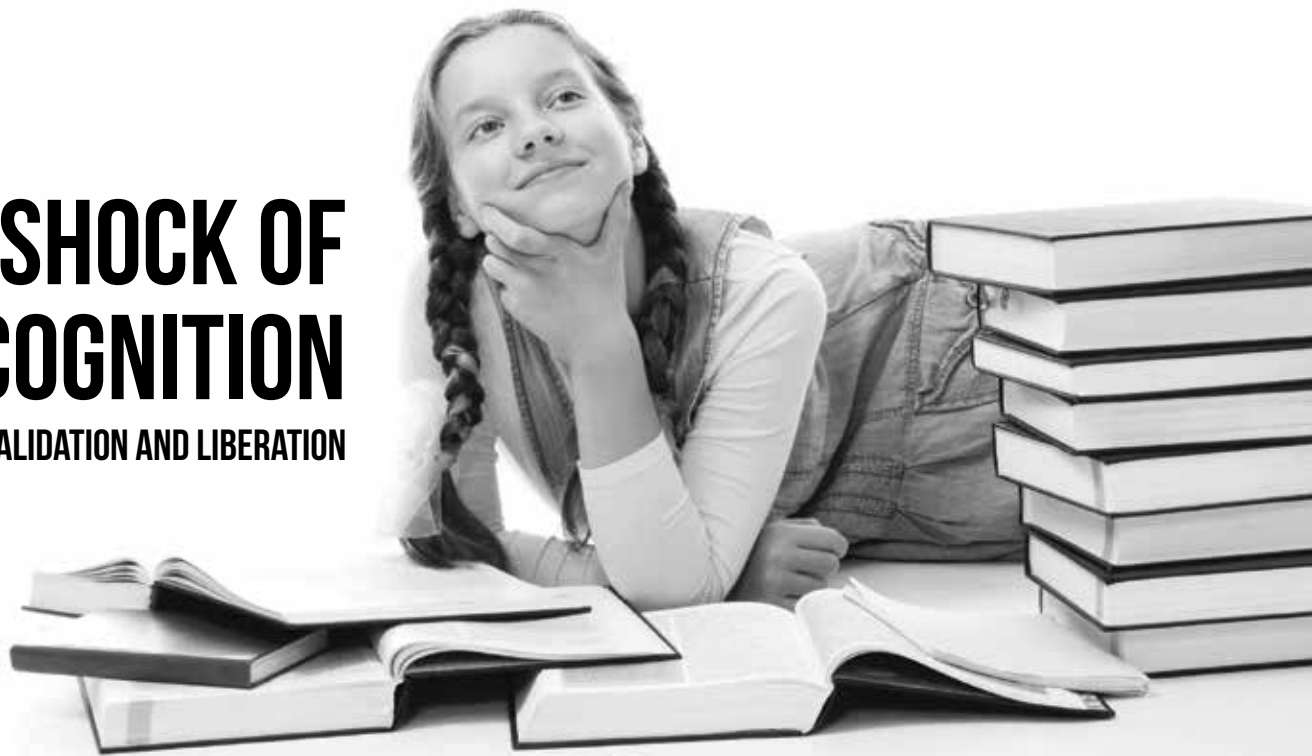


THE SHOCK OF RECOGNITION

STORY AS VALIDATION AND LIBERATION



By Shanna Peeples

Abstract: This article describes how literature works therapeutically to help children cope with feelings of fear and other strong emotions. The author highlights three examples of children's literature that helped her reframe her own experiences and use the characters as models for personal development. The article highlights the research of Robert Brooks at Harvard Medical School and Dr. Gavin Francis, who is both a physician and a writer. Other insights from the folklorist Maria Tatar and the writer A.S. Byatt are provided as support for the main idea that we are drawn to stories as narratives of hope that help us process our lives.

Keywords: stories, courage, hope, children, therapy

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Way out at the end of a tiny little town was an old overgrown garden, and in the garden was an old house, and in the house lived Pippi Longstocking. She was nine years old, and she lived there all alone. She had no mother and no father... "Don't you worry about me. I'll always come out on top." (Lindgren, 1950, pp. 13-14).

Long before I knew it as literature, the books of my childhood reflected one deep message to me: people survive. If I close my eyes, I can still see the interior of the small library at my elementary school where my eyes were drawn to the orange-and-yellow dustjacket of *Pippi Longstocking*. And how strange to realize that the ink-and-paper perfume of the Hutchinson County Library is grafted to some primal part of my brain, bound to the memory of discovering *Charlotte's Web*. Decades later, I remember the tactile comfort of running my fingers over the thready binding of the book containing "Hansel and Gretel."

Within these pages, I found a way to name the chaos in the near-constant churn of my home. The orphan, the hero, the trickster, the monster, the quest, the journey through light and into darkness, these archetypes and patterns ordered the narratives that helped me make sense of the world. My friends loved the one-dimensional, too-sweet heroines of the movies like the Disney Cinderella and Snow White, but I turned away from them and back into the books. It was there that the words worked on me like a spell, promising me that words matter, stories matter, and imagination can take you away from painful reality.

