

Pretending and Storytelling

Paley, V. (1990). The boy who would be a helicopter. Harvard University Press: Cambridge.

This book is the story of a teacher's reflective practice over a school year. Paley uses story telling in her classroom; the children tell their own stories and she writes them down for the group to later act them out. Paley's work is rooted in a number of observations about the way children use stories to find meaning and in the process of interaction.

- Children think up “plot and dialogue without instruction. And, for the most part, without the teacher’s awareness.” (4)
- The fantasies of any group form the basis of its culture That which we have forgotten to do, the children do best of all: They make up stories. Theirs may be the original model for the active, unrestricted examination of an idea.” (5)
- In dramatizing a concept, the child finds the natural method for concentration and continuity and satisfies the intuitive belief in hidden meanings. This is why **play** feels so good . (6)
- For younger students . . . **play** contains the only set of circumstances understandable from beginning to end. (6)
- “**Pretend**” often confuses the adult, but it is the child’s real and serious world, the stage upon which any identity is possible and secret thoughts can be safely revealed. The great writers know this truth, remembering it from childhood. They depict characters who feel real only when pretending to be someone else. Deprived of illusions, they wander about asking, “Who am I? What should I be doing?” (7)
- **Play** is the most compelling and informative of all **storytelling**. Fantasy play and storytelling are never far apart. (8)
- . . . **play**, that most ordinary of human functions, as natural as crawling, walking, and running. Without instruction, these skills flourish. (9)
- The moment several children combine their imaginings, however, group instinct mandates a more conscious organization. Now the children insist upon rules . . . (10)
- In **play** the child says, “I can *do* this well; I can *be* this effectively; I *understand* what is happening to me and to the other children.” In storytelling a child says, “This is how I interpret and translate right now something that is on my mind.” (10)
- They do not pretend to be storytellers; they **are storytellers**. It is their intuitive approach to all occasions. It is the way they think. (17)
- In **storytelling**, as in **play**, the social interactions we call interruptions usually improve the narrative. Yet I can recall a time when I would say, “Please don’t interrupt. Let people tell their own stories.” That was when I missed the main point of storytelling. I did not understand it to be a shared process, a primary cultural institution, *the social art of language*. (23)
- A storyteller, above all, likes suspense. It is the *not* knowing about characters that makes them interesting. (32)
- Two friends alone will memorize each other’s stories and learn a private language. But the story teller is a culture builder, requiring the participation of an audience. Play is not enough, there must be a format that captures the essence of play while attaching to it a greater degree of objectivity. Storytelling and story acting can perform the task. (34)

- An idea must find the rhythm of a group to be fully communicated. The imagination is not a unilateral function; it thrives in the company of those who share its point of view and ask the right questions. (34)
- **Storytelling**, in fact, is a more conscious invention than play. (36)
- Children, in fact, are surprised if someone thinks an explanation or justification is necessary. When Jason wondered about Alex being a lion, he was questioning not the idea that Alex is a lion but rather how Alex *knows* he is a lion. (45)
- Jason and his helicopter are an intriguing pair. Although he knows he is Jason, separate from the helicopter, in anxious moments, surrounded by lots of people, the boundaries blur. (57)
- Children control fantasy, not the other way around. (76)
- **Problems** are not meant to be solved. They are ours to **practice** on, to **explore** the possibilities with, to help us **study** cause and effect. . . . It is the **process**, not the solution, that conveys the message. (80)
 - “*I can’t. I have to go back outside.*”
 - “*Why do you?*”
 - “*Because I’m running back and forth as fast as the sky and faster than the clouds.*”
 - “*Are you pretending to be a helicopter?*” I ask.
 - “*No, a real helicopter?*”
 - “*Real pretend?*”
 - “*No, only just a helicopter.*”

. . . the question itself suddenly made sense. Is there a helicopter in your story? Who wants to be the mother? These are decisions *you* make, not mysterious impositions from the outside.” (120)
- **Pretend** is one of the subjects Jason is studying. It is not easy. Here he is really taking apart something that is a pretend airplane but which he calls a real airplane. At noon, waiting to be picked up, Jason demonstrates the dimensions of his problems with pretend. As we arrange ourselves on the front steps, Alex accidentally sits on Jason’s feet, and Jason responds, “Oh! He’s pretending to sit on my feet.” Alex is surprised. “No, I didn’t pretend. I really did sit on your feet.” “You really did?” “But it was an accident.” “Oh.” (138)

Summarized by Kevin Ruess, February 2001