

Storytelling Revisited

2018

**Gender, Language,
Music, Cinema**

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Autobiography and Storytelling: an Evident Bond between Life-story and Story-novel

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*Every man must be his own law in his own work,
but it is a poor-spirited artist in any craft
who does not know how the other man's work
should be done or could be improved.*

Rudyard Kipling, *Something of Myself, For My Friends Known
and Unknown*

Read a novel, a poem, a story for children written by great authors today and what emotions can they give us? Can reading and literature still fascinate through the written page? What can the great classics of literature still communicate to the younger generations and to each one of us? And above all, who are the great writers who have composed admirable works and who have been able to fascinate entire generations for such a long time? We are passionate about reading works like *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, or *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, or *The Jungle Book*, but we neglect the reasons (or we do not know them) that inspired these magnificent works and how much the personal experiences of the authors are the background to these events.

Every human context speaks almost exclusively a virtual lan-

guage; it uses mainly digital tools and technologies on communication/information; it fills many hours of our day of social contacts and comments on the web, as if human experience had been reduced to a high speed permanent virtual connection. But the reading of novels and stories resists, survives with tenacity, perhaps in reduced and manipulated forms but it resists. This is thanks to the great authors, the great “classic” writers who continue to give us emotions and tell us fantastic stories through the words of their masterpieces. This is extremely important because it helps to maintain an intimate bond with real life, a human (not virtual) link with the depths of our feelings. This fascination persists because their lives and their works have always been an evident and extraordinary blend that has enriched their work with narrative and educational elements of extraordinary beauty.

In this short essay, the autobiography will be presented as a tool for reading. It is a meeting-point for authors, novels and readers. Three great authors, who lived between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, will show us how writing about themselves can become a kind of guiding model to better decipher and understand their great literary works, which only a myopic reading could define as ‘minor’ works because they are dedicated to young readers.

This is as it should be....

Mark Twain, *Autobiography*

Roald Dahl argues that children’s literature

is really one of the most important fields in literature. Other kinds of books are written to entertain and amuse the adult mind. It is clear that even children’s books have to entertain and amuse, but they must also do something else. They must teach the child the habit

of reading. They must teach him how to read, enrich his vocabulary and, above all, make it clear to him that there are better ways to spend time than watching television (Dahl, 2009)

The *autobiographical stories* of authors and narrators open us to extremely rich worlds to explore, both for the contents (cultural, educational, social, etc.) and for the proposed methodologies, fluid and undefined methodologies – as we will see later – able to capture the attention of the reader who, suddenly, becomes the protagonist of a beautiful and not entirely improbable story. A story, a novel, any narration dedicated to children risks becoming an *anaesthetic* - to quote Dahl again - if some central elements are missing: freshness of language, narrative creativity, the element of surprise, intrigue, and so forth, all of which are essential devices for attracting the attention of the young reader (Dahl, 2009).

Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling and Roald Dahl are, in fact, the three autobiographers briefly interpreted in this essay; and if we read their lives as a starting point to better understand their literary production, we can gain a greater number of different perspectives and at different levels of emotional and existential depth that characterize their works, without however “forcing reality”. Their autobiographies highlight the freshness of memories, the fullness of emotions, daily and personal difficulties, youthful disappointments and sufferings, professional achievements, maturity and awareness of a social and individual adult self. These are some of the elements, among others, that can make these autobiographies topics of reading and reflection. This is important because they create a biographical mix that brings both the work and the author alive and makes them interesting – indeed, captivating.

If we tried to combine, for example, Tom Sawyer's story with Mark Twain's autobiography, would we be able to intercept the points of conjunction, existential commingling, the hybridizations between life-story and story-novel? Do these hybrids exist? How much of the young Mark transpires into young Tom? What kind of education has formed the character and the thought of the famous North American writer? And again: for which reader are these autobiographies written? What is the methodology? Elements emerge from his autobiography that we find in his most famous novels: *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. This is because Twain used storytelling to talk about the great social problems, the weaknesses and the contradictions of North American society. He was born in the Deep South and was not afraid of facing extremely serious issues like the question of race and freedom of press: he does it through the exploits of his young protagonists who tell stories of marginalization and violence that the novelist was able to see during his life.

Two important elements should be pointed out: 1) Mark Twain's autobiography is erratic and does not follow the literary technique of classical autobiography. The author did not write dates and events in chronological order; there are no classifications; there is no order: it is the story of an erratic life. The focus is on emotions of memories and the importance of human experience. Of his life experience. Which brings us to the second point: 2) The "speaker". Mark Twain uses the same writing model to talk about himself and to talk about the characters in his novels. He confirms, in his autobiography, the mixture between his experience of being a writer and journalist and the adventures in his stories. Huckleberry Finn is born out of the deeds of his brother Henry, and the same is true for Twain's sister, who acts as inspiration for another important character in Tom Sawyer. There are points of contact

and overlap between real and fictional life and in his autobiography Twain gives us all the tools to better decipher his works from an educational and narrative point of view.

