

Sonja Dunn, storyteller extraordinaire

Bernice Thurman Hunter

Sonja Dunn is “Mrs. Make Believe” — /television’s storylady. I put these questions to her:

1. In this day of computers where does the storyteller fit in?
2. How long have you been telling stories? What got you started?
3. Why do you think there is a rebirth of storytelling, and of reading aloud, and of acting out plays, etc.?

Sonja’s answers suggest some of the reasons for the present surge of interest in live storytelling, and also show the way her personal touch has contributed to that resurgence.

Sonja Dunn was born in Toronto, during the latter part of the depression, to Ukrainian parents. Her mother, a lover of the arts, died when Sonja was just five years old. Her father was a professor of languages, a theatre-director, and a choir master, among other things. He was a freelancer so, like two gypsies, Sonja and her beloved father were always on the move throughout Ontario and Quebec. Thus Sonja had the doubtful privilege of attending fourteen elementary schools and three secondary schools. Finally she earned her B.A. from Laurentian University in Sudbury and her Master of Education from O.I.S.E. She is also a “Dramatics Arts Specialist” (U. of T.); she has a teaching certificate from the Faculty of Education; is a Drama Consultant, and former Artistic Director at Harbour Front, Toronto, in the “Theatre-in-Education” Program.

On a more personal note, Sonja says she loved all her teachers, especially those who read stories and taught music to the class. She had a special soft spot for women teachers and on Mother’s Day, because she had no mother of her own, she would present her teacher with an original Mother’s Day poem.

Sonja’s father was himself a storyteller and she remembers as a child that even being sick was not all bad because her father would sit by her bedside and weave wonderful tales of his boyhood in the Ukraine. And he would read to her, the poetry of Tara Shevchenko, a noted Ukrainian poet, thus instilling in her at an early age the love of great literature. He also taught her to play the mandolin. If Sonja had not been fortunate enough to have had such a special father, and been lucky enough to inherit his gift of storytelling, she wouldn’t have had those wonderful, rich-in-heritage stories to pass down to her own two sons, and to the many thousands of people, in schools, libraries, parks, prisons, folk-concerts and churches, that make up her audiences across Canada. These

tales of Ukrainian folk-lore and mythology have given Sonja insight into her own background, and family history, and made of her a unique storyteller.

Even as a schoolgirl she was constantly putting on plays and cajoling her friends into participating. If her friends were reluctant to join in, then Sonja would, herself, become writer, director, producer, and, of course, she would always end up with the plum part — the starring role.

Today she produces, writes and performs in her own television show, “Sonja and Company”, a pot-pourri of the arts, which airs on “Mid Canada T.V.” (CTV). She also broadcasts a children’s show called “Sonja’s Storytree”, a community work for Maclean Hunter, MHTV Cable 10. This program consists of storytelling, reading, and acquainting children with the work of Canadian authors.

As well as being a first-rate storyteller, Sonja is an interviewer and has had as her guests such luminaries as W.O. Mitchell, author; William Kurelek, artist; Gene McLelland, songwriter; Sylvia Fraser, author; Paul Kligman, actor; and Paul Thompson, artistic director of Theatre Passe Muraille.

As if this were not enough to keep any one human being busy, she is also a theatre and book reviewer. As president of CANSCAIP (Canadian Society of Children’s Authors Illustrators and Performers) she enthusiastically promotes the books of her fellow Canscaipers, Barbara Greenwood, Claire Mackay, Vancy Kasper, Jean Little, Shirley Day, Robert Munsch, and Bernice Thurman Hunter, to name a few. Sometimes she reads excerpts from their books. Other times she tells the book’s story in her own words.

Her favourite stories, however, are folk tales which she tells with absolute abandon. Once you have heard her lively, vibrant, storytelling technique, you will never forget her.

