

Listen up

Cathryn Fairlee sees storytelling as a form of healing



Here, there and everywhere The storyteller picks up tales from different cultures and shares them on her travels • R RAGU

•• MEGHNA MAJUMDAR

As a librarian, Cathryn Fairlee hated reading stories out to children. “I wanted to see their faces, their reaction. I wanted to use hand gestures, and you can’t do that when you’re sitting there reading. It just was not involving,” says the now-professional storyteller, who travels across the globe, collecting folk tales from some cultures and telling them to others.

So Fairlee decided to put down the storybook, back in the library at that elementary school, decades ago. She read the tale a couple of times before storytelling time, and “I told them”. Soon enough, teachers started approaching her for help. “I would do some research, and tell the kids stories just before their teachers started teaching. And their hands would go up; they would ask ‘what’s his name?’ and ‘when did this happen?’” describes Fairlee, laughing at the memory of her colleagues’ sheer surprise. “How did you get them to ask you questions? they would say.”

It’s quite easy to see how. As Fairlee belts out tale after tale at the inauguration of Chennai Storytelling Festival, she has her audience hooked. Wide-eyed as children, the broad mix of 20-year-olds to 60-year-olds cheers “Gambe!” with her in Chinese, laughs at the surprise of a shepherd-turned ruler in Uzbekistan, and tuts sympathetically at a father’s dilemma in Ireland.

While imitating a “creaky old bridge

WHAT’S IN STORE

MONDAY, 6 PM Bedtime storytelling open mic for parents, with the audience deciding the winner @ Cafe Coffee Day, The Square, Khader Nawaz Khan Road

TUESDAY, 7 PM Video conference on ‘Storytelling for Teaching, Training and Healing’

WEDNESDAY, 10 AM Seminar on eco-feminist interpretation of folktales @ Stella Maris College, Cathedral Road

THURSDAY, 10 AM Seminar on storytelling – Telling epics and activating listeners @ Loyola College, Nungambakkam

FRIDAY TO SUNDAY, 10 AM TO 4.30 PM Storytelling workshops @ Loyola College, Nungambakkam

FRIDAY TO SUNDAY, 4.30 PM Performances by storytellers @ Loyola College, Nungambakkam

Registration and details: www.storytellinginstitute.org/#a

..... that sounded like it was complaining”, she tells touching tales of women, women and yet more women, each of whom takes charge of the narrative. She explains the difference between a witch and goddess (hint: it depends on your perspective), drinks wine with one mother and home-made whisky with another, sings with a peddler under a Trouble Tree, and narrates “a story

about a good stepmother”.

It’s evident in Fairlee’s content that she sees storytelling as more than just a mode of communication. She sees it as a form of healing, a means to teach empathy. They are simple tales, some funny and some tragic, each with a lasting impact.

She acknowledges that a story can stay with you without you even realising it at the moment. It had happened to her, taking her aback when she realised it as a professional, years later.

“At one point, I went back to my parents’ house and found this little children’s book called *Tales of a Chinese Grandmother*. And I had no memory of it!” she recalls, “But I looked at the handwriting on it: it was my own handwriting; I could tell I was eight years old.”

Fairlee says she had begun her tryst with storytelling through Chinese stories, right after college. She was never able to explain why she felt so comfortable with stories from that part of the world, in a town which had no Chinese influences, “not even a Chinese restaurant. I only understood when I found that little book.”

Storytelling, she says, is the seed of every art form we have. Singers tell stories; painters and poets tell you how to feel; even embroiderers tell stories through their art with a thread. It is an art form that helps teachers, therapists and people in every profession, she stresses. “They’re all folk tales, after all. And we’re all folk!”