The Natural Storyteller

Wildlife Tales for Telling

Georgiana Keable

Hawthorn Press

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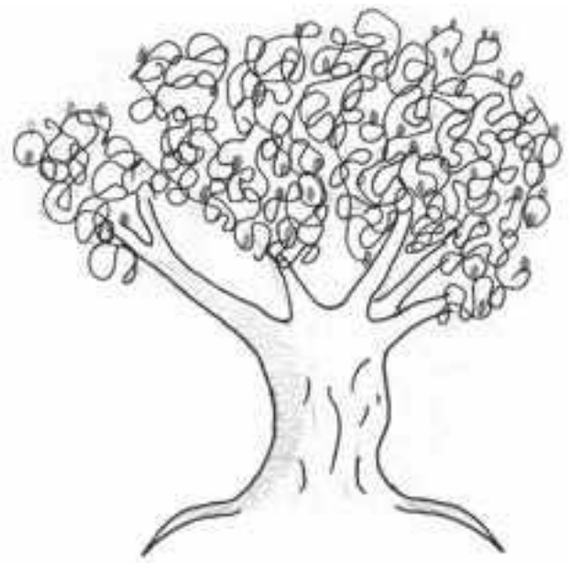
To my favourite storytellers – Mum and Dad

Contents



Foreword

Georgiana and I have been telling stories for a long time. Back in the 1980s we used to perform together as part of a group called 'The Company of Storytellers'. If we were to add together the number of years we've earned our living as tellers, the total would be a whole lifetime, more than seventy years.

In all that time there has been one question that I find myself being asked over and over again. Teachers, parents, librarians and grown-ups of all kinds draw me quietly to one side after a performance and they say: 'These old traditional stories are all very well but they've got nothing to do with the way we live our lives today. Why aren't you telling stories about housing estates and computers and smartphones? What have talking animals, fables and fairy-tales got to do with the real world of multinational companies, economic migrants and global warming? Isn't it time you started telling stories for *now*?'

It's a question that children never ask.

Maybe children instinctively recognise something that their elders have forgotten: that nothing has really changed. Just like our ancestors, we still depend for our survival on the generosity of the land. We may no longer be surrounded by farms and fields and forests but our lives are interwoven with the lives of insects, plants, animals and birds. Their well-being is our well-being. The elemental energies of fire, water, air and earth are as crucial to us as they have ever been. We live out our lives under sun, moon and stars. And emotionally we are no different – greed, kindness, anger, courage, jealousy, love, laziness, laughter and sorrow inhabit us, just as they inhabited our great-, great-, great-, great-grandfathers and grandmothers.

This is the stuff of story. It may be at one remove from the familiar modern world but its ingredients are as true as they've ever been.

The difference between us and those ancestors who first found the stories is that we are no longer aware that we are dependent on nature. For them, a moment of greed or thoughtlessness might have led directly to hunger or disease. They had to live in a right relationship with their world in order to survive. We have become blind to those connections but they are no less true for being out of sight.

The stories that our ancestors told remind us that we are all part of an organic whole. Everything is reciprocal. Animals, fishes, birds and plants are endlessly generous in their gift of themselves ... but there are conditions, and the central one is that we, as fellow creatures, must never forget that we are members of the same sprawling family.

If we're looking for stories for *now*, these must be the ones!

In *The Natural Storyteller* Georgiana retells traditional stories from many cultures. All of them explore themes of interdependence and sustainability (and there are some beauties – 'The Birch Tree' and 'The King of the Deer' are two of my favourites). But what makes her book unique is that her years of working as a storyteller give it a sense of adventure and fun. She knows how to talk with children. She is chatty and engaging. The book is a journey into storytelling as well as story. There are lots of tips about how to remember the structure of a story. She understands that once a story is learnt it actually works its way into the nervous system. It becomes part of you.

At the end of each chapter there's a 'Myths from the Land of You' section, in which readers are invited to find connections between the stories and their own lives. This is a lovely introduction to the idea of myth as a sort of template for human experience.

