

# IN LOVE WITH STORYTELLING

by JADA ALBERTS

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A response to:  
*Stories in the Dark*  
by Debra Oswald



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## Author's Biography



JADA ALBERTS is a Larrakia, Bardi, Wadaman and Yanuwa performer from the Top End of Australia. She graduated in 2006 from the Adelaide Centre for the Arts and in 2007 won the Adelaide Critics' Circle Award for Best Emerging Artist. Jada has appeared on stage in *Frost/Nixon*, *The Birthday Party*, *Second to None* and *Yibiyung*; most recently she played Goneril in the national tour of *The Shadow King*. Jada appeared in the feature film *Red Hill* and on television in *Rush Series III*, *Redfern Now*, *Wentworth* and the upcoming *Wentworth Series II*. Jada is also an accomplished musician and painter of contemporary Indigenous art and in 2013 won the Balnaves Foundation Indigenous Playwright's Award.

## IN LOVE WITH STORYTELLING

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*Part of the power of all storytelling is reassurance, offering hope to those sat in the darkness, that good can succeed and wrongdoing fail.*  
– Charles Sturridge.

In *Stories in the Dark*, storytelling finds itself juxtaposed with the severe reality of a war zone. In the centre of an unknown war-torn city, the circumstances in which the main characters, Anna and Tomas, find themselves reveals a question: What is the value of story when your reality is in extreme crisis? Having never lived in a war zone and having no experience of armed conflict like what is described in *Stories in the Dark*, I don't think I'm able to answer this question from a personal perspective. I feel as though thinking about it, reading or researching could never give me the perspective to talk about war in this context. I am, though, very grateful that this work for young audiences explores the worth of storytelling up against the harshest of realities. Plays like this one remind us of the young individuals and families caught in war zones, the indiscriminate violence they are subject to, and one way in which they might escape it.

Just a few days ago I was sitting on the couch watching a children's film with my five-year-old nephew. I worried that he wasn't enjoying himself as he stared at the dramatisation of a battle scene on the TV. I asked him if he was OK. 'What's a war?', he asked, still staring at the screen. I did my best to answer in concepts I thought he could understand. I talked about good guys and bad guys and soldiers and planes that drop bombs. On the screen, four regular pre-adolescent siblings scrambled for shelter, doing their best to keep each other safe and alive. Whether it made any sense to him, I'm not sure. He continued to watch the war scene play out and I thought for a moment that despite a small hint of fear, he might have escaped the conversation unaffected and not too concerned. Until he wiggled closer to me and leant in. Eyes still glued to the screen he tucked himself in close under my arm. I let my arm relax around him and



held on to him gently. However small his concept of war, however that moment affected him, I'm glad he wasn't experiencing it alone.

Throughout *Stories in the Dark* we get glimpses of the possible effects of war on the psyche of children and young adults who are caught in it. Both main characters are confronted by death and violence and we see evidence of the damage it does. Bullets whizz past their heads while they try to sleep. People they talk to on the street are suddenly shot and killed in front of their eyes. From this excerpt on page 25 we understand that Anna feels far older than 16:

TOMAS: You said you were a hundred and five.

ANNA: I am. But also sixteen.

TOMAS: That's stupid. You can't –

ANNA: You understand nothing. I used to be sixteen. I'd picked out what senior subjects I was going to do. I got top marks at school, you know.

TOMAS: Well, maybe later, you can –

Anna goes on to change the subject. Her outward defence is a hardened exterior and a prickly personality. Tomas navigates carefully and faced with a greater evil outside of their refuge, he resigns himself to her name-calling.

At just 12 years of age, Tomas is struggling to make sense of his home city at war. On page 26, we see him seeking to justify and make sense of death in a way that seems logical to him:

ANNA: Some of our old neighbours were killed in the fire.

TOMAS: Maybe it was punishment because they didn't help you before.

ANNA: What?

TOMAS: I mean the reason they got killed was because they –

ANNA: People don't get killed for any reason. There's no reason.

