

The Magic of Storytelling

Tell me a story, Mama, a child begs, scrambling up on her mother's lap.

I have to tell you what happened to me on the way to the office, says the man to his coworkers, who lean forward, eager to hear the latest turn of events.

It was dark as pitch. The wind howled through the trees as the boy ran, begins the camp counselor as campers huddle closer to the fire, glancing nervously over their shoulders.

Storytelling weaves a magic charm around us and draws us in. Young or old, regardless of background, we all like to hear a good yarn. Iowans who want to give themselves over to a good story can do just that at the Iowa Storytelling Festival. Celebrating its 20th year, the Clear Lake festival is all about a good story.

The event offers a wide range of experiences, from professional storytellers captivating audiences to workshops outlining the art of telling to novices trying out tales during an open-mic session. For those who like to feel the hair rise up on their necks, the Friday night *Lady of the Lake* "ghost boat" cruise offers stories that may be scary, eerie, or just plain strange.

"We will have professional performers from Iowa, Wisconsin, and Illinois," says Jean Casey, director of the Clear Lake Public Library, which sponsors the festival. "These performers represent a wide range of styles: stories of growing up on an Iowa farm in the 1950s, stories that are multicultural and multilingual, stories that focus on Americana and ecology."

JoAnne Lower is a Norwegian Lutheran Iowa farmer's daughter who draws her stories from her own experiences growing up. "We each have a story," says Lower. "Our life is a story. Our stories connect us."

Oral storytelling is one way history is passed along, says Sadarri Saskill, a storyteller from Milwaukee who will

perform with her husband, Rick, and daughter, Autumn Joy. "I come from a long line of storytellers," she explains. "My mom and dad were kitchen table tellers. I never read a story until I attended school, and I thought everyone had that same experience."

The festival has been designed to appeal to a multigenerational audience. "People think storytelling is just for little kids, but a professional teller can engage all ages, in all circumstances," says Saskill, who has performed for groups as diverse as abused women and grieving children. "For those children, we chose stories that were uplifting and inspirational but that had a theme of loss."

Lower agrees that stories can heal. "Telling our stories helps us make some sense of what happened."

Good telling often combines the physical with the verbal, describes Casey. It always involves the audience. "Good tellers draw energy from the audience."

While storytelling is definitely a performance, it's not like being an actor on a stage, explains Saskill. "We have to see the audience's eyes to see how to tell a story. We look into the audience and springboard from their reactions."

Lower describes a similar crucial interface. "There is something magical about face-to-face contact. It is a humbling experience to see someone react when you touch them with a story."

Saskill and Lower take different approaches to their telling. Saskill



COURTESY JOANNE LOWER

JoAnne Lower's stories are sometimes told with help from her duck, Sonja.

weaves languages from Haitian Creole to sign language, along with music, into her multicultural stories. Lower relies mainly on spoken word.

"There's lots of learning that goes on in storytelling," points out Casey. "And the stories take many forms. Some tellers work from the traditional stories many of us grew up with, like Cinderella or the Billy Goats Gruff, and others tell personal stories from their own lives or the lives of people they know."

Even when it's a traditional story, a good teller is imaginative and makes the story his or her own, says Casey. She recalls the year that the story being told was traditional, with a prince and princess. "At the end the prince asked the princess to marry him. But it was a real proposal. It took us all by surprise," remembers Casey. "The princess said, 'Yes!'"

Now, that's magic.

If you'd like to hear a few good stories or tell some of your own, check out the Iowa Storytelling Festival on Friday and Saturday, July 25–26, in Clear Lake. For more information, call 641-357-6133 or visit the Web at www.clearlakeiowa.com.