



Article

**The Public Library and Intangible Cultural Heritage:
The Storyteller-in-Residence Program of the Cape Breton Regional Library**

Tom Urbaniak
Cape Breton University
Nova Scotia, Canada

Abstract

In June 2011, the Cape Breton Regional Library Board appointed Ken Chisholm as its Storyteller-in-Residence, the first such appointment for a public library system in Nova Scotia. The board was also one of the first public bodies in Canada to make a program decision that specifically cited the UNESCO Convention on the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The part-time position was created following local and external research and consultations, and the establishment of a formal selection and advisory process. This article briefly highlights the other “library laureate” programs that were studied and presents an overview of the process adopted by the Cape Breton Regional Library. The Storyteller-in-Residence is a permanent program, although the successful candidate is named to a two-year term. The Storyteller-in-Residence helps communities to preserve memories and oral traditions, serves as an ambassador for the library, and assists with activities in the library’s 13 branches and two bookmobiles.

Glé thrice nuair a ghabhadh fear sgeulachd mhór fhada agus h-àraid ma's e sgeulachd bh'ann a chuala fear pàirt dhu ma dh'fhaidte aig piuthar a sheanair na aid cuideiginn fad air n-aid agus chanadh iad, "Beannachd Dhia dguibh, a dhuine. Nach fhada bho'n a chuala mi roimhe pàirt dhe'n sgeulachd sin." Agus chanadh mór-chuid dhe na bhiodh astaigh, "Moran taing dhuibh, moran taing dhuibh. S'ann a bha sgeulachd a bha gasda ri éisdeachd rithe. Eos Nill MacNill

Very often when someone would tell a great, long tale, and particularly if it was one that someone had heard part of, perhaps from his grandmother's sister or somebody far back, they would say, "God's blessing be with you, my man. Isn't it a long time since I last heard part of that tale? Then most people would say, "Many thanks to you. Many thanks to you. That was certainly a wonderful story to listen to." Joe Neil MacNeil (1908-2000), Cape Breton Gaelic storyteller (MacNeil, 1987, pp. 34-35)

The United Nations Education, Scientific, and Cultural Organization's Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) considers oral traditions to be integral to the well-being of communities, to the identity of places, and to the world's cultural diversity. Public authorities are urged to adopt policies and programs that recognize – and allow for the transmission of – local memory, knowledge, and wisdom.

In 2011, the Cape Breton Regional Library Board (Nova Scotia, Canada) specifically cited this convention, which Canada has not yet ratified, in inaugurating the library's Storyteller-in-Residence program. The part-time Storyteller-in-Residence is working with the library's 13 branches and two bookmobiles, scattered over a vast geographical area, covering small urban and rural communities. The total population of approximately 110,000 is declining due to the downturn or closure of primary and secondary industries, such as coal mining, steel production, and the fisheries.

"Storytelling has undergone a revival even in highly literate and industrial societies," reports David Leeming (1997, p. 7), a leading student of the history of this ancient craft. Ramon Ross (1972), another respected storyteller and teacher, compares storytelling to a harvest that nourishes a community. The effort, skill, and experience associated with storytelling should not be understated. "Like all harvests, this one may not be ours without preparation" (p. 4).

Storytelling has found its place in contemporary business and professional development. Peter Guber (2007), a well-known filmmaker and business executive, has written about storytelling in the workplace: "[W]ords and ideas presented in a way that engages listeners' emotions are what carry stories. It is this oral tradition that lies at the center of our ability to motivate, sell, inspire, engage, and lead" (p. 7).

The storyteller is not necessarily divorced from the written word. Storytellers who have honed their ability to retain an audience's attention through anecdotes, parables, vivid narratives, and accumulated wisdom have often found success when transposing some of that work into writing. Muhammad Yunus (2003) has demonstrated this with his participation in the micro-credit revolution in Bangladesh and internationally. Jan Potocki, an 18-century ethnographer who spent a lifetime travelling in Europe, the Middle East, and Africa, managed to capture the mystical power of stories, but also profound commentaries on the human condition, in his classic book *Rękopis Znaleziony w Saragossie* (Potocki, 2010).

