

Word of Mouth

News from People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos

At Interim House, readers unpack layers of stories

by *Anndee Hochman*

I've lost count of the number of times I've used Peter Cameron's "Homework," a spare story delineating a young man's grief and loneliness, with People & Stories audiences.

But a recent session at Interim House in Philadelphia marked the first time our discussion unpacked the word "it."

In "Homework," the 18-year-old protagonist has skipped school ever since the death of his much-loved dog, Keds. As the story unfolds, we learn that Michael's sorrow and alienation pre-dated the death of his dog; he's a kid who seems friendless and whose family members—mother, father and older sister—occupy disparate worlds.

His sister slathers her hair each night with a "formula" of beer, eggs and mayonnaise; "she wants so badly to be beautiful," Michael observes. His father, fixated on their broken garage door, promises to get another dog. His mother fills the bathroom with houseplants and offers feeble consolation: "You're not the only one who's unhappy about this."

In the midst of this fractured, self-absorbed group, Michael clings to homework—specifically, complex algebraic word problems—for comfort, structure and self-worth. "Find the value for n ," demands one of those problems. "Will it be a whole number? It is never a whole number. It is always a fraction."

"It's like he wants to solve these problems; the homework gives him something to do, something to occupy his time, but he can't ever get a complete answer," Shana said. Then she and others compared that fruitless quest to their own

addictions, saying the missing "n" was the personal vacuum they had tried to fill with alcohol or drugs.

"I kept trying to find a formula that would let me survive," one woman said. "Or that would keep me out of jail and out of trouble. But I never could. I thought other people could do it, but I couldn't."

In the story, they said, each character is chasing something to fill that empty space. Even Mrs. Dietrich, the guidance counselor at Michael's school, the person employed to help students find their way, seems directionless: "She used to be a history teacher, but she couldn't take it anymore."

That led us to wonder what provocation sent the history teacher scuttling from the classroom to her new position in the guidance office, where a blank photo cube rests on her desk and a single banana peel is curled in the trashcan.

I'd always figured "it" was the students, with their clamor and their needs, that drove her from teaching. But Christine wondered if it was the teacher's subject matter that disturbed her; history, she said, was full of wars and struggles, and perhaps that's what Mrs. Dietrich "couldn't take."

Christine's willingness to peel apart the layers of a simple, enigmatic word yielded new understanding of both Mrs. Dietrich's character and Michael's. He, too, is trying to retreat from the jarring noise of life; he is seeking problems that have answers.

Her comment broadened the story's landscape: this was not just a tale of one distraught young man, but a story familiar to everyone who has ever wished for a "formula" to point the way out of a nameless grief. In a vigorous back-and-forth, the women talked about their own efforts to "solve for n ."

"This is such a good story," Erica said, "because it can help us think about our lives and the things we did that are like Michael."

"You really had us thinking!" Christine added as they got up to leave.

The feeling was mutual.

“Reading woke me up.”

—Mark Edmundson

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P&S/GyC groups “read” the world along with words

by Patricia Andres

When Sarah Hirschman studied at Harvard with Paulo Freire, she was inspired to create *Gente y Cuentos* in 1972—and, in 1987, *People & Stories*—opening access to literature for non-traditional groups in a way that mirrored the Brazilian philosopher and educator’s approach to literacy.

Freire’s revolutionary pedagogy posits that human experience, observation and ancestral knowledge is the basis of reading the word: “Reading does not consist merely of decoding the written word or language; rather it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world,” Freire and a colleague wrote in a 1998 paper.

With a belief in the innate potential of all people, including those with scant formal education, Hirschman designed a method for conducting deeply literary-critical discussions of college-level short stories based on the skills participants *do* have rather than on the skills they “lack.” When a colleague once asked Hirschman, “Are you still teaching those Spanish people how to read?” she bristled, knowing that the “reading” skills of our participants go far beyond the usual definitions of the term “literacy.”

Literacies of memory, narrative literacies, sacred literacies, cultural literacies, emotional literacies—all these are brought to bear on the discussion of the story once the coordinator has read it aloud, allowing participants to make contact with the piece beyond their scriptocentric literacy skills. Since the stories we read aloud incorporate poetic elements such as figurative language, allusion and repetition, listeners are immersed in the cadences and sheer beauty of the story’s sounds, so that listening to these pieces rather than decoding the words on the page might be compared to the difference between

hearing a Mozart sonata and examining the musical score.

