



## How did I get here?

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### Helen East: Careering along the way

Helen East is a freelance writer, storyteller and community artist. She also works for Apples and Snakes, and is a member of NAWE and the SFS. Most recently, she has been working on an adult novel about childlessness, a picture book, *Branded with Humour*, a cd of local miners' stories, and *Unbridled*, a collaborative storytelling project about silenced peoples. Her latest book *The Singing Storycloth*, a collection of stories and songs drawn from worldwide sources about and inspired by cloth which is accompanied by a double cd, is available from A & C Black. In progress is *Hidden Tales* – the real people of the otherworld: little known huldu / elf /fairy stories from Ireland to Iceland.

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#### An established 'literature professional'?

Like a story, one question begets another. Where is 'here'? What am I? Why?

'Here' is my cottage on the borders of Wales, in a tiny room at a wobbly desk, surrounded by storycloths, kavads, a story gourd, one wall of recordings, two walls of books – the middle shelf (within child reach) all written by me. 'Here' is approaching fifty, having lived off words – tongue, hand and ear – for twenty-seven years.

I suppose, by now, I could say I am an established 'literature professional' if such a stable entrenched term can ever be applied to this volatile and vagrant way of life.

I am, first and foremost, a traditional storyteller. I am also an author, mainly for children. I am some kind of oral historian, too, in that I listen, record, and give people space to tell stories of personal experience. Sometimes I'm called a

'community artist' because in my workshops I frequently use craft and visual art.

All these things are for me branches of the same tree. I have always swung happily from one to the other, as a natural progression in my career. But perhaps it would have been easier to become properly 'established' if I had fitted wholly into one box. As it is, I am always a bit of an outsider: a member of Equity, and of the Society of Authors, yet without an agent to represent me solidly in either arena.

On reflection, I see how useful that would be – worlds, networks, correct 'in speak' all change, and you need to be 'in there' with a firm footing, eyes on opportunities. Being a 'literature professional' nowadays means being, or having, a good promoter which I am not – at least, not for myself – though I've successfully spear-headed many literature projects, groups and events over the years.

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## So how did I get here?

I was born into a large and talkative Anglo-Irish family and lived in a variety of countries with strong oral traditions – Asia, Africa, Scandinavia as well as Britain – so I grew up happily listening, playing with, and regenerating all kinds of words, ways of talking, and above all stories. I loved hearing stories. I lived in them while they were told, and so absorbed them naturally, 'learning' them like a mother-tongue, and just as easily retelling them, as if I'd always known them.

Years later that still stays with me... Personal stories, though they don't have deliberate mnemonic elements built into them, I usually remember because of the way the person told. Shyly, perhaps, slowly unfolding, if it is the first time they have been openly spoken, or patterned by the frequency with which they have been turned over in the mind or on the tongue.

Sometimes a personal story is as shaped, and universally resonant as a traditional tale. "I was like you, you know," announced the huge black woman in the late night New York bus. "Oh yes, I was white skin too. But I was stung when I was young by a bumble-bee in a blueberry tree..."

Avid listeners invite speakers. Still today, wherever I go, I find people who tell me stories. Hurrying down the Cromwell Road, an elderly man caught my arm. "Do you know the Odyssey?" "Yes," I said, "I've read it." "But have you ever heard it as it should be told – by a Greek?" I was late for work already, and I know how long the Odyssey is. But could you turn your back on an invitation like that?

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## Learning by listening and watching

My love, and knowledge of oral stories has distracted, shaped, defined and sustained me all my life. It pushed me into creating a profession

out of storytelling; it led me through reminiscence work into community 'life story' projects; it persuaded publishers to take me on as a writer. And it was my primary source of literature training.

I realise now that it set up a preferred learning pattern that is essentially oral, especially direct communication since that includes body language and eye contact. This is not to deny the importance to me of reading, but it is a very different learning method, and it only really took precedence when I was a teenager. (My oral memory suffered as a result – up until then I could learn a play by listening to it a few times, and speaking it out loud, and songs and playground chants I caught as easily as colds.) Perhaps this is why I've never managed to do a correspondence course, and learn best when I don't have to be silent or still, but can really participate.

I see this too in countless other children – especially African. When I tell stories, they tell with me – gestures, phrases, refrains. By the end of the story, they can tell it again. Sadly, in this country, children are often stopped from doing this – my teacher, Miss Lambourn, made me sit on my hands and clamp my mouth tight shut when I was six. I felt utterly blocked, as if locked in a box. And I can't remember anything she taught. I sometimes have waves of that when put in a formal classroom situation – even a meeting with questions requested from the floor: We've all been sat too long still and quiet, our questions have dried on our tongues.

