STORYTELLING, YOU, AND EMILY EMERSON'S MOON

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Storytelling enthusiasts in pursuit of improving their practice of this ancient art would do well to temporarily set aside the scholarly works of Arbuthnot, Sawyer, and associates and settle themselves in a small chair in the "Easy Reading" section of the Children's Room. There, shelved between the numerous other M's, is to be found (hopefully) Jean Merrill's Emily Emerson's Moon. It is, as its author intended, a book for young children; obviously then, there is to be found no heavy discussion of the history of storytelling, no "Ten Tips for Storytellers," no list of "Best Stories to Tell." Merrill's book is designed to delight the child, but the student of storytelling will find the story to be a significant statement on the storyteller's role as it regards the child's imagination.

Jean Merrill's Emily Emerson's Moon is the story of a little girl whose father offers to get her the moon. With an equal amount of pride and delight, Emily informs her older brother, Avery, of what her father has promised to do, but Avery's response is flippant:

> Daddy was teasing, I bet.
> The moon's too high
> In the top of the sky
> For even Daddy to get.

Emily's father assures her that he was not teasing, and to prove it he finds her a "little sun" she can wear and a "scrap of rainbow" to tie

in her hair. But Avery stands firm as he snickers at the sunflower ("If that's a sun, I'm a star!") and snorts at the ribbon:

> A rainbow! That rag in your hair?
> You said Daddy said
> He'd get you the moon,
> Not a floppy old ribbon to wear.

By this point Jean Merrill has introduced the three characters of her story. There is Emily Emerson, a little girl caught up in the world of the imagination. Emily could have discovered a Wonderland with Alice, gone"On Beyond Zebra" with Conrad Cornelius O'Donald O'Dell, or celebrated her birthday in Katroo with the Birthday Bird. Avery will never meet the Birthday Bird because he knows that Katroo isn't on anybody's map. He'll never go "On Beyond Zebra" because he knows that "z is the point at which the alphabet ends." He'll never discover a Wonderland with Alice because he knows there is nothing at the bottom of a rabbit hole but a lot of dirt and maybe an ordinary rabbit. Then, there is Emily's father. He also knows that Katroo isn't on anybody's map, that "z is the point at which the alphabet ends," that there's no Wonderland at the bottom of the rabbit hole. And yet he offers to get her the moon!

As the story progresses, it becomes obvious that Emily and her father have the same "moon" in mind. Suspecting what her father is up to, Emily pleads:

> Daddy, you promised the moon.
> And, please, don't tease --
> Don't give me instead
> A moon-shaped yellow Balloon.

Emily, while admitting to her father that she'd be content to have the "moon/ On a piece of string," reveals her own wisdom as she contemplates the inevitable reaction from Avery:

> ... Avery would prick
> A balloon with a pin
> To prove it wasn't a moon.

It is at this point that the problem arises for Emily's father, for he realizes his daughter's awareness of her threatened imaginative world:

> He had in his pocket a yellow balloon.
> But how
> Did a man
> Get hold of a moon?

Emily's father attempts to gracefully work his way out of the predicament, but he realizes that Emily, although very aware of what is real and what is imaginary, is not quite ready to let go of the delightful imaginary world which she and her father have shared. Her imagination is still going strong, and she keeps her eyes firmly fixed on the moon. "The moon," she argues," wouldn't be any bother at all" to her. As for where to keep it, her closet would be the perfect place: "I'd like a moon for a closet light! " And should the stars get lonely for the moon as her father suggests they might, she'll just move her moon to the window so the stars can see it after she has fallen asleep. Realizing the strength of Emily's determination and imagination, her father concludes:

> Well, go to bed, Moonbeam,
> .....
> And I will think of a plan.
> It's true I promised
> To get you the moon,
> And I'll do the best I can.

Left alone, Emily conjures up imaginative ways her father might actually manage:

> He might
> Build a ladder
> Six hundred feet high
> And lasso
> The moon
> Right out of the sky.
>
> He might
> Ride a kite
> That was going way up,
> And scoop up
> The moon
> In a coffee cup.
>
> Or he might find a trap
> That some mice didn't want,
> Which would make a nice trap for a moon
> If he baited it well
> With bacon or jam
> Or maybe a macaroon.

