

Why We Tell Stories *(for Linda Foster)*

Lisel Mueller



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Because we used to have leaves
and on damp days
our muscles feel a tug,
painful now, from when roots
pulled us into the ground

and because our children believe
they can fly, an instinct retained
from when the bones in our arms
were shaped like zithers and broke
neatly under their feathers

and because before we had lungs
we knew how far it was to the bottom
as we floated open-eyed
like painted scarves past the scenery
of dreams, and because we awakened

and learned to speak

Each stanza of this poem is a different answer to one question. What is the question?

Number the stanzas 1-10. Write #1 in the box next to the stanza that makes the most sense to you, #2 next to the stanza that makes second-most sense to you, etc.

Why do trees have roots?

What do people mean when they talk about their roots?

As a young child, did you ever believe you could actually fly? _____

What else might it mean to believe you can fly? (Hint: Think about the R. Kelly song!)



Zithers are shaped like _____

Circle the words and phrases that show the reader where this stanza takes place (its **setting**).

Imagine that for your entire life you had been unable to speak and then one day you woke up knowing how. What would you want to tell people? Write 2 things.

1.

2.



We sat by the fire in our caves,
and because we were poor, we made up a tale
about a treasure mountain
that would open only for us



and because we were always defeated,
we invented impossible riddles
only we could solve,
monsters only we could kill,
women who could love no one else



and because we had survived
sisters and brothers, daughters and sons,
we discovered bones that rose
from the dark earth and sang
as white birds in the trees

Excerpt 1

and because we were always defeated
we invented impossible riddles
only we could solve

Excerpt 2

we discovered bones that rose
from the dark earth and sang
as white birds in the trees

How does the use of assonance in the excerpts support the meaning of the poem?

- a. It suggests a mood of excitement.
- b. It emphasizes the idea that people tell stories as a way of dealing with loss.
- c. It helps describe the setting of the poem.
- d. It provides insight into the contrast between the speaker of the poem and her ancestors.



A person who is **poor** is a person who doesn't have _____

Treasure is _____

Why would a person who is poor tell a story about a treasure mountain?

Defeated means _____

Riddles are _____

Why would a person who feels defeated tell stories about solving riddles, killing monsters, and making women fall in love with them?

What does it mean to **survive** another person?

In what kind of story would you expect to see bones rising out of the earth?

Why would survivors tell this kind of story?

Assonance is _____

Underline the assonance in this passage from the poem:

and because we were poor, we made up a tale
about a treasure mountain
that would open only for us

Because the story of our life becomes our life

Because each of us tells the same story but tells it differently

and none of us tells it the same way twice

because grandmothers looking like spiders want to enchant the children and grandfathers need to convince us what happened happened because of them

and though we listen only **haphazardly**, with one ear, we will begin our story with the word *and*

What is a reputation?

What does it mean to "live up to your reputation?"

What does it mean to know someone "by reputation?"

What do you think Mueller means when she says "the story of our life / becomes our life"?

According to Mueller, stories show both the things people have in common and the things that make individuals different.

Write 3-4 sentences about a time when you told a story one way and someone else told it a different way.

What part of speech is the word **and**? _____

What is the purpose of the word **and**?

What do you think Mueller is saying about storytelling when she says "we will begin our story / with the word *and*"?

Which of the following accurately evaluates the characterization of grandmothers and grandfathers in the poem?

- a. Grandmothers want to entertain children, while grandfathers want children to respect them for what they've done.
- b. Grandmothers want to frighten children into good behavior, while grandfathers want to spoil children with gifts.
- c. Grandmothers want to educate children about their heritage, while grandfathers want children to understand the value of money.
- d. Grandmothers want to inform children about the importance of religious faith, while grandfathers want children to understand events from history.



Part I. In Lisel Mueller’s poem “Why We Tell Stories,” each stanza gives a different answer to the question, “Why do people tell stories?” Every answer to the question also suggests a different *kind* of story people tell. Fill in the grid for the three stanzas below.

In this stanza...	People tell stories because...	What kind of story is this?
Because we used to have leaves and on damp days our muscles feel a tug, painful now, from when roots pulled us into the ground	Stories are a way of explaining who and where we came from.	
and because we were always defeated we invented impossible riddles only we could solve, monsters only we could kill, women who could love no one else		Fairy tales about riddles, monsters, and princesses
	Stories help us remember loved ones who have died and deal with the sadness of loss.	Ghost stories or other stories where the dead return to earth to visit the living



Part II. Choose a stanza from “Why We Tell Stories,” either a stanza from the grid above or another stanza you like. Then, using the **narrative mode**, WRITE A STORY. Your story should be the kind of story Mueller probably had in mind when she wrote the stanza you’ve chosen. (E.g., if you choose the stanza that begins “and because we were always defeated / we invented impossible riddles,” you could write a story about a short, ugly troll who – through a combination of magic, trickery, and a truly winning personality – gets Beyoncé to fall in love with him.)

Your story must fill at least 1 side of 1 page in normal-sized handwriting. You may not use the names of any of your classmates in your story, although your characters may be based on yourself or other people you know. Be sure to use strong active verbs!



Part III. Write a paragraph explaining what the story you’ve written has to do with the stanza you chose from “Why We Tell Stories.” Your paragraph should:

1. Say which stanza you chose.
2. Explain what you think that stanza means. (e.g., “In this stanza, Mueller is saying that people tell stories because...”)
3. Connect your story to that stanza. (e.g., “The purpose of this story is to ‘enchant children,’ just like the grandmothers’ stories in ‘Why We Tell Stories.’”)