After the oral reading, the *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* method includes posing questions both about the lives of the participants and about how the words, themes and enigmas of the story resonate, leading to a deep probing of the text, new understandings of self, of others and of the world. Our discussions, which draw on participants’ strengths, align our method with best practices in adult informal education, an asset-based approach outlined in a 2006 article by Eric J. Weiner, which identifies respect for the learner as a major pre-requisite for growth.

Listeners are immersed in the... sheer beauty of the story’s sounds.

Recently, one of our National Endowment for the Humanities-funded groups completed a series that included works by Gabriel García Márquez, Chinua Achebe and Isaac Bashevis Singer. While the men in the moderate-security correctional facility in Santa Cruz may not have had the skills to read the words on the page, librarian and *People & Stories* coordinator Maile McGrew-Frede shared her reflections: “I was thoroughly impressed with the sophistication and experiential knowledge present in the room. Even at times when they were without the exact vocabulary, these guys were wrestling with complex concepts and fairly sophisticated literary analysis...I keep thinking that if only folks outside the correctional facilities could see some of things going on here, hear some of the statements these guys make, it would not be so easy to write them off.”

New *People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos* board member Julie Denny put it this way: “In this polarized world, where our differences define us, stories help us to see what we have in common.” Expanding our definition of literacy to include the many literacies we all possess is a way to bridge the divide.

Stories yield poetics, secrets for GyC group

by Alma Concepción

"I loved these stories because when you read, I forget who I am. I become the character in the story and I travel far away," said Rosaura, one of twelve women attending a Gente y Cuentos series at the Children's Home Society in Trenton.

CHS works with at-risk infants, children, youth and families, supporting parents to gain the skills and stability to help their children thrive. It strives to be a trauma-informed agency, acknowledging the power of past events in people's lives while instilling hope for the future.

What touched me most during these sessions was the genuine response of participants to the poetics of contrasts and shadows.

Our first story was "La conciencia" by Ana María Matute, in which Mariana, an innkeeper, is blackmailed by a vagabond. When we discussed fear, Adriana said, "When people have no fear, it is because they are willing to lose everything...but because Mariana had a bad conscience, she became unsettled." Clara added, "She had a secret, and when you are hiding something you become suspicious of others." Another responded, "She was poor and married for money, but I am poor and would never marry for that reason." And Sandra concluded, "I believe the vagabond when he says that no one has a 'clean conscience.'"

We read "Catalina y Catalina," by Sergio Ramírez, which tells of a woman who abandons her children after being accused by her husband of adultery. I asked what participants thought about such a radical decision. Some responses were: "When you separate from your mother, like Catalina's children did at a young age, there is a mixture of sorrow and resentment very hard to overcome...I can't say Catalina had no other choice. I would have taken my children with me... You say that because

maybe you have not been in a no-win situation where you cannot escape a man's power...Catalina made the right decision. She saved her life."

In "La pañoleta" by Julio Paredes, a woman disappears while participating in a magic act at the circus. A participant from Colombia identified with the mystery: "My sister had a similar experience. My nephew went to work one morning and never returned. This was 23 years ago. My sister lives in constant anxiety not knowing if he was killed." Another participant was touched in a different way: "I liked 'La pañoleta' because of the many unanswered questions that left me wanting to know more. How did the mother disappear? Where is she? I have many emotions connected to this story because in my mind I can see different endings."

"...I too am relieved once I write what I am experiencing. It takes a big weight off my shoulders."

"La calle del Turco," by Alberto Cañas, is a story about secrets, desire and loyalty, and about putting your own feelings in writing. Carmen said: "I believe secrets become unbearable and it is better to find a way to unload yourself, like the narrator did in the story." Others said, "In my opinion it is better not to burden yourself with secrets in the first place...In the story it is not clear if the narrator loved his wife. He said it had been love at first sight...I don't believe that can happen." Another participant challenged that viewpoint, saying, "I disagree totally. I believe in love at first sight. That is how I fell in love with my husband, and we are still in love!"

Most participants related to the healing power of self-expression: "...I too am relieved once I write what I am experiencing. It takes a big weight off my shoulders...Expressing yourself is liberating, and that is why I found out that in Gente y Cuentos when people express freely what they are thinking, they realize that the stories help us look at life."

"To read fiction means to play a game by which we give sense to the immensity of things that happened, are happening, or will happen in the actual world."

--Umberto Eco

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D.C. libraries partner to bring P&S to diverse new audiences

“I could not stop talking because now I had started my story, it wanted to be finished. We cannot choose where to start and stop. Our stories are the tellers of us.”

