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Anthony Nanson. *Storytelling and Ecology: Reconnecting People and Nature through Oral Narrative.* Pontypridd: University of Glamorgan Press, 2005. 71 pp. GBP 6.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-84054-125-0.

Reviewed by Kevin Strauss

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Readers who are looking for theory and research focused on the use of storytelling in environmental education will find just what they are looking for in ***Storytelling and Ecology*** by Anthony Nanson. This well-referenced book starts by defining storytelling (something that even the National Storytelling Network has yet to do), and then goes on to describe how storytellers are using live narration to teach people to care about the natural world.

While the book does what it sets out to do, it is probably really valuable only to those already familiar with the worlds of storytelling and environmental education. Those looking for a "how-to" book on nature storytelling or a book of nature stories will be disappointed. This is primarily a scholarly work from one storytelling scholar to other storytelling scholars.

Nanson defines storytelling as "extempore narration of a story to a live audience." He focuses on how storytellers can use their tales to help reconnect our increasingly urban and suburban populations with the natural world. He then documents how current consolidated corporate media outlets do a poor job of explaining environmental problems to our disconnected populace. From there he postulates that storytelling would be the one media outlet that is most likely to connect with people at an emotional level and least likely to be controlled by the oil companies and chemical companies that deny that problems like global climate change actually exist. One of the most important things that storytelling can do in environmental education is to help humans "comprehend the stories" of the non-human world. "Stories extend your imagination to see the world from perspectives other than your own. When you hear someone's own story, your sympathy is engaged and you recognise that other person as a conscious being capable of suffering and joy" (p. 34).

While Western science has effectively divided "science" from "emotion" and "humans" from other "animals," storytelling, whether it is with a folktale, personal story, or natural history tale, can help bridge those gaps and help us connect with the natural world. "Thus many ecological storytellers' primary objective--upon which the effective conveyance of knowledge depends--is to elicit a sense of connection: an emotional investment in the locality where the storytelling takes place, so that people will care what happens to it" (pp. 25-26). Nanson also documents how storytelling is an effective educational tool by providing a medium that "makes knowledge more accessible, enjoyable, and memorable" (p. 16). He points out how he has seen students focus more intently and listen more deeply when naturalist storyteller Simon West shifted from scientific exposition into storytelling.

He properly identifies that some environmental educators are suspicious of storytelling since many of our false ideas about the natural world

are rooted in European folktales like "Little Red Riding Hood" and "Aesop's Fables." While Nanson raises this issue, he fails to address it directly. In many cases environmental educators will avoid folktales and mythic stories completely, focusing instead on natural history tales. He also bemoans the fact that some environmental organizations don't really understand how storytelling works. While this is undoubtedly true, I wish Nanson had then gone on to discuss how storytellers could help more environmental educators use traditional storytelling in their work.

One of my favorite parts of the book is when Nanson tries to describe what storytelling is and what it means to people. "Speech is carried through the air on our breath. The words that leave your mouth enter my ears, my nose and lungs. Which makes storytelling, like any face-to-face conversation, an intimate and sensual experience." At a time when storytellers in the United States are trying to figure out what storytelling is and what it does, Nanson's chapter on "making connections between self and other" provides us with a good road map. "Storytelling demands acknowledgement of the storyteller as a person and participating in imagining the story. It engages the listener as an active agent" (p. 30).

This is the "co-creative act" that storytellers like Dan Keding describe in their work today. Because storytellers ***and*** their audiences work together to create the story, it is one of very few art forms that really require an audience to make them work.

Nanson also points out that in aboriginal cultures, storytellers were "tradition bearers" who reminded people how to live in a sustainable relationship with the natural world. Environmental storytellers are recovering some of those skills today. This is important because societies that have not lived in a sustainable relationship with the natural world soon collapse. Anyone who is aware of environmental problems can see the value of knowledge of sustainable living knowledge to today's society. While environmental problems will continue to challenge our society, Nanson documents how environmental storytellers are bringing people back to a connection with the natural world:

"The ecological crisis demands of us a creative reconciliation of things that have become disconnected and positioned in opposition to each other: between humankind and nature, between the inner world of myth, spirituality, and imagination and the outer world of science, politics, and empirical reality. The potential of ecological storytelling to bridge the divide behind science and the imagination is reflected in the careers of its practitioners" (pp. 59-60).

If you are looking for deep thinking about deep ecology and how people are using storytelling to connect people with the natural world, then ***Storytelling and Ecology*** is the book for you.

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