

Remembering Joan Bodger

By Lorne Brown

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Creator Spirit, by whose breath
Were fashioned sea and sky and earth;
Who made the stormy chaos cease
And gave us life and light and peace:
We cry, O Spirit, strong and free,
For those in peril on the sea.
William Whiting 1825-1878

Toronto storyteller Lynda Howes was sitting on a streetcar one day, looking out the window, when she saw Joan Bodger striding along the street. It was hard not to notice Joan Bodger when she walked the streets - short and roly-poly, bedecked with jaunty cap and flowing robes, she carried a huge walking staff in hand. "Ah," said Lynda to herself, "As long as Joan Bodger is walking the streets of Toronto, it's safe."
Indeed.

Perhaps we are now all a little less safe, since Joan has finally succumbed to the cancer that was for too long tugging her from one world to the next. As I'm sure most of you reading this 'little journal that could' know, Joan was co-editor with me of the very first issue of Appleseed Quarterly. The idea came to both of us one sunny afternoon in my backyard, a by-now legendary afternoon. "Why not publish a literary storytelling journal?" we both exclaimed. "Make it a high quality literary-type journal, not just a newsletter of storytelling events and people."

Because of her busy life, Joan did not stay long as my co-editor, but without her inspiration I'm sure AQ would never have been born or lasted as long as it has. Her busy life ... Joan once remarked that she wanted to live her life as story, and anyone who has read her memoirs *A Crack in the Teacup* knows that her life was filled with incredible stories. Stories with much tragedy and sadness, but stories that, as all tellers of fairy tales know, somehow triumph in the end over insurmountable obstacles.

There is no point in my going over these familiar and legendary stories now. They are much better told in her book, and as I have said before, if you have even the tiniest interest in storytelling, you must buy her book and read it.

But there are other stories that didn't make it into the book, and these, too, are legendary. Funny how so many things Joan did had that legendary quality to them.

Such as her famous walk with storyteller Carol McGirr. It was in the early '80s, as I recall, that the two of them decided to walk to Bracebridge, a cottage area town well north of Toronto. Summer Friday nights are legendary in Toronto for the mass exodus of people, all in their cars, heading north to cottage country, and not all, alas, returning safely Sunday. No one, however, walks to Bracebridge. And so Joan and Carol set off bravely, from College and Yonge, deep in the heart of Toronto. As we storytellers would say, they walked and they walked and they walked. They walked for ten days. They had this romantic notion that, as evening approached, strangers would take them in, feed and bed them in exchange for some told stories. This rarely happened. Romantic notions don't always turn out so romantic. But the story of their walk

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became legendary. And I remember Joan saying to me, "I will always be fat, but I will be the fittest fat person ever."

In the pre-Storytellers School of Toronto days, there was the tiniest storytelling movement afoot in Toronto. One unlikely place where storytelling was happening was in a now-departed (alas) downtown restaurant called The Underground Railroad. One of the owners was a Toronto Argonaut football player, and the restaurant specialized in soul food, as you might suspect. It also had a new and unusual feature. During its Sunday brunches, storyteller Joan Bodger told stories.

I heard of this event and decided to show up. I didn't know Joan at the time, and suspected she was probably some young thing with long blonde hair, sitting on a stool with sexy legs crossed, over-acting some story. To my surprise and pleasure, Joan turned out not at all like my pre-conceived image. Although she was middle-aged at the time, she seemed older. Older in a reassuring way. I suspect that she has always seemed older than she was, even as a young woman. It's probably why she so warmly embraced the title of old woman, or crone, in her later years. Her appearance was anything but sexy and glamorous, but when she spoke and told her stories, she became a riveting figure that commanded your attention. Yes, even sexy and glamorous. She knew how important the mind and imagination are.

Celia Lottridge, who saw her at the same time, remembers going out into the snowy streets of Toronto afterwards and thinking that the world would never be the same again. She was right. It was not long before Celia, and Dan, and Alice Kane, and Bob Barton, and Joan, and I, and Rosemary Allison started getting together to ask, "Whither storytelling?"

After a legendary (See what I mean?) breakfast meeting at the Chelsea Inn, the idea of The Storytellers School of Toronto was born. For Canadian storytellers, anyway, Celia was right - the world would never be the same.

Joan planned and participated in the very first Toronto Festival of Storytelling, held, appropriately enough, on April Fool's Day, 1979. I remember sitting on stage in the late afternoon with her in the ever-darkening former St. Paul's United Church. She told "Childe Roland" . I still have a card that she sent me afterwards, complimenting me on my telling of "Elsie Piddock". "I cried," she said. I treasure that card.