TOMAS: I thought it would feel like revenge for you.

As they go on, we get an inkling of the anger he's harbouring. It speaks volumes of the psychological trauma he's experienced and what it can do to a young person:

TOMAS: I want revenge.

*ANNA looks at him, hearing the hard tone.*

ANNA: Revenge against who?

TOMAS: The guys who broke into our house wore black ski masks. But one of them – I recognised his voice. His kids go to my school. We played soccer, we went to each other's houses. The men in the ski masks kept hitting my dad.

ANNA: Nothing you can do about it now.

TOMAS: I want to rip the ski masks off their disgusting faces and smash them into the wall.

*TOMAS's angry energy crumbles into tears. He turns away from ANNA, not wanting her to see.*

TOMAS: If you turn the lights off right now I'll smash your face into the wall.

Like my nephew on the couch, there are so many things that I don't understand about war. And it's devastating to think that right now there are any number of Tomas and Annas out there in the world who know far too much about war than they should. I think it is clear, however, from all perspectives, the extreme violence and tremendous consequence that exists at the centre of this type of conflict. That these two young people have found each other, that there is some small solace that comes from the stories they come to tell each other, is proof of a tender, precious and likely fleeting miracle.

*Stories in the Dark* also speaks of a craving for distraction and a need for calm. Tomas is so terrified of the dark he is sure he won't be able



to sleep without the lights on. But the lights can't be left on after dark, because they draw the attention of near-by sniper fire and Anna is determined to keep them off. Tomas reveals to Anna that his mum used to tell him stories when he couldn't sleep. So Anna reluctantly retells an old story she half recalls, in an effort to calm Tomas's anxieties and get him to relax.

As the play goes on, storytelling becomes a natural part of the relationship that grows between these unlikely friends. It becomes an anchor; a ritual that allows them to take the focus off their own realities. It allows for natural play and imagination to take them somewhere else, providing comfort (of sorts) from the brutality outside their rubble room.

It reminds me of our collective desire for narrative. Our global obsession with it.

Intellectually, we tend to trivialise the role of story in our realities and underestimate our need for it. Like Tomas, though, I have often found myself in a position where my anxiety insisted that I find an alternative reality. When the dark was dark enough that I needed a distraction. That despite myself, and without realising it, I craved to experience dramatic arc and the exploration of a central question. Why? To escape, I suppose. But there are deeper workings at play when it comes to our brains and storytelling, and in our current economic and political climate, questioning the relevance of this ancient phenomenon and rediscovering its significance and power is something, I think, worthy of further investigation.

In the playwright's notes (page ix), Debra Oswald tells the story that helped her "click an idea into place" when working on *Stories in the Dark*:

Maggie (Blinco) told me a delightful story about performing in the musical *Oliver*. At the beginning of the second act, Maggie and the young actor playing the lead role would sit on a piece of scenery suspended high above the stage. They had to wait there

in darkness for twenty minutes until their cue to be lowered onto the stage. To pass the time, Maggie would tell the boy a story, whispering it aloud. Eventually, Maggie ran out of stories. She began reading from books of traditional tales by the light of day so she would have a fresh story to relay to the young actor each night in the dark, high above the stage.

The imagery that this small passage conjures in my mind (undoubtedly quite different to what is conjured in yours) is precious, detailed and beautiful. I see an older actor with short brown and greying hair; she has a face full of wisdom and reminds me of my great grandmother. I see her face, blue twinkling eyes and brown skin, but the boy is so enthralled in her words I don't see his. He leans into her, hanging on every word she speaks. Come to think of it, I even suppose I am the boy, looking back at myself. I see the back of my short cropped hair, a grubby pair of knees and skinny legs in shorts with knee-high white socks. I see the two of us perched atop a horizontal scenic beam like birds on a wire, knees bent, crouching bodies, whispering to each other in the shadows of a lit stage below. In the background I see cables, flies, parts of a lighting rig, the whole image resting in a soft, warm and yellowing glow. My image defies the laws of gravity, obviously, and certainly some occupational health and safety rules on the entry of actors lowered onto a stage. I don't see any harnesses or railings, my fantastical image is romanticised, personal and bordering on the ridiculous, but still, it is an image I won't easily forget.

