



“Stories as Guides Through Darkness and Wonder” with Maria Tatar

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read — where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their paper with Purpose Promise, Boise paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:15] I recently met our next guest at a Reach Out and Read meeting that was held just before the Pediatric Academic Society's meeting in Boston, and she gave a wonderful talk with the provocative title, “Would You Rather be in ‘The Great, Green Room’” or in ‘The Night Kitchen?’” That alone was intriguing, but she then proceeded to make the case that this was reflective of two opposing ideas of “reading as enchantment” versus “reading as a defense against the dark.” And then, she made an assertion that — well, it really is her audience for a loop. I was hooked, and I promise you will be, too. Our guest today is Maria Tatar. She's a senior fellow at Harvard University's Society of Fellows, a professor emerita at Harvard, and the author of several books, including “Enchanted Hunters,” “The Power of Stories and Childhood,” “The Heroine with 1001 Faces,” and the Norton Critical edition of “The Classic Fairy Tales,” among other volumes. Her most recent publication is “Arachnomania: Spiders and the Cultural Work They Do for Us.” Maria, welcome to the show.

Maria Tatar: [00:02:21] Great to be here.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:24] We'll have to come back to the spiders maybe at some later episode, but —

Maria Tatar: [00:02:30] No worries. That's fine.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:32] So, when you were invited to speak at the conference, can you tell us just a little bit about what prompted you to think about this talk and how you wanted to frame it for us?

Maria Tatar: [00:02:45] Well, let's start with enchantment because many years ago I wrote a book called “Enchanted Hunters,” which is about the way that stories cast a spell on us and they take us into other worlds. I'm a firm believer in the value of the symbolic — of how we need the symbolic to navigate the real. So, in that book, I described children as “falling under the spell of stories,” but also waking up. They're not hypnotized or put under by any stretch of the imagination, but they begin searching. They go on a journey with the protagonist. They begin this journey. They're driven by curiosity. “What's next?” “What is going to happen?” And I would say for — in a good children's book, the child always survives and the story ends with hope and a belief in the future. So, there's enchantment on the one hand, but there's also the element — and this is something that I think I discovered during the pandemic — there's also a way in which these stories give us tools for managing darkness. I guess you would call it the “indifference” of the planet to human suffering. We live in a world where terrible things can happen. Anything can happen and we need stories, I think, to help us manage that darkness — as a defense against the darkness. So, I suppose when Perri asked me to give the talk, I immediately thought, “Oh, I have nothing new to say about stories. They're just enchantment. They create these wonderful contact zones.” And I started thinking about the way in which, “Oh, it's so much more than that.” That is, we need those safe spaces more than ever. We've always needed them.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:05] Mhm. I also love how you just blithely go, “Oh, well, it's just enchantment,” right — as if we just, you know, do that every day. Although I suppose we do when we read stories, don't we? Yeah.

Maria Tatar: [00:05:19] Well, you know, it's interesting because I should say, first of all, that folklorist is not the equivalent of storyteller. And so, I've always been rather sad about the fact that I don't have that creative energy that, you know, the true storyteller has. But I've told stories to my children. I tell stories to my grandchildren and with my grandchildren — one of the things I do that I didn't do with my own children, which is to ask, “Do you want fiction or

nonfiction?” Kids are very sophisticated these days, and they learn in school that you can divide things up that way. The interesting thing to me is, while they're very rational kids, they always choose nonfiction because that's where magic happens. And you come across the unexpected. So, the great gift for me is that my grandchildren don't come with high expectations. So, as long as the story has magic and zany things happening, they are quite satisfied. And to my great delight, they always tell their parents about what a great storyteller I am. And I have — they will be disenchanted one of these days, but for now, it's all good.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:50] Well, and your protestations aside, I would posit that we get to tell stories about stories which, you know, is fun and interesting and engaging in and of itself.

Maria Tatar: [00:07:00] Absolutely.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:03] So, before we go into the full arc of what you discussed in your talk, I just want to again, express my pleasure that you began by talking about the role of books and reading. You quoted several authors — including my all-time favorite, John Milton — and our producer is going to be rolling her eyes now, but can you summarize for our listeners maybe a little bit about the perspectives in the quotes that you chose to share, because they really were wonderful ways of thinking about books and reading?

Maria Tatar: [00:07:38] Oh, well, I think you know it was Milton who told us that “Books are not dead things.”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:07:45] Mhm.

