

# *The Place of Literature in an Increasingly Virtual World*

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**Publishing Research  
Quarterly**

ISSN 1053-8801  
Volume 27  
Number 2

Pub Res Q (2011) 27:113-125  
DOI 10.1007/  
s12109-011-9215-6



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## The Place of Literature in an Increasingly Virtual World

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Published online: 26 April 2011  
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**Abstract** The reading of literature fulfils a vital role in any educated and civilised nation. The book is being transformed, as digitisation becomes an increasing reality, however, literature will continue to retain a key place as a critical social and cultural artefact. Story, in whatever form, will continue to provide experiences of joy, amusement, fear, hope, betrayal, curiosity, love, forgiveness and sadness. Literature can do so much more than simply moving and entertaining us. It can impart knowledge, stimulate the imagination and can teach us about language, our world and our relationship to it. It can help us to relate to and understand one another, and can act both as a mortar to build rich personal and textual histories, and a bridge between our lives and the lives of others. As well, literature can enrich our lives, helping us to encounter ‘other worlds’, languages and experiences that are not within our lived experience. Finally, literature can transform us as language users, learners and people and present us with a different view of the world and our place in it. But as digitisation and new forms of communication change, will how we read and how we access and share books with one another also change? Finally, how might we sustain libraries and other spaces that readers frequent as ‘real’ communities where lovers of books dwell?

**Keywords** Literature · Narrative · Books

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This article is based on a presentation titled ‘The Power of Story: How Literature Can Teach, Enrich and Transform’, presented to the 8th International Conference on the Book, St Gallen, Switzerland, 6–8 November, 2010. It was published in an earlier form in *International Journal of the Book*, Vol. 8, pp. 1–11.

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## An Introduction

D.W. Harding [16, p. 257] suggested that “reading, like daydreaming and gossiping is a means to offer or be offered symbolic representations of life”.

The folly of extreme deconstructive postmodernism<sup>1</sup> is to argue that all texts are equal, that the TV advertisement, graffiti, the bumper sticker, the poem, a Twitter ‘tweet’, blog posts, a play and the newspaper editorial are all texts that can have equal value. To relegate literature to the status of one possible means to know, communicate and make meaning would be a fundamental mistake for any civilised society.

We know that words, images and sound are different, and each has value and significance. But in this article I will argue that words have a special place in learning and communication. I want to consider the unique role that the reading of literature fulfils. Reading literature offers the opportunity to grasp meanings in narrative form that are important. The words of other people, whether in spoken and written form, allow us to reflect on the consequences and possibilities of their experiences. Just as I am affected by human tragedy in my world, I am also affected by the tragedy of characters in books. Similarly, words and the narratives of literature communicate or signify joy, amusement, fear, curiosity, love and sadness. For some fortunate children living protected and safe lives, books can also provide their first experience of hatred, death, disease, isolation, war, divorce and so on. These aspects of the human condition need to be understood, even by children, but they do not necessarily need to be experienced firsthand. Books allow us to reflect on these and other experiences, and hence come to a greater understanding of our world and ourselves. Literature also fulfils another vital social function as well. As we share an experience of literature, it can act both as mortar to build rich personal and textual histories, and can act as bridges between our lives and the lives of others [5].

My central message in this article is that literature is important irrespective of the form in which it is experienced. Technology and new media might impact on access to books, the role of libraries, and the way we acquire literature, but its importance should not be diminished by these developments. It cannot be replaced easily. In our excitement concerning the possibilities of digital literacy, we might just forget about the importance of narrative as a vehicle for learning about written language and the shaping of human culture and character.

There are four points that I would like to make in this article:

- The storybook still has an undiminished role to play in early literacy development even in the age of digital literacy.

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<sup>1</sup> Deconstructive postmodernism shifts the focus from the author and the text to the reader and his or her context. It suggests that we do not go to a text to gain meaning, but rather to make meaning, which is seen as relative. Such a view of reading locates meaning primarily in the knower and reflects a view of epistemology that sees truth as relative. While supporters of deconstructive postmodernism focus on the individual reader and writer rather than the text, they also see others as influencing our meanings. Stanley Fish [11] in his book *‘Is there a text in this class?’* suggests that it is ‘... the interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings and are responsible for the emergence of formal features’.

