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FEATURES

Storytime (for Adults)

Wednesday, October 28, 2015 | by **DEANNA DUFF**



Photo by Lou Daprile

Hit readings here and around the world reflect a growing phenomenon.

Twice monthly, crowds gather in silent attention at the downtown Seattle Public Library for *Thrilling Tales: A Story Time for Grownups*. All eyes fix on a spartan table where librarian David Wright sits and reads, a small desk lamp hovering above the book before him. Earlier this fall, the book was Penelope Mortimer’s short story “The Skylight”—and as Wright narrated the frantic tale, the audience hung on his every word.

“Especially for impatient people, it’s good because it slows things down a bit,” says 27-year-old Janice Leadingham, a bookseller at Pike Place Market’s Lamplight Books. “For one hour, you can just *be*.”

Story performances for adults are ubiquitous now. New York’s *The Moth* launched in 1997 with readers sharing true stories; now it’s a national phenomenon thriving in some 25 English-speaking locations around the globe. (In 2014 Seattle Arts & Lectures presented *The Moth* to a sold-out Benaroya Hall.) Celebrities read correspondence of notable individuals for *Letters Live*, a hit series that began in London in 2013 and debuted a Los Angeles spinoff this year. Seattle has an occasional, itinerant homegrown version called *Letters Aloud*.

(The enormous appetite for listening to stories instead of reading them is also reflected in the rising popularity of audiobooks. Audiobook sales have quadrupled in the past five years, with fiction accounting for more than 75 percent of audiobooks sold, according to the Audio Publishers Association.)

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SPL'S *Thrilling Tales* and Town Hall's *Short Stories Live* both launched more than a decade ago, helping to pioneer the concept of adult storytimes in Seattle. Wright, the SPL librarian and *Thrilling Tales* founder, has curated more than 500 *Thrilling Tales* events, focusing on popular genres such as crime, horror and Westerns. *Short Stories Live* hosts "A Rogue's Christmas," an annual event that typically mixes heartwarming holiday stories about angels and talking animals with a hilarious reinterpretation of "The Night Before Christmas" as a lawyer would write it, dripping with disclaimers and legalese.

"It's important that it's not an appreciate-the-beauty-of-writing event," says Wright, who's presented at national library conferences. "It should be the equivalent of a children's storytime where you're dying to know what happens next."

In an age when people's lives are inundated with information, an emotional narrative shared by a roomful of people offers a meaningful moment of humanity. "Stories are what drive us and keep us connected," says Paul Stetler, founder of *Letters Aloud*. "Modern tech has broken down how we communicate to the point of sometimes getting rid of language altogether. It's nice to occasionally put the tech down and just listen."

Story-time events combine elements of reading and theatre. *Short Stories Live* and *Letters Aloud* employ professional actors as readers, without the overhead—no costumes, sets, lighting or music. Limited engagements keep commitments minimal—which helps attract top-notch talent. These factors also make touring possible; *Letters Aloud* will travel throughout Alaska, California, Idaho and Wyoming in 2016.

A lot of the appeal of these series is the community that forms around them. Third Place Books at Ravenna launched *The League of Literary Snobbery: Storytime for Grownups* a year ago and now has a loyal following.

"I like finding new places, but going by myself is a bit out of my comfort zone," says 29-year-old Sharayah Lewis after attending her first *League of Literary Snobbery* event. "Books and reading are my comfort zone, though, so this feels welcoming."

Maggie Hess, poetry editor of *The Los Angeles Review*, organized the 2013 series *Unauthorized Readings* at Fremont Abbey with local poets reading Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself." A crowd of 100-plus people gathered to hear a beloved text interpreted through various voices. Hess is planning another event for early 2016.

"Most people who were there weren't writers or poets themselves," Hess says. "This is something that does feel accessible to people."

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