

# WRITE

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## ORAL STORYTELLING ISSUE /

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# Writer's Blot

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WRITER'S PROMPT /

## Children Will Listen

BY JANICE MACDONALD



*The tradition of the bedtime story can probably be traced back to stories told around a communal fire, and they are still a vital part of the development of our children today.*

In those magical years before school swallows them up, our days have a general pattern. We hug sleepy children awake, help them dress, feed them, and through the day generally mind that they don't kill themselves. After supper, we pop them into the bath, and then once they're clean and tucked into bed, we offer them a way to decompress from the myriad actions of the day. Our voices lull them into thoughtfulness, the pictures on the page connect the ideas they are hearing with the world beyond their comforters, and our heartbeats settle into companionable rhythms as we flip through an old favourite picture book or pick up a chapter book where we left off the night before.

Although Tom Selleck was amusing in *Three Men and a Baby*, when he read a book about a prize fight to a baby in dulcet tones, it really does matter what you read to your children. Their first exposure to the world beyond them will come from the books you read them. They will absorb your values, and your reactions to the ridiculous, the sublime, the frightening, and the ferocious as they hear you deliver the words. Most of all, they will absorb your valuing of literature and the act of reading.

My mother told of reading an alphabet book to me. "Look, Janice," she pointed to the picture of a shiny red apple perched on the corner of a desk, "An apple for the teacher!"

"Yes," I apparently responded with ghoulish glee. "A poison apple!" So, sometimes children make problematic synaptic

connections. This is likely why I now write murder mysteries.

Some of the fairy tales that have been handed down from generation to generation hold hidden wisdom that children understand on a cellular level. "Not all adults have your best interests at heart;" "ingenuity and loyalty will take you further than beauty and wealth;" and "never trust a stranger offering you candy" are all valuable life lessons hovering under the surface of the entertaining stories given to us by the Brothers Grimm or Hans Christian Andersen.

In his 1976 book *The Uses of Enchantment*, Bruno Bettelheim writes of this intuitive ability. While giants aren't real, children catch on that "there are such things as grown-ups, and they're like giants." He goes on to underline the value of telling these tales to your children rather than just having them read a story where a cunning child can get the better of a powerful adult. The oral tradition of the bedtime fairy tale lets children understand that their parents approve, at least in principle, of their "retaliating against adult dominance."

But the bedtime tradition is a gift, not just another teachable moment. It is as much a reward for us, the tired parents — who have lived through another long day of never-ending questions, tantrums, bickering, and lack of adult conversation — as the children listening. Every moment is worthwhile. The silly, the frustrating, the tender, the fierce. At the end of the race, we gather our children into our arms, snuggle their sweet-smelling, bubble-bath-clean little sleeper-covered bodies close, and open a book.

*Janice MacDonald is proud to be TWUC's regional rep for Alberta-Northwest Territories-Nunavut. While she has written in pretty much every genre, she is best known for the Randy Craig Mysteries, set in Edmonton, where she also lives. A one-time university lecturer, she now keeps the Government of Alberta safe from dangling modifiers.*



# A War of Words

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BY DWAYNE MORGAN

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## The long history of poetry as competition.

I have always been curious. Five years into my career, way back in 1998, an email found its way to my inbox, advertising a poetry slam taking place in Philadelphia. At the time, I had no knowledge of what a poetry slam was, but my curiosity was piqued. It seemed to me that the only sensible thing to do was to drive to Philadelphia to figure out what this thing was.

I wasn't expecting it, but I ended up in the show. If this was baptism by fire, I had just showered with gasoline. As the night progressed, I was amazed by what I was hearing, by the energy in the room, and by the performances. I was a flame of inspiration. As I drove back to Toronto the following day, I wondered if such a concept would work in my city. Curiosity got me again!

Upon my return, I started the Roots Lounge Open Mic and Poetry Slam. This was only the second such event in the country, following in the footsteps of the Vancouver Poetry Slam, hosted by the Vancouver Poetry House. Fun fact: Vancouver is the only Canadian city to win the American national poetry slam title. But I digress. The Roots Lounge took a while to catch on. I had to explain what a poetry slam was, demonstrate it, convince artists to try it, explain it to the audience.

It took a year before the idea took root, but there would soon be another problem.