- Literature has a value well beyond its important utilitarian function as an excellent vehicle for the learning of literacy.
- Reading is acquired in the context of relationships with other significant people.
- Literature has the power to teach, enrich and transform.

### **The Storybook Still has an Undiminished Role to Play in Early Literacy Development Even in the Age of Digital Literacy**

There is emerging evidence to suggest that children today are experiencing literacy in new and more varied forms. Even the toddler potentially ‘reads’ a myriad of pictures, images, words and sounds as they observe others using auto tellers, writing letters (although rarely these days), collecting faxes, reading messages on cell phones, updating Facebook and playing video games. Increasingly, children observe members of their families purchasing products via computer, answering email, interacting with their televisions, sending SMS messages, in some cases using a digital reader, and downloading images, recipes and other documents from the Internet in multiple rooms in the house, office and wider community.<sup>2</sup>

In the contemporary literacy world there appears to be a greater interaction between multiple sign systems, particularly print, sound, image, and physical context (note the use of video phones, Skype and so on). We need to know far more about how changing literacy forms impact on opportunities for multi-modal experiences of meaning making. Cope and Kalantzis [9] define multi-modal forms as those that involve the combined use of other forms of meaning making (linguistic, visual, audio, gestural and spatial). Marsh [21] uses the term “communicative practices” to embrace the enhanced range of multimodal meaning making events in which children engage.

Stein and Slonimnsky [30] found that within three South African families that literacy was fundamentally multimodal, drawing on the representational resources available to them. Similarly, work by Li [19] has demonstrated that in bilingual families this richness is even more complex, with first and second language practices adding to the richness of multimodal encounters with texts of all kinds. Souto-Manning and Dice [29] have also suggested that there is a stronger link between parental literacy practices and children’s literacy practices, and that this extends well beyond story reading and homework, to include “...storytelling, rapping, shopping, cooking, participating in religious rites, dancing, acting, drawing...” and so on.

An area of intense interest in recent times is how the internet affects literacy. Increasingly literacy users access the resources of the internet in order to research issues of many kinds. No longer do they require shelves of encyclopaedias. Instead

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<sup>2</sup> There is an important discussion to be had about the way electronic delivery of literacy might change the reading process. As well, the changing nature of communication, the increasing prevalence of the use of video and image to communicate information and narrative the impact of social media might well have an impact on the experience of literature for many readers. I have discussed some of these issues on my blog ‘*Literacy, Families & Learning*’ at [www.trevorcairney.blogspot.com](http://www.trevorcairney.blogspot.com).

they ‘surf the net’ to read print, interpret diagrams, draw, talk, listen, write etc. as part of the one learning activity. University libraries are visited in person much less but can now be visited in virtual form 24 hours per day. So too bookshops are struggling to survive as readers purchase more books online. As our world increasingly relies on technology for information sharing, communication and learning this will be even more marked. Even the way television presents itself has changed, with image and text being integrated in different ways (some would say more like books, newspapers etc.). There is also increased interest in the place and use of film, video games and so on.

Not surprisingly literacy educators when faced with the changing terrain of literacy have been re-working their definitions of what literacy is. The New London Group has even challenged the use of the word “literacy” and suggested that the use of this singular term means that literacy “remains centred on language only, and usually on a singular national form of language at that, being conceived as a stable system based on rules such as mastering sound-letter correspondence...Such a view of language must characteristically translate into a more or less authoritarian kind of pedagogy” [9, p. 5].

