

The Dynamics of Narrative Exchange: Siobhán Parkinson

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience ... and he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.

'The Storyteller', W. Benjamin¹

Internal storytelling is the way we constantly make sense of our experience. Without the ability to tell ourselves stories we would be unable to exercise any control in relation to the world, either as a way of making sense of past experience, or of shaping our hopes and plans for the future. However, we not only need to make up stories, we also need to tell them because 'The willingness to tell, the ability to judge the moment and the capacity to learn from telling are crucial maturational achievements.'² The idea of narrative exchange implies that there must be a dialogue, a give and take, a sharing. Walter Benjamin maintained that the ability or power to exchange experiences was what storytelling was all about, but, as far back as 1936, he believed that the community-centred interaction of a narrator who was known and who told his story directly, face to face, was becoming a thing of the past.³ This is even more true today. In the daily life of the average person there is generally little time for telling stories. Also, nobody has the time to relax and listen, so that the art of listening has also declined. This, combined with the success of the novel and the dominance of television, means that we are losing the ability to communicate experience through story and to share it with others.

Happily, here in Ireland, the ancient art of the *Seanchaí*, the storyteller of the past, is experiencing a revival. Storytellers of Ireland, *Aos Scéal Éireann*, was established in 2003 to promote and foster the oral tradition of storytelling throughout Ireland and, together with The Verbal Arts Centre, they have established an Irish Storytelling Centre to promote and develop storytelling as a contemporary art.

Throughout the preceding chapters, I have been critically assessing narratives by looking at their content, but, as Ross Chambers points out, 'meaningfulness is not exhausted (and indeed it may be completely missed) by analysis of narratives in terms of their supposed internal relationships alone'.⁴ There are other phenomena independent of the verbal text, which also merit consideration. In this chapter I want to look at two novels by Siobhan Parkinson which pay attention to the *act* of storytelling. They do this by shifting the focus on to the act of communication rather than the story told, thereby highlighting the notion that the significance of the stories may be determined much less by content than by the actual function of storytelling and the relationships thus mediated. The stories told in these two novels express something independent of their content and are a feature of the developing relationship between teller and listener. Narrative content is not of course irrelevant, but essentially it is the dynamic of exchange that gives meaning to the stories and has the power to change relationships. 'The storyteller, as Benjamin insists – although he distinguishes in this respect between storyteller and novelist – is one who has "experience" to impart.'⁵ All of the storytellers in these two novels are traditional storytellers in the sense referred to by Benjamin in that they are communicating experience – their own experience – in such a way that it cannot be separated from the intention of the teller, nor from its specific listeners. The moment and the situation are important so that the act of communication becomes an experience itself and not simply a way of talking about experience.

In *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, Parkinson begins by creating an appropriate frame for a storytelling journey. A quarrelling assembly of four children, from different social classes and with diverse personalities, sets out from the small seaside village of Tranarone on what Beverley calls an expedition to Lady Island. The island, only a short distance offshore, could be reached by wading out at low tide. Gerard's beloved fat cat – Fat for short, accompanies them. While there, they meet the eccentric Dympna who lives on the island – the 'witch' (maybe) of the title. One of the four, Elizabeth, draws attention to the fact that this is a storytelling journey by her reference to Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* and her insistence that they are on a pilgrimage, rather than an expedition:

'I think this is just like *The Canterbury Tales*', Elizabeth went on.
'We're like pilgrims, aren't we?'

'Wha-at?' asked Kevin, who'd never heard of Canterbury or its tales.

‘You know, the pilgrims in *The Canterbury Tales* – they all tell each other stories. This is just like that, a pilgrimage with stories.’⁶

Chaucer’s pilgrims had a religious purpose and so were on a spiritual journey but Parkinson’s motley ‘compaignye of sondry folk’ are on a different kind of journey. They are on a journey from childhood to young adulthood. Again, this is evoked by the connection to *The Canterbury Tales* where April, the start of spring fertility and growth, is linked to the idea that ‘Thanne longen folk to go on pilgrimages’. Despite their social diversity, Chaucer’s pilgrims enter a closed world once they set out on their journey and so it is with the children in this story. Almost as soon as they set out on their adventure to Lady Island they leave their different lives behind and become a separate group – a pilgrim company. Like Chaucer’s pilgrims, they often quarrel but are unified by their common goal or destination. The fact that they are all on the same journey makes them appropriate listeners to each other’s stories because it ensures that they are non-distanced and empathetic and so can understand the point of the story in a way that would be difficult for a more distanced listener. There is, in other words, an interdependence between the event that is narrated and the event of narration, and the listener is a participant in the latter.

The children’s transition from childhood to young adulthood is accentuated in the opening story, or ‘General Prologue’ told by Elizabeth, who, like the pilgrim narrator of Chaucer’s General Prologue, is a friendly and casual observer who is also involved in the action. Walter Benjamin thought that the first true storyteller is the teller of fairy tales: ‘whenever good council was at a premium the fairy-tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest’.⁷ According to Bruno Bettelheim, one of the fairy tales that offers most good council to children who are learning individuation and independence is ‘Hansel and Gretel’, two characters who are reluctantly forced into independence. The story that Elizabeth chooses to begin with, although elements of it differ from the standard version, is unmistakably that of ‘Hansel and Gretel’. In this way the narrative situation is defined. Despite her variations on the pretext, there are certain elements which remain constant: siblings who are walking through the woods together when they get into difficulties and of course the tempting gingerbread house that contains both danger *and* the solution to their problems.