As the popularity of the poetry slam started to grow, there was

debate and discourse about whether poets should be competing and whether these were legitimate poetry events. Now, I have a lot of personal thoughts about what some of the critiques were tied to, but I'll avoid getting into that here. I mean, maybe the issue was that art was being judged. But that still didn't make sense to me, because judging art often determines what makes it into galleries and the literary canon. As writers, we compete for publishers, shelf space, readers, attention, and sales, so it seemed odd to me that all of a sudden people had an issue with competition.

That aside, I saw so many positives coming from the events: new voices, young voices, marginalized voices, no gatekeepers. I doubled down, helping to co-create a national competition that became the Canadian Festival of Spoken Word, because competing with words was not something new to me.

Many cultures rooted in the oral tradition have histories that include elements of competition. While I could trace roots back to Africa, I will instead focus on this part of the world. It is important to note that there has always been a close relationship between the oral tradition and music, especially within the Black community. One can look at the connection between jazz and the era of Langston Hughes; funk and Gil Scott-Heron; reggae and dub poetry; and hip hop and spoken word. All have forced us to expand our definitions of the oral tradition.

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## Extempo

Coming out of slavery, the tradition of extempo was born. Originally, stories about living conditions would take centre stage. As the tradition developed, performers would speak rhythmically on a particular theme, usually politics or social commentary. The goal was to win over their audience through wit and ingenuity, often even incorporating their competitors into their performance for extra points from the audience. The tradition of extempo continues today, from Trinidad to Toronto, as a part of Carnival celebrations.

## Dub to Dancehall

A bit north of Trinidad, in Jamaica, reggae artists were releasing their songs on vinyl records, with the instrumental on the flip side. This instrumental was called the dub. People would play the dub and start making their own lyrics to go with it. This is the tradition that gave birth to dub poetry and the likes of Mutabaruka, Lillian Allen, d’bi young, and many more internationally.

The ‘70s saw a new sound emerge from the slums; by the ‘80s, dancehall, the precursor to hip hop, was a major force in Jamaica. The DJs who would play reggae at parties were known as toasters. The toaster would make up a story to put the song they were about to play into context. Toasters would try to win over the crowd with their wit and storytelling. Soon, these stories were brought to the studio and recorded, giving rise to dancehall artists — the storytellers of the people.

As dancehall evolved, these storytellers, often from different parts of the country, would compete with one another to win over the Jamaican public. Festivals like Reggae Sunsplash would pit artists against each other, and patrons from around the world would flock to Jamaica to witness the verbal warfare.

## Hip Hop

The tradition of sharing lyrics over a beat the way the toasters did gave birth to Hip Hop in New York City. DJ Kool Herc started rhyiming to get a crowd excited, and this simple act

grew into what we now understand as hip hop.

With hip hop came the cypher. In cities across the world, young people could be found huddled in groups, taking turns sharing their rhymes, often making them up on the spot. These cyphers gave birth to freestyle battles — where participants would go back and forth in a competition against another artist, each trying to win over the rest of the audience with clever word play, their ability to infuse their current environment into their stories, and their bravado.

These freestyle battles continue today and have a huge niche following.

## The Dozens

Closely related to freestyle battles are the dozens. Some may be familiar with “Yo’ Mama” jokes, which come from the tradition of the dozens. The dozens are a comedic battle of wits where two people compete with each other using one-liners and jokes until one taps out. The dozens are always played in front of an audience who egg on both participants. Today, this tradition is known to some as roast battles.

In the Black community, words, creativity, storytelling, music, and competition have always gone hand in hand and complemented one another. Knowing this, poetry slams were a no-brainer. Just like the traditions before them, I knew that they would resonate with audiences, and force artists to focus more on the work that they were bringing to the stage.

That being said, sure, poetry slams have their flaws, but I have always believed they are outweighed by the positives. Since the first slam I produced, I’ve put over \$20,000 into the pockets of other artists who’ve embraced the war of words.

*Dwayne Morgan is a two-time Canadian National Poetry Slam champion, with fourteen collections of poetry and nine albums to his credit. He has also performed in eighteen countries around the world. Morgan is an inductee to the Scarborough Walk of Fame and has performed for dignitaries including former President of the United States Barack Obama.*