While not wanting to deny that literacy has changed, the impact of such changes on the early literacy experiences of children is less clear, as is our understanding of what other pathways will be effective for young literacy learners. Hence, in this Internet age where we are urged to embrace the worldwide web as a rich virtual world to explore and use to shape our knowledge, we must not forget that literature represents a vital first resource for early literacy learning and a foundational part of human literacy experience. In recognising the substantial opportunities of the Web, we must not overlook the power that literature has to shape children’s early literacy experiences. The Internet, which is largely a means to access expository texts, videos, music, image and engage in commerce (including buying and downloading books), does not suddenly make the storybook obsolete. It does offer new ways to read and receive literature via digital readers like the Kindle and iPads, but literature is a small part of what the Internet offers. Even if the web offered access to all of the world’s literature (and it offers only limited access to it), I doubt that we would still see the printed book become obsolete [7]. There seems strong evidence to suggest that children’s literature will be one of the most resistant text forms holding out against increasing digitisation of books.<sup>3</sup>

There is still a convenience in paper and opportunities for control of print not offered by the web, but as electronic readers increase in quality and reduce in size, there will be increased use of them even by very young children who will be captivated by the interactive use of sound, image, word and even video in association with text. But literature will survive in paper form. J.K. Rowling is one of the world’s richest women as a result of ‘children’s’ books. We have witnessed adults and children queuing to buy every new book in the Harry Potter series for hours. Interestingly, what we also see with Rowling’s Harry Potter books is the complementary operation of other media to stimulate interest in literature.

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<sup>3</sup> I discuss this issue and review children’s literature delivered via iPad and iPhone on my blog at [www.trevorairney.blogspot.com](http://www.trevorairney.blogspot.com).

The relationship between the films and the books has been a vital driver of the popularity of the books themselves. Indeed, a lot of the wealth that JK Rowling has gained is due to media advertising, the film and DVD versions etc., but the driver has been her books in paper form. This could change, but the verdict is out on how completely electronic forms will make inroads.

I watch 6 and 7 year olds reading a 760-page book and I marvel at the power of literature; a story delivered via ink on paper the same way it has been for centuries (and written on paper by J.K. Rowling in this instance ‘longhand’!). And yet, we know that new media are also having an impact on our lives. One thing is clear, while the form in which literature might be encountered will undoubtedly change, there is a power in a story that cannot simply be replicated. Literature explores the endless richness of the human condition and cannot easily be replicated on the web, particularly when it is removed from the context of close human relationships. The latter is a point on which I will now elaborate.

### **Literature has a Value Well Beyond its Important Function as Vehicle for the Learning of Literacy**

There is little doubt that literature has played an important role in the shaping of human existence for centuries. Storytelling has done this for even longer. Story provides a means not only to understand the human condition but also to re-create ourselves [2, 18, 24, 26].

Bruner [1] suggests that while there are two modes of thought, the paradigmatic and narrative, they are complementary ways to view reality. A well formed argument (the paradigmatic) and a well told story (narrative) can both be used to convince others of something. The paradigmatic seeks to convince of truth through logical argument, while the narrative seeks to enrich life, and to communicate timeless truths about the human condition through fictional experiences that are nonetheless reflective of the reality of life. Each provides a distinctive way of ordering experience and of constructing reality. Bruner suggests that people learn best when both modes are used.

Similarly, Rosenblatt [27] describes stances for the reader that can range from the objective and detached reading of a text for a narrow purpose (efferent reading) to the more subjective personal reading of a text when we bring our knowledge and experiences to bear on a text as an insider (aesthetic reading). The subjective experience of the literary text is a vital part of literacy experience. Narrative is the substance of life; we experience much of reality through the power of story. We live our daily lives through narrative [18].

Literature also brings with it knowledge and cultural value that is important for the building of community, shared values and social history. But of course, many have rightly argued that texts have the power to alienate, suppress and coerce. The New London Group [9] argues that literacy can be a tool of oppression (one that empowers some and disempowers others) and as a result that we should seek more equitable tools for learning, communication etc. While not denying that the ‘canon’ of literature (for example) acted in the past to silence the voices of women and

minorities, this is not an excuse for ignoring or neglecting literature.<sup>4</sup> Rather, our understanding of how texts can disempower should motivate us to examine how we can ensure that our children grow up as critical readers.<sup>5</sup>

### Reading is Acquired in the Context of Relationships with Other Significant People

Linguists and psychologists have demonstrated in recent decades, that meaning is constructed within social contexts [13, 14] and similarly, that learning is dependent upon social relationships [28]. Snow examined the language interactions of parents and children in the preschool years, and found development was facilitated in a number of ways. First, adults often continued or elaborated topics that the child introduced. Second, they reduced the uncertainty in the language task by structuring the dialogue. Third, they insisted that their children complete language tasks (e.g. answer the question) if they thought they knew the answer. Similarly, research conducted with one of my students in the 1980s into the social construction of classroom literacy experiences [8], illustrates just how deeply embedded early literacy experiences are in the social relationships that they experience at home and school.

