

Trish Matthews

Reconnecting the Northern Forests Through Stories, Wisdom and Creativity

How can socially engaged storytelling help reveal our own innate wisdom?

Stories can be powerful tools. I've worked with stories for many years now and often used them as vehicles to explore sensitive and emotive topics. Each time, they adapt themselves to whatever is needed and serve their purpose well. One of the interesting features of stories is their ability to have lives of their own. Psychologist and mythologist Sharon Blackie adds that sometimes stories can even seem to conspire with you to subvert the 'official' meaning so that the story presents itself to the recipient in another way.

I have been influenced by the work of Diana Beresford Kroeger and Robin Wall Kimmerer, who combine their scientific knowledge with their indigenous knowledge and heritage. Both have campaigned that we have so much to learn from trees, plants and the non-human world. Each tree and plant makes its own unique contribution to the forest community.

I am increasingly concerned about the deforestation of our native forests and our disconnection from the natural world. Through LiLa, I was reminded that Scotland has lost 99% of the ancient native pine forests that connect us to the Northern Forest biome. During the

early part of the LiLa programme, some of us based in Scotland went out in search of a few of the tiny fragments that remained, and we became very aware of the loss. Alongside the loss of forest, much of our forest culture has disappeared, along with the close connection we once had with our native trees, whereas it was clear from the LiLa seminars that it was still intact and surviving in many of the other Northern Forest countries.

For LiLa, I have used stories to look at the importance of native trees and forests through the creation of contemporary folk tales. The stories needed to speak both for the individual trees and the forest environment and our old forest culture, so are based around the 18 native trees of the mysterious and ancient Gaelic Tree Alphabet, starting with eight of the pioneer trees.

I designed the tree story kits to incorporate other Northern Forest ingredients, including folklore characters, proverbs, snippets from old folk tales, forest dilemmas and even magic props. The kits help stimulate imagination and enchantment. According to Blackie, access to a good imagination is important, as it can help with problem-solving through many of life's challenges.



Figures 1 and 2. Opened and closed story kits. Images: Trish Matthews, 2023.

The first stories were created and shared in Scotland with different groups and individuals, but it was LiLa that provided the perfect platform for the first international story exchange to take place, sending the stories travelling to Norway, Sweden, Finland and Turkey.

Most of the Forest Library stories started their lives in a forest setting, but being able to help facilitate the LiLa tales from the top of an ancient forest made them particularly poignant. By the time we reached the summit at Högklinten, we had already immersed ourselves in the benefits of a forest environment for over an hour, enabling the first stage of story writing to be very focused. The stories then continued to evolve slowly over the following days (see figure 3, p.72).

I am not a traditional storyteller as such—my work is more about the process of finding and creating our own contemporary stories, then seeing where the stories take us. From the discussions that took place during story writing and exchange, both the experience of being in the forest (or the recreation of a forest ambiance) and

the story-making process often seemed to have something of a transformative effect.

Sometimes, the stories help build a more balanced connection to nature by enabling people to see the forest from different viewpoints. This could be seen through some of the elements and non-human ingredients of the story – e.g., through the eyes of the mischief-maker, the tree or the other forest creatures that were chosen to feature in the story. The stories enabled people to explore difficult themes safely in a gentle way that brought more clarity, but they sometimes also tapped into other, more personal issues that needed help resolving. Clearly, the stories were not just guiding us to a better understanding of the natural world; they were also tapping into personal issues that needed help with resolving, too (see Figure 4, p.72).

The Lost Museum follows the Scandinavian natural blueprint model regarding human interaction with nature, i.e., by first getting people into nature to experience it, then observing it, and then starting to understand the



*Figure 3. Writing stories at Högklinten.
Image: Trish Matthews, 2023.*



Figure 4. Illustration from Gold Fever story by Katri, Saara and Kerrienne; artwork. Image: Trish Matthews, 2023.

importance of the natural world. These positive experiences can help everyone learn how man affects nature and can then be used as building blocks towards conservation and sustainable living.

The story workshops were intended as a catalyst for inspiring climate action. Once the stories were completed and given back to the participants, the story makers were asked to give something back to nature as a token of gratitude and respect for the abundance of gifts that we take and receive from the forest. Reciprocity has been an important ingredient in the Forest Library. The stories form part of a reciprocal cycle by being gifts to the story maker, the Forest Library and the audience that receives the story. The experience of the story workshop then inspires the gift back to the forest.

A story is never read or told the same way—each time it is shared, it will likely be a different experience for the audience and the storyteller. Part of the joy of the project

is sharing the stories but also hearing about the journeys they have been on. For example, *The Enchanted Holly Forest*, written by children in the Highlands of Scotland, travelled all the way to LiLa and then to the Nesna school in Norway. There is great excitement when the news of stories reaches back to the storymakers.

Pioneer trees help by preparing the ground and paving the way for other trees and new growth. The pioneer tree stories that emerged helped pave the way ahead for story exchange with our Northern Forest neighbours and inspired small acts of climate action. The project is still in its early stages, but already several have started to give back something to the forest either by planting trees, volunteering at community woodlands or simply by helping create a more wildlife-friendly garden.

“Mighty oaks from little acorns grow.” (14th Century old English proverb).



Figure 5. Emmelin Øwre Lyngås at LiLa receiving *The Enchanted Holly Forest* story by Rosehall primary school. Image: Trish Matthews, 2023. Figure 6. Nesna Primary School, Norway with Rosehall's book, Image: Emmelin Øwre Lyngås 2023. Figure 7: Rosehall Primary School, Scotland at their Forest Library launch. Image: Rosehall Primary School, 2022.

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