

## REVIEWS

### **TRANSFORMING TALES — HOW STORIES CAN CHANGE PEOPLE, ROB PARKINSON (2009)**

London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing UK, 336 pp.,  
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#### ***Transforming Tales – How Stories Can Change People***

The strap line 'How Stories Can Change People' indicates the value of Rob Parkinson's latest contribution to illustrate the impact of stories on our everyday lives, alongside the therapeutic potential of storytelling. *Transforming Tales* illuminates the author's focus on how stories, used therapeutically, can instigate change in people's lives. In this book Parkinson neatly guides the reader through the uses of stories that are hidden in cultures and everyday social interactions, before revealing an odyssey of examples to put into practice to help the reader understand how stories can be embraced further than just bedtime routines and spirited tales around a fire on a cold winter's night. He reveals how we make sense of our own life worlds through the stories we construct, each second and minute of each day. Parkinson also reveals how stories are embedded in our everyday lives and are used by various sources to manipulate or stimulate our way of thinking and provide benchmarks of who we are and what we should or could be.

Parkinson recognises reframing and story trance as a main source of change and draws on the writings of Milton Erikson, the American psychiatrist often noted for his unconventional approach

to psychotherapy, who specialized in medical hypnotherapy and who developed the extensive use of therapeutic metaphor and story. Parkinson extends this further by referring to imagination as being a source of helpfulness and hindrance. Encouraging the use of imagination through the art and craft of storytelling is what Parkinson aims to do by taking the reader on a journey of its uses across cultures and throughout time.

The most useful chapters are 3 and 4, entitled 'It's the way you tell 'em' and 'Traditional ways of storytelling' respectively. Chapter 3 offers practical tips on techniques of storytelling, from familiar techniques such as pacing, preamble, energy, and eye contact to less familiar skills such as the use of 'resistance and confusional language'. This is a technique that can be used in order to get the listener's creative areas of their brains working. The sub-section called 'The attention bargain' also gives an interesting insight into the levels of attention that are needed in the practice and art of telling stories. Within it Parkinson provides a summary of what is at the heart of storytelling: keeping it simple, knowing the story well and trusting it to do its job. Within Chapter 4, 'Traditional Ways of Storytelling', Parkinson draws on two traditional ways of storytelling: the fable and the dilemma tales. Using many familiar fables and tales such as 'The boy who cried wolf', Parkinson illustrates the effect and meaning of the context in which stories are told and the intention with which they are told, touching on the use of metaphor and multiple meanings.

In order to stretch and further stretch stories it gives license to the narrator to fib in order for it to fit the context in which it is being told. This is not only fun but also feels quite natural, and by that one should ask, 'When was the last time you told a story about an everyday occurrence without even the slightest of embellishment?' This adds weight to Parkinson's claims that humans are natural storytellers and that story is central to our everyday lives. These chapters provide considerations from both storyteller and listener perspectives; explaining how the teller can immerse themselves within the story, and become the story in order to bring it alive and captivate audiences of different sizes and backgrounds.

The use of language throughout the book is interesting, stimulating and thought provoking. The extensive use of fables, stories, shorts, narratives, and vignettes, enables Parkinson to share the tools and techniques of the storytelling trade in a unique way. His clever uses of drama and cliffhangers within the illustrations also draw the reader in, helping he/she move through the book more smoothly and enthusiastically than if one had an academic textbook.

As with the illustrations it is clear that the author has drawn from a wide range of sources of theory regarding the claims he makes about the impact of stories, yet the referencing is sporadic. As a result it is not always clear whose view is being expressed, whether these views are credible evidence or whether Parkinson's own speculations are being aired. This will be an important aspect

for those wishing to perform the art of storytelling in settings where evidence-based practice continue to support and influence choices of therapeutic interventions. It is also clear that the author is an experienced storyteller who has practiced as a performer and a therapist in a variety of settings. His writing reflects this, but it may be slightly unrealistically optimistic about the competence of others who wish to follow in his footsteps. This is more prominent in the chapter regarding guided imagery and the inner storytelling process. It describes how the technique can be used for those suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although it explores the work and successes of 'therapists' using the techniques, it is immediately followed with 'Four relaxation techniques' to use in order for the reader to know how to relax themselves, and others, in order for guided imagery to work best. This raises the question regarding the level of competence needed to carry out the techniques. Working with people who experience PTSD requires in-depth knowledge of the condition and, in the majority of cases, training within the subject area in order to practice ethically and minimise further trauma being experienced. However, Parkinson makes no reference to the prior expertise needed or the collaborative working necessary to carry out this particular technique; it is implied rather than explicit.

Taking into consideration one's own limits, expertise and potential growth, this book can act as a manual to anyone interested in using stories therapeutically. It is surprisingly and ultimately a story about the power of stories and storytelling and will appeal to many professionals and anyone interested in the capacity, the power, and the use of stories as a potential vehicle for change.

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e.g. Taylor, P. (2003) *Applied Theatre: Creating Transformative Encounters in the Community*, Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. Note the use of a comma after the book title.

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e.g. Prior, R. (2007) 'Understanding actor trainers' articulation of their practice', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 27: 3, pp. 295–305.