The playground in Susan Langbien's Kindergarten was often the setting for much child initiated drama and dramatic play. Little birds looked for their mothers (from *Are you my mother?* Eastman [10]). A group of children became the three Billy Goats Gruff and the Troll, and used a balance beam as their bridge. Another group played 'house' and whenever Genevieve set off for the shops she reminded herself *Don't forget the Bacon* [17]. Literature was part of the fabric that bound this small community of learners together.

Many researchers have demonstrated that literacy is a social practice that has many specific manifestations [5, 12, 20, 31]. It is situated in sociocultural contexts defined by members of a group through their actions with, through and about language [1]. One of the consequences of accepting such a sociocultural view of learning and literacy is that it shifts our attention "from a view of individual learners to a view of learning as participation in a community of practice" [23]. Our interest is not simply how individual children learn, but also why and how people learn through their participation in the practices that define specific groups and communities, how communities organise their resources, and how participation in the culture shapes identity.

Research on everyday literacy demonstrates that specific literacy practices, views of literacy and what it means to be literate, are created in varied contexts such as

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<sup>4</sup> A topic worthy of exploration is the relative valuing of textual forms. With the rightful questioning of how texts can disempower and privilege particular voices we cannot ignore the question of what is culturally valuable. I would argue that there is little justification for arguing that the latest Coca Cola advertisement has equal cultural value to a Shakespearean play.

<sup>5</sup> A full discussion of critical reading is beyond the scope of this article. For a more detailed discussion of critical literacy the book *Critical Literacy: Politics, praxis and the postmodern* by Lankshear, McLaren and Greene (1993) provides a useful introduction.

workplaces, clubs, classrooms and even families. As Hannon [15] points out, “The family’s literacy values and practices will shape the course of the child’s literacy development in terms of the opportunities, recognition, interaction and models available to them” (p. 104). That is, families’ shared ways of participating in literate behaviour may be defined as the opportunities for literacy learning that family members have through the provision of resources and experiences, the recognition and valuing of members achievements, the interactions surrounding literacy events, and the models of literacy demonstrated by family members [15]. This again raises the issue of the relevance of literature for all families. Could it be argued that picture books are not the only pathway to literacy and that families might well choose other modes of meaning making more closely aligned to their cultural practices? The short answer is yes but the potential to encounter literacy via computers, iPhones, video games and so on, would seem to have some limitations. As well, we know far less about other pathways and further research is required before blindly suggesting that all pathways to literacy are equally effective and valid. This is particularly the case for beginning reading where the picture book is still the most dominant text type that children encounter when learning about literacy and the world, and narrative still the most logical genre to usher them into literacy.

### **Literature has the Power to Teach, Enrich and Transform**

Literature also has a valuable role in children’s learning. In the rest of the article I will consider three major ways literature affects children’s learning.

#### Literature Teaches

All readers know from their experiences with books that stories teach us many things. At the most basic level they teach us new words and ways to use them. They help us to understand how language works, they reinforce the learning of decoding skills and so on. Some might say that Sesame Street does this too, but literature offers even more sophisticated lessons. Let me share a simple personal anecdote that illustrates some of what I am arguing. It is an anecdote that answers the question that Margaret Meek [22] thoughtfully poses in her book ‘How books teach what readers learn’.<sup>6</sup> Her question is “how do children learn to distinguish the hero from the villain?” Jacob (my eldest grandson) learned a related lesson one day during a reading of Brenda Parkes’ [25] simple predictable picture book titled ‘Who’s in the Shed?’