Elizabeth’s tale begins when the children are relaxed and drowsy after cooking and eating in the open air. Beverley who is practical and logical and who likes things to be clear-cut and self-evident, is not

impressed at the idea of telling or listening to stories. When Elizabeth begins, 'Once there were four children, two boys and two girls', and announces that she is telling a story, Beverley's reaction is one of impatience or perhaps embarrassment: 'A story! Good grief, Elizabeth, what do you think this is? Jackanory time at playschool?'⁸ Story-telling, she thinks, is a diversion for small children and something that she has long grown out of. Her reaction is an indication of how little prized the art of storytelling has become. As Benjamin has said: 'More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences.'⁹

In spite of Beverley's disapproval, Elizabeth continues and, in spite of herself, Beverley is drawn into a story about four children who one day went for a walk in the woods. Woods or forests are often used as referential signs. Bettelheim sees them as symbolizing 'the place in which inner darkness is confronted and worked through; where uncertainty is resolved about who one is; and where one begins to understand who one wants to be'. He goes on to say that 'If we ... have entered this wilderness with an as yet undeveloped personality, when we succeed in finding our way out we shall emerge with a much more highly developed humanity'.¹⁰ The children in Elizabeth's story were going happily on their way through the woods, eating the enchanted berries that they found there, when the magic berries caused them to change shape. Each metamorphosed into an animal that reflected both the physical appearance and the personality of Elizabeth herself and her three listeners, although it wasn't until much later that they recognized themselves or the fact that this story had personal meaning for all of them. For example, the boy in the story who corresponded with the tall, good-looking Kevin was 'turned into a very tall and beautiful black heron, with very long spindly legs and a long, black neck and wonderful glowing coal black feathers'. The fussy Beverley's story counterpart became 'a small, dainty sort of pig with an extremely curly tail and dumpy, stumpy little legs which she had to move very quickly in order to make any kind of progress over the ground at all'. Elizabeth herself was represented by a fawn and Gerard, the youngest, who was timid and asthmatic is recognizable in the 'furry little hamster' who 'went snuffling along at a great rate, wearing his little heart out with the effort of keeping up with the others'.¹¹

When disaster struck in the shape of the fawn's hoof being caught in a trap, the animal-children were all wondering what to do when they

spied 'the sweetest little gingerbread house they ever saw'.¹² The two older siblings, the heron and the pig, decided to go for help. At this point in the story Elizabeth insists on putting her own stamp on it. The existence of the pretext has led Beverley to expect a witch in the gingerbread house, but Elizabeth insists that it is not a witch but a wolf in grandmother's clothing. This inclusion of the 'Little Red Riding Hood' story further emphasizes the inner transformation that the children are undergoing. Again, according to Bettelheim, this is a story, which is of particular interest to children who are moving to another level of development. The threat of being devoured is the central theme of both 'Hansel and Gretel' and 'Little Red Riding Hood', but while Hansel and Gretel are forced to leave home against their wish, the more mature Little Red Riding Hood does so willingly. She is not afraid and just needs to learn to be more cautious. By the time Red Riding Hood is cut out of the wolf's belly, 'she is reborn on a higher plane of existence; relating positively to both her parents, no longer a child, she returns to life a young maiden',¹³ having benefited from her experience and successfully made the transition from childhood to young adulthood. The animal-children in Elizabeth's story deal with the wolf by threatening him with the woodcutter. Unlike the children in the Hansel and Gretel story, only when the danger has passed do they help themselves to the candy door handles, clove rock bath taps and other good things that make up the gingerbread house. They find the necessary spells and ointments they need to rescue the fawn and in no time at all their problems are solved and they are continuing on their way through the woods as Elizabeth's story comes to an end.

When Gerard asked whether the animals eventually turned back into children, Elizabeth simply answered, 'No'. Just as it proved to be better for Hansel and Gretel not to find their way directly back home but rather to risk facing the dangers of the world, so too there is no turning back for the children in Elizabeth's story. Their metamorphosis is complete and they must continue on rather than return to their former state. But, if they continue to plan and act intelligently and cooperate in helping each other, they will be well equipped to solve life's problems. By refusing to turn the animals back into children, Elizabeth is unconsciously warning against regression and encouraging growth towards the next stage of development. In telling her story, she has defined the theme and indicated the situation which will bestow relevance on the stories which follow.

Michael Hanne has stated that: 'Frequently in societies I am familiar with (and my guess is that this is a very nearly universal practice),

the telling of one story will trigger the telling of other stories by other members of a group, which illustrate the same theme or respond to the same question.¹⁴ This is what happens in *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)* where Elizabeth's tale triggers a string of stories all broadly linked to the same theme. As in *The Canterbury Tales*, there is no sense of authoritative organization. The children themselves are given control over the ordering and the content of a series of stories, which appear to be without any unifying principle beyond the fact that they are all vaguely familiar fairy tales or legends. However, Elizabeth's story, having provided both the framework and the prompt, seems to have opened a door that allows the others, for the first time, to tell the story of their own experiences, all of which are, in different ways, products of their transition from childhood to the next stage. In this way, a new solidarity and sense of empowerment is created in a group which had previously felt isolated and powerless. In each storytelling performance there is a relationship between personal narrative and related events (although this is not recognized until later), so that the fairy tale structure is shaped by the unique circumstances of the teller. There is, however, a coherence that comes from the common narrative situation of teller and listener in that they are all reaching a new stage of development. This enables them to perceive the relevance of each other's communication. For all of them, the process enables the teller to communicate his or her experience and to lead it on so that they are enabled to work out their own feelings and to make judgements which are based on the new and emerging sense of authority that storytelling gives.