Maria Tatar: [00:07:46] And you know, here I am surrounded by those. “Books are not dead things.” They have the potency of life in them and why, you know, it's an odd thing to say. And for Milton, it's as if these aren't really books. These are vials with containing the thoughts of the writers, and they come to life when we read them. So, I mean, it's really quite extraordinary if you think of it — because in a way, I would say stories don't exist on the page. They exist in a context zone between writer and reader. That is, the book brings us together into, again, you know, this sort of safe space. And then, think about all the metaphors that we have for “the cauldron of stories” — that is, available to “the cauldron of stories,” which kind of makes you think about all the ingredients that go into storytelling and how we pick and choose things, and taste, and savor — or the ocean, Rushdie's “The Ocean of the Streams of Story,” which actually harks back to a much earlier collection of stories or the “One Thousand and One Nights:” the idea that stories are told at

night, again, as a defense against the dark. This is a time when everything is quiet.

We're all afraid of the dark because we never know what is lurking out there — but these stories bring light and illumination, pleasure and wonder. And when I say the word “wonder,” we were talking about “enchantment.” But I think it's important to remember that that kind of wonder is, as Plato and Aristotle told us, the beginning of philosophy and thought. And, you know, I mean — this is to me, you know — I'm against prosocial messaging and all of that. But I'd like to send the message that stories are there to get us thinking, to start conversations, to get the ball rolling. And if you think about when you talk to children, I notice this all the time: parents will ask their children, “Oh, how was the birthday party?” “How was school?” “How was this?” “Did you like the movie?” That never starts the conversation, but a story always does. And I love the idea of interruptions, diversions, and — you know, all kinds of detours and exits and all of that in the storytelling process — or in the reading process where you stop and you call a friend and you tell them about what you have just read.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:45] There's so many elements in what you just said of what we talk about a lot in *Reach Out and Read* around relational health. Right? The health of relationships. Even in as you started with the Milton quote, right — that the book is sort of the relationship between you, the reader and the author, the writer. And then, even what you just said about stories, right — that this is fundamentally how we connect to each other as humans, whether it's from several centuries ago or whether it's your kid coming home from a birthday party, as you just laid out there.

Maria Tatar: [00:11:21] I think also there's, you know — as a folklore, I weigh in as a folklorist for a moment. And there, I would say, a famous 19th century folklorist once referred to the “golden chain of stories that binds us all.” And imagine, you know, we talk about “A Cinderella Story,” but there's a scene in China — or we talk about “Snow White.” And yet, that Snow White story is told all over the world. She's rarely called “Snow White.” She's called “Snow White” in Anglo Anglo-American cultures and in European cultures, but these are stories that we all know. You know, they're trans — they cross borders, they cross cultures, and they give us a way. You know, there's a connection between child and adult, but also all of us are connected through these extraordinary stories that are so different from each other and yet so alike in taking up these fundamental, existential questions.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:12:32] Sure.

So, in your talk, you moved then on to talking about myths. And you particularly talked about Demeter, Persephone, and Hades. Can you say more about that?

Maria Tatar: [00:12:47] Oh, yes. Well, I should start by saying: what is the difference between myth and religion? And I would say there's really not much of a difference because my religion is your myth, and your religion may be my myth. And so, these are stories that we have told each other, have told to provide hope. And what is the story we think of Demeter and Persephone? Oh, that's a myth about seasonal change but it's also a story about death and resurrection. It tells us that no matter how terrible things are — that is, Hades abducts Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, and takes her to the underworld — I mean, it's kind of a metaphor for death in a way, but Demeter manages to bring her back. And so, Demeter is able to live on the earth and, you know, renew the earth and create a sort of seasonal change that allows humans to engage in agriculture to harvest crops. So, this is a story that resonates with us today. It was a religion at one time. It's become a myth. And in some ways, it's just a story — just a story.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:13] So, now let's move to children's literature. You brought up “Goodnight, Moon” and “In the Night Kitchen.” And I think many of your listeners may be familiar of the rough storyline of these books, but in case they're not, could you just very briefly lay out the arc of these two tales?