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## Storytelling – a bonafide job option?

Stories led me directly into my literature career – by chance, or maybe kismet. In 1979 I was 22, unemployed and had just arrived in South London (from Paris where I had been studying mime). In the dole office was an advert for a storyteller for Brixton libraries. I was amazed – I didn't know that was a bona fide job option (and

subsequently no job centre would admit that it was.) However, I passed the interview (although it was an ordeal to tell to a panel of clip-boarded note-taking librarians!) and since there wasn't any training, got straight on with the job.

That turned out to be the best way to learn. Although I'd been telling stories all my life, it was frightening at first, working with big groups, outside, in adventure playgrounds and housing estates. But I found a hunger for stories, and for direct personal exchange that was not being satisfied by any other media. I learnt from watching my fellow storytellers (we worked in pairs), and from the audiences, who would simply walk away if I did not connect with them.

That has been the basis of my training as a storyteller ever since. Listening and watching other storytellers and audiences, and working continuously telling stories to all ages and all sorts of people in utterly diverse circumstances all over the world.

I have been lucky because I was there at the beginning. I have seen storytelling grow as a profession – and helped it to do so – and I've worked with, and learnt from, many many wonderful storytellers, from the vast range in 'Common Lore' (co-founded by me in 1981, a central point for multi ethnic storytellers for nearly 20 years) to individuals such as Beulah Candappa ("don't be afraid of adult audiences. They have a magical quality of silence that tells you when they are wholly with you") and my greatest teacher, Scottish traveller Duncan Williamson. ("Only tell what you really want to share, never something you think you should").

Sometimes it has been more formalised – I've attended a few workshops and one master class, and would highly recommend them for external professional input, new ideas and a chance to review and analyse what you are doing. (I also do this when running my own workshops).

Working as part of a team of tutors at an Emerson College International Storytelling Symposium took this a stage further, by turning

the mirror on each of us in turn, to discuss and examine what was unique about our impetus, approach and style.

So there are opportunities to learn by looking inwards and developing working methods including – most recently – an Arts Council grant for *Unbridled*, an explorative cross-discipline collaborative project about silence. But it is all 'in service training' – and for an outward performance-based career such as storytelling, I think that is the best way for me to learn.

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## The silent inwardness of writing

For writing, however, I feel differently. I learned to read and write early – fortunately before I was 'turned off' by Miss Lambourn. Word and spelling games were part of family journeys, and wherever we lived, home was always full of all sorts of books (including the complete set of Lang's Fairy Tales, courtesy of my mother's aunt, who translated for him). It seemed natural to start writing them myself.

'The Tale of Fannah' was my first – an endless saga of someone beset by 'babbeyes' and needing 'craddels'. At 8 I got a poem published, set to music by my English teacher. She, and another teacher I had when I was 11 and 12, gave me most of my training in creative writing, exploring structures and styles. At that time I was writing a lot – plays, poems, stories, and cliff-hanger serials for my friends.

After that, although I went on to do an English degree, everything was directed towards criticism and analysis of real writers. I put up with it because I liked reading, and it was an easy option. My own creative writing became something private and personal, a much more internal process, sometimes shared with friends.

The silent inwardness of writing has continued for me, in complete contrast to the rest of my life.

I love it because it is another world. Once I am properly immersed, I am unaware of everything else (even in a noisy public space). Sometimes it makes me more sensitive to a particular character, letting them establish their own true voice; sometimes I come up with a twist in a plot that I hadn't thought of. Or, if I'm working on a story or song, it allows rhymes or word rhythm or mood phrases to flow with unselfconscious ease. (Walking helps that too.)

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## The way I write

But for looking – critically – at my own work, it is a disadvantage, particularly now I work on a computer. I used to write everything by hand, then get it typed. When I got it back, in official straight-lined print, it was as if it no longer belonged to me. I could edit it and criticise it with impunity.

The computer has changed all that – and the way I write. Now I am looking at what I am doing, re-reading as it comes up (handwriting was faster so I never did that) and I am constantly correcting and revising as I go along. This can interrupt the rhythm of a line or the flow of a whole piece. It is certainly a different mental process. But it also means that when I have finished, and print what I've written, I am used to seeing it in that format – the impressive printed word – and can't divorce the creative process, can't view it with new eyes.

