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Hayes, Tracy ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6330-6520 (2018) Dr Bear and the adventure bears. Children's Geographies, 16 (4). pp. 461-464.

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Dr Bear and the Adventure Bears

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"*Hello, I see you have a bear on your stand. Why is that*?" I ask the man behind the table which is loaded with academic journals, books and promotional literature for delegates at RGS-IBG 2017 Conference to browse through. He smiles and replies, "*That's Barnaby. He's my bear*." He picks up the bear to give it a cuddle. "*Hello Barnaby, nice to see you here - I don't often see bears at conferences*," I respond with a grin. The man then explains that Barnaby Bear features in their books for children, and for the geographers that teach them (The Geographical Association, 2014). "*What do you think Barnaby Bear contributes to the teaching of geography?*" I query. "*He helps to make it seem more fun, the children can relate to the bear, to where he goes and what he does. It helps them make connections with their own lives*." "*That's so interesting*," I respond, "*I've been doing something similar – although for older ages*." I explain briefly some of the work I have been doing that has involved teddy bears, including taking bears with me to conferences, working on a chapter for an edited book, and this response to John Horton's paper. "*You could write something for one of our journals too – we'd love that. And perhaps you'd like to join our association.*" I quickly realise he means an association of geographers, not an association of bear appreciators (although perhaps we could start one – Arctophiles Not Anonymous?), thankfully avoiding a potentially embarrassing mistake. I take the leaflets from him, and promise to consider it, and he poses for a photo with Barnaby Bear.

Later, away from the busy-ness of the conference, in the quiet space of my room, I reflect on this encounter. And I think back to the conference in Exeter that John discusses. I was one of the few people whose hand had shot up immediately in response to the question as to who still owned a childhood cuddly toy. Not only do I still have some of the cuddly toys from my childhood, including Nelly, the unimaginatively named yellow elephant (see photo 1) that was a gift from my two brothers when I was born, I have added to these over the years. There are toys from my children's childhoods, gifts from family and friends, and some that I have bought myself, to remind me of places I have been and people I have met. And then there are the Adventure Bears developed as part of my doctoral study. These are distributed around the house – one, called Aporia (see photo 2) is well-travelled, having accompanied me on many trips during my doctoral studies. Others are complete and waiting to find a new home, whilst more are in various stages of creation, fabric waiting to be cut, pieces waiting to be sewn together, some waiting for faces to be stitched and others waiting to be stuffed - metaphorical representations for the phases of my PhD.

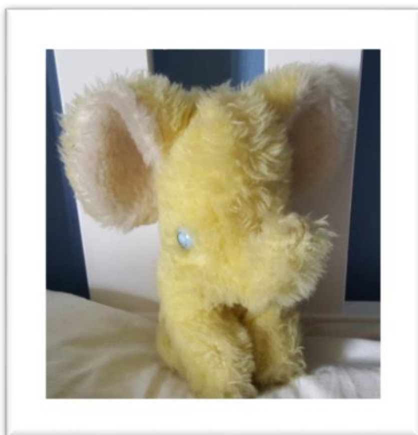

Figure 1: Nelly the Yellow Elephant

Figure 2: Aporia meets Buddy Bear at a conference

After enthusiastically raising my hand, I had looked around the room to see who else had raised theirs – and was surprised by the paucity of hands, and curious about the apparent tentativeness of some of those who had half-raised their hands or not raised them at all. Like John, I sensed an air of embarrassment, of people feeling uncomfortable with the question. Perhaps, like them, I should have been reticent about my fondness for bears? However, it was a bit late for that. A year earlier at the RGS-IBG 2014 I had enthusiastically responded to a call from John Horton and Peter Kraftl for alternative, creative presentations by creating four new Adventure Bears to assist me in my presentation on playfulness in outdoor learning (see photo 3).

Figure 3: The RGS Quads

I wrote a playful short story and put together some goody bags for delegates, complete with children's sweets, wax crayons and drawing paper (Hayes, 2016). Waiting for my turn – the last in the session – I nearly lost my nerve. I had spotted some name badges of academics whose work I had cited. I was feeling a combination of academically star-struck and uncomfortably different. And I was silently asking myself, "*Tracy, why, oh why, haven't you opted to do something 'normal', something safe? Something like the other presenters have done. They will think you're childish, not a proper academic…*" It was fair to say I was being gripped by the dreaded imposter syndrome, so familiar to postgraduate students and early career researchers (for example, see Keefer, 2015). Thankfully my presentation was well received. I have gone on to further develop my Adventure Bears (there are now well over 250 of them having adventures across the world) and I have created a sub-species called Comfortable Bears, tweedy bears which enjoy more gentle adventures. The Bears are designed to be played with outside, and I gift them along with a short story making links to

playing outside. I called the prototype Adventure Bear 'Aporia' as he is easily confused, tends to walk around in circles and become lost – which reflects how I was feeling about my research when I came up with the concept. My doctoral research was a creative exploration of young people's relationship with nature, and originated from my practice as an environmental youth worker. Its initial focus was on dis/connection from nature, looking at practical ways of addressing this. I looked at a range of facilitated programmes that offered outdoor learning opportunities and explored what young people thought of their experiences. I also talked with people who work with them, and are responsible for designing and/or delivering the programmes.