Cape Breton enjoys a rich storytelling heritage. Longstanding linguistic groups on the island – including indigenous Mi'kmaq, French Acadian, Scottish Gaelic, and many of the immigrant communities that originally clustered around the steel plant and coal mines – have strong oral traditions. Some of these stories have been reflected or alluded to in print, as for instance by short story writers like Alastair MacLeod (2001), or by novelists like Frank Macdonald (2005), but much of the inter-generational knowledge is still contained only in stories that have been transmitted verbally from generation to generation. Notwithstanding the occasional reports of a storytelling revival, local storytellers have expressed concern about a disappearing art, especially the longer stories that cannot be summarized in “tweets” or sound bites (F. MacDougall, regional librarian, personal communication, 2011).

Other Designated Storytellers

The Cape Breton Regional Library Board approved annual objectives in March 2010. It decided that the Storyteller-in-Residence concept – initially referred to as “Storyteller Laureate” – should be investigated. The author, who volunteers as a member of the board and had suggested the study, undertook a research project, consulting with a selection of local stakeholders as well as storytellers in other jurisdictions, including Karen Pillsworth and Kimberley Weitkamp.

Karen Pillsworth is the Storyteller Laureate of Kingston, New York, population 25,000. In 2005, she was appointed for life to this position by city council, in recognition of her achievements in the field. (She recommended fixed terms, however.) Her gift for storytelling first came to public attention through the local school system, where she works as a kindergarten teacher. Her efforts have been enlisted by medical professionals – for palliative care and recovery – and by organizations engaged in justice and corrections. She has developed stories and workshops for young offenders.

Kimberley Weitkamp is the president of the Virginia Storytellers' Circle, which promoted a 2006 bill, House Bill No. 1256, in the state assembly to “create the honorary position of Storyteller Laureate of Virginia, to be appointed by the Governor from a list of nominees submitted by the Virginia Storytelling Alliance. Each storyteller laureate shall serve a term of two years with no restriction on reappointment” (<http://lis.virginia.gov/cgi-bin/legp604.exe?061+ful+HB1256>). The bill did not pass, but it generated public interest

in the concept. Weitkamp is also Storyteller-in-Residence at the Center for Peace Studies and Violence Prevention at Virginia Tech. The center was set up to help the campus recover from the massacre of April 2007. She also founded The Wrinkles Project to encourage elders to tell their stories. She speaks of the “heart, heritage, history, and healing” embodied in the craft of storytelling. She often uses three classifications of storytellers, sometimes overlapping: those who perform for entertainment; those who tell stories for therapeutic reasons; and “grassroots” storytellers – people who emerge from or facilitate informal gatherings that encourage others to tell their stories. She is seeing a resurgence of these grassroots storytellers on college campuses.

In 2010, Taffy Thomas became the United Kingdom’s first Storyteller Laureate. There was no formal process of nomination. Thomas was invited to accept this position by a delegation led by Birmingham’s Poet Laureate, Adrian Johnson. Unlike Weitkamp and Pillsworth, who were interviewed, Thomas was not consulted directly in the development of the Cape Breton program. He is a retired teacher, folk theatre founder, and storyteller in residence at the Northern Centre for Storytelling in Grasmere. He started telling stories at age 35 when recovering from a stroke that affected his speech. His life experiences, and anecdotes he had heard, became resources for him:

I spent a lot of my childhood with a grandfather who was the sort of person who took forever to walk the length of the street. He had a word with everyone, and everyone had a word with him. If you grow up like that, it is just a step to turn it into a story (Ward, 2010).

Literary Laureate Programs at Public Libraries

Several other Canadian public libraries have literary laureate programs or partner with literary laureate programs. The most formalized of these appears to be the Owen Sound Public Library’s Poet Laureate. Appointed to a two-year term, the Poet Laureate is expected to perform poems at a minimum of two events, to coordinate the Poet Laureate Map of Canada (showing where counterparts are based), to work with the library and the local newspaper to establish an on-line Poets’ Gallery, to help organize a Poet of the Month offering, and to host a periodic “fireside chat,” among other duties.

The Owen Sound Public Library issues a call for nominations and convenes a formal selection committee. The incumbent is expected to sign a contract. The library offers a \$5,000 annual honorarium, which is covered by sponsors. Chief Librarian Judy Armstrong advised the author that the sponsors “just happened to come forward when we put out the call for donors. Lawyers seem to be a good fit as business sponsors for poets” (personal communication, 2010). According to Armstrong, the benefits to the community are significant:

Municipal politicians and community members are proud that our small city [of 30,000 people, in southern Ontario] has its very own Poet Laureate. The Poet Laureate is active in literary events and activities in

our area, above and beyond the requirements of the Poet Laureate and certainly adds significantly to the literary richness of our community (personal communication, 2010).

