

Stories from the Stacks “*Sharing Stories*” by Library Director, Doug Whistance-Smith

The University of Alberta recently published an article on the negative impact of COVID on reading and literacy skills in young children due to a shift from classroom instruction to on-line learning. The study concluded that reading skill levels can recover quickly upon return to the classroom setting or with support from parents and peers, suggesting a link between reading comprehension and social engagement.

This makes total sense to me as stories and storytelling evolved from an oral tradition. Long before we developed written language, people shared experiences around a fire using voice and movement to convey meaning and pass on knowledge to the next generation.

Stories are not meant to be kept silently to ourselves. They are meant to be shared. Sure, you can read a book quietly to yourself, but unless you talk about what you’ve read with someone else, the experience is lost. And not just lost for you but for the person who could benefit from what you read or the way you perceived it.

I like the Margaret Fuller quote: “If you have knowledge, let others light their candles in it.” This speaks to a primeval imperative to pass our understanding of the world to the next generation, and we often do this through stories. The dawn of language was a series of expressive grunts shared between a parent and a child, a primitive story to convey meaning and pass the torch of wisdom. And the dawn of literature was a series of pictures painted on a cave wall to make early stories a lasting lesson to share with future generations. This is how society was born.

Drayton Valley Library recently wrapped up our twenty-fifth annual Battle of the Books (BOB) and we welcomed a return to in-person battles following a two-year cycle of pandemic-restricted virtual mini-BOBs. The excitement was palpable! Students rushed to the library to borrow dozens of books in preparation for the events. I don’t work at the front desk as much as I would like, but I had the great pleasure of helping some of the students. And man! They were excited to talk about the stories selected for BOB.

It wasn’t just shallow conversation about ‘who did what’ and ‘what happened next’ in the book. There was a much deeper connection with the stories, the themes, the moods and what they meant to the reader. I had a ten-minute conversation with one student about how difficult it must have been to hack the Canadian Pacific Railroad out of the rugged BC interior. He went on to talk about other books in the History of Canada series and overcoming dark and desperate times. He loved these stories and his mother stood by proudly listening to him share his excitement and perspectives with me.

I cherish conversing and connecting with people over stories, to see the light flash in the eyes of a child as they tell me about what they read or how it sparked their imagination. It reminds me of reading to my son as a child and the bond that developed over the experience of sharing stories; by his early teens he was writing his own stories in graphic novels and recommending books for me to read.

Reading inspires us. It generates ideas and expands our potential. When we read our minds perceive, process and produce response to complex concepts. To use a medical term, reading improves mental plasticity; the ability to adapt our knowledge to changing environments. The U of A study accurately concluded that a child responds quickly to the stimulus of reading; and not just reading but relating the story in their own words to family or friends.

After all, literature doesn’t change society from the centre outwards. Rather, literature changes a person’s perceptions and perspectives and that changes society from the edges, working its way in towards the centre. An idea is like a spark and once the flame begins to catch the wind will blow it higher.

The library’s Summer Reading Club (SRC) program runs from July 4 to August 22. Our SRC programmer, Lia, has been busy planning age-appropriate activities for kids to encourage reading and engaging in social events to improve reading skill levels during the summer break from school. Our library programs are fun, and they’re free. So, come out to our SRC launch party on Saturday, June 18 at Rotary Park between 10:45 am to 1:00 pm to see what we have planned. SRC registration opens on June 15; forms are available on the library website or at our service desk.

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