The next episode of linked storytelling comes from Kevin, with encouragement from Beverley. Kevin and Beverley have reluctantly split from the other two so that they can explore different parts of the island. This is the only story in the book where there is a one-to-one situation rather than a group telling and as such it highlights the developing relationship between them and the fact that the situation of the storytelling episode is, at the very least, as important as the story told. Up until now, Beverley, who likes to be in control of every situation, has been unimpressed with Kevin. The new sense of companionship has come about because of Kevin's sympathetic handling of Beverley's fear of heights. His tact and diplomacy following her hysterical outburst of screaming and sobbing and her subsequent embarrassment after climbing down 'a piddling little cliff', coupled with his efforts to find a solution that would allow her to save face, led her to the idea that he 'wasn't all that bad really'. When they arrive back on the beach,

sodden with water from having waded through the sea, they sit back to back on a rock drying themselves in the sun and when Kevin tells her that the local people have lots of stories about seals she invites him to tell her one. There is a new sense of comradeship and 'all Beverley wanted to do for now was sit still on this rock and listen to Kevin talking and feeling the words running down her back. She didn't much care what he said.'¹⁵

According to Ross Chambers:

To tell a story is to exercise power ... and 'authorship' is cognate with 'authority'. But, in this instance as in all others, authority is not an absolute, something inherent in a specific individual or in that individual's discourse; it is relational, the result of an act of authorization on the part of those subject to the power, and hence something to be earned.¹⁶

Kevin has earned this authority. By his sympathetic response to Beverley's vertigo attack, she is now prepared to see him as someone who, like Benjamin's storyteller, may have interesting 'experiences' to share with her. Without this consent and encouragement the story would not be told. Alida Gersie says that: 'Each told story, therefore, articulates, in encoded or explicit form, the teller-listener's respective involvement with the dilemmas of their world. It simultaneously provides containment for their concerns.'¹⁷

Kevin's story, when he is finally persuaded to tell it despite his protestations that he can't tell stories, is a reversal of the seal wife legend; a legend that John Stephens identifies as dealing with initiative and power within marriage. However the children, who took part in Stephen's experiment by rewriting the ending, focussed more on 'the process of letting go of something which is an object of strong desire'.¹⁸ In Kevin's story, contrary to the standard version where the seal wife leaves husband and children to return to the sea, the merman leaves wife and children to live with his new family on dry land. On a rare visit to his old family he explains that 'because he had married an earth-woman he had lost his merman's tail and grown human legs. He said he only had his tail now between dusk and dawn, and during the day he had to live on the land and breathe the air, like humans.'¹⁹

'In the process of storytelling a perspective must be selected as well as presented',²⁰ and although Kevin says at the end of the story that he doesn't know where it came from, the perspective unwittingly chosen by him, whereby he looks at events from the merman's point of view rather than that of the family left behind, adds to his way of interpreting

what has happened in his life. When he begins to do this, Kevin realizes that the story isn't working out the way he wanted or expected it to and he protests that he can't tell it because he 'just can't make it come out right'. He is persuaded by Beverley to continue and the resultant re-telling of the seal legend increases his knowledge of an emotionally upsetting event in his life and allows him to reflect on the present position. The authority to tell his story has given him the power needed to decide how to work through the complexities of his parents' separation and it has also enabled him to work through the process of letting go for himself. It has allowed him to consider events and relationships in a new light and 'this newness in itself reinforces a recognition of the inevitability of change'.²¹ The fact that Beverley has shared this experience with him by listening makes her an active participant in this accomplishment and changes the way they relate to each other. On his part, his story has been given value by her reception of it, and on her side, she realizes that 'she had obviously completely underestimated this boy'.²² The shared experience of telling and listening has promoted a growth of trust between them. As Ross Chambers has said, 'to tell a story is an act, an event, one that has the power to produce change, and first and foremost to change the relationship between narrator and narratee'.²³

The next time a story is suggested there are no objections. Beverley has by now 'got over her inhibitions about stories'.²⁴ She is as happy as the others to listen to a story and to postpone worrying about the problem of what to do about Elizabeth, who has sprained her ankle and is unable to walk. This time Gerard is invited to tell and his face lights up with pleasure because it is not often that people bother to listen to his side of the story. Gerard is the youngest of the group and is described as 'a small, pale, underweight, asthmatic eleven-year-old whose ears stuck out and who wore glasses that looked too big for him'.²⁵ He is the child of a single mother and has already discovered that there are two sorts of people in the world, 'the ones who despised you because your mother wasn't married, and the ones who bent over backwards to show that they didn't disapprove one little bit, in fact they hadn't even noticed that you hadn't got a father, though now you came to mention it, right enough, there didn't seem to be an adult male in your household'.²⁶ His story tells of a sheltered young woman from a good family, who is herself in transition from childhood to adulthood when she becomes pregnant out of wedlock. This was seen as a terrible disgrace, 'as young girls without husbands were not supposed to have babies in that country and at that time'.²⁷ In a story that would be familiar to

everyone in Ireland a few years ago, it seemed that although the girl herself was 'happy enough' about the baby, she was given no choice. Her family wanted to keep the scandal hidden and so she was kept out of sight until the baby was born and could be taken away from her. Despite the fact that she married her sweetheart, the story concludes with the death of the young woman who, 'knowing ... that her child was alive and well, but living among the beasts of the stall, never had a day's happiness, and she died soon afterwards of a broken heart'.²⁸