There are activities and things to do, bringing the stories into practical and playful modes (there's a Songline game and instructions for planting a 'Tun Tree', tracking animals and building a bird box). And there are plenty of riddles.

Georgiana also includes some true-life stories and scientific accounts that connect the story themes with the empirical world.

And the book ends with a challenge – have a story party and tell some of these tales yourself.

The book is life affirming. All of its stories are about taking delight in creation. But there is also a radical undercurrent. Let's not forget what stories do. They are at the root of thought. Narrative psychologists claim that by the age of three we all carry – hard-wired – an internalised narrative grammar. All human modes of conduct (the arts and sciences, memory, planning, religious belief, legislation, craft skills) are deeply storied. Stories are the tools we use to make sense of the world.

They are also viral. They spread. By getting these old stories back into circulation, by encouraging the telling and listening and dispersion of them, and especially by making them available to children, our deep cultural 'story map' can be subtly shifted. They can teach us to reassess our place in creation. Maybe they can lead towards an understanding that sees no contradiction between ancestral knowledge and the concerns of *now*.

It is for this reason most of all that I welcome this book and wish it a happy voyage into the minds and hearts of a new generation of *Natural Storytellers*.

Hugh Lupton, June 2017

Introduction

The Natural Storyteller – Is You!

This book is like a packet full of seeds. When you open the book and read a story seed, you plant it in yourself. The more you water this story seed the bigger it will grow. You may find yourself growing into a *Natural Storyteller*.

Maybe you don't want to tell stories. That's totally fine! Just enjoy the book. However, here are some reasons why you might consider being a storyteller:

1. You can wear a cloak.
2. When you are stranded on Mars, or in a lift that got stuck and you have no mobile phone or book, you can still enjoy loads of stories in your mind.
3. Your life is your own story. Telling stories can give you clues about how you want your story to grow. You will be able to explain all kinds of things in an interesting story kind of way.
4. Stories can be medicine. And being a storyteller can be true fun.

What kind of stories are in this book?

Here you will find myths, legends and fairytales. You will find tales of real life. You will find histories of people who were seriously brave. You will find stories of talented sparrows, enchanted trees and superhuman deer.

Every story in this seed-packet-book is about that outlandish-beyond-astounding-and-staggering stuff we call nature. That weird and incredible more-than-human world.

These stories come from peoples all over the world who live close to each other and to nature. People who see that nature's wild beings are often great travellers. A cuckoo flies from England way over the Sahara Desert to Africa and a salmon swims from America to the Arctic. And the stories themselves have travelled, without passports, flying over many borders to land in this book.

Adventure stories

In Norway, where I live, the word for 'story' is the same as the word for 'adventure'. This book is about having adventures. As you read it you may find your family gets bigger, you may become a tracker for wild cousins, you may discover you have relatives with extremely long roots and you might get the urge to go on a quest to save a squirrel. I'm not promising anything but you never know.

Story Heart

If the world was utterly jolly and happy all the time there would be no stories and it might be rather a boring place to live. However, there are lots of quests, disasters and excitements to keep us awake and on our toes. Heroes and heroines who are navigating dangerous waters need a good heart. That is usually more important to them than big muscles, a hairy chest or frilly clothes. They need to be brave and think with their heart.

Where do daring heroines and heroes keep their *Story Heart*? Same place as you keep your heart – in a cage, your ribcage, which protects it as it beats every moment of every day. Maybe you feel it – 'Dunk, dunk, dunk!'

This first chapter starts with a riddle:

You talk to me, but I have no words,
You sing to me, but I play no music,
You love me, though I am a stranger.
Who am I?

If you haven't worked out this riddle by the end of *Story Heart*, you will find the answer there. Meanwhile listen to the secrets hidden in the ribcage.

The Story of Tasoo

Long ago, a tiny bird flew through an enormous forest. The little bird's name was Tasoo. As he flew his bright eyes saw monkeys jumping in the trees and his little ears heard butterflies on the wing.

