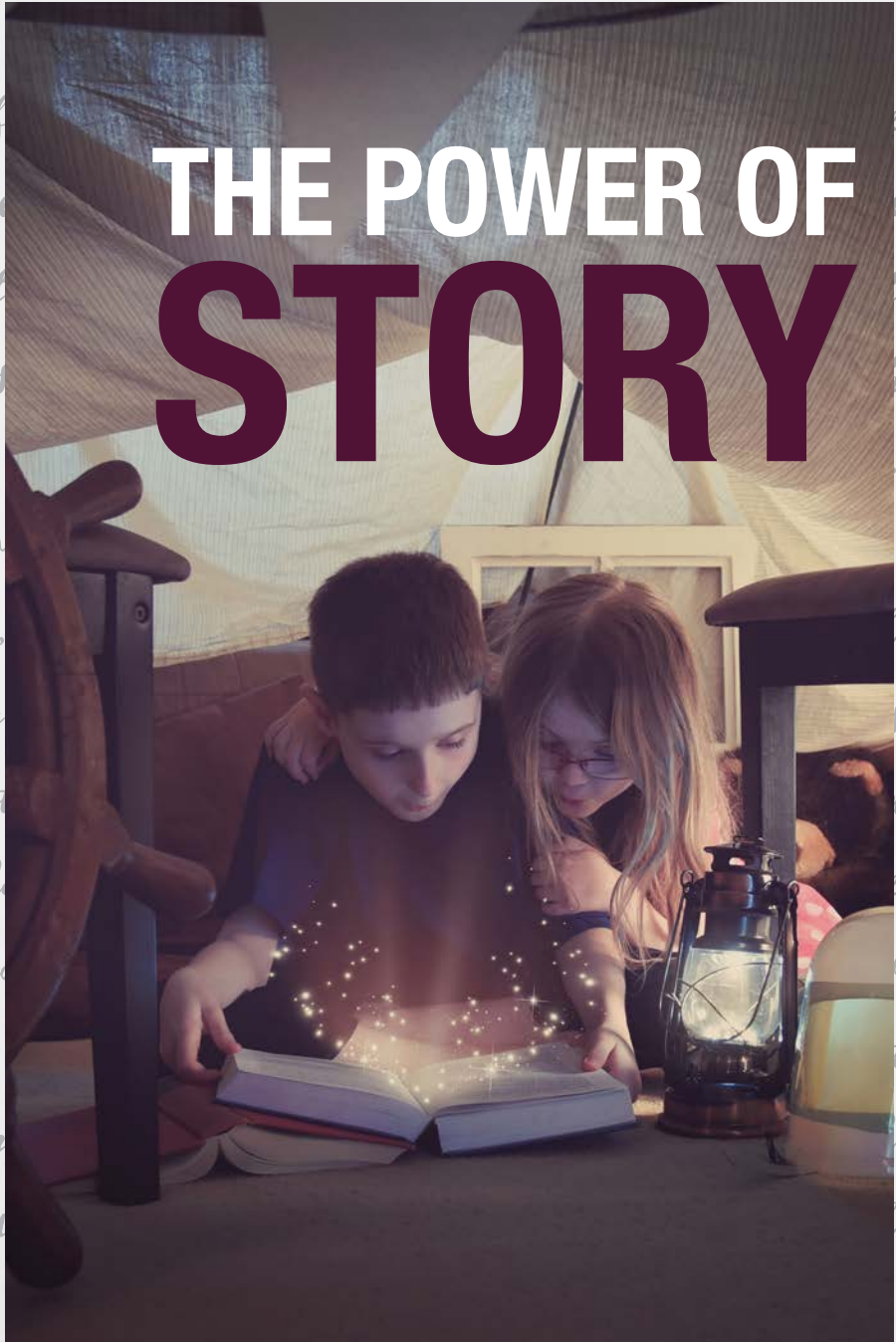


THE POWER OF STORY



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About the Author

Pr Daron Pratt is the Family and Children's Ministries director for the North New South Wales Conference of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Australia. He is married to Lisa and has two children; Andrew and Maddison. Daron is passionate about the importance of bringing Churches and homes together with a strategic focus and, with intentionality, raise our children to know and love the Lord.

