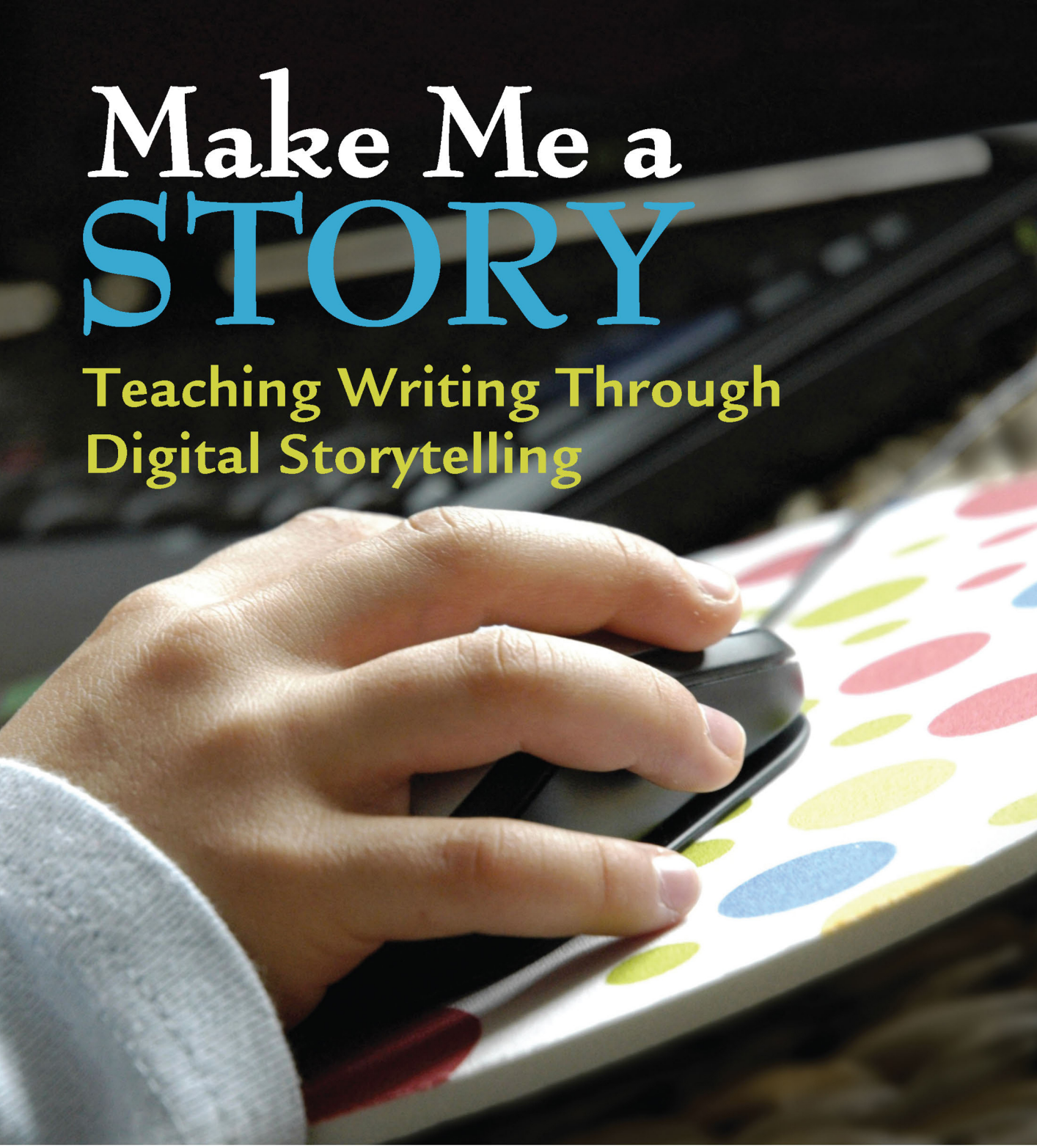

Make Me a STORY

Teaching Writing Through Digital Storytelling

Lisa C. Miller

Foreword by Linda Rief

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For Don

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Foreword

By Linda Rief

Last October I was on my way to a yard sale in Rowley, Massachusetts, with my son and his family. Harrison, my eight-year-old grandson, was riding with me. Earlier in the week I had noticed that Harrison had a lump on his head and a black eye. "What happened?" I asked him. Harrison told me how he had found a skateboard at the recycling center and set up a ramp in the barn to test it out. He explained what had happened as he tested out the skateboard. It was a great story, filled with his joy at finding a free skateboard, the exhilaration of the jump, and the *thwack* and *slap* as his entire contraption fell apart when he tried to skate down the ramp on the barn stairs.

As we rode in the car that day I asked him, "Did you write down that story about the skateboard you told me last week?"

"No," he said. But within seconds he had pulled out his iPod touch and begun typing rapidly with his thumbs. I wasn't sure what he was doing until he said, "Done. Want to hear it?" He read the story to me as I drove.