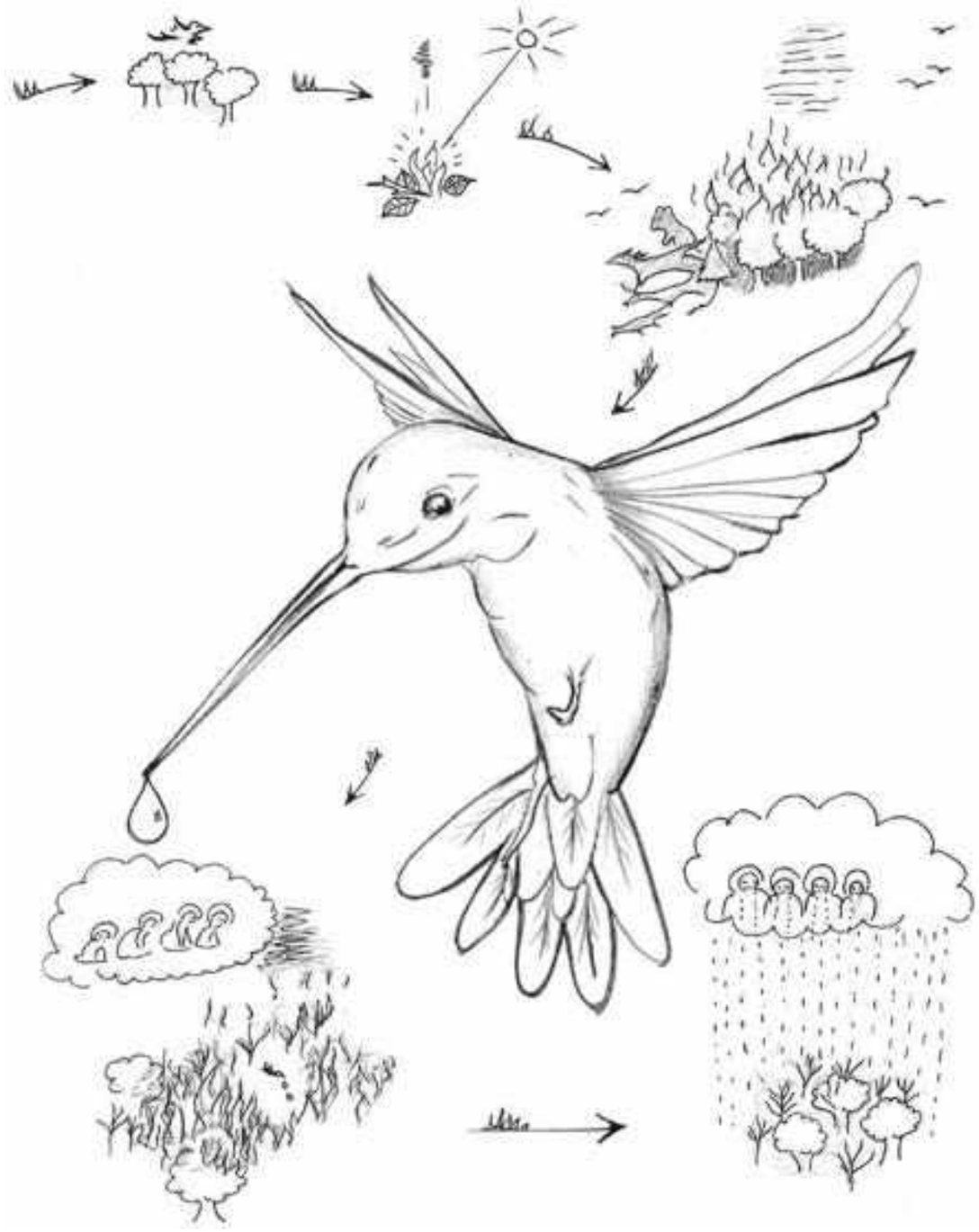
In the sky above Tasoo the sun was blazing down fiery and hot. Below him on the forest floor the dry grass was beginning to smoulder. Wind blew onto the grass and soon the glowing grasses burst into fire. Before long the whole forest was ablaze. All the animals from the largest elephant to the tiniest mouse ran and galloped away to save their skins. Above them the birds soared high into the air to save their feathers.