THE POWER OF STORY

“Stories capture the imagination, grab our attention and help to communicate the message”

INTRODUCTION

Eustace Scrubb was his name and so begins the “Voyage of the Dawn Treader” by CS Lewis. Lewis describes Scrubb as a spoiled brat with no imagination. The only books Scrubb reads are books of information. This one-sided approach becomes a problem because he knows nothing about the tales of adventurers on the high seas, of dungeons and dragons, of princes and princesses, knights and giants. Consequently, when he encounters a dragon Scrubb does not know how to deal with it. He does not know that if you discover a dragon’s lair and go to sleep on the dragon’s hoard that you will, in fact, turn into a dragon.

The rest of the book is a story about the rescue of Scrubb from the predicament he finds himself in. Reepicheep, the rat-like figure, begins to help Scrubb. Surprisingly, the way to do this is to tell him the stories that he has missed out on growing up. In the end, Aslan, the lion helps him to remove his dragon condition and become a boy, a much-changed boy, once again.

We are all living in a story. There is the story of our life, growing up, leaving school, getting a job and marrying but we are also living in the greatest story that has been told and is still being told. God chooses to communicate with us through a story. His Story – The Bible. It is a story of kings and queens, princes and princesses, heroes and villains. It is a story of tragedy and triumph, despair and hope and our eventual salvation and transformation. It is in this story that we discover our facts, figures and doctrine. The sad part is that we often extract the facts and figures from the story, dry them out and then present the desiccated remnants to our children and wonder why they don’t enjoy it, embrace it and believe it.

Stories capture the imagination, grab our attention and help to communicate the message. Values are passed on through stories; imagination, creativity, resilience and empathy are fuelled by the story.

Let’s look at why stories are so important first.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH AND LITERATURE SAY?

Recent research into stories provides some important insights into why they are so important.

In a 2015 study by the University of California, Santa Cruz, Dominic Massaro, professor emeritus, found that picture books were two to three times more likely to include vocabulary that falls outside of the 5,000 most common English words than a parent-child conversation. “We talk with a lazy tongue,” he told EdSource. That “lazy tongue,” with its emphasis on pronouns and reliance on context, can hinder a child’s path to literacy. It’s reading that most directly helps children with word mastery and grammar; it’s also reading that serves as an equaliser, combatting the belief that children with “professional” parents are exposed to upwards of 30 million more words by the age of three than children whose parents are in a lower socio-economic tier.

The evidence for sharing books is strong enough that in 2014, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced a new policy: read to your children from birth. In addition to strengthening the building blocks of literacy, it prepares children to be lifelong students.

The Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research (2013) has not only proven a causal effect between the frequency of reading to a child and his or her development but have also for the first time measured the benefits.

Children, four to five years old, who are read to three to five times a week have the same reading ability as children six months older who are read to twice or less a week).

Reading to children six to seven days a week puts them almost a year ahead of those who do not have literature read to them. This research also found that reading to small children has a positive effect on the development of numeracy skills.