When Elizabeth, speaking for all three of Gerard's listeners, declares that she doesn't like the ending and suggests that he change it, Gerard becomes unusually assertive and insists on maintaining the authority of the narrator because it is the lived experience of the teller which gives authority. Having being authorized to articulate his experience in story, he has reversed the situation whereby he is usually the weaker one, and he is now speaking from a place of strength and control. Not only has his story become an instrument of self-assertion, but it has also involved his listeners in a way that requires them to extend their way of thinking to take in different opinions, different life experiences and different assumptions; to be able to see a reality that may differ from their expectations. He is adamant that he cannot change the ending because 'it doesn't *work* like that. I made it up, but *that's* the way I made it up, with that ending. So that's the way it is. If you want to change the ending for yourself, well, I suppose you can, but then it's a different story.'²⁹ The ending is part of the whole narrative form and development and as such it helps determine the significance of the story. It also demands from the listeners that they are willing and able to explore other ideas, beliefs and experiences. Their desire for a cosy alternative ending that they feel more comfortable with would change the whole point of the story.

With a storm approaching and Elizabeth's sprained ankle posing a problem, there is a parallel with the children in Elizabeth's earlier story and that worries her a little. She has a notion that if you are not careful about how you tell it, 'you might get stuck inside a story',³⁰ a remark that underlines the importance of poetics. In a further reminder of Elizabeth's original story, Gerard tells them that he has seen a house on his way back to the beach that they hadn't noticed on their outward journey. "It's made of gingerbread, I suppose!" Elizabeth tried to inject scorn into her voice, but she was half afraid that Gerard was going to reply that now she mentioned it, yes, it was actually made of gingerbread.³¹ But this is a real house not a 'magic' one and their failure to see it before is easily explained. "It's at a funny

angle", Gerard explained, as he thought harder about the house. "Yes, that's it. And it's well hidden by trees. It wouldn't be visible from the other direction".³² Kevin, as the only one of the group who lives locally, has already guessed that the house probably belongs to the woman who lives alone on the island and who avoids all social contact with the people of Tranarone. Consequently, she is considered by the locals to be 'not the full shilling'. He is reluctant to go to the house for help though he can't say exactly why he is afraid of the mystery woman. However, in the face of being caught out in a rain storm with a patient who can't move, no lunch and no way of getting home, there isn't much choice and a decision is taken to throw themselves on the mercy of 'the witch, the madwoman whatever she was'.³³

By now it is evident that a change has come over Beverley. She has 'a sudden fit of democracy', waiting for everyone's agreement when they are deciding whether or not to go to the house for help. This is in marked contrast to the 'old Bossy-Boots Beverley' who had earlier been annoyed at anyone who disagreed with her: 'first Elizabeth and now that Kevin. Taking over *her* expedition on *her* island'.³⁴ She is so concerned and sympathetic when Gerard realizes that his beloved cat is missing that Elizabeth wonders 'What had come over her?' When she offers to come back and help Gerard look for Fat after she and Kevin have carried Elizabeth to the house, he too is surprised. 'He didn't know what to make of all this unexpected tenderness from Beverley but he was grateful for it all the same.'³⁵ Alida Gersie believes that:

stories told in a group generate both confluence and divergence. Groups thrive on the constructive exploration of difference. The largest possible tolerable variety is the material upon which democracy and well-functioning organisational or interest groups are built ... alternative understandings and interpretations grant group members ample opportunity to explore other ideas, beliefs and experiences.³⁶

Certainly, the stories that Beverley has listened to seem to be having a softening effect on the 'Miss High-an' Mighty' who had begun this expedition. She appears to be less self-centred, although, as we see when she tells her own story, the old challenging Beverley is still there. When the 'whole pantomime camel' of the four children, hot, sticky and tired, reach the house it is empty, but there are several clues that the occupant isn't very far away. There is a fresh sticky ring on the oil cloth cover on the kitchen table and a mug with tea in the bottom sitting in the sink. They wait nervously for their strange hostess to return.

The 'madwoman of Lady Island' turns out to be called Dympna. She seems a surprisingly ordinary woman, if a little eccentric, 'a stoutish woman in a beige raincoat tied round the middle with blue twine, and with a funny squashed-looking, battered brown velvet hat on her head'.³⁷ She doesn't seem at all surprised to see three strange children and one local boy whom she recognizes in her kitchen and produces a sort of nervous, hysterical laughter from them when she continues the fairy-tale theme by asking in a high-pitched, stagey voice: 'Who's been sitting in *my* chair?'

As soon as the kettle has boiled and the preparations made for tea, Dympna surprises the children by asking, 'Who's going first with the story?'³⁸ Suddenly Elizabeth remembers the sneeze on the beach that had come from none of the four children, she remembers a snort she had heard earlier and thought it had come from a sheep, she also remembers the feeling she has had all day of someone watching them. It seems that Dympna has been following them around and listening to their stories and now she wants to hear more. As the only one of the children who has not yet told a story, Beverley volunteers to be next. Although, first she has to impose her authority on the irrepressible Dympna, who doesn't think Beverley's opening description of a beautiful young girl with long, slim legs and long golden hair quite fits the bill. Dympna thinks that if Beverley is telling her *own* story 'stumpy little legs and wiry black hair' would be a more accurate description.

However, as soon as she begins her story Beverley feels in charge of things again. The familiar fairy-tale motifs of a beautiful girl imprisoned in a dense forest leads into a story where a fairy predicted at the girl's birth that her son would one day slay her father. In the context of the story, it does not take much imagination to translate this into a prediction that she will one day bear a son who will have little in common with her patriarchal father and who will effectively slay him by bringing an end to his power. In an effort to prevent this, the girl's father hides her away in a dense forest and sets an impossible task for any prospective husband who might be brave enough to enter the forest. There are obvious similarities with the story of 'Sleeping Beauty' where, despite all attempts to prevent the sexual awakening of the child, it takes place anyway. In this case, despite her father's attempts to retain patriarchal power, feminism prevails. One day a handsome young prince comes along who manages against all the odds to accomplish the task and carry the princess off to his own kingdom.