All except Tasoo. His little eyes went red with determination and he flew down through the flames to the river. Filling his tiny beak with water, he flew, back and forth, back and forth, and drops of water dripped onto the roaring furnace. On and on he flew, until his tiny wings were burnt and singed again and again. It seemed impossible that he had the strength to keep flying, yet he did.

High above, sitting on their silver clouds, all the gods peered down on him. Rubbing their eyes in disbelief, they saw this tiny heart of courage. Drop by drop all the gods began to cry. From their tears the rain poured as if gigantic buckets were being emptied down onto the forest and the fire was quenched.

Little Tasoo sat on a branch, dripping wet. Around him the animals and birds returned to the forest. Tasoo felt so happy he did what birds do. He began to sing.

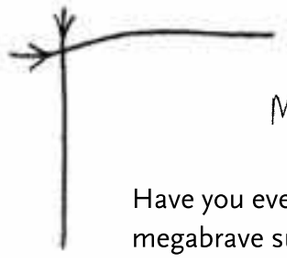
When you feel like telling a story make sure it's one you really like. It's good to start with a really short one like Tasoo. To help remember it you can make a map of the story – like this ...



True or False?

To help remember this story, say if the following are true or false:

1. Tasoo was a monkey.
2. The sun was blazing down on the forest.
3. All the animals ran for their lives.
4. The gods were busy playing computer games so they did not notice the forest burning.
5. Tasoo celebrated in typical bird style, with a good old sing-song.



Myths from the Land of You

Have you ever seen or been someone brave? Not necessarily a megabrave superhero like Tasoo or Spiderman. Sometimes a little thing like giving someone a look when they are being mean can take a lot of courage. What happened? This is the stuff that stories are made of.

Wangari and the Green Belt

Do you know how big Africa is? It is so enormous that the whole of India could fit in it, the whole of China, plus the whole of North America and most of Europe.

Over a hundred and thirty years ago the powerful European countries took a map of Africa, cut it up and shared it out as if it was an enormous pizza. France, you take this slice. Germany, you can have that bit, Britain, this. Do you think they asked the African people? No.

Britain was given a huge and beautiful country called Kenya.

There in Kenya in 1930, a child was born. An ordinary African child, born in a round house made of earth. As soon as she was born three women came in with gifts. One woman was carrying a sweet potato, the second brought blue sugar cane, the third brought sweetcorn. The new mother took juice from all these and dripped it into the mouth of the newborn baby. So the first thing the baby tasted was not mother's milk, but the fruits of the earth. The baby was given the name of an African goddess – Wangari.

Wangari's dad was tall and clever. He was a car mechanic. He was so strong that if he needed to change the wheel on a car he just lifted up the whole car, took out the old wheel and slung in a new one. Wangari's mum was also tall and her whole life no one ever heard her say an angry word.

Wangari had one dad and four mothers. She called them Big Mummy, Mummy (her real birth mother), Little Mummy and Younger Mummy. How can you have four mothers? At that time in Kenya a man who was rich enough could marry several women, as long as he promised to look after all his children. So Wangari had lots of sisters and brothers to play with.

When she was seven years old her dad said, 'Wangari, your mother and I want your brothers to go to school and there is no school here. You will go with your mother to your grandparents' village. I will not be there, so she will need your help.'

When they got to her new village Wangari stared wide-eyed. All around the village was the most beautiful forest she had ever seen. Her grandmother hugged her and said, 'Wangari, go out and play in the rain, then you will grow as tall as the trees.'

Wangari was only seven years old but she worked hard. She planted seeds, looked after her younger sister and brother, washed clothes and made food. She fetched firewood but her mum said she should never take wood from the fig tree, which was God's tree. She promised, but she often played beside it because there was the fresh water bubbling up and little frogs hopping around.