The Mississauga (Ontario) Library System's Children's Laureate is less elaborate in its structure. There is no formal job description, no honorarium, and no formal selection process. Chief Librarian Don Mills noted that it was understood by library personnel that the laureate would promote literature and literacy. "We agreed with both [there was a Poet Laureate prior to the Children's Laureate] on what they wanted to do and could do and did it" (personal communication, 2010). The laureates have been used for library special occasions and have promoted the library to politicians in this city of 750,000 people. Mills recalls one of the witty laureates leaving the mayor "in stitches."

Consultation With Local Scholars Interested in Intangible Cultural Heritage

Lindsay Marshall, then principal of the Unama'ki College, Cape Breton University (CBU), and now chief administrative officer of Potlotek First Nation, supported the Storyteller-in-Residence concept. He suggested that the Mi'kmaq Association for Cultural Studies would be an important source for ongoing advice once the program is operational. The Mi'kmaq Resource Centre at the Beaton Institute, Cape Breton University, is an archival repository for written and recorded information on the evolution of Mi'kmaq storytelling traditions over time. Marshall also drew attention to the importance of the Mi'kmaw word *a'tukwey*, meaning the art of storytelling. He noted the occasional, well-publicized storytellers' gatherings in nearby Richmond County, attracting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal participants.

Heather Sparling, CBU associate professor of ethnomusicology and chieftain of the Cape Breton Gaelic Society, was likewise supportive. She observed that fluent Gaelic speakers are often in considerable demand and that it may be difficult to recruit such a person to an advisory committee. Nevertheless, a well-constituted advisory committee may help the Storyteller-in-Residence Laureate connect to cultural and community resources. Sparling supported the use of job descriptions, even if the position were to be an unpaid one.

Afra Kavanagh, professor of languages and letters, eventually became a community representative on the advisory committee. She has studied storytelling and has organized 13 successful storytellers' symposia at CBU. She, too, was in favour of the concept, but suggested that a designation other than the originally contemplated "laureate" would be more appropriate. "Laureate" could be deemed pretentious, especially in the context of the egalitarian culture of the local storytelling community. She recommended that the incumbent receive some remuneration: In her experience, many storytellers live on modest incomes.

Richard MacKinnon, Canada Research Chair in Intangible Cultural Heritage, suggested that a Storyteller-in-Residence program could ultimately be part of a more ambitious library initiative to formally recognize people who possess endangered traditional skills,

somewhat akin to Japan's Living Treasures program. Be it wooden boat-building, particular forms of step dancing, or rug hooking, these community teachers could be invited to use the public libraries – as they sometimes already do – to teach their skills and crafts. MacKinnon opined that the library, as a provider of accessible places and programs of learning for all generations, is the best-suited institution to run such an initiative.

The Structure

The external advice summarized above was carefully examined by members of the Cape Breton Regional Library's staff Communications Committee and by the author. Regional Librarian (CEO) Faye MacDougall shared the results of these discussions with the board. The following structure was adopted:

1. Criteria.

The Storyteller-in-Residence must be a resident of Cape Breton Island. He or she should:

- have demonstrated, through storytelling, an interest, appreciation, and understanding of communities served by the Cape Breton Regional Library, for local heritage, and for cultural diversity;
- support the mission of the Cape Breton Regional Library;
- be a highly effective communicator and possess superior instructional skills.

2. Terms.

A term of two years was considered appropriate, renewable for up to one additional term. The Regional Librarian would have the authority to terminate the appointment.

3. Expectations.

The Storyteller-in-Residence is expected to undertake the following:

- attend at least two library events per year and at least two outside events on behalf of the library, with the events to be agreed to in advance with the Regional Librarian;
- although not all content prepared and transmitted as part of this program need be local, the storyteller should prepare at least one composition per year;
- offer at least two workshops per year at a local library.

Stories composed and told in the incumbent's capacity as Storyteller-in-Residence, or where the incumbent is introduced as such, shall be suitable for a general audience and reflective of the library's respect for communities and for diversity. Where in doubt about suitability, the Storyteller-in-Residence will confer in advance with the Regional Librarian and/or the Advisory Committee.