As a Gestalt therapist, Joan had a second floor office above the old drugstore owned by Mr. and Mrs. Stafanian. If she and I looked out of our office windows at the same time (me in the principal's office at the Kensington Community School) we could wave to each other. Joan soon became a frequent visitor to the Friday Afternoon in the Library programme in the school, spinning her stories to the enthralled kids sitting by the fireplace.

I remember once she was telling to the little ones. One child, I think in grade one, put his hand up during her story and started to get up. Without missing a beat, Joan rose from her rocking chair, threaded her way to the child, telling her story all the while, put him firmly back on the floor, and returned to her chair. So great was her command of her audience that no one's attention wavered for even a second, including the student, now sitting in his place and waiting the end of the story. Even the student's mother, who had come to collect him for his dentist

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appointment, patiently waited to the end, not daring to interrupt the story! I don't know if they made it on time or not, but they heard a good story from Joan.

Joan's office was the scene of many a lively board meeting of the Storytellers School. I particularly remember hot summer nights. Alice and I would come in from the relative cool of the outdoors, exchanging tales of the moon. The room was sweltering hot; we sat on various uncomfortable chairs or on the floor. Discussions raged; brows were mopped. Carol Howe deftly kept us in order and kept minutes of the proceedings. The former was the difficult task. Wisdom flowed from Alice and Joan. Legendary.

Alice Kane did not always see eye-to-eye. Once, after a public telling by Joan of The Marriage of Sir Gawain, Alice told me that Joan had made several errors in her telling. Joan would talk to me, warning of the deification of Alice. Nevertheless, they had a great respect and affection for each other. I particularly remember the Saturday night concert of an early Toronto festival where Alice was the sole and featured performer. Uncharacteristically, she became nervous; her voice dried up, she needed water, and she looked in distress. Some rushed to provide a glass of water. Most sat uncomfortably, not quite sure what to do. In the audience, Joan - who never hesitated to say anything, at any time, in any place - called out, "Alice, it's all right! We all love you! Relax!" Everyone, Alice included, relaxed, and we are all then treated to superb storytelling.

Then there were all those walks she led through King Arthur country in England. I was so enthralled with her tales of Glastonbury and the nipple of the goddess (her term) that my wife and I set out once on our own to discover the nipple of the goddess. It was near a tiny village named Wimble Toot, or some such name, (my memory seems to be going these days) and was rather anticlimactic, so to speak. But somewhere I still have a snapshot of me standing with the goddess' tit behind me.

Joan's final stage in life was a whirlwind of book publishing. What author has ever had so many books being published in such a short time? How the Heather Looks was reprinted. (A legendary book.) The Forest Family came out. Belinda's Ball again. And, of course, The Crack in the Teacup. There was a television biography shown on the public broadcaster TVO. It was almost as if time were running out. Which it was.

Always marching to her own drummer, her leaving of this life was surreal. It was a time for farewells, but she never said farewell. She would phone people and abruptly ask them if they wanted to purchase some of her belongings. No explanation, no goodbye. She made a last appearance at the 1001 Friday Nights of Storytelling, unheralded. I missed it, but people there said they could tell it was her farewell, but no mention of the word crossed anyone's lips. It is now a legendary Friday Night. In a phone conversation both of us knew would be our last time to talk together, there were no goodbyes, no thanks for the memories. She did tell me I should be proud of Appleseed. And then she was gone to the west coast to die by the sea, destination to be a secret. A secret that soon everyone in the storytelling world knew. The sea and water have always held a huge attraction for Joan.

Romantic notions do not always turn out so romantic, as I have said earlier. This romantic last journey to die by the sea became a practical nightmare. Friends in Toronto felt cut off. Some

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made the journey to help her, but it was an expensive, difficult, and time-consuming trip. People received unexpected phone calls from her, putting them in charge of future funeral arrangements. Very precise funeral arrangements, at that, with everything dictated down to the dotting of i's and crossing of t's. The sea was well represented: ... May there be no moaning of the bar/When I put out to sea ... King Arthur and Glastonbury were there: And did those feet in ancient times/Walk upon England's mountains green?
But in the end, she died, not by the sea, but in a hospital.
Still riveting, outrageous, courageous. A proud old woman. Legendary.

Read more and listen to Joan, our honoured StorySave teller for 2003 by [clicking here](#):

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