What’s at Stake? A Story about Stories

Long ago, with elegant succinctness, Horace defined the educational transposition by which readers identify with narratives: “Change the name,” he says, “and you are the subject of the story” (*Satires*, 1.1). From the time we are born, the narrative cradle of story rocks us to the collective heartbeat of our species, ushering us across the threshold of consciousness and into the domain of humanity. What’s at stake in our lives and in this book is (1) the way stories embrace human existence in a narrative environment that is ubiquitous and inescapable, (2) the way stories construct pictures of the world’s workings and interpretations of the world’s events that are not only emotionally compelling but that we often treat as knowledge, (3) the way stories invite (and, to a surprising degree, control) responses of emotion, belief, and judgment that we hardly ever refuse to give, (4) and the way stories exert shaping pressure on our ethos because both the “knowledge” offered by stories and our seldom denied responses constitute kinds of practice, modes of clarification, and sets of habits for living that, once configured and repeatedly reinforced, accompany us into real-life situations day in and day out.

The overarching claim of this book is that stories are an important component of the ethical development that all human beings undergo because stories are an important component of every human being’s
education about the world. I will have much to say in this book about the benefits offered by our educational encounters with stories, but I will not be repeating the age-old claim so often advanced by Western humanists that, somehow, literary education automatically elevates and improves moral character. Just as the nutritionists’ claim that “we are what we eat” does not entail a corollary belief that all foods are equally good for us, so my claim that stories are important for everyone is not the same thing as claiming that all stories are always good for everyone.

To give you a sense of the distance between the claims I make here and the extravagant claims often advanced throughout the history of literary education (at least in the West) by such humanists as Petrarch, Philip Sidney, Percy Shelley, Matthew Arnold, and others, listen here to Petrarch’s glorification of the virtues that one acquires by reading classical works of literature (from a work in Latin written near the end of Petrarch’s life in 1374):

[These works, the studia humanitatis] stamp and drive deep into the heart the sharpest and most ardent stings of speech, by which the lazy are startled, the ailing kindled, and the sleepy aroused, the sick healed and prostrate raised and those who stick to the ground lifted up to the highest thoughts and to honest desire. Then earthly things become vile; the aspect of vice stirs up an enormous hatred of vicious life; virtue and “the shape, and as it were, the face of honesty,” are beheld by the inmost eye “and inspire miraculous love” of wisdom and of themselves, as Plato says. (497)

Who knew that studying the classics could yield not only honest desires but heal the sick? More than two hundred years later, however, Philip Sidney’s claims for benefits of a literary education are hardly less extravagant. Literary study produces automatic moral improvement, he says, by means of “this purifying of wit, this enriching of memory, enabling of judgment, and enlarging of conceit, which commonly we call learning, under what name so ever it come forth, or to what immediate end soever it be directed, the final end is, to lead and draw us to as high a perfection, as our degenerate souls made worse by their clay-lodgings, can be capable of. . . . Now therein of all Sciences . . . is our Poet the Monarch.
For he doth not only show the way, but giveth so sweet a prospect into the way, as will entice any man to enter into it” (163).

