

Word of Mouth

News from People & Stories / Gente y Cuentos

“Story Talk” will reach teenagers around the U.S.

High-school students enrolled in a drop-out prevention class. Young patients in a long-term hospital drug and alcohol recovery program. Older teens who live in a housing project in Washington, D.C.

Beginning this fall, young people from Alabama, Louisiana, New York and the District of Columbia will join the circle of People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, thanks to a National Endowment for the Humanities grant that aims to help youth transform themselves through literature.

The program, Story Talk/Cuentos y Plática, builds on a 2003 NEH grant that brought People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos to adults in libraries across the country. The new project will give teenagers the chance to hear and critically discuss short stories “in a way that helps them understand the value of their life experience, as well as the value of literature,” said Patricia Andres, executive director of People & Stories.

“When youth share ideas and receive affirmation from others — feeling ‘yeah, something like that happened to me’ ” — said Andres, “they are likely to feel less isolated...This exchange can help build community, trust, empathy and an appreciation for differences, as well as for experiences that members have in common.” In Gadsden, Alabama, public library director, Amanda Jackson, said short stories are the ideal route to get teens talking about the gritty issues of their lives. Along with librarians from Washington, D.C., Lafayette, Louisiana and Mt. Vernon and Tarrytown, New York, Jackson participated in a People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos training at the American Library Association conference in June.

“I wanted to go home immediately and start [the program],” she recalled. “In book

clubs, you might talk about ‘was that a good story?’ but you don’t get into the poetics and shadows. People & Stories takes it to a whole different level.”

She chose her teen groups — patients in long-term rehabilitation at a nearby hospital and students in a drop-out prevention group at the local high school — because she believes the program can speak especially to those who feel marginalized. In most schools, she said, “the ‘smart kids’ get to do all the activities. But if your grades are bad, you’re typically confined to the classroom. That makes you feel more alienated.” The combination of Story Talk with the drop-out prevention class “seemed like a natural partnership.”

Story Talk also seemed a natural fit for Kelly Navies, a library associate at D.C.’s southwest branch with an expertise in oral history. She hopes to work with 14 to 19-year-olds who live in a housing project adjacent to the library.

“I like teens because you can introduce them to mature ideas, but...their ideas are not completely shaped. There’s still a chance to reach them.”

Ultimately, twenty youth librarians from across the country will lead Story Talk programs in English or Spanish, using stories that voice themes of “epiphanies, coming of age, exile and interior worlds.” Each story will be available as a podcast, so that youth can listen to them at any time on iPods being provided to the libraries. In addition, an interactive blog will be a forum for coordinators in different states, so they can share successes, challenges and unforgettable moments.

Jackson expects to experience plenty of those, like the stereotype-shattering occasion when she went to fill her car at a local gas station. She told the male attendant — dressed in work coveralls, streaked with axle grease — where she worked, and watched him pull a worn copy of *The Scarlet Letter* from his pocket. “That was so cool. You think you know somebody, and you don’t.”

C.K. Williams on Whitman's life and literature Lines that connect us all

by Patricia Andres

"Through the telling of stories and reading of stories, we have a chance to learn something about ourselves that maybe we knew, but didn't know we knew."

--Elizabeth Strout

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In his book, *On Whitman*, published this year by Princeton University Press, poet C.K. Williams' gaze never seems to waver from the relationship between literature and life. He begins with his own life and reflects on the influence Whitman held over him, wondering at a paradox: Whitman colonizes his imagination, but at the same time, only Whitman's poetry awakens Williams from the threat of that potential paralysis.

Next, he delves into an exploration of the growth of Whitman's imagination and spirit, gleaned partly from biographical information but mostly from an intimate relationship with the poems in *Leaves of Grass*. Throughout, Williams' attention to the sounds of the poetry reveals how intimately bound with experience Whitman's breathlessly long lines are, ultimately reaching beyond the music to life itself.