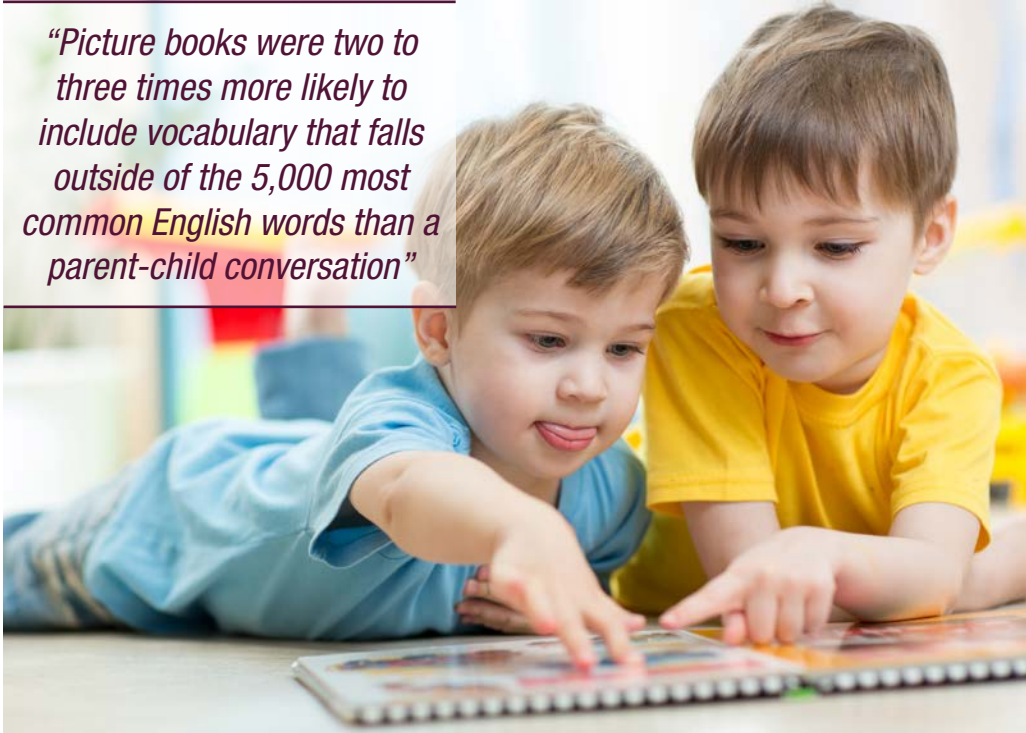
“It does appear to be the case that children who are read to more often keep doing better as they age than other children,” said Professor Guyonne Kalb, director of the institute’s Labour Economics and Social Policy Program, and co-author of the study.

“Reading prepares children to be lifelong students”

The research - which was funded by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development - found the positive outcomes occurred in children regardless of parental income, education level or cultural background. That is, children with poor backgrounds or parents of limited education or ability have the same benefit from being read to frequently.

A 2010 Princeton University Study discovered using MRI scans that stories link the brains of the storyteller and the listeners. During a story, the brain activity of all of the people involved becomes synchronised, that is identical in their activity. When the storyteller has activity in the insula, an emotional brain region, the listeners do too. Story listeners experience the story in the exact,

“Picture books were two to three times more likely to include vocabulary that falls outside of the 5,000 most common English words than a parent-child conversation”



same neurological pattern that the storyteller does. In other words, a story is a shared brain experience between the reader and the listener.

Stories help us form memories. They bring a group together and make experiences more fulfilling. Neuroscience studies have shown that stories are integral to forming memories. If we want people to be shaped spiritually, then we need to help them share our Christian experience.

Neuro-economist, Paul Zak, in his 2014 Harvard Business Review article, “Why your brain loves good storytelling”, demonstrated

the powerful impact of the love/trust hormone oxytocin on the brain when we tell stories. A good story builds tension, causing the hearer to identify with the character in the story and mimic the character in the story. Feelings of empathy and trust are created through stories which consequently result in the listener wanting to go out and accomplish good things.

Books can be portals to understanding other worlds and other views, to helping our children be more open to differences and cultivate new perspectives. We’ve always assumed that a good story can make us feel more deeply, but now several studies prove it.

Researchers in Canada at York University and the University of Toronto (Time, June 3, 2013) found results that startled even them: people who read fiction are more capable of understanding others, empathizing, and seeing another person's point of view than those who read nonfiction. What's more: adults who read less fiction report themselves to be less empathic. Other studies (Raymond Mar et al, 2010) have found that books affect young children as well. Raymond Mar, a psychologist from York University, found that the more stories young children had read to them, the stronger their ability to imagine what other people are thinking and feeling. That effect was also found when the preschoolers watched movies—but not television.

Paul Zac also found that character-driven stories with emotional content engender a better understanding of the key points a speaker wishes to make and enable better recall of these points weeks later.

