



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“Step out of the clamorous world and come face-to-face with fantastic realms or affecting personal drama at the Bay Area Storytelling Festival ...Stories from long ago or just last week swirl around you as an ancient art steps into the modern world.”

-From the Bay Area
Storytelling Festival
brochure

This year I finally made it to the Bay Area Storytelling Festival. Now in its 22nd year, this yearly festival is a project of the Storytelling Association of Alta California (SAAC) and the East Bay Regional Park District. It includes storytelling, workshops, storytelling resources and something called a story swap, which is an open mic for storytellers.

The festival took place over two days and it was held at the Kennedy Grove Regional Recreation Area in El Sobrante – a place I had never been. But the drive was easy, the directions were good and the array of white tents tucked into meadows and between tall trees was inviting. Each tent was packed with teens and adults of all ages, alternating laughing, clapping and silence as the storytellers shared their talents. The first person I heard was the gifted Pat Peterson, from Seattle. She began by commenting on the portable toilets on wheels that were available to

festival goers. A friend mentioned to her that it probably would be good to avoid being in one of them when they were being wheeled around, but Peterson said, “Oh, I don’t know. It would make a good story.”

The story Peterson told was a wonderful one by Margaret Mahy called “The Man Whose Mother Used to be a Pirate.” It was about a little man with a brown suit and neatly tied shoelaces who takes his mother to the ocean for one last visit. The story was engaging, with characters you could imagine, and by the end I felt as if I had really traveled to the sea.

Kevin Kling was the next teller and his story was about traveling to Missouri (or Missoura, as he pronounced it) for a family Christmas. Kling’s humor is understated, clever and amazingly funny – I can’t remember the last time I laughed as hard. His quote in the festival brochure is: “I have a small command of the English language, so I try to make every

word a hero." If you ever have a chance to hear him, take it.

The third speaker was Sheila Kaye Adams from North Carolina. I know it must be because of my mother's roots in South Carolina, but simply listening to her accent made me happy. Adams read from her book *My Old True Love*, while her husband Jim Taylor accompanied her on the guitar. The vivid descriptions in the book were beautiful. One in particular struck me as she talked about a plowed field and the "dark furrow like water" opening up in the land.

The second set of tellers included Bill Harley, who told an entertaining story about being a fourth grade boy. One of Harley's strengths seems to be his vivid memories of childhood feelings. I think all adults in the audience could relate in some way to the thoughts and even behaviors of the children he described.

Dan O'Gara was next and his was an Irish story called "Connor and the Wolves," about a farmer who goes searching for two missing cows and ends up spending the night with a wolf family. It is a tale of good deeds never forgotten and I enjoyed hearing it.

Many of the people I talked to at the festival go year after year and I can see why. I will treasure the memory of being part of an amazingly responsive audience, as we all listened to a range of stories that celebrated the power of words, music and memory.