For example, when Williams asks what might have accounted for the brand-new aesthetic of sound in the lines of "Song of Myself" (which apparently streamed out of the poet in a remarkably short time) he insists on the mysterious unlikelihood of it all: "It's as though," he writes, "his actual physical brain went through some incredible mutation."

Ultimately, though, Williams turns to the poem to address his questions about the "most profound and most blatant secret of the poets: that only they can generate language music":

*My voice goes after what my eyes
cannot reach,*

*With the twirl of my tongue I
encompass worlds and volumes of
worlds.*

*Speech is the twin of my vision....it is
unequal to measure itself.*

And just what is this voice going after? As Williams intuits, it seeks no less than a revised relationship between self and "other," galloping from "acceptance, [to] communion, [to] merge." So, when Whitman boldly announces,

*I celebrate myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good
belongs to you,*

or as reiterated here,

*It is you talking just as much as myself...
I act as the tongue of you,
It was tied in your mouth...in mine it
begins to be loosened*

we hear not only the ineffable music but the poetic insight encoded within it. Whitman will not only sing of all Americans, he becomes one with us. It is this connectivity, and the power of Whitman's verse to transmit it, that Williams embraces. What Williams celebrates about Whitman is the way "he defines some ultimate reach poetry can have into life...demonstrat[ing] for us how to see and hear more attentively, sympathetically, accurately."

Interestingly, when C.K. Williams offered his introductory remarks at Sarah Hirschman's talk about her book, *People & Stories / Gente y Cuentos: Who Owns Literature? Communities Find Their Voice through the Short Story* at Labyrinth Books last spring, the relationship between literature and life was his overarching focus. Reflecting on the correlation between the birth of *People & Stories / Gente y Cuentos* and Hirschman's life, he said: "I suspect that if Sarah had said to herself back then: 'I think I'll get an institution going that someday will have outposts spotted here and there over fourteen states and several hemispheres, and will bring hundreds of people a way of experiencing the world and themselves of which they had only the slightest inkling,' she might not have begun at all, although, knowing Sarah, her largeness of soul, her innate kindness, her tenacity and energy, she surely would have put aside her trepidations and gone on anyway."

Board member shares lifelong love of books

Talking with Margaret Griffin

Margaret Griffin remembers her reaction after hearing about People & Stories for the first time: Sounds great in theory, but can it really work?

Then she observed a session at a women's shelter in Trenton. The story was "The Shawl," a multi-layered tale of trauma passed down through generations of a Native American family.

"I remember being blown away — the reaction many people have. I didn't think it would really work, that such a vibrant conversation would get going. But everybody responded. I felt welcomed by the group, even though I was the outsider."

Shortly afterward, Griffin accepted an invitation to join the People & Stories/ Gente y Cuentos board. "I had a library background, I had been a librarian and I owned a bookstore," Micawber Books in Princeton. At the time, Griffin was still serving on the foundation board of the Princeton Public Library; she had been part of the fundraising campaign for construction of a new building.

"The organization was so small then, and it seemed to be a little rag-tag. But ever since, the board has been growing, and the organization has been getting tighter."

Griffin also had deep ties to Princeton; she'd spent every Saturday morning of her childhood in its library, where the radiators clanked and the air smelled of book glue. She knew Trenton, too — where her mother had worked in the library during World War II — and she believed the two municipalities had to work together, across class and race barriers, to solve the region's problems.

People & Stories appealed to Griffin, in part, because of her own passion for literature. "I was read to by my mother quite a lot," she recalls. "My favorite childhood book is *Rackety Packety House*,

by Frances Hodgson Burnett, the same author who wrote *The Little Princess*. There were always books in our house.

"As an adult, I love fiction but also intersperse it with a lot of non-fiction reading. I love 19th-century Russian and English literature. Since People & Stories, I've learned to love the short story more and more. I like that it's compact; it packs a punch in a short time."

An English major whose interest in reference was piqued after taking a course on historic preservation, Griffin earned a master's degree in library science and worked at Harvard as a reference librarian in the graduate school of education.

"I love reference. It's like a mystery: helping people find things.