One day, as she was serving a dish of steaming ugali porridge to her big brother, he said, 'Mum, why doesn't Wangari go to school?'

'Now that's a good question, my son!' said her mum and, sure enough, soon Wangari became the first girl in the family to go to school.

On her very first school day Wangari's cousin walked with her. 'Can you read and write, Wangari?' he asked.

'No, I can't,' she said.

He proudly took out a pencil and wrote a big W on his book, then he took out a rubber and rubbed it out. 'Wow, that's magic!' Wangari wanted to learn this magic.

Wangari stayed at school and over the years worked very hard. On her last day she was amazed. She had won the prize as the cleverest pupil in the whole school!

Her mum said, 'Wangari, we have decided that you will go on to the high school. It's far away. Be brave – we love you.'

So Wangari set off alone. Her sack was light, for she had only one dress to carry, a present from her brother. She had no shoes – she didn't get those until she was fifteen.

The new school was run by nuns. Many of the nuns had come from Europe and Wangari thought they were kind to leave their homes and help girls in Kenya. However some of the nuns were very strict. The girls were never allowed to speak their own language – their mother tongue. If they did they had to wear a badge which said, 'I am stupid, I spoke my mother tongue today.' Wangari worried that she would not understand her grandmother when she went home, but luckily she still dreamed in her own language.

At this time a terrible war began. Over the years not only had their country been taken over but so many unfair things had happened. Kenyan men fought bravely for Britain in the Second World War. But when they came home their farms had been given away to British soldiers! Their country had been taken away and now even their farms. This was the final straw and Kenyans began to fight to get their own country back.

At her school Wangari was sheltered from violence and the girls were told that the African fighters were wrong. Wangari loved learning and when the last day of school came she was amazed.

'Wangari,' said her friends, 'you have won the prize as the cleverest girl in the whole school! You could be a nurse, or even a teacher. What will you be?'

'Neither,' said Wangari. 'I want to go on studying. I want to learn everything there is to know about nature – forests, animals and birds!'

'What?' said her friends. 'Don't be ridiculous, Wangari, you are not a man.'

But Wangari's dream came true. Along with other bright Kenyan students she got a scholarship from the president of America. For five-and-a-half years she studied biology in America. After all that time, you can imagine how excited she was on the long boat ride home over the ocean.

At last, nearing the coastline, she saw a big group of people singing and as she drew nearer she could see it was her family. Big Mummy, Mummy, Little Mummy, Younger Mummy, Dad, Grandmother, all the sisters and brothers, singing for her! As she ran down the gangplank she was crying with happiness.

Her aunty stared at her and said, 'Wangari, what is wrong, you are so thin! Don't they have proper food in America? Why have they been starving you?'

Wangari laughed. 'Don't you know it's fashionable in America to be skinny and thin, not like Kenya where it's beautiful to be big and gorgeous. I'm so happy to be home!'

Kenya was now an independent country. Wangari got a job at the university and she kept studying nature. She became a professor; in fact she was the first woman professor in the whole of Central and East Africa. By this time she had saved enough money to buy herself a car. There were not many women in Kenya who had their own car and she was excited to drive out to the village where her grandparents lived.

Even before she had arrived she stopped the car. She was confused, staring at the landscape that she knew so well. How could it be? The great beautiful green forest was gone. Instead she saw mile upon mile of tea and coffee bushes.

Her heart pounding, she approached her family house and saw a beloved figure sitting outside. 'Grandmother,' she called, 'where is the forest? What happened?'

'Money, my child,' said her grandmother. 'They have cut the forest for money. But they have forgotten that money cannot buy everything. Money is no home to the birds of the forest, for mother elephant and brother monkey. Money cannot shade us from the hot sun. Money cannot be burned on our cooking fire. Money will not stop the earth from washing away in the floods or bring sweet rain for our crops.'

