance, Donna Washington is considered an artist teacher, author, and itinerant performer. That means she writes books, educates through the arts, and

travels to tell her stories. She is also an award winning recording artist of the spoken word. She is most known for presenting international folklore, but she also does literary material, a bit of personal narrative, and original works. In performance, Washington is a minimalist who uses her voice, face and gesture to create stories without music, dance or puppetry.

What Kinds of stories will she tell?

On the high school level, talking about storytelling as an art form is the crux of the assembly. We will talk about what stories were used for, the power they have to change society and the power they have to shape our understanding of people.

There are a number of themes Donna Washington might explore during an assembly. Some of the themes deal with history. There will be some stories from the middle passage. Some stories explore how women are dealt with in story. Some stories will be completely entertaining and will be used for a study in techniques from vocal control, breath support, sound effect creation, pacing and pitch. Some tales might be on the scary end, and all of those stories are classified as Cautionary Tales, a great way to talk about sensitive subjects in a context that is consumable to this audience. There is also the possibility of a story about the unending war between men and women.

The stories will be a mix of ideas as well as technique unless a school requests a particular theme. Some possibilities are:

Family stories: Growing Up Army. These are personal narrative tales that are fun. War of the Sexes contains stories about relationships between men and women. Scar and fun

Folk and Fairy tales: These are stories that come out of some of the darkest and lightest parts of the human heart. There will be discussion of techniques and storytelling skills

Straight up Scary: The name says it all

The school is not required to pick a theme, but then they will get a mix of whatever the teller wants to tell that day!

The stories are meant to illustrate the art of storytelling while presenting age appropriate, entertaining and educational material to a group of people who are trying to decide what they want to do with themselves when they graduate.

Rock Paper Scissors, Everything!

A Jaunt Through Imagination

Rock, Paper, Scissors, Everything! Is a lovely game that my son started playing with us when he was about five.

It is easy. You set it up like the traditional game, only after you say, ‘one, two three – go!’ you can be anything.

Anything you can think of no matter what is fair game. Afterwards, the negotiations begin. Each participant must explain why he/she believes the thing they have come up with could actually trump their opponent. If both have good cases and it is not at all clear which wins, they call it a draw and start again. If neither party will yield, you have to ask up to three people what they think. Take turns giving the reasons you think your thing tops the other. If your judges can’t decide or if it is a split decision, then you call it a draw and go on to the next hand.

It is not necessary to win every hand. The idea is to see who can come up with the most creative things and the most creative reasoning.

Sometimes the pairings can be obvious like...worm/tractor

Sometimes the pairings could be much less obvious...measles/amoeba

Sometimes they are just silly....Superman/habanero peppers

This is about creative thinking, imagination and good old fashioned debate skills.

So, have fun!

How Does It Start, Where Does It End?

Every student writes the beginning of a story. You can either give them a list of possible characters, or they can come up with their own. Here are the steps.

1 Each student takes out a sheet of paper. Each student writes the beginning of a story.

2 Pass the paper to another person in the class. Each student reads the new paragraph. Then, they write the middle of the story. Pass the paper to another student.

3 This student reads the first two parts, turns the paper over and writes the ending of the story on the BOTTOM of the page on the back. Pass it to another student.

4 This student reads the end of the story WITHOUT TURNING IT OVER TO READ THE FIRST TWO PARTS! After reading the end, this student writes the middle that goes with the end. Then, the paper is passed to the last student.

5 The last student writes the beginning of the story. Then, the paper is passed to the student who wrote the first paragraph.

Now you have two stories: One built from the first paragraph, and the second built from the ending. This is a fun writing exercise that students tend to enjoy.

Resources

I have put together a large number of bibliographies in my life, and upon checking with people, I discovered most of them are lost, passed on or filed, never to see the light of day again. I don't put them together often anymore!

I do recommend the Storyteller's Source Book, second edition. Gayle Research puts it out and Margaret Reed MacDonald and Brian Sturm put it together.

The best source is the library itself. Find what speaks to you and use that for your work with storytelling.

For more information about storytelling and literacy I suggest the following:

Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young Children. Hart, Betty PhD & Risley Todd R. PhD. Paul H Brookes Publishing Co. inc. (latest reprint 2000)

Reading Research to Practice: A Series for Teachers. Biemiller, Andrew PhD. Brookline Books. 1999

The Schools We Need: Why We Don't Have Them. Hirsch, E D Jr. PhD. Doubleday. 1996

Mosaic of Thought: Teaching Comprehension in a Reader's Workshop. Zimmerman, Susan, Keene, Ellin Oliver. Heinemann Publishers. 1997

Strategies that work: Teaching Comprehension to Enhance Understanding. Harvey, Stephanie. Goudvis, Anne. Stenhouse Publishers. 2000

Explaining Reading: A Resource for Teaching Concepts, Skills and Strategies. Duffy, Gerald G. The Guilford Press. 2003

Beyond the Beanstalk. Rubright, Lynn. Heinemann, 1996

Three Minute Tales: Stories from Around the World to Tell or Read when Time is Short. MacDonald, Margaret Read. August House 2004

I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers. Tovani, Cris. Stenhouse Publishers. 2000

Social Studies in the Storytelling Classroom: Exploring Our Cultural Voices and Perspectives. Stenson, Jane & Norfolk, Sherry. Parker Brothers Inc. 2012

The Storyteller's Source Book: A Subject, Title, and Motif Index to Folklore Collections for Children. First Edition. MacDonald, Margaret Read. Gale Publishers. 1982

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For more information about Donna Washington:

www.donnawashington.com

www.bookhive.org

<http://donnawashingtonstoryteller.blogspot.com/>

For more information about storytelling:

www.storynet.org

www.tellabration.org

www.storytellingcenter.com

For a great source of free stories broken down into age appropriate groupings:

www.Storybee.org