This is where the story usually ends happily ever after, but Beverley has realised that this is *her* story and it is possible to change the

ending. The princess in Beverley's story asks to be taken to 'a school for young ladies, or to a convent perhaps, or to a family where there is a mother who longs for a daughter as I have longed all my life for a mother'.³⁹ She is looking for a female institution or role model that she can relate to. It is generally a characteristic of fairy tales that once the damsel in distress is freed from her captivity she marries her knight in shining armour and they live happily ever after. This princess has other ideas. When the prince begins to talk about preparations for the wedding, she asks innocently, 'Is somebody getting married?'⁴⁰ Once he has got over the shock of having his proposal refused and listened to her reasoned argument that she had not been consulted and that whatever contract he had with her father had nothing to do with her, the prince 'knew he had met his match for sure in this one. She was as clever as he, and as quick witted, and more than ever he desired to marry her. But he saw that this princess was not to be won by trickery, nor by gallantry, nor through contractual arrangements made with her father.'⁴¹In the end, he abides by her wishes, agrees to take her to his mother's house where she may live as long as she wishes without any more trouble from him and there the story ends.

The degree of additions and changes suggested by the other children is an indication of their engagement with the stories. Elizabeth is not happy with the abrupt ending of Beverley's story. She wants to hear more. She wants to have the loose ends tied up, but the only concession Beverley makes to Elizabeth's demand to know, 'But did she marry him or not?', was the reply: 'Perhaps. Perhaps not ... Maybe she will one day.'⁴² She invites Elizabeth to add her own ending if she wishes but is not persuaded to change hers. Both Beverley's and Kevin's stories are about initiative and power within marriage. Having been enabled to impose their own predicaments and experiences onto the story, each has gained additional understanding of the other side and so the prospect of achieving harmony with a person of the other sex is increased.

The final story is told by Dympna. In the time that has elapsed since Beverley's story the children have been alarmed by Dympna's strange wailing, Kevin has rescued Gerard's cat despite his own fear of thunder, and Dympna has somehow miraculously cured Elizabeth's ankle. After all this activity they are having the farewell banquet suggested and presided over by Dympna, when Gerard invites her to tell *her* story. Dympna's story is reminiscent of Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Ugly Duckling' - a duckling who didn't like the water and who ran away to escape the derision of the other ducks. However, unlike the

original story, the duckling in Dympna's story doesn't turn out to be a different breed and grow into a beautiful swan. It remains a duck who is fated to be 'unducklike' and eventually takes refuge in a cement mixer. The resulting 'duckling-shaped statue' sits in the garden of the building worker who found her and although it can sometimes be a lonely life, she is reasonably content to be left in peace. Gerard explains to the others:

Well, that's really Dympna, you see. She's different, she's peculiar, she doesn't do the sort of things everyone else does and like the things other people like. She's like the duckling, and like the duckling, she ran away, looking for somewhere new to live, where she would be able to be different in peace ... she needed us to understand how threatened she felt, how much she needed to be protected, and so she told us the story, like a sort of code so we'd understand.⁴³

Before the storytelling 'pilgrimage' began the group members had not realized that others are also exposed each to their own particular pressures. When they began to tell, each story was born out of feelings that were not yet understood by the tellers themselves. Both Beverley and Kevin are surprised by their own stories and profess to have no idea where they have come from. And although they may have sensed the presence of a known referent behind each other's stories, this was not acknowledged until Gerard reminds them of what Dympna had said: 'When you tell a story, it's your story. Your telling it makes it yours. And every time you tell a story, you're telling people something about yourself.'⁴⁴

The return journey to Tranarone brings us back to the story that started the ball rolling. Like Hansel and Gretel, the children are unable to return home after their adventures the same way that they came because they have missed the low tide which would have enabled them to walk back. In 'Hansel and Gretel' the children are helped by a duck who carries them safely across the water. In this case the children are helped by Dympna who lets them borrow her currach and who seems to personify the original kindly white duck who returned Hansel and Gretel to safety. Bettelheim, in *The Uses of Enchantment*, likens this to a new stage of development for Hansel and Gretel: 'The children do not encounter any expanse of water on their way in. Having to cross one on their return symbolises a transition, and a new beginning on a higher level of existence (as in baptism).'⁴⁵ This is also true of the children in Parkinson's story who seem to have reached a new beginning in their level of understanding of themselves and of others.

At the end of the book, in keeping with the fairy-tale world of their stories, the children are still wondering about the seemingly magical cure of Elizabeth's ankle with an ordinary bottle of pink baby lotion. The logical Beverley insists that it 'can't have been the Johnson's Baby Lotion' and 'she couldn't, simply couldn't, accept that it had been a miracle'.⁴⁶ Parkinson, however, like a good storyteller, leaves her audience wondering with Gerard's question: "And what about my asthma? ... Has anyone noticed that I haven't had a single attack in three weeks, since the day on the island, in fact?" The others looked at Gerard in amazement. They hadn't noticed, but now that he said it, of course he was right.⁴⁷

If we do as Ross Chambers suggests, which is 'not simply to read texts in situation (which is inevitable) but also to read, in the texts, the situation that they *produce* as giving them their "point"',⁴⁸ then we will see that by the end of the novel, although nothing in the circumstances of the children has changed, inner attitudes have changed. In some cases change can mean a reinforced feeling, such as when Beverley's resolve is strengthened by her realization that she has control over the ending of her own story, although, as a listener, she has now also learnt how to negotiate different opinions or different life experiences. Change can also produce an alternative, as when Kevin learns to see things from his father's point of view. There is in each case, as Chambers puts it, 'a transformation *that itself has narrative structure*'.⁴⁹ Using the method of traditional fairy tales, they have developed a way of articulating their perceptions and a capacity to deal with emotional exploration and contradictory feelings. In other words, the fact that they have learned to tell and to listen means that they need not, as Elizabeth feared they might, get 'stuck inside a story'.