In the history of Western education, at least until late in the twentieth century, books on literary education have often taken this line of extravagant praise and pugnacious assertiveness about the “improving” effects of literary study—the implication is frequently made that such improvement occurs automatically and inevitably—but you will not find me repeating such claims in this book. In the first place, I don’t believe them. Stories can only extend invitations, not coerce effects. In the second place, traditional encomiums in defense of literary education always ignore one crucial logical entailment of their praise, namely, that any kind of learning capable of producing powerful benefits must entail a corollary power to do harm. The traditional defenders of literary study have often operated like terrier defense attorneys eager to dig up every conceivable virtue that will make their gilt client (Lord Literature of Epic Hall located in the county of Nature and designed by that redoubtable architect Truth) look good in the eyes of the jury, while assiduously avoiding any reference to facts that might raise doubts about the value of some stories’ effects. In the third place, traditional defenses of literary education have always focused not on narratives in general but on forms of art that authors and critics of canonical art usually call “great literature.” Despite my profession as a teacher of traditional British literature, however, as well as my lifelong addiction to literary works (some of them great and some of them not) this book is not exclusively about literature. It is about stories—narratives in general—and the world of stories is much vaster than the world of literature. Only some of us are addicted to literature. All of us are addicted to stories. My claim is that exposure to stories is educational and therefore formative, and the appropriate follow-up to this claim is not a set of specific predictions about the inevitable outcomes of our formative experiences with stories but rather an analysis of why and how stories exert formative influence in the first place. Just an account of what “formative” might mean, for example, turns out to be a highly complex issue, an account that requires many books for its investigation, including this one. Let me begin my investigation into the influence of stories by telling a story—my own. How stories worked for me illustrates in a general way how stories work for us all.
The beginning of my story is that I was born into a highly dysfunctional family. My parents never managed to get their individual lives in order, and they found overwhelming the task of constructing a family life that might nourish the development of two children. Instead of being raised by my parents, I was mostly raised by the stories I read. Sometimes this was a good thing for me; sometimes it was not. The adventure stories, travel tales, and legends and fairy tales that I devoured in my childhood benefited the development of my language powers, imagination, and capacities for both introspection and empathy. But when at age thirteen I discovered my adolescent uncle’s hidden cache of Mickey Spillane novels and eagerly devoured their salacious contents like a kid who had discovered a box of forbidden chocolates, I, who knew absolutely nothing about the forbidden sweetness of either women or sex, came in for some horrible lessons about both. I learned that real men spice sex with violence and that women like it that way, that real men are disposed to violence even when sex is not at stake, and that real men view women as commodities to be owned, mastered, and bullied, not treasured and not even respected. On the other hand, I was so ill-equipped to place Spillane’s violent and sexist images into any social context or set of relations readily available either to my experience or to my imagination that his stories did me no lasting harm. This escape was mainly because of my ignorance, however, not because the stories themselves are harmless.

But the education that I gleaned from most of my youthful encounters with stories was profoundly useful to me. Because my parents didn’t mind how much I read as long as I completed my chores and maintained the family fiction that I had no needs, reading stories was for me an escape. Stories also projected hope, a vision of different and better worlds, and they bestowed on me a blessed education about life that supplemented the meager instruction I received in the rural Indiana communities where I lived in the mid-fifties, communities where some of my classmates came to school barefoot, wearing bib overalls, and looking for all the world like Huck Finn tryouts on a movie set. I often felt like an outsider and was often treated like one. My outsider status was sometimes frustrating but not generally traumatic, in part because my inveterate reading gave me interesting and vivid companions who filled in the companionship gaps in my real life. Outsider kids need solace, and
I was certainly not the first child nor, I hope, the last, to find consoling sociability in stories that were richer in ideas and feelings than the forms of sociability generally available to me in my real life.

Stories in effect were my real home. In a short but intense book called *How Reading Changed My Life*, Anna Quindlen (another person who endured a miserable childhood) says that “it is like the rubbing of two sticks together to make a fire, the act of reading, an improbable pedestrian task that leads to heat and light. Perhaps this only becomes clear when one watches a child do it” (20). Reading as a “pedestrian task.” An intriguing phrase. Quindlen does not say outright what she means by heat and light, but I suppose she means something like the heat of feeling and the light of knowing. Reared in my family’s broken-glass nest of dark Faulknerian brooding, I certainly experienced the tremors of deep feeling, mostly underground, that my parents dealt with, or, more accurately, did not deal with, but no one ever offered me the light of learning. Things happened, but explanations were rarely forthcoming. I was ordered about, but not given reasons. Stories offered me a world of explanations and models. Reading may be pedestrian when it refers to such tasks as reading the newspaper or reading the washing label on a shirt, but when a child starts the literary pedestrianism of engaging with stories, her walk through one word after another can lead to a walk through one world after another, producing extraordinary results. So it was with me.