The story is situated on a farm. A truck arrives in the night and the next day the farm animals take it in turns to peer through the cracks of the shed to work out who has been put in the shed? The climax of the story comes when the pig finally looks and the circus bear roars “HOW DARE YOU STARE!” When I tried to read this to Jacob aged 19 months, I wasn’t able to sustain his interest long enough to reach the

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<sup>6</sup> Margaret Meek develops this thesis at length in her small monograph *How texts teach what readers learn*. South Woodchester (UK): The Thimble Press, 1988.

end of the story on the first two occasions that I read it. But by the third reading a day or so later I reached the climax of the story, and growled loudly as the bear was revealed. Jacob jumped slightly and said “again”, meaning of course he wanted it read again.

On the next reading when the final page was reached and I roared the words of the bear he jumped and ran to the door of the room looking back at the picture. He didn't want to hear it again that day.

For several days he would enter the room and move tentatively towards the book, open several pages then retreat a safe distance of 3 or 4 m and make a growling noise. It took him some months until he would let me read it again.

Jacob learned many things from the reading of this simple book. Of course, learning is cumulative; he didn't completely learn these things in the one reading, but the reading was what I call a 'critical incident'. Here are a few of the things he learned from the encounter:

- That not all bears are cute and cuddly like his Pooh Bear that he carried everywhere.
- That books have the power to shift the emotions.
- That authors often reveal the most important bit at the end.
- That in the normal events of life things can happen that will scare us.
- Authors structure and layer their meanings to tell their story.
- Words and pictures have a relationship in books.

In this simple example we see illustrated the partial answer to Margaret Meek's question. Literature provides one significant way in which children explore the sometimes troubling territory of fantasy and reality, truth and fiction. They may never meet a real 'villain' but they can encounter many in books. In the world of literature they will encounter new fears but also receive wonderful 'lessons' concerning justice, love, life, death, human diversity, hope and despair. I wrote a book some years ago titled 'Other worlds: The endless possibilities of literature' (1990). The title pointed to one of the key concerns of the book, literature opens up worlds not normally available to be experienced firsthand by children.

### Literature Enriches

I grew up in a home where there were few books and no television until I was 11 years old. For me, life outside school was made up of sport, exploring the bush, swimming and fishing in the creek, annoying my sister, and playing in the street till dark. I wasn't read to and I can't remember more than a couple of books in my house. So when I arrived at school I wasn't a reader.

Eventually, I learned to read from school readers. But it took 8 years of my life before I read my first complete book, not just a snippet of a book, a short story or a school text. I was 8 years of age and had been a reader for 3 years, but one Christmas I was given a copy of Jules Verne's 'Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea' at my Dad's work picnic. This book captured my interest as soon as I began to read it. It engaged me. The quiet evil of Captain Nemo and his plan to use his cleverness to kill and terrify helpless seamen captured my attention from the first

pages. When the story took me into his cabin beneath the ocean's surface, I could almost smell the leather in his furniture. I felt the panic of the sailors on the wooden hulled ships as the terrifying sight of a yellow-eyed monster came hurtling towards each ship in the darkness. As a child interested in making and inventing things I was fascinated by the technology alone, and was impressed by the fact that Verne wrote the book in 1869. This first introduction to science fiction offered depth and complexity that I would never encountered before in school reading books. The book offered a richness of language, a complexity of themes and a simple but compelling plot that had me in as a reader.

My experience of Verne's book taught me new things about language (for example, the mix of French and English names and vocabulary was my first brush with a foreign language) and new things about the sea. It also introduced me to science fiction, which was a genre I'd not experienced before, and it introduced literary themes that were new to me. But the book did more than teach me about language, reading and literature, it enriched me as a learner and as a person; that's what books can do! The reading of this book has stayed with me for 50 years and has been part of the foundations of my literary history and experience. It is related intertextually with other narratives read, seen, heard and experienced as part of my life [3, 4, 6].