--Chris Cleave

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Alexis Waide thought “Ovrashki’s Trains” would be foreign territory for her People & Stories listeners, a group of adults at a senior wellness center in Washington, D.C.

The story, by Lara Vapnyar, was the only piece in the series set in a locale other than the United States—the Russian seaside and a dreary section of Moscow. “Even though it was a completely different country, and there were Russian words sprinkled throughout, they found a lot to identify in it,” Waide says. “My own prejudices were: Oh, they don’t know about other cultures besides the U.S. or they won’t find anything to relate to. But they found a lot to connect with.”

In fact, many participants in the group—the youngest was 60, and the oldest 93—said “Ovrashki’s Trains” was their favorite piece. Their responses underscored Waide’s chief take-home from the series: Don’t assume anything.

“I try not to have any preconceptions about people: what direction they might take by the end, who’s going to come every week, what they’re going to say, what kinds of stories they might have to tell,” she says.

Across town, another D.C. librarian was learning a similar lesson as she led People & Stories discussions at the Harriet Tubman women’s shelter east of the Anacostia River.

Wanda Jones thought “Spilled Salt,” by Barbara Neely, would resonate for the group because most participants were mothers; she didn’t anticipate that the subject of sexual violence—the story concerns a mother whose adult son has just come home from prison after serving time on a rape conviction—would feel so treacherous. “Clearly, they were all uncomfortable with the story; no one really wanted to talk about it,” Jones says.

Another surprise was Raymond Carver’s

enigmatic story, “Fat,” in which a waitress’s life and outlook are altered following an encounter with an extremely overweight customer. For this group, the story’s shadows—Why does the fat man refer to himself as “we”? Why does the waitress linger at his table? What does she mean when she says, “My life is going to change. I feel it.”?—alienated readers rather than intriguing them.

Other times, a participant’s life experience provided a flash of illumination. When the group read “A Handful of Dates” by Tayeb Saleh, Jones was puzzled by why one character touched the hem of another’s garment. A woman in the group who had traveled extensively explained that the gesture was a sign of humility.

And when the group read “Breaking and Entering” by Sherman Alexie, in which a man swings a baseball bat at a teenaged boy who has broken into his home, inadvertently killing him, a woman from Australia voiced an outlier perspective on self-defense. “She said [the man] could have talked the teen down. That became a real back-and-forth,” Jones says.

“[The women] are intelligent. We talk, we have conversations, they express their opinions about their lives, about the world, about how they ended up here.”

The main branch of Washington D.C.’s public library system shut down for a three-year modernization project in March 2017. But the closed doors at the MLK Jr. Memorial Library have nudged open opportunities for People & Stories groups at other branches and in partnership with local social service agencies.

An initial round of D.C. programs served adults with disabilities—chiefly, visual impairments—along with seniors at the wellness center, women at the Harriet Tubman shelter and homeless adults at Miriam’s Kitchen, a day center that provides food and programming.

At the Center for Accessibility (formerly housed at the MLK branch of the library), coordinator Myra Remigio-Leonard quickly realized that reading aloud carried more weight when participants could not follow along with a written text.

“We had to be really cognizant of clarity and volume, and prepared to stop the reading if people had questions or needed

clarification,” she says. In discussion, participants needed to identify themselves: “This is Barbara speaking...” Instead of binders with copies of the texts, each participant received a flash drive with podcasts of all eight stories.

Remigio-Leonard, too, learned not to make assumptions about which stories participants might enjoy, which ones would provoke disagreement and how the discussions would unfold. One woman, for instance, typically listened to the reading without saying a word.

“But when it came to speaking about the story, her recall was really incredible: small details, the relationships between characters, who said and did what...She would tie that into stories about her own childhood and relate that to people she knew when she was growing up,” Remigio-Leonard says.

She was also concerned about a participant with a developmental disability, worrying that she might need to “reel him back” from tangential comments about the stories. In fact, “he was more textual than some of the others, more focused on what was happening in the text and less likely to go off into a personal tangent.”

Jay Sambasivan, a librarian for adult services at D.C.’s Georgetown branch, coordinates a People & Stories group for older adults who belong to a Global Talk Village, an aging-in-place design that allows people to remain in their homes with a network of community supports. Because many of the seniors no longer drive, Sambasivan brings the program to them—a board room in their apartment building, just an elevator hop away.