> *THE SKATEBOARD*
>
> ***Chapter 1***
> *I was just going to the dump when this all started. It turned into a monster. I was now at the dump. Yes, just looking at the swap shop. I had seen two nice UNH Wildcats basketballs, so I took them. Then when my dad went to empty some oil, he saw it—the thing that I was waiting for, an old skateboard, so . . . [He read this as "so, dot dot dot."]*
>
> ***Chapter 2***
> *So, as you probably know, what any kid would do is take it home with them, so I did just like any kid would do. When I got home I went out to the barn. I skateboarded for at least an hour then my mom and dad came and said that*

> *I was going out to dinner right when I was getting all the stuff in the right spot. Something popped in my mind. I wanted to do one last trick. So I was doing the trick and the skateboard flung up into my head and that is how I got the lump and mark on my eye.*

"Harrison, I really like the part where you said the experience turned into a 'monster,' and that you did what any kid would do if he found a skateboard at the recycling center: 'take it home.' I like the way you kept us in suspense by not telling us what happened until Chapter 2. I also love the way you said 'something popped' in your mind.

"You know the part where you said you put 'all the stuff in the right spot'? I was wondering what kind of contraption or ramp you built and how you placed it on the stairs. I was also wondering what it felt like, or what you were thinking, as you tried to do the trick and the skateboard flung up into your eye. Do you think you might want to add that information to the piece?"

"Not really," he said. (So much for moving the story forward with an eight-year-old, I thought.)

"Well, I would love a copy of your skateboard story just as it is."

He clicked the iPod keys a couple of times and said, "Done!" The story was waiting for me in my e-mail inbox when I returned home.

Harrison's iPod touch made it possible for him to write his story right there in the car, and the e-mail function allowed him to send his work to me (and potentially others) easily and quickly. However, the story didn't go where it could have gone if Harrison were in a class taught by a teacher who had read Lisa Miller's book, *Make Me a Story: Teaching Writing Through Digital Storytelling.*

When Lisa's editor, Toby Gordon, asked me if I would be interested in reading *Make Me a Story* and writing a foreword for it, I asked, "Are you sure you want me to do this? I know nothing about digital *anything.*" After reading this book, however,

I realize I am the person to whom this book is addressed—the teacher who is intimidated by the prospect of incorporating technology into her classroom but is open to the possibilities.

I will never catch up with my students. I will never be as fluent as they are with these twenty-first-century tools. And I will never catch up with Harrison. He will always be far ahead of me when it comes to using technology as a natural way to tell his stories. But if I want to continue to teach, I have to learn how to use some of the tools my students are using. I must be open to learning. In the past I've been totally intimidated by technology—afraid to use it if I didn't know enough about it. All of these technologies that seem to change daily are frightening. I often don't know what I should even try to learn. What tool should I use? Where do I begin? Will it be outdated before I've learned it?

Frank Smith admonished us years ago to let kids into the "literacy club" via real reading and writing, and now I have to join the twenty-first-century version of the club. At the very least, I have to let my students show me (and teach me) how they use these tools to enhance their learning.

I'm not surprised when students forget to bring pens or pencils to class—those are no longer the tools that come to mind when I ask them to write. Reading methods have changed as well. Paul, one of my eighth graders, carries all of his books in his backpack—on his Kindle. Another student, Charlie, can find definitions, synonyms, and histories of any word we have a question about in a matter of seconds using his cell phone, long before any other student could locate the dictionary or thesaurus on a shelf in the room (if they even know the answers can be found in a book).

We have to remind ourselves constantly, however, that the focus in our classrooms is reading and writing. The focus is not technology. The *tool* does not deliver the meaning; the tool may enhance the meaning and make it more engaging, but we cannot let technology itself be the message. Lisa Miller shows us that the message—the writing—is what matters. Digital stories are built on the writing and thinking that students do.

Lisa shows us how to teach writing, but she also shows us that writing is enhanced and becomes more engaging to both the writer and the audience when it is delivered

through a digital medium. This is the world in which our students live. They have grown up with technology, which makes them fearless with these tools. This is what Don Murray taught us about writing: Play with it. Don't be afraid to put words on the page. Digital storytelling allows kids to play, but it also teaches them to be meaningful in that play.

As soon as Harrison was done writing his story, he was *done with his story.* I wonder how the story might have taken shape if he had added pictures, video, or sound. I can imagine Harrison's skateboarding experience as a digital story. He would have engaged in all of the sophisticated thinking necessary to build such a story. His thinking would not have stopped once he delivered it to my e-mail inbox.

A couple of years ago, Al Stuart—the technology education teacher at the middle school where I teach—and I decided to collaborate on the idea of letting kids make animated cartoons from personal narratives they had written in my class. Here's how complex the collaboration was:

AL: I'll order twenty-two copies of a program called Frames.

ME: I'll ask my teammates if I can remove twenty-two kids from their regular classes for an entire day, and then I'll rewrite the remaining schedules for the week.

AL: Do you know anything about digital storytelling?

ME: Not a thing. Do you?

AL: No. Let's try it.

Of course the kids had already done so much of what Lisa Miller explains they need to do in this book—develop story ideas from questions they want to answer, construct storyboards that organize their ideas with compelling beginnings and surprising endings, and understand that the best stories have a hook that appeals to an audience as well as to the writer.

We sat the students down at computers and gave them six hours to tell their stories digitally. We found that none of them wanted to leave the computers—they were totally engaged and engrossed in all they could learn and produce. Adolescents,