In *The Moon King*, Ricky is a young boy who is also crossing the threshold into the wider world, albeit in different circumstances. The children in *Four Kids*, *Three Cats*, *Two Cows*, *One Witch (maybe)*, once they had an interested and sympathetic audience, had no great difficulty in sharing their story with others. In *The Moon King*, Ricky comes from a violent home and is being placed in the care of foster parents. His inarticulacy and inability to tell his story is a symptom of the abuse he has suffered.

The subjection of Ricky by his circumstances is registered by the fact that he has difficulty in speaking at all, but especially by the fact that he cannot express subjective experience or perceptions of his own situation. This is evident from two exchanges which take place between himself and Rosheen, one of the children in his new foster home. The

first of these exchanges takes place when Rosheen shows him his new room:

He turned to Rosheen, his eyes shining. 'Yours?' he said, in a muffled tone, barely managing to get the word out.
It was the first word she had ever heard him utter.
'No, yours', she said gently.
'Yes', he nodded, 'yours.'...
'No', giggled Rosheen, 'not mine, yours.'
'Yours', Ricky agreed and smiled at her.⁵⁰

The second exchange takes place in the attic room where Rosheen finds Ricky asleep in the moon chair:

'You are the moon king, Ricky', she said again. 'You are the moon king.'
'You - are - the - moon - king', Ricky said carefully after her.
'No, no, Ricky, you always get that wrong. I can't be the moon king, I'm a girl. I can be a queen, but not a king. *You* are the moon king.'
'You are the moon king', Ricky repeated.
'No, no, oh Ricky, can't you get this right? Listen. Say it after me: I am the moon-king.'
'I?' said Ricky.
'Yes, yes, 'I', that's right', said Rosheen. 'I am the moon king.'
'You are the moon king!' said Ricky again. 'You are the moon king!'⁵¹

This absence of language renders him unable to share his story with others and thus unable to give shape and purpose to his individual subjectivity and so his stories are constructed in the silence of his mind. Gersie says that there may be many reasons why someone might be unable or unwilling to speak about their own experiences. One reason may be that, 'the ability to give voice to multitudinous perception is halted by the heart's commitment to some form of anonymity. In the inner world of people in this predicament, silence feels, and may well be, safer than speech.'⁵² Ricky knew that his mam worried about him annoying Ed because then Ed hit him and this caused his mother to cry. 'Ricky didn't know which was worse, being hit or hearing his mam cry.'⁵³ The feeling that telling may be dangerous and that his story would not be received sympathetically by the more powerful Ed reduces him to a silence generated by the unwillingness or inability to tell. In order to survive he constructs first the Spiderboy image which

helps him interpret events in his life, and then the storied image of the moon king which gives him the sense of being valued that he so passionately desires.

When the story opens Ricky is on his way to meet his new foster family accompanied by a well-meaning but remote social worker. In traditional stories, Ricky would fit into the type of character which Propp in *The Morphology of the Folktale* calls the victim hero. Gersie says that victim heroes are ambivalent about leaving their home even when they have been abused there, partly because the decision to leave was not their own. 'Instead of being relieved, they endlessly ponder what has gone wrong and how they are not even acceptable to bad people in a bad place.'⁵⁴ As he stands nervously outside the tall, sloping house waiting for some unknown person to answer the doorbell the thoughts running through Ricky's mind are contradictory. 'Don't like change. Want go home. No. Don't want. What then?'⁵⁵ He watches a spider on the wall. 'Want hide. Look at wall. Wall friendly. White, with cracks. Spider scuts out one crack, into another crack. All legs, spiders. Shoulders hunched. Busy, busy, busy.'⁵⁶ Looking at the spider, Ricky is envious and wishes he too had a crack to scuttle into. The character of 'Spiderboy' is thus created in Ricky's mind by the incident and he begins to use this figurehead as a way of both organizing the structure of events in his life and organizing the telling of them. In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner states that: 'Discourse must make it possible for the reader to "write" his own virtual text.'⁵⁷ He goes on to list three features of discourse which he considers to be crucial in this process: a background in terms of which the stories may be interpreted, the depiction of reality through the eye of the story's protagonist, and multiple codes of meaning which allow for the creation of possibilities rather than certainties. The background in terms of which Ricky's stream of consciousness or 'stories' can be interpreted is provided by the spider who runs in and out of the cracks on the wall. The spider then conjures up the character of Spiderboy, who transforms the collection of impressions which make up Ricky's unworded narrative into a story, the telling of which helps to make his experiences comprehensible to himself. It also provides a stance to take towards that story. As the artifice of spiderboy distances him from his difficulties, it allows him sufficient space to grasp the meaning of it all and creates a fictional character who can deal with the real-life feelings he is experiencing.