Water! The land was so dry. Wangari ran to the fig tree where she used to play, God's tree. Where it had stood was a dried old stump and the clear delicious water and the little frogs were gone too. Wangari knew now from her studies that the fig tree has a root that goes so deep it always finds water. The tree was gone and the land was dry. She looked around at the children of the village and saw many who looked hungry and unwell. 'Yes, child,' said her grandmother. 'People use the money from coffee to buy white bread and sweets for their children. They no longer grow good vegetables and they can no longer pick

the fruits and nuts of the forest, which used to be free.'

Wangari was so angry. She got into her car and drove straight back into the city, straight to the government building, and took the lift up to the forestry department.

'I want to plant trees. No, I am going to plant a forest!' she said to the forestry minister.

'Well, Professor Wangari, I know you are very clever, but how can you plant a whole forest?'

'It's simple,' she said. 'The people of Kenya will help me.' Wangari wrote in the newspapers, she spoke on the radio and to crowds of people, saying, 'Cutting down our forest is destroying our beautiful Kenya. It's making our children hungry and our animals and birds are losing their homes. There is a simple solution. We will plant trees!'

Sure enough, women and men listened to her words. Little by little they learnt to scarify, soak, stratify and plant tree seeds. They cared for the tiny saplings so that no one trod on them and no stray goat ate them. A great new forest grew up. Wangari and her friends called this work the Green Belt movement because they were planting long green belts of forest over the whole of Kenya.

Meanwhile Wangari was also determined to protect the old forest that remained. When she heard that an ancient forest was in danger she went with groups of students. They stood bravely before the bulldozers and the chainsaws. The rich people who owned these forests were furious. They made up lies about her in the newspapers, they threatened her and at last they sent her to prison. Many times she was locked up in prison for protecting forests and people.

Do you think Wangari gave up? No! One day she got a letter in the post. It was from Norway. She had won perhaps the highest honour a person can receive in this world. She had been given the Nobel Peace Prize. She and the thousands of women and men who had helped her were so proud. And they kept planting trees.

Wangari was a real person, a warm and inspiring person whom I was lucky enough to meet. When she came to Norway for the Nobel Peace Prize a group of African women asked me to come and tell her a story. She was the best listener – you could see from the expressions on her face that she was listening to every word. Maybe that's what made her brave; she listened to what people and trees needed.

Here is the Wangari Maathai Quiz, to help remember her story:

1. How many mums did Wangari have?
2. What was so special about 'God's tree'?
3. Where did Wangari study?
4. Why did the Kenyan people get angry?
5. What was happening to the forest?
6. Why did Wangari go to prison?
7. What was the prize she got?

This next story is about John who had a big heart and tried not to listen to it.

The Pedlar of Swaffham

In a town called Swaffham in England lived a man named John. His house was so small that he could sit on his chair and shut the front door with his right hand and the back door with his left hand and warm his hands on the fire without moving. In his tiny garden grew an apple tree. In the spring the tree was white with blossom and in the summer it was red with apples.

John lived around six hundred years ago when there were few shops and nobody had a car. John walked around with a big sack filled with buttons, ribbons, knives and other things to sell. Though John had a small house he had a big heart, and when he was out selling his wares he might see an old widow who needed a knife, or a boy with sparkling eyes gazing at a football, or a young lady taking some bright buttons in her hand. John couldn't help himself. He gave away more than he sold. And so the day came, as it had to, when there was nothing left in his sack.

That day, John looked in his pockets, but they were completely empty. He searched in his cupboards. They were empty too. In the garden the apples were long gone from the old apple tree. That night John went to bed hungry and, as hungry people often do, he had a dream.

In his dream the door opened and a man in shining white clothes appeared, calling, 'John! Wake up! Go down to London and stand on London Bridge. There you will hear something to your advantage.'

That morning John woke up with a start and thought, 'Ho, what a good dream, but after all it was only a dream.'

That day he dug over his little potato patch and found two tiny potatoes. But two small tatties don't fill an empty stomach, so that night he went to bed hungry and, as hungry people often do, he had a dream ...

Once again the door opened and the man in shining white clothes said, 'Wake up, John! Go to London town and stand on London Bridge, where you will hear something to your advantage.'