As well, books offer children opportunities to consider, often for the first time, major issues such as life and death, pain and suffering, fear and frustration. New aspects of the human condition are brought into focus, language is extended, and literary devices for plot development and characterisation are observed and understood for the first time. Encounters between readers and texts have the great potential to teach much about reading and language, but they offer so much more. In my book 'Pathways to Literature' (1995) I argue that:

Literature is not just about story; it is about life and one's world. It can act as a mirror to enable readers to reflect on life's problems and circumstances; a source of knowledge; a means to peer into the past, and the future; a vehicle to other places; a means to reflect on inner struggles; an introduction to the realities of life and death; and a vehicle for the raising and discussion of social issues (pp. 77–78).

At times books do many of the above things concurrently. Let me share just one example. In White's classic story 'Charlotte's Web' [32] we don't just encounter a cute narrative about pigs, spiders and a host of barnyard animals, we encounter a story with richness of character and plot and an array of literary themes that intersect with children's lives; not just in the moment of reading, but well into the future. Books stay with us; they intersect with our lived experiences and those of others.

You can enjoy 'Charlotte's Web' at the level of a simple narrative of a pig who meets a spider who has an impact on his life. But you can be moved by the rich thematic exploration of friendship, devotion, love, sacrifice and redemption. You can be amused, saddened, frustrated and confused by the characters and their actions. And you can certainly gain scientific knowledge about spiders. But beyond

the things to be learned, here is a narrative so poignant that it buffets the emotions and can change the way we see things in our own lives.

When a memorial service was held for a sister of a friend who died suddenly at age 43, her husband in speaking of her self-less friendship and ability to give to others, was reminded of and used the words Charlotte had spoken just before her death as a summation of her life and words she might well have spoken:

By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle.

These simple words spoken by a spider, in a children's book, had stayed with him and helped him to make sense of the loss of his wife and the mother of his three-year-old son. The words of Charlotte, dredged from his literary history and experience, had comforted him with the thought that his wife had touched many lives with her care, kindness and friendship and that her life, though short, had been rich and well lived. This is what I mean by the power of story. Stories can 'teach' and stories can 'enrich' our lives too.

### Literature Transforms

One day, as a middle-aged researcher I came to an even more startling conclusion about my early literacy experiences. While I had limited experience of literature I had been immersed at home in narrative recounts, anecdotes and poetry. Both my father and my grandfather were constant sources of story and poetry. My father (Henry Cairney) was a Scottish Coalminer and Trade Unionist; he shared thousands of anecdotes and stories throughout my childhood. Many of these centred on his childhood living in poor tenement housing in Scotland, his journey by sea to Australia, the battles with his nine brothers, how his mother cared for ten boys alone while her husband was in Australia establishing a house as a miner for 2 years. But he also spoke of his prowess on the soccer field, boxing for money during the Great Depression, WWII, the 'evil of the mine owners' and the great solidarity of the union movement, the pain of feeling responsible for the death of his little sister the last born of 11, who died at age two, and marching off from his home pit in the brass band as a 16 year-old to take part in the infamous Rothbury riots of 1929. I loved these stories even after I had heard them over and over again.

My grandfather (on my mother's side), Alexander Linton, was also of Scottish and English stock, and recited from memory the great poetry of Robbie Burns, Robert Louis Stevenson, the literature of Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson, Sir Walter Scott, and slabs of the Bible (especially Psalms and Proverbs).

For most of my life I thought I'd had no literature and story, but I was to realise that my world was filled with it. It was also filled with music. 1950s and 1960s contemporary music was a big part of our household, with both parents accomplished musicians and singers. Most of the music I heard was in the form of ballads, especially Scottish, Irish and Italian ballads—'Danny Boy', 'Pedro the Fisherman', 'Ave Maria', 'Hang Down you head Tom Dooley', 'Ciribiribin'. This was yet more rich language and poetry.

In middle age I concluded that my language and literacy had been enriched by my experience not of literature, in book form, but by oral storytelling and poetry,

music and the anecdotes and stories shared with me by my family. My experience is not a singular one, in fact all cultures had oral storytelling before books, and some cultures still rely on oral traditions more than books.

So here is another key point about the power of literature and books. While it is possible to learn to read without a rich tradition of books and literature, I would argue that it is not possible without a foundation of narrative and story. Harold Rosen [26] explains why:

Narratives in all their diversity and multiplicity make up the fabric of our lives; they are constitutive moments in the formation of our identities and our sense of community affiliation.