The next morning Emily's father refuses to say a word about the promised moon, but Emily gets her moon by night. While Emily's imagination conjured up a number of interesting plans, her father's own imaginative mind was hard at work on one. In the evening Emily discovers the fish pond that he has built:

> And there in the pond
> Were six speckled fish
> And a frog with a crocky tune.
> And better than that--
> On top of the water
> Was a beautiful silvery moon.

Emily, of course, is delighted:

> Oh, thank you, Daddy!
> The pond is exactly right
> Because it's a very good place
> To keep the moon
> When I go to bed at night.

It won't be lonely
With the fish and the frog,
And there are stars in the pond beside.
And, look! If I tickle
My moon with my toe,
It dances from side to side!

And Avery Emerson?

Avery Emerson
Didn't snicker
He hardly knew what to say.
For the moon in the pond
Was the moon from the sky
In an upside-down sort of way.

It is Emily Emerson whom children will undoubtedly hail as the heroine of the story, for she manages to get her moon in spite of a doubting brother. The adult reader, however, will identify Emily's father as the true hero. His heroism lies not so much in the fact that he saves Emily from the fate Avery had in store for her -- a broken yellow balloon -- as in the fact that he allows her to hold onto her imaginary world as she gradually comes into significant touch with the world of reality. It is through his own preserved imagination that he comes up with a moon. When Merrill refers to this moon being present in an "upside-down sort of way," she is, of course, making reference to the moon's reflection in the pond. The phrase, however, holds further significance: this particular moon is an "upside-down" sort of moon in that it draws its existence from the factual world of Emily's brother and the imaginative world of her father.

Although the yellow balloon Emily's father intended to use as a moon proves useless in view of Avery's pin, for the reader the balloon proves to

be the perfect embodiment of Emily's imagination. Her imagination is a big, bright balloon on a string, bringing her a world of adventure, excitement, and delight; however, as is the case with all delicate balloons, it flirts with a fatal end as it nears the sharpness of reality. Emily's father sees the significance of this balloon and its need to be carefully guided and cared for. And, more important, he realizes that although Emily sees this balloon for what it really is, she is not quite ready to let it go nor is it necessary that she do so.

"There is only one child in the world," wrote Carl Sandburg, "and that child's name is All Children." As Sandburg told his own children of the Rootabaga Country and the big city of Liver and Onions, he caught sight of the bright, big balloon that comes into the lives of all children. Whether this balloon is carefully cared for, merely tolerated, or suddenly and purposely destroyed, it is the experience of All Children.

Emily's experience with her bright, big balloon is a grand one, but it stands in stark contrast to the experience of Marco, the creation of Dr. Seuss in And To Think That I Saw It On Mulberry Street. Marco, like Emily, is a child whose imagination is vibrant and strong; unlike Emily, however, he receives no approval from his father. From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Marco's father places his emphasis on the real world and echoes the cry of Avery: a sun is a sun, a star is a star, and a balloon is just a balloon.

Marco relates his awareness of his father's attitude:

When I leave home to walk to school,
Dad always says to me,
"Marco, keep your eyelids up
And see what you can see."

But when I tell him where I've been
And what I think I've seen,
He looks at me and sternly says,
"Your eyesight's much too keen.

"Stop telling such outlandish tales.
Stop turning minnows into whales."

Although Marco listens intently to his father's admonition, his imagination begins to work as he views the only sight on Mulberry Street: "Just a broken-down wagon/ That's drawn by a horse." To Marco, whose mind bears the imaginative mark of Emily's, the sight is hardly worthy of notice, so he envisions how a zebra in place of the horse would bring some life to the scene. Yet an animal as "marvelous" as the zebra is certainly worthy of something more than an ordinary wagon, he reasons, and then proceeds to replace the wagon with a reindeer, the chariot with a sled, the reindeer with an elephant carrying a Rajah, and the sled with a big brass band and wagon. As he tacks on a man in a trailer to listen to the sounds of the band, he concludes that two giraffes are necessary to help the elephant pull the load. When he realizes that his vision will undoubtedly cause a traffic mix-up where Mulberry Street and Bliss intersect, he adds the police and Sgt. Mulvaney, and then proceeds to add the mayor, the aldermen with banners, a circling airplane that drops confetti, and crowds of people. To top the vision off, he adds "...A Chinaman/ Who eats with sticks..../A big Magician/ Doing tricks.../A ten-foot beard/That needs a comb..."