“They’re all avid readers,” Sambasivan says, so enthusiastic that they wanted to take turns reading aloud. “The Model,” by Bernard Malamud, became a nexus for discussing gender, power and vulnerability. “They were divided: some were very sympathetic to the older person [a male artist who hires a model he can paint in the hope of “refreshing his feeling” for life], and some were all against him: the old creep. A lot said it was so poignant; they could relate to him. Even before I could ask them any questions, they brought out all these things about aging and gender.”

The cadre of D.C. librarians—whether conducting People & Stories sessions in a basement-level day shelter or a light-

drenched room in a senior wellness center—reported one common thread they heard from participants: The groups bolstered their sense of connection.

“One of the things they said was that they don’t see so many of the others in their day-to-day life; this is bringing them together and helping them get to know one another,” Sambasivan said of participants in her group of older adults.

“[The women at the emergency shelter] are intelligent. We talk...they express their opinions about their lives, about the world, about how they ended up here.”

Waide echoed that idea: “They really loved talking and hearing other people’s thoughts and experiences. I had one woman who told me that it really added something to her life to be able to talk about things in such a deeply personal way...It was almost like therapy for her—to find connections to these stories that brought up things she hadn’t thought about in a while.”

Jones says she has learned along with the shelter’s participants; together, they have built trust and rapport. She recalls the “sample” session she did, in which only two women spoke up; now, at least half the group joins in the discussion. One woman, with a vast knowledge of Scripture, answers every question with a Bible verse.

“I love...hearing their views of the world, their personal experiences, the lessons they’ve learned. How the stories can bring out their personalities. There’s one lady who’s sort of a bully, but when we start talking about the stories, about being a mother, she calms down and can relate to the others.”

“Part of the experience,” Remigio-Leonard says, “is creating that ‘third space’—a space that is not private, and not public, for speaking to each other and being real.”

“I will tell you something about stories . . . They aren’t just entertainment. Don’t be fooled. They are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death.”

--Leslie Marmon Silko

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Jayanthi Sambasivan
Janna Tanner
Cindy Welsh
Eric White
Alexis Waide

Untying knots, offering moments of intimate insight Columbus House P&S

by Rachel Epstein

him and tries it out himself.”

Following a question about how children learn about religion and formulate their ideas of God, one woman volunteered that her young daughter had passed away. “It’s hard to know how to talk to my other daughter about it. She wants to go and put a blanket on the grave, to keep her warm when it’s cold out. I tell her God is taking care of her sister now.”

Something about the story's focus on a child's intimate experience, in tandem with its sensitive exploration of spirituality, seemed to prompt the confidence of such painful, private histories.

Another woman responded, “I don't really talk about it—I should talk about it—but my daughter died thirteen years ago. I was there.” There was a reverent quiet, with respectful nods of support. Another woman shared that she also had a child who passed away. The shock that this was a common experience in the group resonated palpably around the room.

Something about the story's focus on a child's intimate experience, in tandem with its sensitive exploration of spirituality, seemed to prompt the confidence of such painful, private histories. The author's roundabout approach to the subject of mortality—exploring it through the death of a bird—made it permissible to discuss.

We returned to the last line of the story: “The bus ran between the rows of poplars while Miguel and his friend spoke of the power of God.”

“What does this evoke?” I wondered. “What do you see?” M. responded, “I imagine walking slowly, with columns all along the way. It's like a cathedral.”

“...for a story has as many versions as it has readers. Everyone takes what he wants or can from it and thus changes it to his measure.”

--John Steinbeck

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At the start of a new series at Columbus House in Trenton, some women are cautiously curious, some are a little suspicious, and some are wholly enthusiastic. In this women's re-entry program, cooperation and friendship prevail, despite everyday tensions. For People & Stories this means a tendency to get to the heart of the matter quite fast.

This spring, we began with “The Proof,” by Guatemalan writer Rodrigo Rey Rosa, born in 1958. The women eagerly entered several “knots” of interest in the mysterious story. A young boy, Miguel, home alone, kills his family's canary as an experiment. Only if it comes back to life will Miguel be sure that God exists. The next morning, the family's maid sees the empty cage and runs to the market to replace the canary “she thought had escaped due to her carelessness.” The remainder of the story includes several cold interactions between family members and the maid over the killed canary.

While I read the story, there were murmurs of “Oh!” or “Wow!” One line in particular prompted spontaneous expressions of horrified surprise. The maid brings the new canary home and puts it in the cage; “however, when she drew back the window curtains and the sun's rays tinted the room pink, she saw with alarm that the bird had one black foot.”

