

I'm going to tell you a story.

These are some of my favourite words. They make me prick up my ears. They make me wonder what's coming next.

And I really am going to tell you a story, but I want to say a few other things first.

This state of ours, lutruwita/Tasmania, holds layer upon layer of stories, and I was lucky enough to grow up with a father who was a storyteller.

The Disappearing House at Conara Junction; the Halfway House near Tunbridge; the champion ram's skull that used to be nailed to a telegraph pole south of Oatlands – thanks to my dad's stories, these were a part of my childhood myths, and the Midlands Highway seemed like a magical place because of them.

But there were stories my dad didn't tell. Stories of the frontier wars, of Aboriginal resistance, of the so-called 'convict stain'. Even now I don't know how much he knew about them, or whether they had been carefully forgotten by previous generations.

But stories are hardly ever entirely forgotten. There's nearly always someone keeping them safe, waiting for the right moment to bring them back out into the light, and the recent flowering of palawa voices in theatre, literature and film is a welcome and powerful addition to the stories of lutruwita.

As a species, we seem to be hardwired for story. Apparently when we listen to a story, or read or watch one, the exact same parts of our brain light up as if it was actually happening to us. There are theories that this helped us survive, that through stories we could pass on knowledge and try different ways of behaving before we actually found ourselves in a situation. What did uncle do when the herd of

mammoths turned on him? How did grandma escape drowning when she fell in the flooded river?

Stories let us try on different lives. They give us a hundred different models of courage, persistence, imagination, and all the other things we're going to need to get through life. They show us *possibilities*.

When I speak in schools, I often ask the kids to put up their hands if they love stories. Nearly every hand goes up. *Nearly*. There are always a few kids up the back who fold their arms in a challenging fashion.

So then I define what I mean by stories. 'Books,' I say. 'Movies. Comics, games.' And when I say 'comics and games', the rest of the hands go up.

As a novelist, my bias is towards books, and I have to remind myself again and again that they are only one way to tell stories. And that for today's kids, some of the vehicles they will use for telling stories probably haven't been invented yet.

Now, a story. Some of you will remember the mountain festivals we used to have every two years in Hobart, a celebration of the mountain and its place in our lives. One of them had the theme 'invertebrates'. It was seen as an opportunity to bring artists and scientists together in a sort of creative cross-pollination.

So one day a couple of invertebrate biologists from the University of Tasmania took a group of writers, musicians, designers and visual artists up the mountain.

They showed us amazing things. Velvet worms, caddis flies, mountain shrimps. Something called the songless hairy cicada. Something else called the 'ancient bug' – and I'm still not sure if the person who named it was being ironic or just lacked imagination.

My favourites were the tiny spiderlings that lived among the dolerite boulders, creatures so small that we needed a magnifying glass to see them.

At a certain time of year, those tiny spiderlings spin a thread and throw themselves onto the westerly winds, with no idea where they'll end up. Some of them are blown straight into the River Derwent. But others are picked up by the wind and carried across the Derwent to the east coast of Tasmania.

Some of them are carried past the east coast, across the Tasman Sea to New Zealand. And every year, a few of those tiny spiderlings are carried past New Zealand, all the way across the Pacific Ocean to South America.

And that's what stories do. They spin a thread and toss us onto the wind. They carry us to new lands, new worlds, new lives.

Telling stories is an ancient and honourable part of being human. There have been storytellers as long as there has been language, sitting around the fire, passing on wisdom, provoking laughter and tears. And now here we are, carrying the torch one more step along the way.

I wish you all much joy and delight at the very first Storygig Festival.