"But my dream had always been to own a bookstore." Once her family moved back to Princeton, a friend suggested she speak to the then-owner of Micawber Books, who was looking for a business partner. Griffin and Logan Fox ran the store together for twelve years, closing it in 2007.

Now Griffin works part-time as a tutor. She trained with Literacy Volunteers of Mercer County and now teaches English as a second language, twice a week, to five Central American and Haitian adults in Trenton. They meet at a library branch that is slated to close. "My heart is breaking that these libraries are closing," she says. "I see how people, once they set foot in a place that has books and stories and reference items, just love it."

The past few years have been challenging for People & Stories, along with other non-profit organizations, as they compete for the same shrinking public and private funds. In that arid economic climate, Griffin believes the work of People & Stories matters more than ever.

"I think it's almost as important as food. We are a multicultural society; we need things that bind us together...with other people. Literature is a perfect way to do it. When people are engaged by reading these stories and discussing them, they feel part of the bigger whole. It's not frivolous; it's not entertainment. It sends ripples down the generations: parents reading to children, stories being related and told. We have to keep communication open more than ever.

"My wish is that we could get more and more people to see this program in action."

"There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves as fiercely as if they had never happened before."

--Willa Cather

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“We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome. One of our ancient methods is to tell a story begging the listener to say — and to feel — ‘Yes, that’s the way it is, or at least that’s the way I feel it. You’re not as alone as you thought.’ ”

--John Steinbeck

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Coordinators reflect on three different stories

“Classic” Hughes piece can inspire and humble

by Scott Feifer

One classic story, for me, is Langston Hughes' "Thank You, Ma'm," which tells of a boy, Roger, who tries to steal the pocketbook of the imposing Mrs. Luella Bates Washington Jones. A large woman with a large heart, Mrs. Jones drags Roger to her room in a boarding house, where he fears she will turn him over to the police. Mrs. Jones invites Roger to share her modest supper. Her careful words and actions offer the boy lessons in kindness, forgiveness and mutual respect. She tells him that she too, has done things she is ashamed of. Mrs. Jones offers Roger her trust and an opportunity to prove that he, too, can be trusted.

"Thank You, Ma'm" offers us the chance to think about and pay tribute to the Mrs. Joneses of our own lives: those who have shared the best of themselves and have helped us to find and share the best of ourselves. Toward the end of our conversations, I ask participants if they would be willing to name the "Mrs. Jones" in their lives. We call out names and relationships: "my mom, my grandma, my parents, my coach, my sister, my brother, my girl." Because I am often reading with those who are in a detention center or a shelter, it feels as if the names are lifted on waves of gratitude and offered up beyond the walls of the building, sent out to those who have stood by us in difficult times.

There is something powerful here for participants who want to feel forgiven for their own transgressions. The characters of this simply told tale become more complex as readers ponder the boy's home life and the good in his character that emerges in his honesty, courtesy, and respect. We also imagine the possibilities of Mrs. Jones' personal history: Is she a widow? Divorced? Does she have children, and, if

so, what is her relationship with those kids? Is she lonely? What are the sins to which she refers? Roger becomes more than a thief. Mrs. Jones becomes more than "the law" or a self-righteous victim.

Frequently, we talk about how Mrs. Jones gives Roger \$10 for something he wants — blue suede shoes — but also gives him so much more than he seems to need. It is interesting to hear participants ponder what Roger gives Mrs. Jones in return.

This classic story allows us to witness human kindness. It inspires us to act with fuller compassion. And it humbles us toward a gratitude that sometimes leaves us speechless, but with "thank you" sitting on our lips, perched upon our hearts.

Borges' "difficult" story sparks imagination

by Marcy Schwartz

While none of the stories we choose for our bibliography are particularly "easy," and in fact we search for stories with ambiguities and uncertainties in language and plot, some present more unusual difficulties than others. Some years back, in a New Jersey prison, I experimented with the story "Emma Zunz," by Jorge Luis Borges.