We spent a good while discussing the idea of testing God's existence and talking about the maid's invocation of Satan's influence in the world. Several women had clearly thought about these subjects in depth, and in this light they explained why Miguel might have acted as he did.

N. drew on the author's upbringing in a violent and unstable Guatemala to suggest that the boy was expressing the violence in his surroundings: “This is how he reacts to his environment. He sees the killing around

Men in prison contemplate how we change

by Marcy Schwartz

At the end of the first session at the Federal Correctional Institution at Fort Dix, New Jersey, as I scanned the group of more than 30 participants from all over the Spanish-speaking world, I knew we were off to a dynamic start. As we concluded the discussion, I asked if anyone had any questions. One of the participants eagerly raised his hand. “I was going to ask what this program was really for,” he said, “but now that I’ve been part of one session, I have seen it. I don’t need to ask.”

At this prison, located on a military base, mostly middle- and late-middle-aged participants are sent to complete long sentences for federal crimes. One of the recurrent themes in our discussions has been change: How is it possible for people to change? What kinds of experiences prompt us to change? How do changes in our environments, our neighborhoods or technology impact our lives?

In the story “Scribbles” by Pedro Juan Soto, the protagonist is an aspiring artist who draws a mural on a wall in the family’s basement apartment to evoke a remembered romantic past. The tropical scene of his youthful wife, naked on a horse and surrounded by palm trees, contrasts with the dreary apartment and the dirty snow outside.

The story describes the gloomy winter sky as “grandiosamente opaco” (grandly opaque), and the participants mentioned how the weather weighs on them in winter, how the cloudy sky can be “asphyxiating.” Rather than accept the man’s gift of the drawing, his wife takes offense and erases it. Some of the participants thought his plan to rekindle the couple’s love would be impossible; others said it would only work if both were equally committed. Another said that once you lose the magic, it’s gone.

We read two stories about siblings that underscore family changes, the transformations of growing up, and how

adult decisions complicate or reinforce sibling tensions. In José Balza’s “The Almond Tree in January,” two brothers drift apart when one of them leaves their small rural town for the big city. In Emilio Díaz Valcárcel’s story “Obligatory Death,” a brother comes back to the family village for a funeral after years of living in the U.S., and his sisters agree that he has not changed.

One of the recurrent themes...has been change: How is it possible for people to change? What kinds of experiences prompt us to change? How do changes in our environments, our neighborhoods or technology impact our lives?

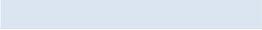
Nearly everyone had something to say: one participant declared that “change only happens from within,” while another noted that it takes something dramatic to push people to change. Another suggested that even if people change, their essence remains the same. In an especially poetic moment of our discussion, one participant compared change to being caught in a rough current or whirlpool in a river: “You have to accept it and allow yourself to get through it.”

Short stories read and discussed collectively—through their imaginative language and evocative fictional worlds—lead to unexpected avenues of memory and self-discovery. When we talked about the characters in the stories and whether they had changed, we ended up questioning whether we can truly change. One of the participants answered affirmatively, “Of course! Just look at us!”

“I always wondered why the makers leave housekeeping and cooking out of their tales. Isn’t it what all the great wars and battles are fought for—so that at day’s end a family may eat together in a peaceful house?”

--Ursula K. LeGuin

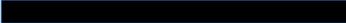
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On the Bookshelf...

Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard, by Jill Stauffer. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

by Rachel Epstein

As part of her analysis of patterns of human suffering at the hands of the human community, Jill Stauffer cites the testimony of a Holocaust survivor, Hanna F., who when asked how she felt upon her liberation from a concentration camp, responded, “That I am alone in the whole world.” We might be tempted to observe that this experience is not unique. Abandonment by institutions and even close neighbors, but also by humanity at large, has been a fact of life of many people around the world, as Stauffer reminds the reader with examples of oppression in South Africa, Cambodia, Bosnia,

Argentina, and elsewhere. Yet part of the point of her book is that the experience of Hanna F. is unique, and that we—humanity at large—are not accustomed to addressing that uniqueness.

While legal trials and truth commissions may be reparative, Stauffer argues, they can circumscribe suffering by excluding painful stories and, in some cases, exacerbating pain through the demands of structured testimony. She also notes the failure of “ordinary citizens” to listen well to accounts of victimhood.

Only when those who live in relative safety make themselves vulnerable to the pain of others, Stauffer argues, will persistent and cross-generational suffering be assuaged. In her definition, “responsibility” does not mean culpability, but rather “the duty to...be responsive” to voices that speak of broken lives and to respect the silences that are also part of communication.