



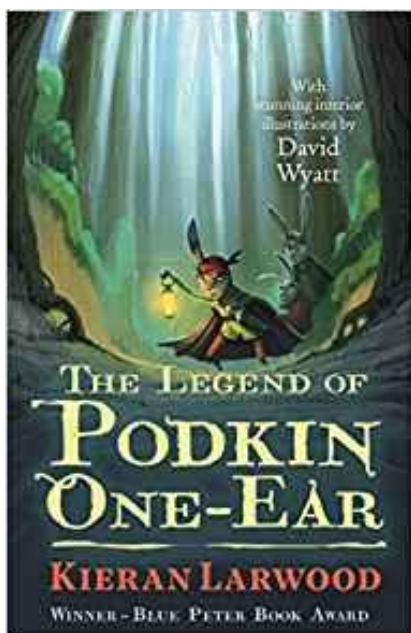
## What inspired the author?

Kieran Larwood, author of *The Legend of Podkin One-Ear*, tells us what inspired him and how he went from teaching a reception class to writing an award-winning children's book.



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I was very honoured to be asked to contribute to the Talk for Writing newsletter as, in my previous life, I was a Reception class teacher for fifteen years. I was lucky enough to attend one of Pie Corbett's Talk for Writing workshops early on in my career, and his approach of getting children to explore story structures through learning, telling, then adapting them made perfect sense to me. It quickly became a staple of my teaching approach (I can still recite 'the Jack story' in my sleep) and it was such a pleasure to see children progress towards retelling stories, attempting to write them, and finally improvising their own.



As all teachers know, the act of 'writing a story' is far more complicated than sitting down with a pencil and a title and letting rip (which is what I remember being expected to do in my dim and distant schooldays). It involves having an understanding or experience of structure—plot, events, characters, dialogue—and being able to sequence these into a particular order, even to write something as basic as the retelling of a fairy tale. And to build upon that to create something new takes a serious leap in using a quite advanced type of imagination.

Perhaps this can be subliminally absorbed through exposure to a constant stream of fairy tales, rhymes and so on, but when I began teaching I soon learned that this wasn't always happening.

It was quite a shock to me personally, having come from a background where I was lucky enough to have wide access to books and libraries, but year on year I was progressively more horrified when I asked the children which stories they knew. Many were familiar with the traditional tales you would expect, and the rest had done Goldilocks or the Three Little Pigs at pre-school but, in an ever-growing number, the exposure to staple stories seemed to be ebbing away or morphing into Disney versions. I began to realise that, not only was

immersing my class in stories important for their development, it was something you couldn't assume they were getting at home.

Albert Einstein famously said that, for a child to develop their intelligence, they should read 'fairy tales and more fairy tales,' as a way of fostering their creative imagination. The interactive nature of hearing and imagining a story is part of the skill of 'outside the box' thinking that develops into ingenuity. But the modern world of passive entertainment doesn't provide enough opportunity for this. Outside of school there are very few chances for some children to read or be read to, and even this precious class activity is under threat from other timetabled demands.



Which is why, as every teacher will understand, it is so depressing that reading and writing in the current curriculum seems to revolve around spotting or regurgitating examples of grammatical structures, as children grind their way along the conveyor belt towards the Year 6 SATs test.

When I think back to my own schooling, the moments that hang in my memory even now are my teachers reading aloud books such as *Goodnight Mister Tom* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (with all the voices). The neurons containing the mathematical formulas and grammatical terms that were drummed into me have long since quietly blinked out.

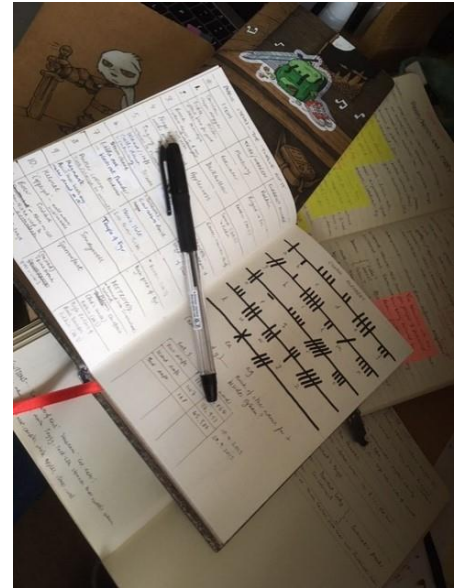


So, it was the importance of storytelling— that magical moment when the minds of the audience are connected through words alone— and the dying art of the storyteller, that was on my mind when I came to write my children's book *The Legend of Podkin One-Ear*. I had already decided that I wanted to create a fantasy story, one which tried to capture the magical qualities of books I'd read as a child, such as *The Hobbit* and *The Box of Delights*, and had the beginnings of a rabbit-filled world sketched out. I had no idea of what the actual plot might be, but my first character was already in my head. He was going to be a wandering bard who would tell the tale, Scheherazade-style, and also explore something of the nature of stories: why we have always told them and the ways they help us.

The tale of Podkin developed as I began to write, but I made sure to intersperse it with several interludes where the bard interacts with his audience. These come straight from my experience of daily story times with a class of fidgety four-year-olds, with the storyteller becoming more and more grumpy as he just wants to get on with the flipping adventure.

As well as giving children a good old-fashioned epic quest to lose themselves in, I hope I've succeeded in making them think a little about the function of stories, how important and useful they are, and how reading or listening to them can help their minds grow in a way that highlighting a bunch of 'fronted adverbials' never will.

I have been absolutely thrilled to see my book, and those of many other middle-grade authors, being shared in this way in schools as part of a recognition of how important 'reading for pleasure' is. My joy was complete when I heard of a teacher who put a virtual crackling fire on the smartboard and gathered the children around to hear a story. I know, in thirty years' time, that class will still cherish that experience.



Whilst our own bards have long gone, and we now have books or computers to record our histories, films and television to entertain us, I hope we never lose our love of tales, or our appreciation of how they can help us grow, understand each other and connect with a part of our brain that sometimes gets neglected.

As the wandering bard himself says: 'Stories belong to the teller. At least, half of them do. The other part belongs to the listeners. When a good story is told to a good listener, the pair of them own it together.'

Kieran Larwood  
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*The Legend of **Podkin One-Ear**, published by Faber Children's, was winner of the 2017 Best Story Blue Peter Book Award and the French Prix Sorcières 2019 for middle-grade fiction.*

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