Many coordinators were hesitant to share this story with groups, but People & Stories founder Sarah Hirschman encouraged me to take it on. In this story, Emma, the protagonist, simulates a prostitute, falsely accuses her boss of rape, then shoots him — all in revenge for her father's exile and eventual suicide after being framed and wrongly accused of stealing from the company many years before. Choosing to read this story with a group of Hispanic male inmates, many of whom were sex offenders, presented a considerable challenge. How would they react? Would they be inhibited in discussing this story because I am a woman? Was it a mistake to use a crime tale in a prison group?

Borges' style offers its own potential difficulties: his terse, compact prose, foreign names, and less than linear chronology make for a complex read. It was important to repeat key passages, restate some subtleties in the plot and verify comprehension with careful

questions. Borges intersperses references in languages other than Spanish that create a poetic tension with the Spanish prose, possibly intimidating to participants. The German Jewish names in the story contribute to this special poetics, as does the name of a Scandinavian ship in the port, the Nordstjärnan. We discussed the effect this has on Emma and on the reader, emphasizing the impersonal and dehumanizing experience she has with the sailor in the bar who does not speak Spanish.

The potentially awkward subjects of prostitution, sex and murder did not handicap the discussion at all. The gripping story, told drily as an intricate detective mystery, sparked the group's imagination. Participants easily entered into the debate about whether or not Emma was guilty, whether her revenge was justified and what her responsibility was to her family. The themes of blackmail and corruption proved ripe for reflection. The participants completely understood Emma's father's name change (from Emanuel Zunz to Manuel Maier), as they were aware of former inmates who had changed their names after being released from prison in order to gain a new start. Deeper questions — about how we process childhood memories and traumas, and about relationships with employers and people in authority — led the discussion in new directions. Finally, the story's shadows (Emma's fear of men, the lack of information about her mother) allowed the group to reflect on the origin of fears and family secrets.

New Adichie story addresses stereotypes

by Stephanie Hanzel

Nigerian born writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explains that she was “profoundly irritated” when she first came to America in 1997. She wrestles with this irritation and the cultural misunderstandings between individuals, communities and nations in her powerful collection of short stories, *The Thing Around Your Neck*.

In the book's title story, Adichie's narrator is irritated by “well-meaning” strangers, her waitressing job, her boss and her white, affluent boyfriend. Told in the

second person, the narrator forcefully plunges the reader into her separation by crafting sentences like this opening one, “You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun,” and “You knew you had become comfortable when you told him that you watched *Jeopardy* on the restaurant TV and that you rooted for the following, in this order: women of color, black men, and white women, before, finally, white men — which meant you never rooted for white men.”

Last month, I discussed Adichie's story with men residing at the Rescue Mission of Trenton, an agency that serves the homeless, transient and addicted. Before reading, the group generated associations with the word “Africa.” I felt it was important to examine our own preconceptions that might lead one to feel “irritated,” and perhaps cull some empathy for the story's narrator. We examined the narrator's struggle to understand herself in a foreign land. Jeff M., a usually reserved participant, noted that it *was* possible for understanding to occur between the narrator and her boyfriend but that “you have to *let* someone understand you.”

As we dug deeper into why the narrator might be defensive, we revisited the story's title as it recurs: “At night, something would wrap itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you fell asleep,” and later, “The thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go.” Michael felt that the “thing around your neck” referred to the narrator's loneliness and alienation. For Jeff S., the phrase described the feeling one gets in a new place when everything is strange, like his time in prison and his first days at the Rescue Mission. However, he said, his feeling about the Rescue Mission slowly changed.

“So it loosened?” I asked. “Yeah,” he said, “it starts to loosen because the familiarity is coming along now.” It was a distinctive People & Stories moment, when life and art become family with a common metaphorical ancestry.

Adichie's quietly commanding story helped us examine our own experiences of invisibility and to consider ways in which being American-born might contribute to the irritation of others.

“In the tale, in the telling, we are all one blood. Take the tale in your teeth, then, and bite till the blood runs, hoping it's not poison; and we will all come to the end together, and even to the beginning: living, as we do, in the middle.”