**Mrs. Baumgartle and *Smoky the Crow***

I see with yesterday’s vividness the image of me at age six starting my long literary, pedestrian trek in the living room of my family home in New Albany, Indiana, where I had just finished reading, all by myself, my first whole book, *Smoky the Crow*. Had I been a six-year-old book reviewer, I would have gushed, “Best bird story of the year! A must-read avian adventure!” Because there were no children’s books in my home, my self-conscious attempts at narrative identification prior to *Smoky the Crow* had been limited to my attempts in church to identify with the child Jesus. Despite squeezing my eyes and concentrating hard, however,
I never had enough data about Jesus to make him seem anything other than an odd little adult.

In reading *Smoky the Crow*, however, I enjoyed my first independent experience of full narrative engagement, and had that sense of going out of myself and living for the time *there* instead of *here*, that sense of simultaneous liberation and fulfillment that we all have when we go intensely *inside* a story. It makes no difference whether that story is on a movie screen or TV screen, in the pages of a book, or whether it comes from the speakers of a CD player or emanates from the mouth of a spinner of tales. I was hooked. I was as hooked as the ancient Greeks listening to the rhapsodists chanting about the Trojan War in the marketplace, as hooked as medieval warriors on mead benches listening to bards singing about King Arthur’s round table, as hooked as my mother on the porch swing breathlessly reading fake stories about the scandalous capers of movie stars in the latest issue of *Silver Screen*. Until *Smoky the Crow*, reading had been a dull affair performed in the company of plodding peers, all of us under the supervision of the huge and formidable Mrs. Baumgartle (a name I am not making up), who was ready to pounce heavily on every predictable and irksome mistake made by a group of six-year-olds who had world-class talent for making predictable and irksome mistakes. *Smoky the Crow* was the story that first ignited what eventually became my professional and personal interest in all the different facets of language: the histories and meanings of individual words, words as images and metaphors, and words as story.

One of my earliest epiphanies about the quicksilver quirkiness of individual words occurred in Mrs. Baumgartle’s class, as my reading group was struggling through what I considered the boring account of an airplane pilot using the magic of radio signals (magical in those long-ago days) to fly through bad weather by “staying on the beam.” But while our poor pilot was trying *not* to crash his plane, I was definitely crashing the reading session by clowning around. Right in the middle of one of my most brilliant ripostes, however, Mrs. Baumgartle, like a recumbent grizzly grouchily awakened, grabbed me suddenly and smoothly by my shirt collar, lifted me in the air like a nine-ounce puppy, whacked me across the bottom with a nine-pound palm, and said with energetic exasperation, “Marshall Wayne, I wish *you* would ‘stay on the beam!’”
Instantaneously and with great improbability, right in the middle of Midwestern Nowhere, the gods on Parnassus, probably needing new prescriptions for their glasses and probably thinking that they were zapping a genuine middle-class kid from a genuine city who would attend genuine schools, marked me (mocked me?) then and there as a future English professor. I know this because as I dangled at the end of Mrs. Baumgartle’s arm, I found myself more interested by her pun on “beam” than I was upset by the whack on my bottom. The smack was a passing thing—I had been hit by smackers much more maliciously motivated than Mrs. Baumgartle—but I loved her play on “beam,” a little word dance that opened a permanent window allowing me to see instantly, albeit only vaguely, that language could be fun.

**Religious Fundamentalism and Linguistic Vividness**

Being raised among Protestant fundamentalists offers lessons in linguistic vividness that last a lifetime. A woman in one of my father’s churches with the unlikely name of Fern Turnipseed, for example, had, in a moment of either aesthetic amnesia or inspired comedy (I could never figure out which), named her son Forest Turnipseed. In addition to the comic delight I took in a mother/son duo named after plants, I found Fern to be linguistically fascinating even without Forest, for Fern had the gift—or the pathology, depending on your prejudice—of “speaking in tongues.” At moments in church when Fern felt completely overcome with divine visitation, she would jump up in the middle of one of my father’s sermons, swing herself around and around the nearest church pillar, and shout gibberish to the ceiling in an absolute frenzy of abandoned tears and religious inspiration. This performance sometimes stimulated two or three other people in the congregation to do the same thing, on which occasions our church service looked more like a mad house or a Friday night fraternity party than like anything considered religiously respectable by the Presbyterians (or even the Baptists) in their own churches on the other side of town, where people had landscaped yards. Fern was the queen of “shouters,” a more or less technical term among us fundamentalists for folks with Fern’s gifts, and her transformation from
the woman she was all week long—a meek, repressed, tight-lipped, ’50s housewife—into an oracular Delphic priestess mainlining a direct emotional jolt from the gods, or, as she believed, The One and Only God, was truly spectacular. It took me many years to learn that the linguistic part of Fern’s startling phenomenon has a name, “glossolalia,” but it certainly underscored for me that words, even incomprehensible words, could serve as the vehicle for an amazing range of human expressions.