Further, Zac's research found that an organisation's transcendent purpose is better understood through story, that is how we can improve people's lives. Zac concludes by challenging organisations to remember that (and I quote), "your organisation has its own story – its founding myth. An effective way to communicate transcendent purpose is by sharing that tale. What passion led the founder(s) to risk health and wealth to start the enterprise? Why was it so important, and what barriers had to be overcome? These are the stories that, repeated over and over, stay core to the organisation's DNA. They provide guidance for daily decision-making as well as the motivation that comes with the conviction that the organisation's work must go on, and needs everyone's full engagement to make a difference in people's lives."

"...the more stories young children had read to them, the stronger their ability to imagine what other people are thinking and feeling"





“A compelling story is like music in a noisy world: it makes us want to stop and listen”

Melanie Green and Tim Brock argue that entering a good story, “radically alters the way information is processed.” Green and Brock’s studies demonstrate that the more absorbed readers are in a narrative, the more the story changes them. They argue that, “To the extent that individuals are absorbed into a story or transported into a narrative world, they may show effects of the story on their real-world beliefs.”

While intergenerational relationships are important, they can only carry a child so far before they are interrupted by sports, hormones, family breakdown/mobility or by the transitional nature of church ministry itself.

We often only have a season to invest in children’s lives. However, as part of this mentoring/teaching relationship and if we want to impart anything of value, then we need to impart the big story of God and his action in human history.

Sara Arthur, author of *The God Hungry Imagination*, says that ‘Story’ gives “form to content and incarnates meaning”. Arthur says that story achieves this through the following elements.

Intimacy

Story creates a connection between the teller and the hearer. “A child relates storytelling to human contact, and that contact becomes as much a part of the story as the story itself. . . In many cultures, storytelling is viewed as a form of touch. (Ray Buckley, *Dancing with Words*, 2004)

Identity

Stories express the beliefs of a people by incarnating them into unforgettable images rather than abstract statements. It preserves cultural memory and gives the hearer a sense of his or her identity within the community.

Wonder

Stories expand our children’s capacity to wonder; it excites their natural curiosity so that they want to know what happens next.

World Building

Story speaks to universal longing and desire. It fuels our child’s natural creative drive to be an active participant in the world of story and imagination and to build new worlds, creative words and better worlds and to eventually find their place in God’s bigger story in the real world.

Play

If there is a point to the epic narrative, it is that God can be glorified in our creative play. Story is one important way this happens.

Timelessness

Story gives our children a break from the daily grind, the tyranny of the urgent. It gives our children a chance to touch eternity, a chance to escape time and to be lost in the story. Stories have a beginning, a middle and end which gives our children a connection to the past, present and future and allows travel between all of them. Story also reminds our children that behind the relentless tick of the clock is the unperturbed, unhurried pace of that other kingdom, the kingdom of God's eternity.

Transcendence

Story lifts our young listeners out of themselves, offering the chance for self-forgetfulness – a much-needed gift to a generation of self-obsessed materialists. C.S Lewis says that “in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . I transcend myself and am never more myself than when I do.” (C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 1961)

