

## **THE MAGIC OF THE STORY BAG**

By Michael D. McCarty

In 1993 I took a Storytelling workshop with Kathleen Zundell and she introduced me to the Story Bag, a bag filled with a variety of miscellaneous objects. You pluck something out of the bag and make up a story that involves or is inspired by the object. Little did I know how useful this tool would be and how many young lives it would impact.

Since that workshop I've done bunches of storytelling workshops with K-12 kids, and the story bag has been a major hit. I once used it at a continuation (alternative) high school, a school for kids who'd been kicked out of every other school in the district, and even they took to it!

So let's talk particulars. In a recent workshop series with 3-5 graders, one session a week for five weeks, here's how it went. I open up the first session asking the kids what are the three basic parts of a story (beginning, middle, end), and what does every story have that makes it interesting and drives it forward (the problem). Then I tell them a story. Each session a model a different type of story.

After telling them an extremely engaging and animated tale, I ask them questions to help them break down the story; what are the problems, what is the main problem, what happens in the beginning, etc. I also ask them how voice, body, eyes, etc. are used in the telling of a tale. Then I break out THE BAG.

I actually have three story bags. I am always on the lookout for interesting items for the bags. There are stuffed animals, robots, dinosaurs, noise makers, a ball of fingers (very popular with middle school types), and stuff like that. Not everything in the bag is odd or exotic; ink pens, caps, dolls, a medicine bottle, any old thing will do. I once got to the site of a workshop only to realize that I'd forgotten my bag! I rummaged through my car and the office at the site for goodies, and came up with my bag.

When prepping the kids for THE BAG game, I tell them that they can't look into the bag and that the thing they pull out of the bag can be anything they want it to be. Sometimes I can see them trying to think up the story before they tell it and I tell them that this is one time in their little lives that I want them to talk without thinking:)

There are times when the story told will be very, very short, and that's okay, however, other times if the child starts telling a good story and gets nervous and wants to end the story abruptly I'll ask them, what happens next, and gently prod them to continue.

In one workshop at a Boys & Girls Clubs in Long Beach, a boy about

seven years old went up, plucked something out of the bag, faced the audience and just stared at them for about thirty seconds and started to cry. I had him sit down, but first had everyone applaud him for going up there. This scenario repeated once or twice more with little additions. He'd say his name or start to say more before sitting down. Each effort was applauded. After a few more sessions he finally told a story, a short one, but that was all right.

You can always count on the class clowns to volunteer. I rarely force anyone to participate. The exception was in that continuation high school where everyone was too cool to volunteer. So I drafted the two class clowns and that got everyone else going.

Teachers are often surprised at some of the kids that participate. Students who've never volunteered for anything will suddenly get bag happy. At one school there were several special needs children in two of my workshops. Some of them also got into THE BAG. Even though a couple of them could not be understood they clearly felt that they were telling a coherent story. The teachers were very pleased.

The Story Bag is not the only exercise that I use in my workshops but it helps get the kids ready for all the others. And, most importantly, it gets them excited about storytelling. Try it, you'll like it.