



# Once Upon a *Tale*

BY DEAN WHITLOCK



CELEBRATE THE WINTER SOLSTICE WITH STORYTELLERS

“Imagine a world without stories...” So begins the tale *Ananzi Gathers Stories*, as told by Simon Brooks, a professional storyteller and part-time children’s librarian in Thetford. The story is a favorite of Simon’s, not only because it is lively and funny and filled with wonderful characters, but also because he can imagine a world without stories. A world before ►



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—Simon Brooks

imagination was born or, worse, where imagination has died.

#### Imagination is Key

"So many kids these days are given everything," Simon, a father of two young children, explains. "All the images, all the sounds, all the colors: everything apart from the sense of smell and taste is given to them from their TVs, their Gameboys, their iPhones. It worries me, because if people aren't exercising their imaginations, where are all the future designers going to come from, the future playwrights, architects, teachers? Storytelling," Simon emphasizes, "is a huge tool to encourage people to use their imaginations."

So Simon travels across New England, not only telling stories, but also teaching his art to teachers, parents, and children to guarantee there will

be a future generation of storytellers. Late each fall, he begins a special six-week storytelling workshop hosted by the Latham and Peabody libraries in Thetford, a workshop that culminates on the Winter Solstice. On that longest night of the year, ten or twelve brand-new storytellers regale their families, friends, and neighbors with stories told for the very first time ever, at least by them.

#### Simon's Path to Storytelling

Simon began his own career in a more roundabout way. A native of Worcester, England, he worked summers as a caretaker at youth hostels. He also wrote children's stories, which he would read aloud to school groups who came to stay in the hostels. One day, on a field trip to a castle in Hastings, he had the chance to hear a real storyteller, Eric

Maddern.

"He showed me, just by my listening to him, that history could be so much more fun than it ever was in school," Simon remembers, "and that there was a real art to this. There was a real power to his words, in the way he told his tales."

Simon began to tell, rather than read stories at the youth hostel. And he added tales from other traditions: historical, Native American, Northern European, African. But he didn't believe anyone could make a living at it. He went to college to study photography and graphic design.

In 1994, Simon moved to the United States, married, and in 2002 became a stay-at-home dad in Orford. A year later, he agreed to take the children's librarian job in Thetford only if he was allowed to tell stories and not just read



aloud to his young patrons. Word went round to other libraries, and soon he was traveling across the twin states as a professional storyteller.

Preparing for the Thetford Event  
The Winter Solstice Celebration in Thetford was started by head librarian Peter Blodgett a number of years before Simon arrived. It is a non-denominational event, focusing on the cycle of the seasons and the return of light that signifies the official start of winter, but also the promise of spring. When Peter asked Simon if he would take part, Simon's immediate reaction was to try to recruit other community members as storytellers. But he knew there weren't many people out there who would just get up and tell stories, so he offered the workshop beforehand. "I wanted to allow the members of the community to feel they would have a chance of being successful," he explains.

To teach storytelling, Simon uses a variety of exercises in technique. Because the voice is the storyteller's main tool, he shows students how to change the size of their mouth and the amount of breath to achieve the same volume at the high and low ends of their range.

Unlike some storytellers, Simon likes to create a distinctive voice for each character in his stories. It helps him get into each character's personality, which brings the story to life for him. "And if a story doesn't come alive for me, how can I expect it to come alive for my listeners?" he asks. So he has his students try different voices, at the same time assuring them that it's quite all right to tell a story in other styles.

To illustrate that point, he will tell the same short scene in several different genre styles—science fiction, horror, romance, western, a Sponge Bob episode—and then have them try it, to see how everything changes. "All of a sudden you're telling a different story with the same story."

He has the students close their eyes while he leads them through a guided visualization, asking them to focus on what they see, hear, feel, taste, and smell as it happens, and to relate the strongest sensations afterward. He shows them how to use motions to rep-

resent action and sound: a pomegranate falling from a tree, the sound of moving water, the actions of an old man. Then he has them each act out a scene without sound or voice, while the others try to guess who and what they are seeing.

Once the students choose the tales they want to tell, then comes one of the most difficult tasks of storytelling: memorization. Simon teaches them a technique based on what psychologists have dubbed "The Magic Number Seven (plus or minus two)."

"Basically, the brain is good at remembering seven things, but not much more than that," Simon explains. "So I try to break all of the stories down into seven sections."

He reads a story aloud and asks everyone to relate what they remember. Almost always, the group comes up with somewhere between seven and twelve high points, some of which they can combine to yield just seven. Then they put the points in order, and that's what the storyteller has to remember: "Not the 1,500 words we've just read, but these seven sentences you've got here. And that's not so bad. That's manageable." Everyone has plenty of chances to practice the story, bit by seven bits, until it becomes a whole.

#### Let the Stories Begin

Then it is the Solstice. The Peabody Library, crowded with books and people, glows in the light of dozens of candles. Simon makes his introduction, and the first timid apprentice storyteller steps to the end of the long walnut table. The





room stills. And so the story begins.

Nine-year-old Thea Cole admits she was a little nervous, because one part of her story, “The Three Brothers,” was hard to learn. But she remembered it all. “By the end of the workshop I was pretty comfortable telling that story,” she says. “I liked it.”

Nick Buonanducit, also nine, picked “Babe, the Blue Ox,” a story that he had heard before, which made him feel more confident. Nick had been in some plays in school but says that storytelling was different, because there was no one else talking. “I had to rely on myself the whole way. I felt really proud of myself.”

Would he do it again? “Oh, yeah!” And Thea? “Definitely!”

“For me,” Simon says, “the real exciting thing is when I see kids lose themselves in their story. Because I know from when I tell stories that that is a really fine, magical place to be. You’re connecting with this other part

of yourself that’s really primordial, a prehistoric part of us that we’ve forgotten about. When we reconnect with that, it’s like we’re becoming whole again.”

Like the sun at the Solstice, turning with the season to bring back the light of imagination. ☺

For more information about the Winter Solstice storytelling workshop, contact the Thetford Library at (802) 785-4361. The event takes place December 16 at the Peabody Library at 3 p.m. To find out more about Simon’s other storytelling programs, visit his website at [www.diamondscree.com](http://www.diamondscree.com).

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