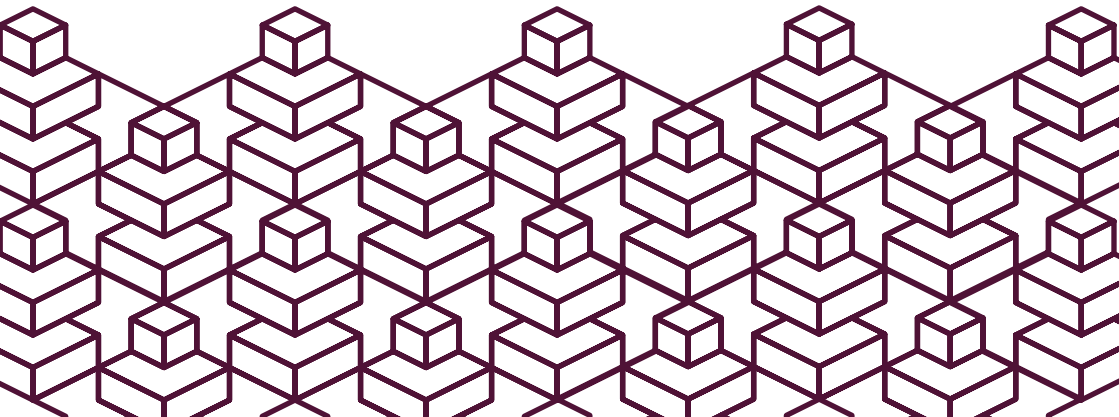
Resonance

Walter Wangerin Jr writes, “To identify well with a major character in a story is to identify oneself.” (Walter Wangerin, “Hans Christian Anderson: Shaping the Child's Universe”, 2002) Story resonates with our human experience, it speaks to our hopes, dreams and identity but also speaks to our universal longings and desires.

Subversion

The meaning and morals and themes of a good story are subverted and are always there just below the surface, which is why the hearer's defences are down, making them more willing to listen. Immersion allows for truth to sink in slowly over time. The hearer/reader will keep mulling things over long after they have heard the words “The end”

Stories give our children the weapons they need to defeat the dragons. There are many “dragons” that are real and very present and want to bring our kids down. By reading stories, telling stories and encouraging our children to read, we are giving them an awesome grounding in life and its ultimate meaning.



KEY POINTS

1

Reading/telling a story is a shared brain experience

6

Stories impart real world beliefs in a non-confrontational way

2

Stories help us form language and memories

7

Stories convey beliefs that are more likely to stick

3

Story telling is a form of touch and connection

8

Stories give our children the opportunity to touch eternity

4

Stories generate feelings of empathy and trust

9

Stories give our children the weapons they need to defeat the dragons

5

Stories enable memorisation and retention of content



MY STORY

Right from before I can remember, My mum read stories. The Magic Faraway Tree, The Swiss Family Robinson, Seven Little Australians to name a few. In my mind, I travelled to faraway lands and places and my imagination ran wild. I would lose and find myself many times over.

Each day after school Mum would have me read to her about Dick and Dora, Jack and Jane, Fluff and Nip for at least 20 minutes each day. All of her children had to do this. Those early days of reading fostered a love of reading for myself. It was nothing for me to devour a book or two over a weekend. Oh, the adventures I would have. Along the way a picture began to form in my mind... The Great God Story of the Battle between Good and Evil.

Each evening mum would read to us from Arthur Maxwells "My Bible Stories." This set of Bible stories tells the stories sequentially. We must have read that series three or more times during my growing up years.

Many a Friday night or Sabbath afternoon was spent sitting on my parent's bed as mum read a good story.

Mum would also read us stories of our Adventist Pioneers, especially the Australian stories and I found myself amongst those great characters that helped to form the Adventist Church.

Mum and Dad also told us stories about their lives, both good and bad, that taught me my family history and my place in that story.

As I grew older, I continued reading independently, and whenever I could, I would read a good book borrowed from the library. I would get lost in faraway places, mission fields and jungles, on ships and trains and in so doing found myself.

"Each day after school Mum would have me read to her...Those early days of reading fostered a love of reading for myself"

My favourite thing to do in the holidays was to spend a day at the Mildura Carnegie Library, arriving there at 9am and not emerging until closing time as the sun went down. It was such an awesome experience to get lost in the library and in doing so, finding myself and my place in the story, God's story.

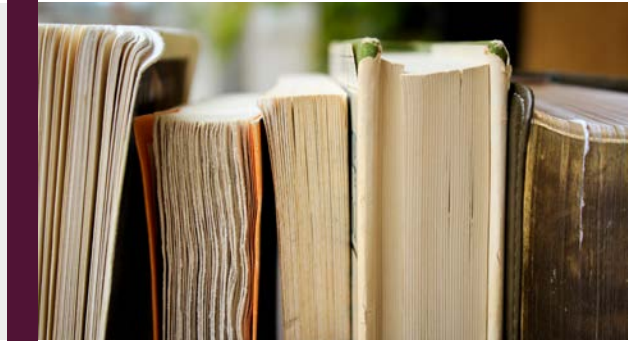


WHAT TO DO

Our Children need to hear stories. They need to hear the big story of God found in nearly every story. Make books available! Studies show that the more books you have in your home, the greater the chance your kid will become a reader. You don't have to break the bank, but you should have available a wide range of age appropriate books. Dig out that library card. Take advantage of store sales. Listen to audiobooks and then read the book as a family!