These stories drew me in because I had that "shock of recognition" that Melville (1850) describes when you see your experience reflected back to you in another's words. Although my mother hadn't died or taken me to the middle of a forest, the ambivalent



nature of my parents' attachment to the responsibilities of raising four children seemed cut from the same narrative cloth as the parents in the books.

And if my life were bound into a series of books, like my copies of Pippi's adventures, it would be possible to turn pages in one of the early chapters in Book Two of my life, right around the time my parents were getting a divorce. Readers would have already become familiar with the operatic screaming matches between them, mostly done in short chapters intercut with scenes of finding my father passed out in the front yard, or my mother's refusal to get out of bed that signaled her deeper slide into depression. There's so much that's dismal in Book One that it's best to just skim it.

Book Two opens with a scene in the Family Medicine Clinic where Dr. Ingham, drawing on his pipe like Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings*, is asking the fourth-grade me why I wanted to see him.

"Because I feel like I'm going to die. I feel my heart a lot to see if it's still beating. And I worry that my parents will die, or my sisters and brother, or my meemaw will die. Or that the world will end because God is mad."

Decades later, I can remember the smell of that pipe. The soothing applejack tobacco that ringed a halo above his balding head. His voice, deep, sonorous as a Sunday preacher, answered, "Oh, Shanna, I don't think you'll die for a long time, and I'm pretty sure none of your family will die for a long time either. I'm your doctor and you're pretty healthy, so I'm not worried."

I remember exhaling loudly, completely relieved to hear this.

"Send your mom in here for a minute, and then wait for her in the waiting room," he said.

What he told my mother is that he was worried about my constant stomachaches (later revealed to be caused by an ulcer), and he prescribed the same chalky liquid given to nervous petroleum executives in my hometown. He also told my mother it'd be okay to occasionally give me a quarter of one of her yellow five-milligram

Valium if I became particularly agitated.

The following books will introduce you to all kinds of characters as my home life swirls with the volatility of the relationships that form and fracture around my parents. Some of those characters will do things when they're alone with me in the dark that aren't easy to describe because they're the kind of things that make you wonder why no one ever went to jail. Inferential readers will note the subtext within the shadows and whispers and crying.

What the books will show is 10-year-old me trying to read the cooking directions for spaghetti so I can feed my three younger siblings because my parents are always distracted by their entanglements with these other characters. My mother will chase one all the way to Wyoming and miss an entire book. My father, who spends most of his time at Red's Lounge and only comes home after 2 a.m., also doesn't get much page time.

So, the spaghetti scene works as a vignette of neglect. At 10, I don't really understand how to time the boiling water, so the noodles aren't fully cooked, but my sisters and brother spare my feelings.

"It's really good," they say, because they're hungry and because it's what we have. The noodles crackle as they try to chew them. I've put food coloring in their glasses of water so it will feel like something fancy.

These middle books take a turn away from darkness into Pippi-like scenes of ingenuity. I learn to forge each of my parents' signatures on school documents so my siblings can get vaccinations, school lunches, and other services that require parental permission. I learn how to use a wrench to turn the water back on at the meter after the city shuts it off. An extended scene shows how I deepen my voice to sound like my mother when I call the electric company. Because I like to read, I know how to create stories to explain why the bills aren't being paid that are compelling enough for them to keep the power on.

The idea that Pippi's model might serve as a muse for other girls who must try to find a way to "come out on top" of trauma is one that

called forth *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*. Swedish author Stieg Larsson, in one of his rare interviews, said that Pippi Longstocking was the inspiration for Lisbeth Salander, the novel's main character. "What would she be like as an adult?" he wondered in the only interview he gave about his novels before his death. . . . Instead of being endowed with physical strength, Salander is a hacker magician. With a few keystrokes on her laptop, she can access every piece of information in the world" (Rich, 2011).

It was easy for me to see Pippi within Lisbeth Salander and to see Lisbeth Salander as a version of myself, both characters a study of female strength and ingenuity. When I give books to students, friends, and colleagues, I am often giving them a message I think will help them. I choose the books and stories because they are freighted with models of hope.

Hopeful stories are critical medicine for me and linger inside me like long-term, time-released wisdom. Down deep, past all of my adult sophistication, they are grafted into my earliest memories. Sandra Cisneros, in her brilliant short story "Eleven," says that we are all the ages we have ever been "like the rings inside a tree trunk or [like] wooden dolls that fit one inside the other" (1991, p. 6). Were there ever a machine to visualize them, there are versions of Pippi, of Gretel, of Charlotte inside of me. The call to think, to be brave, to use words in a way that wraps them around me, glimmers from each archetypal character like a diamond chip.

The story of Hansel and Gretel (Grimm & Grimm, 2007) seemed to describe my life so well: adults who couldn't be trusted, or adults who abandoned you, or adults who would, given the chance, eat you up whole.

