

Pumpkins and Peacocks - Multicultural Storytime in Blacktown, Australia

by Rosemarie Somaiah

We were on our way to Max Webber Library in Blacktown, New South Wales, Australia, and I remember thinking to myself, “Why exactly am I going there? I know I’m a storyteller, but, I’m supposed to be on holiday... Oh, yes, Kiran arranged it, so here we are...” Kiran Shah, storyteller, educator and dear friend, was still in Singapore, but I figured I could trust her.

It was a large, airy library and looked very welcoming that Friday morning. We were in time for Multicultural Storytime scheduled from 10.30-11.30am. Lee Castledine, the librarian, and Kiran Shirodkar, responsible for outreach programmes were preparing for the show. Kiran, who was to be the storyteller for the day, had an armful of puppets and materials for related craft activities. Both of them looked very confident and sure of what to expect. But, there was no audience... as yet.



And then they began to stream in – all kinds of people, from young mothers with children in prams and toddlers in tow to elderly grandmothers, aunts and other relatives, some resident and some just visiting. Various other people had been drawn in by the sense of anticipation. And then, a large group of adults and senior citizens, dressed in a variety of traditional ethnic clothes, led by their group leader from the nearby community college walked in as well. These wonderful people, carrying the wisdom of their years in their eyes and their smiles, had enrolled to study English, and what better way to engage with the language than through some storytelling! They settled down on the comfortable seats that circled the storytelling space.

Exactly on time, Kiran began. “I need a forest in my story,” she announced to one side of the room. “Can you help me?” Immediately the older group rose, raised their hands - and there was a forest! “I need a grandmother,” said Kiran as she took the hand of a gentle old lady dressed in a white robe. She smiled, and was the grandmother. From the group of children on the other side, Kiran found the grandchild in the story. And then the tiger – the puppet in Kiran’s hands - said “Roar!” and everyone roared along.

As the story progressed, the storyteller drew upon the wealth of experience in the audience. “What do you call your grandmother?” “Nana, Thayi, Amma, Por por, Gran, Ammachi...” came the responses. “What is your favourite food?” ...Our stomachs grew large with the sampling of food from around the world! It is a good thing the protagonist had a barrel to jump into to avoid the tiger – it would’ve been a tight fit in any case! – And, what a good thing it was that she got home safely.

Then, out came a beautiful peacock puppet fluttering her tail. The audience joined in to call up the dark clouds, the thunder and the rain, so that the peacock could dance. Lee and Kiran handed out separate pictures of the pumpkin and the peacock together with crayons, and stickers to add to the brilliant colour. By now, the crowd had grown so much, we had run out of pictures, so Kiran quickly arranged to get some more.

The children were then ready for some rhymes and songs. They enjoyed this too, especially as the regular attendees had, at another session earlier in the week titled 'Baby Rhyme Time', received handouts with the words. Now they were eager to sing along and everyone joined in. Then members of the audience were invited to sing a little song, or share a little story of their own. It is amazing how such simple activities can help build a sense of community! Several groups of people had started coming together and now had reason to become friends. And friends brought other friends or new relatives along and the community had grown.

After the session, Lee took me around proudly to show me the selection of multi-cultural books at Blacktown Library –The library service has permanent collections in 23 languages including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Filipino, Punjabi, Hindi, Italian, Korean, Persian, Polish, Serbian, Spanish, Turkish, Urdu and Vietnamese that are held at Max Webber Library, Blacktown. They have magazines in three other languages - French, German and Dutch. Patrons can also request for other languages, and the library arranges to borrow boxes of books from the State Library NSW so patrons can borrow them. And the library obviously has librarians and storytellers who care!



The session had been so invigorating, such a joyful experience, that I was glad my own grown daughter had been with me. A little boy, bright and articulate, had commandeered her to read to him as his own doting and grateful mother, could not read English. She had had to gently coax him to say farewell, to remind him that the session was over and everyone else had left, before we could say goodbye.

And so, as we headed out into the town to see what else it had to offer, I was grateful that three wonderful storytellers had contributed in their own ways to make everyone feel welcome on another very special day in Australia.

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