

Gael Cresp.

Gael Cresp tells the story of Gawain and the Loathly lady and her telling clearly illustrates the point: that the stories we choose to tell resonate with a little of ourselves and our understanding of life. Her emphasis comes by leaving the punch line until the very end of the story. "What is it that women most desire? The right to choose for themselves." This is for her the important question of the story.

Likewise, conscious decisions and over fifteen years of work as a storyteller inform Gael's storytelling. It is interesting, informing and exciting to have had the privilege of watching her development over this period of time. The publication of her first picture book, The biography of Gilbert Alexander Pig, sees the osmosis of these ideas and values at work in a classic tale.

Gael first entertained the idea of becoming a storyteller in 1981 whilst undertaking a unit of 'storytelling' as part of her Graduate Diploma in Children's Literature. The medium appealed to her and it became apparent that she had that intrinsic ability needed to be a storyteller. Pace, timing and conscious choice of story was to come later. Although she credits 1984 as the beginning of this career her father maintains that 'she has been telling stories all her life'. She also has a degree in Librarianship and a Certificate in the foundations of Professional Writing.

The seeds for Gilbert Alexander have been growing along the way. Gael admits in the early days of telling she did not always understand what brought her to particular stories. But as her work progressed she became aware of recurring themes, motivations and stories as metaphors that paralleled stages in her life. Like many of us she was beginning to realise the power of storytelling and acquire a conscious knowledge of the messages behind her stories.

I had my nine year old reluctant reader of a son read the story of Gilbert and then asked to him to retell the story to me, a .) to check that he had read it and b.) elicit a child's reaction to the story.

He loved it and a few things stand out in his retelling. 'The pig goes from his mother into the world.' He often repeated that 'the pig loved to fish by the river and at night he played his trumpet to the stars.' A wonderful repetitious refrain that gives the story immense appeal to children and positively sings in the telling. He paraphrased certain sections by saying, 'you know, like in the three pigs, the house of sticks and bricks.' 'And there's a wolf who keeps trying to steal the trumpet but they negotiate and talk about it and the pig teaches the wolf how to play trumpet and they end up in a band.' My son understands the concept of negotiation, thank you Gael, this is sure to come in handy. As an aspiring rock star, with a trumpet playing uncle as role model, Dominic found this a hugely satisfying conclusion. I must add here that this resolution came not through the word's but David Cox's 'cheerful, racy, scribbly illustrations that burst out of their frames.' The two end up on stage together on the very last page, playing their trumpet to the stars (and audience).

The story of a trumpet playing black pig with a texan drawl came about at a workshop presented by the Victorian Storytelling Guild in 1996. It was conducted by Guild member Trish Sykes on the 'why, what and how to's' of working with story. A busy schedule meant Gael had forgotten to prepare a traditional tale, so 'the three pigs' was roped in. "I discovered that I wanted to put a spin on the story so that the traditional meaning could be juxtaposed

with the other interpretation.' She also reflected on the role of traditional tales and the message she had brought from the three little pigs. She vividly recalls the family copy of a musical tape that had the song on it. It was played often in her childhood and is imbedded in her memory, 'Nix on sticks, I will build my house with bricks, I have no time to sing and dance Because work and play don't mix.'

From this she brought the notion, "I must work hard, build on strong foundations and lock myself in (to a secure job and a proper house) if I am to be happy and successful.' The story of Gilbert Alexander began as a joke to poke fun at this idea and to suggest that there are, indeed, alternatives.

The Texan drawl was borrowed from friend Gil Askey, a black, Texan jazz trumpeter. With his voice the story came to Gael and a way to explore her interest in the masculine point of view. As she refined the story she began to see connections between the kind of man he is and the way (she wanted...) the pig to behave.

She emphasizes that her initial concerns were in retelling the traditional story in a humorous way, 'I was (and am) primarily interested in creating a good story. One that hung together in a logical sequence and that entertained.' But the more she thought of her friend Gil and the way he worked she realised this knowledge was shadowing the story. 'The most remarkable thing about Gil is his lack of resentment and bitterness about the appalling treatment he and other black people received over the years.' She would show the reader how to negotiate their way to a conclusion. By employing politically correct language she gave it a contemporary feel,

'What we need is some dialogue here, he says. I'll listen to you. You listen to me.....We'll negotiate a solution so we can BOTH be happy.'

One review I read suggested this was an 'issues' book designed to stimulate discussion about racism and conflict resolution and well it might do this but this seems to suggest a didactic stance. Gael tells a rattling good yarn in the style of a traditional tale where the messages are subconscious and deal with some some important issues for our times. Underlying the story that a nine year old boy found so entertaining are issues of appropriation, negotiation and reconciliation. As a storyteller she believes it is important for children to hear these traditional tales. Gilbert Alexander Pig is a one world story. This phrase coming from issues we raised at the time of Pauline Hanson's one Nation party. We need stories that cross all boundaries. But Gael is not afraid to turn these stories on their head, she employs the form of tale and uses the voice of a traditional storyteller to bring new understandings.

Gael is the current President of the Victorian Storytelling Guild and this year it celebrates its 21st birthday. She has been involved for a good many of these years and has watched the Guild grow and evolve. This involvement has allowed her to watch and observe and appreciate the many different styles of teller. She thinks an important role of the Guild is to offer a community for storytellers, a place we can get together and listen, run workshops and share stories. A place where people come to find out what storytelling is for them. 'If they are storytellers it doesn't matter how they do it if it works.'

'People often assume a Guild means there will be hurdles and tasks to perform. In Victoria storytelling is as varied as the storytellers, the stories and our listeners.

Maybe it's the same silvery hair but her style reminds me of Patricia Scott, the Tasmania teller who has been awarded many honours for her services to children's literature. Quietly animated, more with inflection of tone and language than any loud body movements. She commented that storytellers must be true to their own style, this quantifies the storyteller more than any other consideration. Humor and strong female characters also often feature in her work.

Over the years I have noticed her ability to cut to the heart of the story and provide pithy comment on underlying themes and the big picture. She talks of the symbols that are represented in the stories we tell.

As a great storyteller she has made The biography of Gilbert Alexander Pig seem natural and effortless whilst embracing the important themes for our time. The quality that informs her stories, the metaphors she looks for 'are that people must make their own decisions.'

Harking back to Dame Ragnall, the Loathly Lady.

and the way she guides Gawain and Arthur through the action until Gawain 'negotiates' 'talks it through' and allows the dame to make her own decisions we can see this important theme freedom