I feel compelled by this tiny story. I feel inspired by it. I feel both comforted and hopeful at the idea of it all. I feel I've been able to glimpse a moment that I will probably never experience (I'm scared of heights for one thing and am too old to play the role of Oliver now), and so I've imagined myself in it, creating a moving image that looks and feels like it could be a memory.

This story, like the play it helped inspire, is a powerful reminder of what story can do. Here is a teeny example of a story that has travelled from reality and experience, to the ears of a playwright,

from playwright to play notes and now finds itself here, in the ridiculous imagery of my mind. Here it will stay as two social creatures high above the world, connected in the shadows in the most wonderful way, despite their differences.

While reading *Stories in the Dark* I felt compelled by another question at the centre of this precious work: Why are we all so in love with storytelling?

Whether we had the gift of a loving parent to tuck us in at night, to read to us before we could, whether the first story we told was a lie to hide our wrongdoings or a fantasy to fall asleep to, how deeply storytelling penetrates our everyday life remains a generally unacknowledged enigma of sorts. We assume we are the only animals that tell stories, we have no real idea of when we started doing it, and even the why remains abstract and elusive (page 42):

ANNA: The world is not like those stories.

TOMAS: I know that.

*There's a silence as the two of them listen to the shelling around them.*

TOMAS: But the world isn't only like *this*. That's what I think, anyway.

*TOMAS waits for ANNA to argue back. She doesn't say anything.*

What I like about the stories – it's not because everything turns out magically right – it's not like that. Sometimes the stories are like my grandparents talking to me even though they're dead. It's like secret treasures... Oh... If I try to think it in words it falls apart in my brain but I still know I like the –

ANNA: It's your brain that's falling apart.

TOMAS: I'll shut up then.

Narrative and story have mostly gotten off lightly in the past. Or perhaps our fascination with it runs so deep that we've failed to notice we're desperately addicted. As a species – scientifically speaking – we've only just begun to scratch the surface of why we're obsessed by it, why our brains are hardwired to see it even when it isn't there. We know how central storytelling is to human existence, that it is an organising tool for our memory, that it's so deeply ingrained that we begin to absorb and negotiate it even during infancy. We also know it's the most efficient human transfer of information, our most effective form of communication. This remains the case despite our intellectual tendency to favour facts or hard data to influence our rational, academic, adult selves. All evidence points to our species being one that operates mainly according to our emotions. And effective story has the power to manipulate (for better or worse) our emotions and engage and activate more parts of the brain, no matter the listener or readers' age, sex or cultural background.

Narrative can quite literally *change our brain chemistry* with long lasting effects. And because of a lack of neurological distinction between fictional and real experiences, effective story produces a rich simulation of reality in our minds. Every day we tell ourselves many stories: some real, some fabricated. We read books, we gossip, we flock to cinemas, theatres and the internet, absorbing narrative at every turn. The more effective the story the greater our engagement. The greater our engagement, the longer we retain the story. And with a larger brain event we experience a deeper processing of the information within the story.

In studies conducted by neuroeconomist Paul J. Zak, blood samples were taken from people before and after engagement with effective narrative. Results showed increased levels of hormones like cortisol (responsible for distress, known to cause a focusing of our attention) and oxytocin (related to bonding, empathy and trust).<sup>1</sup> In an unrelated study at the Centre for Neuropolicy at Emory University, neuroscientists found that readers' brain chemistry were altered after engaging in effective narrative, and that readers remained in this changed state for several days after the narrative was completed<sup>2</sup>. The

evidence goes so far as to suggest that those who regularly engage with narrative fiction have a greater capacity to engage in social interactions. In this way, we must understand that effective story has the power to achieve, to do, to effect change in the most complex organ in our body. That it's not simply an aesthetic article, but a tool with quantifiable utilities. For some reason or another, our brains are wired particularly for this.

