

Foreword

The coming to being of this book has a long history, as a matter of fact nearly as long as my own life.

When I started school, I was the smallest boy in the class, and I wore glasses. The other boys never chose me for their football team. I could never compete with them in the physical schoolyard sports. But, against all odds, I was never bodily beaten by them as other small boys with glasses sometimes were. When the strong boys became threatening, I found out that I could divert their attention by telling funny jokes that made them laugh, or puzzle them with clever riddles, or surprise them by reeling off indecent rhymes. I discovered the power of the spoken word. Now, more than half a century later, I am convinced that it was there and then that my curiosity to understand how stories work was awakened. What mechanisms were in operation to make oral narratives stronger than physical skills?

Thirteen years later, at Stockholm University, Bengt af Klintberg taught me the basics of folklore studies, and since then I have regarded myself as a folklorist with a focus on popular storytelling. For several years that followed, I worked as a freelancing folklorist, collecting and publishing folk legends, chain letters, children's ghost stories, and xerox lore. During the same period, I performed as a professional storyteller in schools and libraries all over Sweden. When political decisions in Sweden put an end to this sort of livelihood, I completed my doctoral dissertation and entered an academic career.

In January 1995, I was planning the project "Life in Visby" to collect the material that I will discuss in this book. At the time, I thought that the material might become useful for future research, but it was not obvious then that I myself would work with it. However, some years later, when concepts such as narrative analysis and narrativity research started flying around, I realized that my existing collection of interviews could provide a fruitful ground for discovering more about the secrets of the narrative form.

In the early summer of 1998, I was given the opportunity to arrange a symposium on the concept of narrativity and its application in the Nordic Child Culture Research network (Barnkultur i Norden, BIN) and the Nordic Network of Folklore (NNF) (Palmenfelt 2000). For me, this became the first incentive to consider what the perspectives of folkloristic narrative analysis could involve. In the same year (1998), together with Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, University of Turku, and Torunn Selberg, University of Bergen, I started a two-year project with Nordic folklorists who wanted to penetrate deeper into narrative perspectives. The article I wrote for the final project

report is included as part of the chapter “Life Stories” in this book (Palmenfelt 2006a).

In the spring semester of 2001, I was invited by John Lindow, University of California at Berkeley, to substitute for him during his research sabbatical. In my higher seminar on narrative analysis, participants such as Kimberly Ball, Merrill Kaplan, Katya Rapaport, Victoria Somoff, and Michelle Sullivan listened patiently to my ideas and gave me many wise comments. At Berkeley, I was also privileged to participate in frequent and profound discussions with Ülo Valk from the University of Tartu and on a couple of occasions with Katharine Young.

On occasions like those mentioned above, I have been able to broaden my understanding – theoretically and practically – of the function of stories and the art of storytelling. Some of the chapters in this book are based on conference papers or seminar texts.

When I started to systematically penetrate my empirical material in search of the hows and whys of oral narratives, I found six aspects particularly tempting to discuss (now forming the chapters “Memories”, “Positioning”, “Emotions”, “Dialogues”, “The Smallest Collectives”, and “Common Human Experiences” of this book). Some of my analyses of these themes are fairly firmly rooted in the contemporary disciplinary discussions, while others take a more private explorative stance. Other possible and undoubtedly equally important topics and approaches were left aside.

I believe that I was able to uncover at least some of the narrative mechanisms that I instinctively managed to apply during the school breaks back in the 1950s. These structures are to a large degree also those that create groups’ collective figures of thought and simultaneously provide individuals with tools to position themselves in relation to such mental constructions. Narratives help us to interpret the world in which we live. Narratives help us to handle our relations with our fellow humans sharing the same world.

The anthropologist Benedict Anderson (1991) described how the printed word as distributed by newspapers and magazines was active in cognitive processes that led to common acceptance of “imagined communities”, such as nation states. My study could be regarded as providing a folklorist’s addendum in its efforts to show the role of popular oral narrative in such processes.

The people of Visby who contributed their time and their memories are not mentioned by name in this book. More than a few of them are no longer alive. Their voices, their words, and their experiences are preserved in the recordings at the Gotland Folklife Archive. This book is dedicated to all those who generously shared their life histories.

For several years, my employer at the time, Gotland University College, granted me research funding to transform this material into a book. Vice-Chancellor Jörgen Tholin also granted me research leave as compensation for acting as head of department. The Swedish Research Council gave me a grant that enabled me to complete this book. Grants towards the printing were kindly provided by the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture and by Wilhelmina von Hallwyl's Gotlandsfond. For generous financial support to enable this English translation, I thank the Helge Ax:son Johnson Foundation, Konung Gustav VI Adolfs fond för svensk kultur, the Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy for Swedish Folk Culture, Längmanska kulturfonden, and Sällskapet DBWs stiftelse.

My book is finished, but – as is the fact with all scholarly works – my words will not be the final ones, colleagues will continue (and have already continued) the exploration of the powerful cultural form narrative.