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Stories Are Good

Ella Simpson

(script from a presentation at HMP Wakefield for the *Koestler Awards Prize Giving* 2016)

There's loads of popular acclaim to be had from writing stories. People generally think it's a good thing. I wrote my first story when I was about seven or eight. It was a poem that told a story about all the things we did in the park, well perhaps not all the things... but my mum thought it was brilliant. She thought I was brilliant. I got social acclaim. And I liked that.

But then, sometimes, people think that stories are less good, perhaps even bad.

And my first experience of a story being seen as bad came much earlier than the good stories. The morning I told my mum that I had a stomach ache so I didn't have to go to school, that was a bad story. That's what she told me when, come mid morning she found me chasing the dog around the back yard.

And prisoners probably have more experience than most of having their stories seen as bad. Having their stories viewed with scepticism, cynicism or downright suspicion. But no matter how we use our stories, and I would argue that the good or bad of a story comes from how we use it, not the story itself. No matter how we use stories, they all come from the same place. They come from the imagination. They're about creating different possibilities, alternative outcomes, new ways of seeing ourselves or others. Stories can help us to create whole new identities for ourselves. At the most obvious level when we write a story we become writers, and if you get that story published or you win a competition, as some of you have, you become a Writer with a capital 'W'. Now there's a change in identity. And that's what happened to me, too, I published my first short story in the book *'Tubthumping: New Yorkshire Stories'*.

And I went from being a council estate kid to be a proper published writer.

But of course it isn't quite so easy as that. No matter how good a story is you can't turn it into a decent square meal or a cheque to pay the rent - certainly not overnight. So then perhaps the doubt sets in. That's what happened for me. It wasn't that I stopped thinking that stories were good, it was just I didn't think I was very good at stories. And the truth is when you try to write for a living you get an awful lot of rejections. Stephen King has written about how when he first started sending his stories to magazines he banged a six inch nail into the wall over his desk. Every time he got a rejection letter he pushed it onto that nail and before he got even a single story accepted that six inch nail was absolutely crammed with letters turning down his work.

But luckily for me, by this point I was running writing workshops in prisons, and this, more than anything, kept my faith with stories. In fact, working with prisoners gave me an even greater belief in just how good stories are. And a clearer understanding of what makes those stories so good. And some of that was down to the rewards, the awards, and the publications that people achieved.

Which is why I got involved with *'Not Shut Up'* magazine. I would see the difference it could make to the writers in my workshops. The sense of pride people felt when they got published and how that can have a positive impact on all sorts of other things in their lives. But that said, prisoners also taught that telling stories isn't just about the product, it's also about the process. The researcher, James Pennebaker, has

looked at the effects of writing stories that never get seen by a reader, they're written and then destroyed. And he found that, even the unread stories, aren't only good, they are also good for your health.

Based on 30 years of experimental research he concludes that:

'(E)xpressive writing promotes sleep, enhanced immune function, reduced alcohol consumption, and more' (Pennebaker and Chung, 2011)

Pennebaker is talking specifically about writing that comes directly from our own experience, about autobiography. Facing our own life stories head on. But I would argue we don't have to write directly about our own lives for that writing to have an impact. The author Isak Dinesen whose best known work, '*Out of Africa*' was made into the film starring Meryl Streep and Robert Redford has said that:

'All sorrows can be borne if you can put them in a story'

And that story can be fact, or it can be fiction, or more likely it can have elements of both all mixed up together. Because sometimes in order to get beyond the reality of our sadness, or pain, or general stuckness in life it's necessary to take a leap of imagination to a different place, or time, we may create a whole new character who we'd like to be, or not, project into a future, where we'd like to stay, or not, and we may rearrange elements of our past and fit them into plots where we never thought they'd fit. And while we might lose ourselves in these stories, the story never loses us. Because we're its writer, we tell the journey and we are the journey. And this, I think, in part, is what the psychologist, Jerome Bruner means when he says that, in the end:

'(W)e become the stories we tell about ourselves'

Now this isn't a logical process. When we sit down to work on a story we aren't thinking about how it might change us. Reasoning through how a particular part of a plotline relates to our own life story. How the hero's downfall might reflect our own. It isn't rational, it's a story. And that's perhaps why it's so powerful. Story seeps into us, heart and mind. It bypasses the gatekeepers of reason and slips quietly into the places where the dialogue of discussion becomes the monologue of self. And from there, I argue, it can create possibilities that exceed our greatest fictions.

That's certainly how it feels to me, standing up here in front of you. Council estate kid to academic researcher? That certainly isn't in any of the stories that I've written. But the combination of self-esteem that grew from being published, that identity of being a 'Writer', the lessons I learned from prisoners about the value of their writing processes, and the profound changes in identity that started from the stories I wrote for others and slowly shifted into the stories I told to myself. All these factors, and others I've yet to discover, are, I believe, what allows me to stand up here and feel qualified and confident enough to tell you that the stories you have written and the stories you will write have the potential to change lives, that essentially, simply, stories are good.