I not only liked the meanings of individual words; I even liked their sounds and rhythms. As the son and grandson of ministers, I was raised in a word world shaped by the language of fiery evangelism and the Shakespearean locutions of the King James translation of the Bible. My grandfather literally raised the hair on the back of my neck as he preached in grave, sepulchral tones, “You sinners who don’t repent at this altar tonight are like spiders that God is dangling over the yawning pit of hell by a brickle thread of life!” I immediately had a vision of thousands of people all squirming like spiders, about to be turned from frisky sinners into crispy sinners the moment God severed that “brickle” thread. Years later in college, I was amazed to find that my grandfather had somehow inherited this image from Jonathan Edwards’s famous sermon called “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” which I am virtually certain that he never read. This image must have been passed down in an unbroken string of oral repetitions from one backwoods evangelist to another until it got to my grandfather—and to me—the language remaining vital and indelible across many generations.

Once reared in the word world of evangelistic fundamentalism, one cannot withdraw from it linguistically, no matter how far one withdraws from it theologically. Nor have I any desire to lose the sense I had then that salvation might hang on using or knowing just the right word in just the right way. There is much proof in the everyday world that one kind of salvation or other—the end of the war, the “guilty” or “not guilty” of a jury’s decision, the final fracture or real reconciliation of a troubled marriage—does indeed hang on someone’s knowing how to employ just the right word in just the right way at just the right time. We fundamentalists, however, generally construed “salvation” in a more literal way, and getting the language of contrition or scripture or doctrine right was vitally important. “Close enough” wordings were never close enough. Lack
of precision was perilous. Not only the language of the King James Bible but the images from thousands of hellfire sermons and gospel hymns (both doleful and joyous) strengthen today the blood and bones of my own language. Many people may reject, as I did long ago, the theology of hellfire sermons, but theology aside, few discourses can equal these sermons for demonstrating to young people the power of vivid language.

At about age nine I attended a revival service in my grandfather’s church and was captivated by a narrative description of Judgment Day proffered by the Reverend Kykendahl, an evangelist notorious even among us fundamentalists for his methods of building up a congregation’s emotions over a week’s time of nightly hellfire sermons. The heavenly story that Kykendahl painted on the night I am recalling was a conventional Christian portrayal of Judgment Day that depicted Jesus floating down from heaven surrounded by angels and smiling cherubs, all singing in triumph and joy. But while one narrative angle of this story focused on Jesus floating in the sky, the other narrative angle focused on earth and revealed a chilling picture of sinners weeping and wailing, gnashing their teeth, and praying for rocks and mountains to bury them from the sight of God’s terrible judgment.

Just as Kykendahl was approaching meltdown intensity in the midst of telling this story, he acrobatically jumped into the front pew where I was sitting and accidentally kicked me in the head, suddenly raising the possibility that I might be catapulted to my own final judgment sooner than anyone expected (but I only turned out to be more startled than hurt). Later in the week, as Kykendahl orchestrated the rising emotional fever of the congregation attending these nightly services, he arranged for the church janitor to turn off the sanctuary lights at a prearranged cue in the sermon, at which point in the performance he ran up and down the dark aisles rattling a chain and imitating the frenzied shrieks of sinners in hell. It was a case of metaphor being turned into literal sound effects, a sort of primitive Dolby sound for anyone needing a religious jump start. We fundamentalists may have been over the top, but we did not take language for granted.