Marco's vision nears a halt as he reaches home. As he rushes through the gate to his yard, he is alive with the excitement of a story that, in his words, "NO ONE COULD BEAT." But his excitement is short-lived as he confronts his father:

Dad looked at me sharply and pulled at his chin.
He frowned at me sternly from there in his seat,
"Was there nothing to look at...no people to greet?
Did <u>nothing</u> excite you or make your heart beat?"

Marco, like Emily, is aware of the difference between the imaginary world he has just created and the world of reality to which his father clings. Unlike Emily, Marco is to experience no delightful upside-down combination of the two, and his response to his father's stern question indicates his awareness that he must set this imaginative world aside:

"Nothing," I said, growing red as a beet,
"But a plain horse and wagon on Mulberry street."

It is the storyteller who has the opportunity to witness "All Children" and their balloons -- whether they be bright and big, losing the air that gives them buoyancy, or shattered and gone. The first challenge is to recognize the magnitude of this view and to realize, like Emily's father, the true significance of the imagination. Emily's father sees the significant difference between the two worlds, yet he does not see them as separated by a barrier that must make the traveler choose one or the other. He is, indeed, a traveler who journeys through both, does not lose sight of where he is, and appreciates the significant relationship between the two.

In 1967 the British scholar and statesman, Jacob Bronowski, spoke of this relationship:

> When a child begins to play games with things that stand for other things... he enters the gateway to reason and imagination together. For the human reason discovers new relations between things not by deduction, but by that unpredictable blend of speculation and insight that scientists call induction, which, like other forms of imagination--cannot be formalized.

In looking ahead to the day when man's dream of landing on the moon would become a reality, Bronowski declared that when it happened it would be "not a technical but an imaginative triumph." Is it any wonder then that Albert Einstein, a genius of our time, believed imagination to be "more important than knowledge."

The concern, of course, as we contemplate this emphasis on the imagination, will be whether we encourage children to turn from reality. Dr. Bruno Bettelheim, the noted child psychologist, puts the concern to rest as he tells the story of another Emily Emerson. In the midst of a discussion about Christmas and Santa Claus, the ten-year-old girl stood up and declared: "I know there's no Santa and no Tooth Fairy who puts a dime under my pillow." Then she cried, "I hate reality." "To hate reality," says Dr. Bettelheim, "is a likely consequence of being forced to give up fantasies too early" -- a likely consequence of having somebody stick your balloon with a pin just to prove that it isn't the moon. "All children," Dr. Bettelheim remarked, "sooner or later must learn to distinguish between reality and fantasy, but they will learn this on the basis or their own experience.... Magical thinking will eventually be abandoned on the basis of the child's widening experience with reality."

The storyteller's realization of the significance of the child's imagination is vital, and the second challenge illustrated in Emily Emerson's

Moon, is of equal significance. To encourage the development of the imagination in the child, the storyteller must understand the imaginary world by recalling within himself the excitement, adventure, and the true delight which it once offered to him. In his essay on Shelley,Francis Thompson asks and answers the question that must be contemplated and taken into the storyteller's heart:

> Know you what it is to be a child? It is to be something very different from the man of to-day. It is to have a spirit yet streaming from the waters of baptism; it is to believe in love, to believe in loveliness, to believe in belief; it is to be so little that the elves can reach to whisper in your ear; it is to turn pumpkins into coaches, and mice into horses, lowness into loftiness, and nothing into everything, for each child has its fairy godmother in its own soul....

Should you as a storyteller decide to settle yourself in the Children's Room with these thoughts and Emily Emerson's Moon, don't be so quick to leave when the book is finished. Further reading will take you deep into the child's imaginary world of "Wild Things," "On Beyond Zebra Places," and people you'll meet nowhere else. And don't be surprised if, suddenly, you see and recapture that bright, big balloon that you yourself once held as a child. As a storyteller it is important that you do so, for the true storyteller is one who can, at a moment's notice, step naturally and sincerely into the imaginary world of the child and realize the significance of doing so.

Emily Emerson's father has the makings of a true storyteller. He still has a hold of his yellow balloon though he knows that it isn't the moon.