Maria Tatar: [00:14:35] Oh, well, “Goodnight, Moon” — it's the mother of all bedtime stories. So, I mean, again, thinking of stories as connectors, all we have to say is “Goodnight, Moon” and I think, you know, something goes off in our heads right away. But it's a wonderful story in that it, I think, calms both adults and children at night — reminding them of how the day is ending. But there's a moon out there, a source of illumination, and then the naming of objects — that is, you may be losing control as you move from illumination to darkness, but you can still name things. You could still give meaning. I love that idea of naming and giving meaning because we are “homo significans.” We search for meaning in the world. And so, there's a great comfort to that story. My only objection to it is that last — is it the last line — “Goodnight, noises everywhere,” which is a little scary. But then, all of children's literature is about death and — dare I say — about hope, about light, about darkness, about our fears, about what's hiding under the bed. “In the Night Kitchen” has to be one of my favorite bedtime stories, because in it, Mickey becomes an inventor. He's put to bed. It's dark. He's annoyed that he can't bother his parents. So, what does he do? He invents an airplane that takes him into the night kitchen where — spoiler alert — what does he do? He bakes a cake with these three rather eccentric chefs. And in the morning, we have cake in the morning because of Mickey. And the book ends with this wonderful portrait of

Mickey, and the rising sun, and the wonderful cake. So, I have to say, I kind of love the idea of Mickey as inventor, as “maker” in a way. I mean, I talked about “the cauldron of story” and all the ingredients that are put into it. And Mickey, in a way, is doing that when he makes that cake for us.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:17:17] Yeah. Thank you. So, you tell us about your premise here with these two books and what they tell us about the darkness. You've been touching on it in little pieces, but that it almost felt like a surrender to the darkness in one and a mastery of the darkness in the other.

Maria Tatar: [00:17:41] Yes. That's a perfect way of putting it. And when I compared these two stories, I had a sense of this — you know, unease, should I call it. I knew there was a problem there to solve. And I realized that it had to do with the Western sort of glorification of light and illumination and its connection with knowledge and enlightenment. Think of The Enlightenment. That's what we all strive for, using reason to understand our world. And darkness, on the other hand, is often connected with evil in our culture. Think of the Disney villains. What are they wearing? Not just the Disney villains but villains in general are in black — maybe with a splash of purple or something like that. But for the child reading a book, let's say, this connection between darkness and evil can be problematic because it's entangled with skin color and racial dimensions. So, it reminded me that, I guess, we want to be careful about what we read to children — because something may be going on in their heads that we're not aware of. And I think here of the wonderful scene in Spike Lee's “Malcolm X” film, where the two prisoners look up “black” and “white” in the dictionary and you know — go ahead and do that and you'll see that, you know, all of the associations with black are negative and white is “purity” and “innocence” and things that are not soiled, “unsoiled.” So, not to — I don't want us to move into a mode where we're suspicious of everything. Literary critics call it — I love this term and my students loved it and embraced it — a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” where we criticize. You know, “Oh, what is the real meaning of this?”

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:06] “Is there a motive?” Yeah.

Maria Tatar: [00:20:07] “What is the motive?” Yes. Right. And I think, you know, there's a danger of becoming hypercritical and too politically correct, in a way. At the same time, we really need to be sensitive to language and how children take it in. So, what I was trying to do in that talk is, you know, to bring in the dark side of storytelling in a way — and how, you know, the story of “Goodnight, Moon,” for example, may really be scary and frightening to some children because of the negative association with darkness, and blackness, and all of that.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:51] Yeah. And I do recall you sharing a wonderful quote in your talk from Toni Morrison that I think also helped rebalance some of this Σ and I'll just share it with our listeners here.: "Images of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable. All of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness alone is mute, meaningless, unfathomable. Pointless. Frozen. Veiled. Curtained. Dreaded. Senseless. Implacable."

Maria Tatar: [00:21:26] Yes, so interesting! And you know, the whole color coding of, in our culture, where black is associated with death — whereas in some cultures white is what you wear to funerals, for example.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:21:40] Right. So, you touched on this earlier, the startling thing that — I was in the audience, and I remember people just looking at each other going, "Wait, what" was when you said: "yes, 'Goodnight, Moon' is it? The narrative culminates in a form of death, right — that, you know, the darkness is falling and everything is just winking out of existence, in a sense. Right?" And that caused quite a stir. I don't think anyone had ever thought of "Goodnight, Moon" in that way.