—Ursula K. LeGuin

P & S helped Sudanese man “open his eyes” Talking with Nour Salih

Past the crammed shelves of Classic Books in Trenton, New Jersey, in a circle of folding chairs, Nour Salih bends his head over a copy of “Making Do” by Linda Hogan. He tracks the text with his finger as the facilitator reads this wrenching story of a woman rendered temporarily mute — “one of the silent ones” — by the deaths of all three of her children. Eventually the woman moves to another town, where she begins to carve wooden birds to be placed on the graves of her children. “We make art out of our loss,” the story’s narrator notes, and Salih nods quietly.

Salih, a Sudanese immigrant who wandered into the bookstore one afternoon and found himself drawn to the story circle in the back, knows about loss, about art, about the struggle to make something meaningful from sorrow.

“Sometimes you have a sadness or a problem; as an artist, you make art. It’s hard to keep it in your heart. Your fingers need to do something — painting, writing. It happens between the heart and your fingers.”

Salih prefers not to talk about why he left the country he loved in 2003, except to say that “a lot of sad things happened in Sudan” and “I don’t like the politics in my country. I’m an artist. I like to be free.” In Trenton, he’s been able to pursue his passion for painting and drawing, pursuits he began at age nine. He got an apartment; he worked at Wal-Mart for four years. He chatted with people on the street to improve his English.

And he became a devoted member of this lunchtime People & Stories group, which draws residents of Trenton as well as Crossing Borders participants from nearby suburbs. “For me, poetry and stories are good to practice English. I love the stories. Sometimes I can’t understand all of it, but I understand what the story is about. And I enjoy everybody.” Before joining the group, Salih said, the only American writer

he’d heard of was Ernest Hemingway. “With this group, I know a lot of writers. It helps me a lot.”

Today’s story, which explored both the loss of children and the destruction of Native American culture, touched Salih. “When you leave a country, you miss your culture. I miss my friends, the city, the river at night.” But he loves his adopted home—the people who buy his drawings at street fairs, the friend from church who advises him to “read everything!” and his companions in People & Stories, who share their own lives so freely as they discuss literature.

“Sometimes you have a sadness or a problem; as an artist, you make art. It’s hard to keep it in your heart. Your fingers need to do something — painting, writing. It happens between the heart and your fingers.”

“Everyone talks about what they see in the story,” he says. “It’s wonderful. It opened my eyes to understand American stories, the techniques writers use and how to lead groups.

“I think about if I go to school here. In art. Painting. I’m learning every day. I like all kinds of art: classical and modern. Surrealism. When I started, I liked only classical drawings. But the artist changes. I see it all as material for me.”

At 56, Salih says, he doesn’t feel old. “I see some white hairs,” he smiles, pointing to his temples. “But that started at 21. When I sit down to draw, I feel very young.”

“There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

--Maya Angelou

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Wary reader joins “club” of literature lovers

Talking with Jona Deleo

At Friends Select, a Quaker school in Philadelphia, a history teacher pushed Jona Deleo to excel. In that class, she got A’s for the first time. “She pushed me, and I hated her for it, but I’d go to her on the side and talk to her about everything. She’d say, ‘You’ve got to believe in yourself.’”

But Deleo didn’t. Reading didn’t come easily, concentrating was an effort, and “I gave up on myself a little bit.” When she graduated, Deleo was the only student in her class of sixty who was not college-bound. “I wore that as a badge of honor; I didn’t want to do the norm.”

At seventeen, she was bartending to pay the bills, renting an apartment and relishing her independence. Today — after the pills, after getting clean in Florida and relapsing back home in Philadelphia — Deleo, 25, is a resident at Interim House.

“I hadn’t even been home three weeks when I relapsed and kind of lost my mind. It really scared me. My mom had kicked me out of the house. I wasn’t ready to be homeless. I wasn’t ready to go to jail. I wasn’t ready to trick. And I didn’t have to.”

Instead, she enrolled in Interim House’s intensive residential treatment program, where, Deleo says, she’s learning to trust other women, making plans to go back to school and finishing books for the first time in her life.