That we dismiss, belittle or remain indifferent to the power of effective story, that we box it as a childish trait – something of a hobby to partake in outside of office hours – that we don't recognise its organisational usefulness, that intellectually we don't respect its influence as much as we should, is really something of a danger unto ourselves. Because our advertising companies know it. So too, I expect, do our news media and politicians.

One reason we feel compelled to narrative is its power to reassure. Put simply, story gives us an example of cause and effect. If I do that, this will result. And so narrative coherence can help us navigate our past, present and future selves. It can help us to understand where we are, where we've been and where we are going. The reassurance that story can provide is essential for human survival, even when the comfort it provides is based on complete untruths. The sense of security that it can provide, factual or not, is just one of the reasons we engage with it so readily.

We see a beautiful bit of reassuring storytelling that Tomas tells himself and his brother at the end of *Stories in the Dark*. Tomas has found his brother and returns back to the rubbled room that he and Anna shared to find she has left, heading towards a border in hope of a better life. He begins to tell one more story (page 55-6):

TOMAS: Anna keeps the pendant with the bee, the one that belonged to her mother [...] She sells the rest and gets a suitcase full of American dollars. Once she gets to Paris [...] with the American dollars, Anna buys the most beautiful house in Paris. And then once a year – on her mother's birthday – she throws a party, even though

her mother's dead [...] Anyone in Paris who's having a crappy time and needs a party, they'd be invited. Everyone cooks Anna's mum's favourite recipes and cakes. [...] And they eat and play music on instruments made from singing bones and tell jokes all night. The potato-head boy travels to Paris for the party too. [...] And – and then... uh... [...] I hope she's all right.

Mixing what he knows of the real Anna and the war they're living inside of, he combines details from folk tales they've told each other, of singing bones and potato-headed boys. He tells a version of Anna's story with fantastical circumstance and a precious but tenuous hope. While the likelihood of Anna's survival is small, the hope that Tomas holds for her is great, and so his story here is grand. Inside a rubbled room with no electricity, running water or food, in the middle of a warzone, he tells the story of Anna's survival, the only gift he can give her now that she's gone. A gift he undoubtedly needs himself.

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This play draws us into a world we rarely see on our Australian stages, let alone in our theatre for young audiences. It poses composite questions about some of our most complex practices, and reminds us of the comfort and hope we find in engaging and drawing close to one another through our imaginations. Even when we find ourselves deep in the darkness.

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Copyright Agency's Reading Australia website has been live since October 2013 and has already engaged thousands of teachers Australia-wide with its free resources for primary and secondary students.

'We developed the website and the resources with the specific aim of getting Australian literature back into schools', says Copyright Agency's Cultural Fund Manager, Zoë Rodriguez.

The First 200 list of works on the Reading Australia website was chosen by the Australian Society of Authors' Council after considerable debate and discussion.

'Teacher resources have so far been developed for 21 titles (10 primary, 11 secondary) in partnership with the Primary English Teaching Association of Australia, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the English Teachers Association NSW, with another 20 secondary resources already commissioned and due on the website before the end of June.'

The teacher resources include classroom activities, assessments and links to the new Australian curriculum. In addition, the secondary resources include an introduction to the text from high profile authors and artists, such as Libby Gleeson, David Berthold, Melissa Lucashenko, Malcolm Knox and Alice Pung.

‘The extra funding, which will begin in the new financial year, will rapidly expand the free resources for teachers with 20 teaching modules related to books for primary students, 40 for secondary students and 30 for tertiary students’, Ms Rodriguez says.

‘It’s a tremendous commitment to Australian authors, publishers, teachers, students and general readers. We feel Reading Australia will put adored, but sometimes forgotten, Australian books back on people’s radars, beginning a whole new love affair with some of this country’s finest authors.’

### **Visit the Reading Australia website:**

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