All people, irrespective of language and culture, spend most of their lives relating through story. Yes, there are variations across groups, and there are countless language genres with their own structure, purpose, modalities and so on. But we build our relationships with one another, and we share our humanity through the stories we tell about our own lives and those that we have heard from others. That's what my father and grandfather were doing when I was a kid, that's what you do in those deep and meaningful conversations late at night with that special person. Our stories of people, places, events, trials, successes, failures, fears, loves, hates, passions, prejudices and so on, are not simply personal memories, once told they become part of a collective memory in which something is shared between father and son, lovers, enemies and friends. Even public narratives become part of us and can change us—Martin Luther King Jr's 'I have a dream' speech, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's sorry speech, President Obama's campaign launch, Mandela's letters from prison and eventually his speeches of reconciliation and many other significant orations by great men and women throughout the centuries.

## Conclusion

I have argued above for the maintenance of a special place for literature in all classrooms. While, the world is changing and new forms of literacy have specific currency, the power of narrative remains central to human existence. As such, I believe that it will continue to have a significant place in any curriculum. As Judith Langer [18, pp. 7–8] argues:

Narrative, the form through which we most often experience subjective reality, calls upon, embodies, and is everyday human experience. We live and tell our lives through narrative. In doing so, we are faced with viewing a life – a human condition – in its entirety...

There will be a number of challenges as we negotiate this period of transition from paper books to far greater use of electronic books. At the moment the sales of electronic books are low in the non-scientific categories, but this will continue to rise. What will this mean for our libraries? How do we ensure access to books for those without the resources to buy their own books online? How will we sustain libraries as 'real' communities where lovers of books dwell?

How do we ensure that as electronic forms of the book grow, that children don't end up just 'playing' with books rather than reading them? My recent explorative research on children's reading of literature on the iPad suggests that children are easily distracted with e-picture books, and play more with the interactive elements on electronic books rather than reading the text.

How will we make sure that the reading process isn't changed by electronic books (as it probably is) with detrimental effects for the young reader in comprehension, early learning and enjoyment?

How do we ensure the longevity of books? Is there a chance that the life of an electronic book might be substantially less than the paper book? Some of the world's greatest books have survived for over a 1,000 years; can we be confident that electronic storage will be able to match this?

While I have voiced some concerns in this article, I also see great possibilities. The most obvious one is that books should be available at a cheaper price making them more accessible. Second, the translation of books from one language to another is much simpler with the e-book, and can even be controlled by the reader! Third, authors will have more power in this new electronic world with the ability to publish and sell their own books if they don't like what publishers do for them. We have seen this already in both the music industry and the book industry, just how prevalent this becomes in the children's book industry remains to be seen. Fourth, having books available electronically should increase our access to books in all their forms. Many of us marvel at how much easier it is to buy books today thanks to the Internet. Some of us have already discovered how much faster it is to get books delivered to a reader like the iPad or the Kindle.

In short, literature has a vital place within great nations and books have the power to do more than just entertain. As I have discussed, literature has the power to teach, enrich and transform, and it will continue to do so irrespective of the form that it takes.

The key with the use of literature is to avoid what Cope and Kalantzis [9] quite rightly warn us against, the decontextualising of any literacy event or practice. What I hope I have demonstrated in this paper is that literature can be part of a rich classroom environment where like many emerging forms of literacy it can be experienced within a classroom context where students are part of the creation of the context within which the texts have meaning. Texts are experienced, enjoyed and critiqued by community members who understand and use literary forms for purposes that are significant and which ultimately have the potential not only to teach things about language and textual meanings, but to transform their lives.

Literature is the most developed and permanent form of story telling; it lasts and is passed from generation to generation. Great texts have the power to change our lives, to give direction to us and to offer meaning and purpose. Individual texts become part of our textual histories as they pass on timeless knowledge and truth, values and wisdom. Much of the richness of story that has been communicated through the ages has been distilled into great books. We must continue to read them, whether delivered on paper or by some digital device, and we must continue to share them with our children.

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