“I didn’t even read until I got into Interim House [in April]. I’ve read three books since I’ve been here, and I’m halfway through [Jean Auel’s] *Clan of the Cave Bear*. The author describes everything, every little leaf. You feel like you’re there.

“I was a little wary of People & Stories at first,” she says. “I was new to the house, and it was just something else I had to do. But when I got there, I really enjoyed it. It was like a little book club.” Deleo became one of the most enthusiastic and vocal members of that “club,” offering cogent comments on stories including “The Shawl,” by Louise Erdrich, “The Oasis,”

by Alice Adams and “The Key,” by Isaac Bashevis Singer.

One of the stories Deleo loved most was “A Summer’s Reading,” by Bernard Malamud, the tale of a young man, unemployed and aimless during a sticky city summer, who lies to an older man in the neighborhood about how many books he is reading.

“I could feel the humidity and picture the stoops. I know that feeling: neighbors sitting on their steps, the kids playing. It was a little bit nostalgic for me. I grew up in South Philly.”

Reading didn’t come easily, concentrating was an effort, and “I gave up on myself a little bit.” When she graduated, Deleo was the only student in her class of sixty who was not college-bound. “I wore that as a badge of honor; I didn’t want to do the norm.”

In the end, caught in his lie by the older man whose admiration he wants so desperately, the young man decides to make his ambition a reality; he enters the library and sits down, trembling, with a stack of books. Deleo, too, wants to make her dreams palpable: She draws, mostly in pencil, hyper-realistic “flash art” with lots of shading, and would like to study art therapy. She’ll start small, with some community college classes and the hope of transferring to another school, even one out of town, in the future.

“At 30, I want to be happy. I want to travel a little bit, have school under my belt. The house, the cars — that’s for later. I want to be able to say that I’m content.”

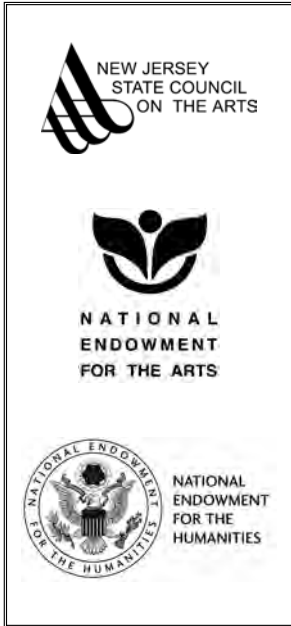
“No story is the same to us after a lapse of time; or rather we who read it are no longer the same interpreters.”

--George Eliot

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On the Bookshelf...

The Soloist: A Lost Dream, an Unlikely Friendship, and the Redemptive Power of Music. By Steve Lopez. New York: Berkley Trade, 2008.

by Lawrence McCarty

During the past nine years, I have coordinated People &Stories at Project H.O.M.E., whose mission is to end homelessness in Philadelphia. *The Soloist* pays tribute to all agencies and individuals who work together toward that goal.

Lopez, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, recounts the day he paused at a downtown street corner, drawn in by the music of Beethoven. The soloist was Nathaniel Ayers, dressed in dirty clothes, playing on a two-stringed violin. Lopez learned that Ayers had been a scholarship student at Julliard until he suffered a breakdown.

Determined to help, Lopez searches for

housing and treatment, but Ayers resists. Gradually, both men are transformed by their friendship and by the interventions of a range of professionals, including social workers, activists and musicians. Although homelessness is a complex problem, with no single solution, the answer here seems to be found in patience, mutual trust and the healing power of music. Lopez learns that he cannot help Ayers alone; true change requires a community.

The Soloist is rich in contrasts and poetic vignettes. Skid Row is a "little patch of hell in the middle of paradise," Ayers dresses in "ruffled elegance," and when he is reunited with his sister, they are "alone in each other's arms, a lifetime revisited in a single embrace."

Ayers' and Lopez's relationship, with its ups and downs, is most convincing, and their courage and commitment can inspire us all.