There are many ways of telling a story, Sonja explains, and a good story will always stand on its own. Some purists use no aids whatsoever, depending entirely on their voices, actions and expressions. Such stories need to be told with an effervescent quality which brings the characters vividly to life. A good storyteller can make her listener actually live in storyland: the listener sees in her mind’s eye the scenes, actions, and people. If a storyteller can do this, then she has succeeded in involving the listener and can hold her audience captive to the very last word. But whatever technique you choose to use, says Sonja, never forget that in the story-circle you must always leave a space for the sun to shine in and for the laughter to get out.

Sonja, herself, likes to employ whatever materials enhance her stories. My favourite among her visual-aids is her voluminous, colourful, magical story-skirt — a huge, flamboyant garment that she ties around her waist while talking a mile-a-minute. The skirt has giant pockets, deep and mysterious, each containing some exciting mnemonics to add to and reinforce the story. One hilarious incident occurred concerning the skirt. Sonja had just finished her stint, and was sitting down catching her breath, when it was discovered that a little boy was missing. The teachers searched everywhere, to no avail . . . and, you guessed

it . . . he was found comfortably settled in under Sonja's skirt.

Sonja was "discovered" at a party in Sudbury in 1962. She was playing her ukelele and singing her songs and she so captivated and impressed her audience, especially a t.v. producer, that she was asked to sing Christmas folksongs on a local television program. Since then her career has mushroomed and has literally taken her all over the world — to Venezuela, the Caribbean, the Grenadines, Labrador, South America, and many other exotic places.

After each of her workshops, there is a flood of demands for her chants and songs. She receives so many requests for a collection of her works, that she is now in the market for a publisher to produce such a volume.

I have been asked, "Does a storyteller like Sonja enjoy television and radio like the rest of us?" The answer is, yes. But she still prefers a good book and encourages children, not just to read, but to write their own books, and to start a library of their very own.

Everyone has a story to tell, says Sonja, and if you have a favourite one that you particularly love, do share it with your friends, just as you would a plate of cookies or a birthday cake. And you will notice in the telling, and re-telling, that each person will make the story his or her very own. For each will add his own dimension, her own charm, and over the years it will grow and eventually become a special story.

"Particistory" is one of Sonja's favourite methods of involving her audience. She begins by forming a circle (children or adults, it makes no difference) then encouraging each person to add his or her unique ingredients — a new chant or song or poem, or a new idea.

During her "keynote experiences" Sonja also plays the guitar and accompanies herself in songs and chants which are very soon picked up by the audience. Her rich voice and natural musical style, make it lots of fun to participate while at the same time learning new and exciting storytelling techniques.

Now, just for a moment I would like to get back to my first question: In this day of computers, where does the storyteller fit in when all a child needs to do is push a button to be transported, via television and video, into a vast, make-believe world? Where is the place of the *live* storyteller? That is the definitive word — live. Can a television set or a computer spontaneously reach out and hug a child? Or pat her on the head? Or tell him that the boy in the story has big brown eyes just like his? This, Sonja feels, is the answer, the main reason for the rebirth of live storytelling. The personal touch . . . the aliveness . . . the nearness . . . the eye to eye contact . . . being invited to join in.

How long has Sonja been storytelling? Forever. Since she could talk (and can she ever talk!).

Another interesting question is, "How do you manage to communicate in a strange land, when you do not speak the language of the country?" The answer can be found in an experience she had in Labrador where the children enthusiastically joined in even though they didn't know a word of English. And Sonja

didn't find this out until it was all over! How, then, did she reach them? By mime, and music, and the rhythm in the words. The voice inflections, the eyes, the expressions, and — the silences.

These are the tools of storytelling. And of course, my personal favourite, the magic story-skirt, in whose pockets puppets and picture-books, dolls and ghosts and goblins, and all manner of exciting things reside, just waiting their turn to pop out to fascinate the audience and become a part of a rich and wonderful story experience.

***Bernice Thurman Hunter** is author of That Scatterbrain Booky, With love from Booky, As ever Booky and A place for Margaret.*