As for getting other people's feedback, I was spoiled early by having a very good editor for my first eight years of writing professionally. I could try all sorts of initial ideas on Lucille, as well as trusting and being able to discuss her editing of final text. I didn't always agree! But I still feel that is the best way to work on a book – a collaboration between interested parties.

Sadly most editors don't have the time to work like that now, and of course it is a very personal thing too. When I lost that editor (the small publishing company having been bought up by

an American giant) I didn't have the same rapport with her replacement, so stopped writing picture books.

By this time, however, I was working as Director of the National Folktale Centre and was asked by A & C Black to compile a collection of folktales... and so I moved into writing different things for other publishers, and even for radio.

So my writing career continued, but I no longer had someone for work-based ongoing dialogues about how, and what, I was writing / wanting to write.

This might have been a natural point to join a writers group, or find creative writing classes, but I was away touring a lot, and, after my school experience, I was chary of exposing my internal world.

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## "you gotta have obsession"

Once again, I was lucky. A friend recommended me for an experimental writing 'laboratory' run by Performing Arts Labs (PAL) that allows a group of writers to try writing plays. It was a wonderful week, and although I never published my play (*The Secret Life of Shoes*), I learnt a huge amount.

My first draft was described by a tutor as 'opening a door to a cupboard of characters who all begin to shout at once'. A fair summary of my way of hearing the world! But then I had the luxury of time to rewrite to suit other people's ears, or reading eyes, so that, without me there to guide them, they can enter into my story.

That experience opened a window for me onto the kind of education or training that it is always good to return to at intervals. And for the need to search out that support, in order to develop as a writer.

As a teacher once told me, "You should be more ready to ask for help when you need it. You don't

always have to re-invent the wheel." Because, like many other 'literature professionals' I have had to carve out my own career, I sometimes feel that it is all up to me. But looking back I see that all along the way I have been helped by generous friends and interested strangers: a self-supporting web of storytellers, writers, educationalists, literature officers and organisations. That is how I got here.

Plus luck. And obsession. "Because" (as overheard from two old women chatting) "you gotta have obsession, haven't you".

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## Useful links

Helen East

[www.eastorywilsound.co.uk](http://www.eastorywilsound.co.uk)

Apples & Snakes

England's leading organisation for performance poetry – stretching the boundaries of poetry in performance and education.

[www.applesandsnakes.org](http://www.applesandsnakes.org)

Arts Council England

The national development agency for the arts in England. Funding for writers and literature professionals is available through the Grants for the arts programme.

[www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

BBC writersroom

The BBC's online resource for writing for TV, radio and film featuring writers' guidelines, script archive and free script formatting software.

[www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom](http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom)

Equity

The UK Trade Union representing professional performers and other creative workers from across the spectrum of the entertainment, creative and cultural industries.

[www.equity.org.uk](http://www.equity.org.uk)

NALD (The National Association for Literature Development)

The only national body for all those involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.

[www.nald.org](http://www.nald.org)

The National Association of Writers in Education

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK.

[www.nawe.co.uk](http://www.nawe.co.uk)

PAL (Performing Arts Labs Ltd)

PAL Labs explore creative collaborations between, across and beyond disciplines, discovering radical ideas, processes and products.

[www.pallabs.org](http://www.pallabs.org)

The Society for Storytelling

Brings together anyone with an interest in oral storytelling, whether teller, listener, beginner or professional, to enjoy, discuss and practice the art of storytelling.

[www.sfs-org.uk](http://www.sfs-org.uk)

Scottish Storytelling Centre

Scotland's national organisation for storytelling with a network of over 80 professional storytellers.

[www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk](http://www.scottishstorytellingcentre.co.uk)

The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators

The largest children's writing organisation in the world with active branches in the UK.

[www.britishscbwi.org](http://www.britishscbwi.org)

The Children's Writers and Illustrators Group

A specialist group within The Society of Authors which represents the interests of professional writers, writing in all areas of the profession.

[www.societyofauthors.org](http://www.societyofauthors.org)

The Writer's Guild of Great Britain  
The trade union for professional writers in TV,  
film, theatre, radio, books and new media.  
[www.writersguild.org.uk](http://www.writersguild.org.uk)

writernet  
Provides dramatic writers with the tools they  
need to build better careers.  
[www.writernet.org.uk](http://www.writernet.org.uk)