Teaching it to bored, jittery seventh-graders helped me remember that it's a story about conjuring hope in the midst of fear.

What I love about the story is that it centers on the bravery of children, of their resistance and victory. The first time they're abandoned, well, it's to be expected in their family. Though their stepmother seems to make their lives her own personal experiment in finding new ways to be cruel, their father's passivity frustrates her most homicidal inclinations. Because Hansel doesn't deny the low-level threat humming under each day in his home, he is the model of planning for contingencies, of innovating around disaster. Sometimes, the text suggests, a good idea is like stones on the ground that will return you to safety should things go horribly awry.

Most of Hansel's courage, I suspect, is a protective response to Gretel. However, it's Gretel who is the figure of courage. She faces down a monstrous creature, a witch who fattens up children for her personal feasting. With her brother caged and a cooking fire kindled, Gretel refuses to despair, to cry, or to run away. Instead, she turns toward the witch. And when it comes time, she acts: Into the oven goes the monster.

The witch fatally underestimates Gretel. Since Gretel seems compliant with her orders, the witch believes she has broken Gretel's spirit. But she just makes Gretel more creative, more disciplined, more committed to action. That act of final resistance—that act under her own strength—of pushing the witch into the oven—that's what sticks. That's what I call on when it comes time to do the thing I think I cannot do.

I read this story to my students during the last week of school because I want to tuck that message inside them as they go out to face their own dark woods, their own monsters, their own calls to action. Maria Tatar writes, in the preface to her annotated version of the story, that it celebrates the triumphs of children as it also addresses their anxieties about starvation and being overwhelmed. "It is the presence of magic—not the magic of Wonderland, Narnia, or Oz—but a form of magic that settles down comfortably in the world we inhabit. . . . [We enter] a world where good magic always triumphs over bad, where virtue is rewarded and vice is punished, where the small and meek get revenge over the large and powerful, and where children succeed in surviving" (2004, p. xxviii).

The magic of story is that it gives us a way to view our own struggles and offers us symbols and imagery to describe our own acts of opposition and creativity. The writer and doctor Gavin Francis, in the 2016 Sheridan Lecture on Medicine and Literature delivered at Brown University, says that stories help us "explore ways of being human, grants glimpses of lives beyond our own, aids empathy with others, alleviates distress and widens our circle of awareness." In short, stories can heal because they give us words to describe what hurts us: "The language we use to articulate our pain has the power to transform our experience of it" (Francis, 2017, n.p.).

Of all the characters in the books I've read, the one who taught me that it's heroic to use language in service to others was a "common grey spider" named Charlotte A. Cavatica (White, 1980). Charlotte demonstrates how to repurpose the ordinary into art. Because after all, what is art but something created that makes us slow down and pay attention, something that makes us see the familiar as remarkable. Wilbur, a pig just as common as any other barn animal, becomes "Some Pig" "terrific," and "radiant" in Charlotte's writing. Her insight about people's need to "believe almost anything they see in print" literally stops the machinery of Wilbur's death.

Charlotte is eminently wise, patient, and practical—traits to which I aspired. In Charlotte, I saw the possibilities of who I might become and where words might take me. Charlotte's example taught me that the deepest privilege in life is weaving your vocation into your relationships: "It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both" (White, 1980, p. 184).

E.B. White probably didn't intend his book to be used as a form of medicine, but that's what it was for me. I read it when I needed to hear Charlotte's calming maternal voice tell me that death is a part of life, but that death can be softened by knowing that you've done good work. Dr. Robert Brooks, a clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School, said the practice of using books to help children deal with personal issues is called bibliotherapy. Reading literature like *Charlotte's Web* helps kids turn despair into optimism "because the child finds that there can be ways of solving problems. A major part of resilience is that you start focusing on things you have control over" (Begley, 2015).

This idea of giving students literary models of tenacity, rather than the brittle techniques of "grit" we are told to teach today's children, seems a better curriculum. Libraries, in ancient Greece, were seen as "sacred places with curative powers" and in 1969, the Association of Poetry Therapy formed to establish poetry therapy as a treatment (GoodTherapy, 2016).

Our personal narratives of struggle and success are other texts we

can draw from to help students connect to their own strengths. Parker Palmer wrote that “by remembering ourselves, we remember our students” (1998, p. 24). To be the best teacher for my students, I have to remember this. I remember so I can gain their trust because I want them to read and write their way out of where they are. I remember that my best teachers put books and paper in front of me and showed me that words can take you up and out of the worst situations.

I quit calling myself an English teacher several years ago and began calling myself a literacy salesperson. Stories help me sell readers on books and books help me sell hope to my students. I want them to know that writing, if you go deep enough, can help you cope with your present pain and begin believing that it can be redeemed in a way that literature shows us that it can.

We need to know these lands of imagination, the writer A.S. Byatt says, and their signposts that point toward eventual solutions: “We fill our heads with improbable happy endings, and are able to live—in daydream—in a world in which they are not only possible but inevitable” (2004, p. xx).

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