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Book Review

Moenandar, Sjoerd-Jeroen and Wood, Lynn (eds.) - *Stories of Becoming: Using Storytelling for Research, Counselling and Education*, Nijmegen: Campus Orleon, 2017, ISBN: ISBN 978 94 91862 03 8 262pp

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Storytelling is big business. The past few years have seen the growth of such forums as TED Talks, podcasts, storytelling festivals and workshops. Even some advertisers and public relations consultants now give themselves the job title 'storyteller'. The editors of this book claim we are living in an 'era of narrativisation', which is not a bad thing. But storytelling's universality does bring with it the need for critical reflection.

Of particular interest to this edition is the use of narrative communication and storytelling in human sciences research, counselling and education. The book is essentially broken into three sections addressing each of these fields of practice, plus a comprehensive introduction written by Sjoerd-Jeroen Moenandar. While the introduction focuses on theory, the remaining chapters largely draw on case studies from a variety of countries.

The introduction commences its inquiry by examining the book's title and contextualising the terms storytelling and what the Russian philologist Mikhail M. Bakhtin called 'becoming'. Bakhtin's 'becoming' is defined as 'the ongoing process through which an individual learns to relate to him or herself and to his or her surroundings' (xvii), and the book ultimately proposes that storytelling is an ideal tool for doing just this.

However, Moenandar further teases this out and suggests that not all stories may spawn personal growth and success. Indeed, less traditional or 'unnatural' stories may resist neat endings and wholesome outcomes, instead exploring the frayed edges of a chaotic life. Such narratives can show us that life is essentially random and unpredictable.

By providing an overview on narratology, Moenander shines a light on what makes a story work. He also discusses how narrative research is a useful way of helping people to add structure, meaning and purpose to their life. But he argues that not all stories of becoming follow a simplistic formula, and nor should they. The editor further theorises on the notion of becoming, drawing on the suggestion that neoliberal culture is fixated on the need to 'become a better person'. This type of narrative is referred to as the 'Bildungsroman', whereby the 'subject who, through a series of events, discovers his or her true 'self' and place in the world' (xv).

Hollywood films, reality television and popular music all decree that we should be striving toward greater things, and the pressure to formulate narratives of personal development can be an

encumbrance for some people. Moenander argues that 'a story of becoming could very well be about someone who, ultimately, does not become anything' (xx). Such stories are valid and worthwhile, and must be honoured. The introduction draws on Derrida's words to define becoming as 'the temporal flux of what is lived' (xviii), suggesting that by acknowledging this, researchers, counsellors and educators can utilise narrative more effectively in their work in helping people.

The book's first section, 'Research', commences with a chapter on narrative sociology, analysing how individuals make sense of themselves and the world they live in. The writer of this chapter, Floor Basten, summarises the book's theme neatly when she writes:

The beauty of stories of becoming is that they are found in multiple disciplines. Their ubiquity is overwhelmed by the utility they provide in helping the creators and audiences of the stories attempt to understand complex phenomena (95).

Ensuing chapters in this section apply this notion to stories of migration and Roma identity, forgotten minorities in Northern Cyprus and Zimbabwe's liberation fighters. One chapter takes a unique approach, exploring the genres of patient narrative and auto-ethnographic methodology through a contemporary form of narrative: a Wikipedia profile. In this chapter, Emma Frances O'Connor draws on the work of sociologist Arthur Frank (1995) who proposes three types of narrative: the restitution, the chaos and the quest narrative. This reinforces the editor's note that not all narrative is linear or resulting in resolution. O'Connor's Wikipedia entry explores the genre of patient narrative and autobiography, informed by the author's own experience with cancer and surgery. Her choice of storytelling in the form of a Wikipedia entry is an interesting way to illustrate her research interests and concerns around patient narratives, but also to show that an autobiography may only part of a person's story, ending her chapter with: 'All this before I even begin to tell my story' (118).

The book's second section 'Counselling', draws on several studies of narrative therapy across educational settings. Noorit Felsenthal Berger's chapter is set in a special education school located in Jerusalem for children with severe motor and cognitive disabilities. The author, who is the school's psychologist, discusses her use of narrative therapy and the subsequent process of meaning making. She considers how 'the expression of voice is not an obvious experience for children and adolescents with disability. Their main experience is of silencing by society' (158) yet the chapter goes on to intertwine poignant stories that in their telling, hold much gravitas. As well as helping the students to find their voice, the author is enlightened to discover that rewriting her students' stories enabled her to 'express her own personal and professional belief and voice' (171). I was reminded of Arthur Frank's (1995) thoughts on the 'reciprocity that is storytelling [whereby] the teller offers herself as a guide to the other's self-formation' (17-18).

Another chapter in this section, also about a school in Jerusalem, discusses how narrative therapy helped students throughout a period of transition and crisis as the school was forced to close. Nurit Sahar writes: 'narrative psychology offers a frame of reference that can help restore a continuous and stable sense of identity and enabled us to look at the future as promising and positive.' (189)

The third and final section titled 'Education' draws on life stories from countries such as South Africa and Brazil to illustrate the use of narrative teaching techniques and the importance of literacy. The chapter by Alicia van der Spuy and Lynn Wood demonstrates how the personal is political. This chapter describes a university project whereby students in South Africa interviewed and wrote about a woman from their community. In telling these stories, the students not only learnt about their subjects, but also about their own histories and how to 'appreciate and realise the true value of the voices of the women of South Africa' (239).

It came as no surprise that some of the most thought provoking parts of this book were the stories themselves. Through collegiality, the authors broaden what Frank (1995) calls the 'circle of shared experience' (xii). And through the such sharing of stories, the book tests and strengthens its own inter-disciplinary theories, demonstrating why storytelling is such a popular and valued medium.

References

Frank, A.W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller: Body, illness and ethics* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

About the reviewer

Katie Sutherland is a DCA candidate from Western Sydney University's Writing and Society Research Centre. She is researching and writing a collection of narratives about families living with high functioning autism, utilising an autoethnographic methodology. Her research also examines how writing and reading about illness and disability creates a sense of connection and breaks down stereotypes. She is a freelance journalist and sessional tutor.

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