TOP 30

Here is a list of 30 great children's stories to add to your reading Bucket List or library.



01
02
03
04
05
06
07
08

The Hungry Caterpillar (Eric Carle)

Where is the Green Sheep? (or any book by Mem Fox)

Lost Sheep Series (Andrew McDonough)

My Bible Friends (Arthur Maxwell)

Me Too Bible Stories (Marilyn Lashbrook)

My Bible Story (Arthur Maxwell)

The Narnia Series (C.S Lewis)

Going on a Bear Hunt (Michael Rosen)

09

Charlotte's Web (E.B White)

10

Winnie the Pooh (A.A Milne)

11

Cat in a hat (Seuss Stories by Dr Seuss)

12

The Velveteen Rabbit (Margery Williams Bianco)

13

Guess How Much I love you (Sam McBratney)

14

Aesops Fables

15

The Little Red Caboose (Marian Potter)

16

The Ugly Duckling (Hans Christian Anderson)

17

The Little Red Hen (folktale of Russian Origin)

18

Dogger (Shirley Hughes)

19

Wonky Donkey (Craig Smith)

20

The Magic Pudding (Norman Lindsay)

21

Moo Baa La La La (or any book by Sandra Boynton)

22

Scruffy The Tug Boat (Golden book series)

23

Small and Big (Karen Collum)

24

A splendid friend indeed (Suzanne Bloom)

25

Edward the Emu (Sheena Knowles)

26

Paddington Bear (Michael Bond)

27

The Magic Faraway Tree (Enid Blyton)

28

Giraffes Can't dance (Giles Andreae)

29

The Little Engine That Could (Watty Piper)

30

Willie the Bumble Bee (Craig Smith)



Don't stop reading out loud!

Around the age of eight is when our children generally stop reading for enjoyment. Ironically, it's also when we typically stop reading aloud to them, so don't stop reading aloud to your child. Find a book your whole family enjoys and use it as an ongoing read-aloud. Also, make sure your child sees you with a book in hand. Children who are more apt to be good readers have parents who read for pleasure.

Here are the sorts of stories they need to hear:

Stories of the Bible – They need to know the Big Bible Story

Great Fiction Stories – Stories of Kings and Queens, Castles and Dungeons, Princes and Princesses, Triumph and Tragedy, Good stories that fire the imagination and transcendence. C.S Lewis is an example of this genre.

Stories of the Early Church (Universal) – Stories of the heroes of faith

Stories of the Church (Denominational) – Why does your church exist? Tell stories of the church pioneers.

Stories of the Church (Local) – Why does your local church exist? How did it begin and what are some of the stories from years gone by

Your story - Why are you a Christian and what is your story? Where has God come through for you? (These are the stories our children love to hear the most.)

When telling a story, keep in mind the following:

The real key to successful storytelling is less about study than it is about practice. The more stories you tell, the better you'll get. It's as simple as that. Real-time, you'll figure out what works and what doesn't.



Children will love the story no matter how you read or tell it.

Once you understand the elements of story structure, you're halfway there.

1. **Setting** (where your story takes place)
2. **Character** (the hero/heroine/protagonist who has adventures)
3. **Plot** (the events that unfold — the arc of what happens)
4. **Conflict** (the obstacles the characters encounter)
5. **Theme** (the resolution of the conflict — what's been learnt along the way)

So get to it. Read stories to your children. Tell stories to your children. What an incredible story we as Christians have to tell. The patriarchs and matriarchs of the Bible, and what the early Church did, that risked health and wealth, life and limb because they believed in God's Story. They believed that it was a story worth telling and living. It's a story worth repeating; it's a story worth believing because it is The Story of Hope. As your child hears the story, they will be lost and found in God's story and eventually find their place in God's Story – A life worth living.



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Prepared by Pr Daron Pratt
Family and Children's Ministries Director
North NSW Conference
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