Even though the self is disguised, Ricky is still telling his own story. His thoughts as Spiderboy are written in a different typeface which

serves to emphasize not only the indirect nature of his voice, but also how the goings-on in his mind are isolated from the rest of the world. Bettelheim says that the only way a child can hope to get a hold over internal pressures is to externalize them. In the same manner as the characters of traditional fairy tales, Spiderboy offers a figure onto which Ricky can externalize what is going on in his mind and although he is as powerless as Ricky in many ways, Spiderboy can spin webs and scuttle into cracks when he sees trouble coming. Bettelheim goes on to explain that: 'when he experiences the emotional need to do so, the child ... may split himself into two people who, he wishes to believe, have nothing in common with each other ... the child externalises and projects onto a "somebody" all the bad things which are too scary to be recognised as part of oneself.'⁵⁸ As well as externalizing scary personality traits on to some other character, this same method can be used to deal with seemingly insurmountable problems. In this case, all the worrying events of Ricky's life are happening to Spiderboy, not to Ricky, and although he is still unable to share his experiences with others by storytelling, he has at least discovered a story *making* capacity; he has become a silent storyteller. This suffices for Mammy Kelly, her husband Tomo and the other children, especially Rosheen, all of whom, in the absence of spoken words, interpret Ricky's smiles, his paintings and his efforts to help with the family chores as a positive sign of his developing relationship with his foster family.

The one exception is Helen who doesn't want him to settle in. She is jealous and goes out of her way to get him into trouble and generally make life difficult for him. 'When we are upset, shocked or in pain, we become preoccupied with our inner world. This inner story is insufficiently checked to see that it actually matches the outer circumstances.'⁵⁹ This is precisely what happens when Helen tells Ricky that the social worker is coming to take him away. Despite Rosheen's assurances that Helen is just jealous and making the story up, and Fergal's derisive dismissal of the idea of Helen having any influence with the social worker, Ricky believes that he will be sent back to the violent Ed and so he runs away. He 'didn't have a clear idea any more what it was that he was afraid of, but his instinct was to run and run and run'.⁶⁰ Part of the reason for Ricky's fear is the thought that perhaps he is bad. Perhaps that is why Ed hits him and his mother doesn't make him stop. 'She must believe him if she went on letting him hit Ricky so often. She must think he needed to be beaten. Maybe he *was* a bad boy. Ed thought so. Helen thought so.'⁶¹ In spite of Mammy Kelly and Tomo's efforts to make him feel secure and welcome, the memory of

potential violence and the absence of warmth and safety are ingrained in him and he doesn't understand what is happening. It is only when he is cold, wet and scared and wants to find a safe sleeping place for the night that he realizes that the place he has run away from was 'the only place where most people were nice to him, where they let him do his stuff and they didn't shout or make a fuss or tell him he was bad'.⁶² His decision to return, even though he is still worried about the 'lipstick woman' coming to take him away, is based on the hope that maybe Mammy Kelly wouldn't let her, or Tomo would tell her to leave him be. It would seem that, due to the dynamics of his relationship with his foster parents and the other children, Ricky is learning 'to re-animate the fictions of [his] inner world with more benign possibilities and kindlier creatures'.⁶³ Their acceptance of his silent state, encouragement of interactive behaviour and appreciation for his contribution to family life have given him the ability to make the right decision as to what the best course of action might be.

In traditional fairy tales when the hero sets out on his course of action a magical agent is needed. This object may be located in another kingdom; it may be at the top of a mountain or the bottom of a lake. Led by Rosheen, Ricky finds his particular magical aid at the top of the dark, steep stairs leading to the attic. Usually, before he receives the magical aid the hero is tested. Ricky's initial fear of climbing the stairs, and his subsequent overcoming of this fear with Rosheen's help, eventually leads him to the attic room which contains the moon chair. 'Ricky gasped. He had never seen anything as magical as the moon chair.'⁶⁴ For Ricky, the magic is contained in the chair's power to transport him to another place where he can experience things differently; where his imagination can soar:

Oh Froggo, look! It's great here, I think we must be on the moon. It's all shiny, look it's bright and light, there's oh! there's a rainbow, only it's not a rainbow, it's filling the whole sky, the whole sky is a rainbow, it's like a roof, like a roof made of rainbow, all glittering with stars. A rainbow with stars! And, hey! I'm not walking under the rainbow, I'm flying, I'm gliding, I'm floating. Wheee! It's oh, it's like, what is it like, Froggo? I don't know, do you? It's like sailing, only it's in the air, it's air-sailing! It's like being a bird.⁶⁵

He had been feeling rejected and longing for some sense of selfhood and the moon chair allows a possible world where he can compensate in fantasy. It provides him with a cathartic power. According to

Bettelheim: 'Every child at some time wishes that he were a prince or a princess – and at times, in his unconscious the child believes he is one, only temporarily degraded by circumstances. There are so many kings and queens in fairy tales because their rank signifies absolute power.'⁶⁶ When he is sitting in the moon chair Ricky becomes the moon king.