The language of the hymns in this religious tradition was often melodramatic and morose, filled with metaphors about the blood of Christ, slain lambs, lost sinners, sinking ships, heavenly gardens, the old rugged
cross, the rock of ages, and final judgment. “There is a fountain filled with blood,” intones one old hymn, “Drawn from Immanuel’s veins; / And sinners plunged beneath that flood, / Lose all their guilty stains.” The stouthearted fundamentalists among whom I spent my childhood never seemed daunted by the prospect of being washed in a fountain of blood, and they were serenely untroubled by any anxiety that violent religious imagery might damage the tender psyches of their young offspring. I, on the other hand, as a child undoubtedly more earnest than God needed me to be, was positively riveted by metaphors of sinners drowning in an ocean of sin or bathing in fountains of blood.

The Embrace of Family Stories

When I wasn’t at church being steeped in the metaphors of evangelistic fundamentalism or at school immersing myself in stories like Smoky the Crow, I was sharpening my sense of language and story in the embrace of oral family tales. Sitting in rocking chairs and porch swings on my grandfather’s farm on summer evenings, eating popcorn and apples, I listened to the adults tell and retell the tale about Uncle Billy, who at sixteen lied about his age to join the Navy during World War II and was on a ship in the South Pacific hit by a kamikaze pilot; about Uncle Noral, who got locked in the outhouse by his two older brothers (one of them my father) and in his panic dug his way out through the filth at the bottom of the privy; about Uncle Wayne, who not only was the source of my middle name but was taken prisoner of war in Germany in 1944; about my great-grandfather Cox, who, when his family didn’t want to leave the farm in the 1930s and move to town, allegedly burned down his house and barn; and about the logging and preaching my maternal grandfather did in the forests of southern Indiana in the early 1920s. And of course there was always a large number of suggestive and bloody Bible stories referred to so often in my world that they seemed like family tales themselves: King David secretly watching Bathsheba take a bath, Esther cutting off the head of Holofernes, Lot’s daughters “lying” with their father (it took me years to understand the look on adults’ faces when they solemnly but deliciously repeated this mysterious phrase about Lot “lying” with his
daughters), Samson getting his hair cut by Delilah while he slept, and Saul being struck blind by God’s light on the road to Damascus. All of these stories contain racy, stirring stuff for lads of thirteen or fourteen whose testosterone is just beginning to flow.

In the pre-television days of my childhood, one of my favorite family modes of taking in stories and acquiring sensitivity to language was listening to the radio. I had a particular love for the wooden Zenith tabletop model that my family owned. It had tubes that took about a week to warm up, it had an imposing gold needle that turned in a big circle to select the station, and it had a golden italic Z in the shape of a bolt of lightning that zapped diagonally across the entire front of the radio. This Z was a triple pun on the manufacturer’s name, “Zenith,” on the power of electricity, and on the mystery of radio signals. I listened not only to weekly radio narratives but also to “Walter Winchell,” who always opened his program by speaking in a distinctively urgent, staccato voice—“Good evening, Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea”—while a clicking telegraph key could be heard in the background, ensuring that Winchell’s narratives were, indeed, being heard all over the world simultaneously. I was too naive to ask myself why ships at sea might have any interest in Walter Winchell’s gossipy little stories about politicians and movie stars, but that clicking telegraph key carried powerful proof to me of the universality of people’s fascination for stories.

Stories: The Language of the Human Heart

Whenever human beings are most deeply moved by the great passions of life—grief, love, desire, anger, loss, outrage, profound happiness—they are likely to reach for special words or special forms of language—catechisms, eulogies, wedding vows, the affirmations that precede court testimony, baptisms, deathbed declarations—designed to capture the speakers’ full depth of feeling. Without the words, it seems difficult for human beings to be fully present at our own deepest experiences. It is the job of words and stories, as Elder Olson says in his poem, “To see, to say / It was this way, this way” (“Prologue to His Book,” 3). Metaphors and stories become in those moments and in those modes the language