

AS IF: TRUTH AND LIES IN FICTION

Here's a Sudanese storyteller's opener:

'I'm going to tell a story

It's a lie.

But not everything in it is false.'

From Norma J. Livo and Sandra Rietz *Storytelling Process and Practice* (1986)

And here is an extract from the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy's entry on holes:

'Naive... descriptions of the world treat holes as objects of reference, on a par with ordinary material objects... yet it might be argued that reference to holes is just a [way of speaking], that holes are mere... as-if entities, fictions.'

I am often asked by children who hear the stories I tell, 'Is it true?' And it is not easy to know how to answer this question. In the dictionary, a storyteller is described as 'a reciter of tales', but the very next entry is, 'a liar, fibber'. Roger D. Abrahams (1983) said that 'tales are, in the ears of their hearers, permissible lies'. There is a school of thought that objects to the way stories are, allegedly, used to tell lies. Myths are an example of the sort of thing these objectors have in mind, and the story of Santa Claus, to this day, divides parents over whether it should be told as true or not. What is so difficult about answering such a simple question as 'Is it true?'?

According to Gregory Currie (2012) the reason it is so difficult to answer is because narratives 'represent as true' the content of that narrative. But, he says, representing-as-true must be kept separate, conceptually, from being-committed-to-truth. It is true, in the story of Sindbad for instance, that Sindbad lands on an island that is in fact a giant turtle, and the storyteller certainly refers to the story – like a hole – as if it were true. But if the person who told the story were asked, outside the context of storytelling, whether they believed that the events they had described really happened, they are likely to say 'no', though perhaps with some qualification.

If the storyteller were to simply answer the question 'Is it true?' with 'No' then they would jeopardise the authenticity of their telling that is so important to the storyteller and their audience. It jeopardises the all-important suspension of disbelief. With adults, the suspension of disbelief is an important ironic attitude they are able to adopt in order to enter into the story-world of a particular narrative. Rationally, they know that the events they are witnessing never took place, or at least not exactly as they are told in the story, and that the characters do not exist and are not really feeling pain and the like. But, with the suspension of their disbelief, they are able to allow real emotional responses to occur in themselves.

With children, however, the picture is more complicated because their position is not necessarily ironic; sometimes, instead of a suspension of disbelief it may simply be belief. It is this sensitivity that a storyteller needs to be aware of. To illustrate this, here's another anecdote:

I used to run a session for classes based around the curriculum subject 'Earth, Sun and Moon' in which I would go into the class and tell them that I was a member of the Flat Earth Society, or FES, and I would say that, 'as a member of FES we believe that the Earth is flat and not round'. I would then use this premise to galvanise the class to try to prove to me that the Earth is round and not flat, given that they thought my 'FES position' ridiculous. This helped them to see the difficulties in proving their 'obviously true' position and it helped them see that most of the evidence they have for the Earth being round is secondary evidence and not primary evidence (also an area of the curriculum at that time).

I would always feel somewhat uncomfortable telling them that I was a member of FES when in fact I was not. My discomfort was heightened when, after the session, the children would come up to me and quiz me quite earnestly about the Flat Earth Society. I realised that the irony enjoyed by both myself and the class teacher was not shared, or even recognised, by the children. Later I adapted the session (see page 143) by telling classes a story about a time-travelling scientist in which the children were to play the role of the scientist. In the story, the scientist travels back to the time of the ancient Egyptians, who believed that the Earth was flat. I then role-played the Egyptian whilst they, playing the modern-day scientist, tried to convince me of the Earth's roundness. In doing this I felt much more comfortable because the children knew that I did not hold the views I espoused throughout the session even though they spoke to me during the session as if I did. The former situation describes what seems to me to be an impermissible lie and the latter, permissible.