I have listened to and observed people's stories, and embracing the use of everyday language, I have created new stories based on these experiences. I have focused on small, intimate, personal stories – the kinds of stories that tend to get lost amongst bigger, less subjective studies. My stories have proved useful for presenting findings and for generating discussions, for a range of audiences (student, academic, practitioners and public). Themes that emerged highlighted the role of the practitioner/facilitator; peer, family and school pressures to 'grow-up', and be responsible; the importance of playfulness, kindness, comfort and belonging. One of my key findings was that young people (and practitioners) responded most enthusiastically when the facilitator of outdoor learning experiences was playful. I have felt compelled to do the same when disseminating my work.

Like my stories, the Adventure Bears are useful for prompting discussions – and as tools for engagement. They are everyday objects: they are fun, comforting, a childhood toy, a reminder to be childlike – childish even (see Macfarlane, 2016). They serve as a link to our past, our memories and reflections – allowing us to make connections through time and space. And yet as we recall those moments of childhood, we are looking back through time, through the eyes and awareness of an adult. As identified by Jones (2003: 34) when doing this 'Our imagination needs to work with our memory and we need to recall the feelings and emotions themselves, as far as is possible, as well as narrative accounts of events'. Many people's first contact with the natural world is through a toy or a fictional character in a story. Recognising and valuing this provides an effective way to engage people in the debate of how we can support others to develop an awareness and appreciation of the world around us. It offers us a way in, an opening we can explore. When we experience nature, culture and family as an interwoven entity, the connections and attachments we make can be very strong and meaningful (Derr, 2002). We can make use of fairy tales, nursery rhymes and soft toys to explore the world of nature with children, introducing them to some of the creatures with whom we live, and helping them to feel a sense of familiarity and desire to learn more (Hayes, 2013). And perhaps children who know how to play in nature, and who value these experiences, will be more likely to grow up keen and able to play with their own children in a similar way, and to protect the places where this happens (for discussion on memories of childhood experiences and impact on adult behaviour, see Chawla, 1990; Waite, 2007).

As I respond to John's paper, I consider the three silences he has identified, and I reflect on the times when I have felt silenced – either through silencing myself because of self-consciousness/lack of confidence, or being silenced by the actions of others, who are not open to listening. Feeling silenced by others, being unable to express myself through my 'outer voice' has helped me to develop the ability to listen and attend to my inner voice; through reflexivity I have learned how to weave these together.

Silence one: I openly share personal stories, and embrace auto-ethnographic and creative writing. As a result, at conferences – usually within the breaks and in-between-spaces - I have had some intriguing conversations about bears (and other soft toys). I recall one, rather earnest young academic who sidled up to me and said, "*I have a penguin I take with me on my expeditions*…" and another well-known, highly-respected, award-winning academic who quietly told me, "*I have a bear with me, he stays in my room while I'm at the conference. Actually, he's my daughter's bear and he comes to keep me company when I'm away from her*." They were not there when the question was asked. I wonder, would they have raised their hands?

Silence two: as John identifies, I embrace a playful style. I believe that when I say it is important to be playful, then I need to be playful. I need to be what I say – otherwise, am I just saying that it is important for other people, other contexts? Why not for me, us, within academic contexts?

Silence three: I agree there is a need to consider material and popular cultures, the stuff of everyday lives, I am currently working on a paper about the representation of bears in children's literature, and I am often referred to as 'Dr Bear' by those who know of my work. However, it would be naïve to deny that there are barriers to this type of work, and to adopt this focus within a culture of accountability and performativity can be a risky strategy, especially for an early career researcher who wants to be taken seriously by the academic community. It requires a responsive, open audience, that is prepared to consider alternative perspectives, and a network of similarly-minded people to provide support, guidance and encouragement. I have been fortunate in encountering many people who been appreciative of my approach, and generous with their feedback. Perhaps it is time to form a new association – Arctophiles Seen and Heard.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to John Horton for his Viewpoint and to Tracey Skelton for inviting me to be part of this response.

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