



Passing on family storytelling tradition

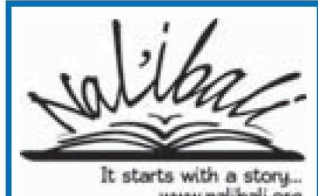
I LEARNT the art of storytelling from my messy, extended family. My grandmother was one of 16 children, my mother one of eight and between step- and half siblings, I am one of nine.

There is very little of the human condition that has not been experienced by our family at one time or another. From the Great War to family feuds, my childhood was woven with tales of tragedy to triumph and the ever present scandals that were 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 the cereal boxes and jam jars until I could pick my book up



English teacher and thriller writer AMANDA COETZEE is passing on her love of words and reading to her son

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 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 that 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



When AMANDA COETZEE is not writing crime thrillers, she works as a deputy headmistress. She grew up in Bedford, England, and now lives in Rustenburg with her husband and son.

Redemption Song is Amanda's second novel after her acclaimed debut crime thriller, Bad Blood.

yet to tire of *The Gruffalo* 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 reference 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 to each other.

Perhaps it is magic after all. **Send your comments to letters@nalibali.org or www.facebook.com/nalibaliSA.**

● From Monday, the Nal'ibali column will appear on The Herald books page.