4. Selection.

A committee consisting of three library staff, one member of the library board, and two community members recommends the Storyteller-in-Residence. The final recommendation is presented to the Library Board for approval.

The committee issues a call for nominations. The committee is also permitted to consider persons who have not been nominated and to specifically solicit nominations from or about individuals who may be suitable candidates.

The consideration of nominees is in confidential session. Interviews are to be held. The committee, seated in a circle without tables, requests the candidate to facilitate a storytelling session – including a story for children and a story for a general audience.

A criminal-record check and a child-abuse registry check are required.

5. Advisory Committee.

The nomination committee is to also function as an advisory committee, meeting at least once per year to make recommendations for the administration of the program and to provide a consultative platform for the incumbent Storyteller-in-Residence. Membership on the advisory committee is to be reviewed once every two years.

6. Remuneration.

It was determined that remuneration of \$1,500 per year be awarded, plus expenses. This is a modest sum, the result of a very limited library operating budget derived from a funding formula that penalizes regions with declining populations, including the region served by the Cape Breton Regional Library. But it also signals the desire of the library to give some special status and recognition to this position. The Storyteller-in-Residence is to be more than an honorific title; it is a way to markedly enhance the library's programming.

It was decided that there not be a title sponsor. The library board wished to clearly identify this as a public library initiative.

The First Storyteller-in-Residence

In June 2011, following interviews with a short list of candidates, Ken Chisholm was officially appointed the first Storyteller-in-Residence for the Cape Breton Regional Library. He has been telling stories in various genres for 35 years. His original songs, which are stories and narratives in their own right, such as *Brothers in the Saddle* and *Company Town*, are considered Cape Breton classics. He has directed numerous plays, including award-winning children's plays, using Cape Breton's many community halls as venues. His approach has been without pretense or self-aggrandizement, a humility that is respected in the local cultures.

Chisholm immediately embraced his new role. With Appalachian storyteller Sheila Kay Adams and Cape Breton historian and storyteller Jim St. Clair, the new Storyteller-in-Residence participated in a workshop on the "storytelling tradition" at the Celtic Colours International Festival, the largest event on Cape Breton Island, an event that takes in most of the island's communities. He conducted a storytelling session with children of various ages at the Cabot Trail Writers' Festival. He headlined the library's Hallowe'en Fun Day for older children, and then did a sing-a-long for younger participants, incorporating local lore and helping children as young as two years of age to add their voices to the event. He has become an ambassador for public libraries at a variety of events.

Chisholm reports a very positive reception. He emphasizes that it is not just about him telling stories. It is about him providing the forum for, say, a local World War II veteran to share a haunting memory of trying but failing to save a burning comrade. It is about understanding how communities handle big global events or trends in their own way. "I wouldn't mind if some sessions were even less structured," Chisholm says (personal communication, 2011). "I could be available for an hour or so – office hours, so to speak – and anyone could come in and I could tell a brief story one on one or in smaller groups, and they could share their stories with me. We often devalue our own stories or need to tell them to someone else to gain perspective on them."

Conclusion

The announcement of the Storyteller-in-Residence program generated considerable publicity for the Cape Breton Regional Library, including national media coverage. For example, the television and radio coverage of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation tied the initiative to Cape Breton's well-known storytelling traditions. Afra Kavanagh, who represented the library in an interview for the cross-Canada radio program *As It Happens*, emphasized the multicultural character of the island's stories and recounted her own immigration experience. The coverage provided a platform for library representatives to explain the role and values of a modern library – including outreach, sensitivity to local cultures and traditions, and assisting communities to develop their own, original forms of expression.

The Cape Breton Regional Library Board and the Advisory Committee for the Storyteller-in-Residence program will periodically evaluate this initiative and explore new opportunities. How can we effectively use new media without losing the texture and richness of our timeless stories? How can the Storyteller-in-Residence give other storytellers outlets for their craft? How do we preserve traditions without commodifying them? Indeed, it is in part through the medium of the storyteller that the library is asking important cultural and educational questions, and giving voice to the region's diverse communities.

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Tom Urbaniak is Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, Cape Breton University, and Trustee, Cape Breton Regional Library Board.

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