The same thing also happens for the other two authors, although with different methods and objectives.

In contrast to the writing model presented by Mark Twain, Rudyard Kipling's autobiography is very cultured and sophisticated. His education was extremely refined and followed the family tradition and certainly it was not a common one. He lived a condition of extreme comfort and enjoyed incredible rich and stimulating experiences both from a linguistic and cultural point of view. We find this sophisticated educational art in his autobiography and his works: his reflections on English and Indian society are accurate and with *The Jungle Book* he proposes the metaphor of a complex society through the hierarchical organization of the animal community. Young readers can also learn about the political and social issues of Kipling's time through the reading of his stories. All social, political and human events are present in Kipling's most important novel and also in his autobiography.

Roald Dahl's autobiography is different from Twain's and Kipling's and was written as a children's story. It seems like a fantasy story but the similarities with the author's life are more than explicit:

An autobiography is a book a person writes about his own life and it is usually full of all sorts of boring details. This is not an autobiography. I would never write a history of myself. On the other hand, throughout my young days at school and just afterwards a number of things happened to me that I have never forgotten. None of these things is important, but each of them made such a tremendous impression on me that I have never been able to get them out of my mind. Each of them, even after a lapse of fifty and sometimes sixty

years, has remained seared on my memory. I didn't have to search for any of them. All I had to do was skim them off the top of my consciousness and write them down. Some are funny. Some are painful. Some are unpleasant. I suppose that is why I have always remembered them so vividly. All are true (Dahl, 2009).

Family, childhood, adolescence, school: these are the pillars of his narration. The unexpected, the humour and the suspense! *Boy* is a great adventure, full of comic events, painful, unexpected: it is a story of passions and emotions where the young Roald, along with his large family, goes through many different human experiences. The life of a child employed to tell other children about the most important facts of human experience. It is an extraordinary means by which to capture the attention and interest of young ones, who can recognize themselves in these adventures and bring them back to their own reality: it is an educational process of recognition and acceptance. Roald Dahl wrote more than six hundred letters to his mother during school, and when she died, her family returned all the letters to the writer.

She had kept all of them in the original envelope, with the postage, bound with green ribbons: his childhood and youth were all gathered there: "It is an immense fortune to have such material to refer to in my old age" (Id. 9. 85): it would be like retracing the paths of a long adventure.

Finally, autobiography ...was used to learn more about our authors and to give a different and deeper meaning to their novels. It would be interesting for the young readers to know a good deal about the life of the authors they read, because every word, every sentence, every verse would take on a different form: more alive, more evident, more real.

But how could all this happen?

They were called Boazers, and they had the power of life and death over us junior boys.....

Roal Dahl, *Boy*

Everything has a value that can appear to us in the right place and at the right time. The problem is to recognize this value and know how to use it in the most diverse situations. All the information we have received from reading the three analyzed autobiographies, can add value to the reading of the novels of these three great storytellers. The task of life stories is to document, observe, collect information, pay attention to exceptional facts and then place them in the right space, place and time, to create continuity between the different narratives. How can we begin to create these bonds? Furthermore, how can we help younger people to understand the importance of this *double work* of reading and research? As educators and teachers, we must build new educational and didactic models to facilitate this literary process, which dialogues with the new generations. We should think of young readers as *young explorers*. We should think of our students and young people as if they were novice researchers, and give them all the clues and information to activate new ways of reading and research.

First of all, solicit ENCOURAGE their curiosity by proposing more than one novel to read. Second, ask which of these books they have chosen. Then ask what the elements that have caught their attention are. Finally, ask what they know about the author. Through these first steps, we can solicit ENCOURAGES their creativity and they can become the main agents in their educational and knowledge process. The most important meaning of things often seems hidden because it is very familiar and simple. But it is this familiarity that makes the interweaving between the reader and the author even more powerful and important. It would be

highly advisable for young readers to come to these discoveries autonomously. We, as experts in reading and education, can advise and direct the research work of young people. We can urge them to compile a collection of experiences that emerge from the chosen texts. And we can suggest that they collect other objects and other information about authors and characters. The structure of the work will appear clearer if it is filtered through the experiences of those who wrote it. This experimental style is an operative (theoretical) method that is able to develop: 1) motivation and love for reading; 2) an independent and interdisciplinary working method; 3) research not only as an educational and scientific tool but also as a *forma mentis*. So, to close this brief pedagogical reflection, Tom Sawyer's raft could be, for young readers, a means to lead young Tom along the great river but, at the same time, could be an emblem of freedom, a symbol of emancipation, a metaphor of a difficult journey that distinguishes the writer-author-character's time and that could redefine our time as adult-children readers. Author and reader become agents of the same story because, as Italo Calvino reminds us, every story is unrepeatable.

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