Every story needs both a teller and a listener because its meaning exists dialectically. Parallel with Ricky's inability to tell is Helen's inability or unwillingness to listen, which could be said to be due to a failure of narrative imagination. She doesn't like sharing her parents with so many other children and may feel that the content of other people's stories might challenge her position in the family. Whatever the reason, her refusal to listen means that she never allows herself to think herself into the place of the other person and consequently she is lacking in sympathetic imagination. Richard Kearney explains that: 'If we possess narrative sympathy – enabling us to see the world from the other's point of view – we cannot kill. If we do not, we cannot love.'⁶⁷

It is Rosheen who sees that Helen's treatment of Ricky is a matter for moral reflection and change. She explains to her what it means to 'do the friendly thing': 'it's about thinking about the other person's point of view sometimes, instead of always about yourself. It's about noticing when someone is hurt, instead of just looking for notice yourself all the time.'⁶⁸ In other words, it is about listening to the other person's narrative and being able to use your imagination to empathize with them. Kearney illustrates his argument by quoting a passage from one of J.M. Coetzee's characters, Elizabeth Costello. The passage concludes by saying:

There are people who have the capacity to imagine themselves as someone else, there are people who have no such capacity, and there are people who have the capacity and choose not to exercise it ... there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination.⁶⁹

Helen is one of those who has the capacity and chooses not to use it. She is initially unrepentant and professes that she doesn't 'get it' but Rosheen doesn't allow her to use this as an excuse. She tells her: 'You can *decide* to get it, Helen.'⁷⁰ The point is that, hand in hand with the importance of imagination, is that of ethical sensitivity. The connection can be seen when Helen decides to behave differently in future and her new-found sense of narrative sympathy leads her to suggest that going to the moon-chair room might 'inspire' them about where Ricky is.

Her personal triumph comes when she and Rosheen do indeed find Ricky there sitting in the moon-chair:

'It's him', whispered Rosheen excitedly. 'Oh, you were right, Helen.'

Helen smiled in the darkness. She hadn't really been right. She hadn't expected they would actually *find* Ricky. But she had been sort of right. It *had* been her idea to come up here.⁷¹

She has been right because her idea and her action is connected to her empathy with Ricky, proving that storytelling is an intersubjective thing and that the dynamics of narrative exchange make possible 'the ethical sharing of a common world with others'.⁷²

All fairy stories must offer consolation and have a happy ending. For Ricky, the knowledge that he will never again be deserted is the ultimate consolation. We seem to have the appropriate fairy-tale ending when Rosheen and a repentant Helen find Ricky asleep in the moon chair and realize that he has come home. When Helen admits that she lied about the social worker coming to take Ricky away, she tells him: 'I just made it up. She wouldn't take you away from here. Mam and Tomo are the best foster parents in the county. Everyone knows that. They never take people away from here, unless they're ready to go home. Honest to God, Ricky, cross my heart and hope to die.'⁷³ When Rosheen once again says, 'You are the moon king, Ricky', this time Ricky's small piping voice manages to answer: 'I - am - the moon king', and then more loudly 'I am the *moon* king', and finally with conviction, 'I *am* the moon king.'⁷⁴ It seems that Ricky's narrative ability has been jolted into action. He has found his voice because he has found sympathetic and willing listeners, and, as 'the effect of a tale rests not only with its content, but ... abides above all within the relationship between teller and listener',⁷⁵ we may confidently assume that Ricky will live happily ever after.

NOTES

1. Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana/Collins, 1982 [1970]), p.87.
2. Alida Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, 1997), p.2.
3. Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', pp.83-109.
4. Ross Chambers, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p.8.
5. *Ibid.*, p.50.
6. Siobhán Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1997), pp.99-100.

7. Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p.102.
8. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.40.
9. Benjamin, 'The Storyteller', p.83.
10. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Penguin, 1991 [1976]), p.94.
11. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.45.
12. *Ibid.*, p.47.
13. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.183.
14. Michael Hanne, *The Power of The Story* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1994), p.15.
15. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.81.
16. Chambers, *Story and Situation*, p.50.
17. Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.8.
18. John Stephens, *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (London: Longman, 1992), p.60.
19. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.88.
20. Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.10.
21. *Ibid.*, p.18.
22. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.90.
23. Chambers, *Story and Situation*, p.74.
24. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.100.
25. *Ibid.*, p.20.
26. *Ibid.*, p.19.
27. *Ibid.*, p.104.
28. *Ibid.*, p.106.
29. *Ibid.*, p.108.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, p.110.
32. *Ibid.*
33. *Ibid.*, p.123.
34. *Ibid.*, p.57.
35. *Ibid.*, p.115.
36. Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.113.
37. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, p.127.
38. *Ibid.*, p.139.
39. *Ibid.*, p.140.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, p.141.
42. *Ibid.*, p.142.
43. *Ibid.*, pp.189-90.
44. *Ibid.*, p.181.
45. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.164.
46. Parkinson, *Four Kids, Three Cats, Two Cows, One Witch (maybe)*, pp.186-7.
47. *Ibid.*, p.187.
48. Chambers, *Story and Situation*, p.4.
49. *Ibid.*, p.8.
50. Siobhán Parkinson, *The Moon King* (Dublin: O'Brien Press, 1999), p.43.
51. *Ibid.*, p.76.
52. Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.30.
53. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.141.
54. Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.156.
55. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.15.
56. *Ibid.*, p.10.
57. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), p.25.
58. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.69-70.
59. J. Wigran, 'Narrative Completion in the Treatment of Trauma' quoted in Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.33.
60. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.139.
61. *Ibid.*, p.94.
62. *Ibid.*, p.165.
63. Gersie, *Reflections on Therapeutic Storymaking*, p.167.

64. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.66.
65. *Ibid.*, p.72.
66. Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, p.205.
67. Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.140.
68. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.151.
69. J.M. Coetzee, *The Lives of Animals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), quoted in Kearney, *On Stories*, p.140.
70. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.152.
71. *Ibid.*, p.170.
72. Kearney, *On Stories*, p.150.
73. Parkinson, *The Moon King*, p.172.
74. *Ibid.*, p.173.
75. Alida Gersie and Nancy King, *Storymaking in Education and Therapy* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers Ltd, 1990), p.30.