



A childhood woven with magical tales

AMANDA COETZEE

I LEARN'T the art of storytelling from my messy, extended family. My grandmother was one of 16 children, my mother one of eight, and between step- and half-siblings, I am one of nine.

There is very little of the human condition that has not been experienced by our family. From the Great War to family feuds, my childhood was woven with tales of tragedy to triumph and the ever-present scandals whispered by adults and overheard by children.

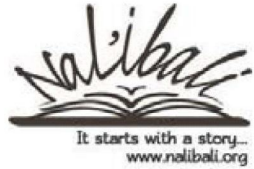
I was the reader of the family before I became the writer. At four years old I entertained the customers at the corner shop where my grandmother worked by reading the newspaper aloud, perched next to the meat slicer and penny sweets. Banned from reading at the table, I would defiantly read cereal boxes and

jam jars until I could pick up my book again. I was strange, but in my family it takes a lot more than being a compulsive reader to cause anxiety. Perhaps had my early attempts at writing been discovered, this might have tipped the balance into concern.

Things have changed, the world grew smaller and my large family split into groups that had less in common and children who neither knew each other nor their communal history. Still, shadows of our stories weave their way into my writing, and I'm still strange.

As my three-year-old son begins his own journey into the written word, I find myself torn between technique and magic. Do I teach him phonics, the ABC or simply allow the process to occur organically? As an English

teacher, I find myself burdened with the complexities of teaching a language that seems to have little place in my home. I hear him laugh at rhyme and absurdities I would not know how to teach, but that are instinctively communicated in stories. He grows in confidence and understanding as we ritually read one



of his favourite books every evening and I laugh when he adds a burp or narrative to the story that makes perfect sense. I have yet to tire of *The Gruffalo* (by Julia Donaldson) because it is never the same book; it has become our story and our secret language.

I want my son to learn to read, but more, much more than that, I want him to learn from reading. I want him to discover heroism, sacrifice, joy, love and adventure through words and find a refer-

ence to navigate his own journey. I want him to discover that there is a story in us all and though at times the tales may be mundane, they are still profound and should always be respected.

Like all man-made accomplishments, whether art or architecture, perhaps the more important question should not be how we create and build — but why? Yes, we can and must formally teach reading, but at our peril we ignore the wonder of the shared, common need to connect with each other.

Perhaps it is magic after all. ● When she isn't writing crime thrillers, Amanda Coetzee works as a deputy headmistress. She grew up in Bedford, England, and now lives in Rustenburg with her husband and son. 'Redemption Song' is Coetzee's second novel after her acclaimed debut crime thriller 'Bad Blood'. Send your comments to letters@nalibali.org or www.facebook.com/nalibaliSA



WORDSMITH: Amanda Coetzee is a deputy headmistress, crime writer and mother