Maria Tatar: [00:22:16] Well, the creator of "The Simpsons" — Matt Groening, is the creator of "The Simpsons." He has Christopher Walken reading "Goodnight, Moon" to toddlers who all back away as his goodnight noises everywhere. You know, so I think there is a tiny bit of awareness, particularly from adults as they're reading that story to children. And you know, if you think about, "Gosh, as a child going to sleep and the loss of consciousness" — and yet, "Goodnight, Moon" is also comforting. You know, I would say it's a wonderful dialectic. It's both scary and comforting. And by the way, the best children's stories are both of those. There's a little bit of a scare element. We're entering a slightly dangerous world, but in a safe space — and also things are going to turn out well in the end.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:22] Well, and then the inevitability, right — of the sun always rising the next day, which I feel like I'm about to break into the song "Tomorrow" from Annie, but I will not for the comfort of our listeners — and then, there's the theory that I shared with you after your talk when I came up to chat for a few moments, which is that I think we could also read "Goodnight, Moon" as a metaphor for entropy. Right? So, for our listeners who may have put away memories of physics class, right — the second law of thermodynamics basically says, "entropy increases," that basically all the energy that turns into "sameness" — that's the heat death of the universe. Right? And I mean, yeah: goodnight, stars; goodnight, air; goodnight, noises everywhere. I think it's a physics tale, as well.

Maria Tatar: [00:24:19] Oh, yes. And the loss of light, you know, everything is “dark” in a way. And I suppose that's why I love Sendak, because he tells us that darkness can also be a space of creativity, of creative energy. And you put your mind into that, you know — Mickey dreams up this incredible world at night. So, to me, Sendak is telling a story about the value of art in our lives and how — if there's anything that does give us meaning — it's the kinds of stories he tells and the creative activity that his protagonist is involved in.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:10] Well, and — what is cooking if not a redirection, realignment, and reapplication of energy to different things to transform them? That's really fundamentally, what Mickey's doing in that story, isn't it?

Maria Tatar: [00:25:26] Beautifully put. Yes.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:28] Yeah.

Maria Tatar: [00:25:29] Yeah. And gosh, doesn't he make the airplane out of dough?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:33] He does. It's a bright airplane.

Maria Tatar: [00:25:36] It's a jet airplane. Yeah.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:25:37] Yeah. So, there was so much in that talk that that stood out in so many ways. So, I'm happy to have this opportunity to share that with our listeners here. Just in closing, you know, you definitely offer different perspectives on how to think about children's books, and narrative, and so on. What guidance would you give readers of children's books that would help them keep that those broader perspectives in their minds?

Maria Tatar: [00:26:14] I suppose, are we talking adults here in terms of advice?

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:21] Or we could go with adults and we could also go with children.

Maria Tatar: [00:26:26] I guess I would say be an omnivore. Try everything. And I would also say resist the urge — and I give into this myself — to stream. I mean, there are great stories online and series and all of that but keep the book in your head: the magic of the book. And I don't mean to be nostalgic here. I mean, I say this with real conviction. There's something about the way

that these little black marks on a white page can come alive for us, and there's no batteries required. And you know, I would say don't forget that — and the Kindle, great for many when you're on an airplane and don't want to lug books with you and all of that — but don't forget the books, the libraries, the places where you meet up to tell stories: stories that make the human world and that also keep us human in marvelous, extraordinary, enchanting ways.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:27:49] Excellent. What a lovely note to end on. Thanks again for the conversation.

Maria Tatar: [00:27:54] Thanks, Dipesh. Great to talk to you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:28:00] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. We referenced a few quotes that Professor Tatar had used in her talk, and we never really went into them — so, I thought I'd share them with you, because they really are wonderful. The first is from John Milton's "Areopagitica" in 1644. "Books are not absolutely dead things but do contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are. Nay, they do preserve, as in a while the purest efficacy in extraction of that living intellect that bred them." The second is from Vladimir Nabokov. "Up a trackless slope climbs the master artist, and at the top on a windy ridge. Whom do you think he meets? The panting and happy reader. And there they spontaneously embrace and are linked forever if the book lasts forever." And then, finally, from Tim Wynne-Jones talking about deep reading. "The deep read is when you get gut hooked and dragged overboard, down and down through the maze of print and find, to your amazement, you can breathe down there, after all. And there's a whole other world. I'm talking about the kind of reading when you've realized that books are indeed interactive. I'm talking about the kind of deep read where it isn't just a plot or the characters that matter, but the words and the way they fit together, and the meandering, evanescent thoughts. You think between the lines, the kind of reading where you're fleetingly aware of your own mind at work." And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read Podcast. Reach Out and Read is a nonprofit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily, and supports, coaches, and celebrates engaging in those language-rich activities with young children. We're continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and Early Relational Health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org/podcast to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to. Our show is a production of Reach Out and Read. Our producer is Jill Ruby. Lori Brooks is our chief external affairs officer. Thank you to our founding sponsor, Boise

Paper, for making a difference in local communities like ours. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria. I look forward to spending time with you soon. And remember, books build better brains.