



# Bringing Stories to Life

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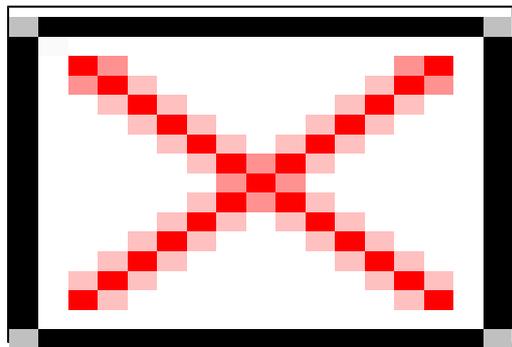
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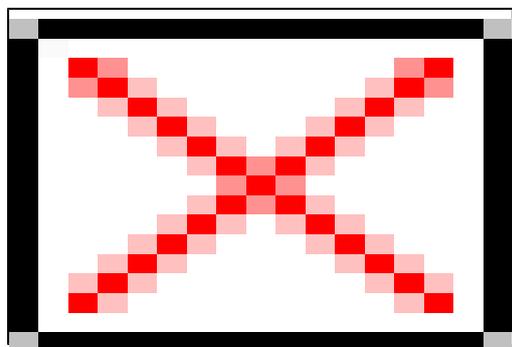
Byline:

Director Tish Francis guides us round Oxford's refurbished **Story Museum**

**Tish Francis** gives us a behind the scenes tour of Oxford's newly refurbished **Story Museum**.



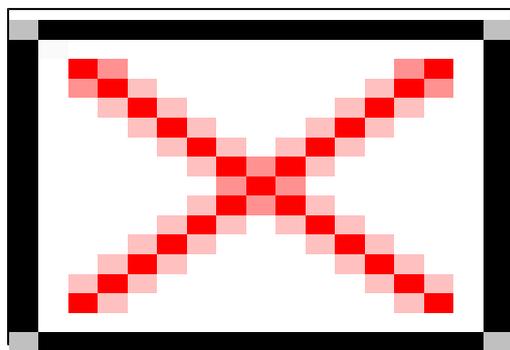
We all know there's something very powerful that takes place when you lose yourself in a good book. You surrender yourself to the imaginary world between the pages, immersing yourself in the characters and their narrative - often returning to the 'real world' with an uncomfortable jolt. For many of us that experience started once we'd become confident independent readers, and we could list for you the stories that hold a special place in our hearts because they entered our lives at this transition point when the whole world of literature opened its secrets to our hungry imaginations. And we also know that in order to stand a chance of achieving the joys of surrendering to a good book, we need to ensure that younger children have built the necessary vocabulary and confidence with books from their very earliest years.



The **Story Museum** in Oxford, reopening this April after a £6 million redevelopment, seeks to get right to the heart of these all-important early story experiences. Starting out as an outreach project in schools, using storytelling to help children build vocabulary, confidence and communication skills, the Museum has always had a clear ambition to also exist as a physical entity, celebrating stories in all forms. And where better than Oxford, a city with so many rich connections to story from Lewis Carroll to Philip Pullman and where the streets buzz with languages and peoples from across the globe.

In 2014 [The Story Museum](#) [3] opened as a 'part-made' Museum, using the rough spaces in its city centre buildings to try out a range of temporary story exhibitions. We learnt so much during those four years of public opening! Some discoveries were quite surprising, others less so - and all have informed our current redevelopment. In no particular order, here are some of our findings.

1. If you have a wardrobe full of fur coats and you let people step through it into Narnia some of them will cry because they've finally realised a life time's ambition, but if they're under 5 then they'll be very happy imagining that they're in **Frozen!**
2. Don't underestimate the power of a comfy sofa and a selection of books. When we provided a room of places to sit and read because we didn't have the budget to fill the space with a new exhibition, it proved to be one of the most popular rooms in the Museum.
3. People love to share stories. One of the most striking things about **The Story Museum** has been the way that groups of all ages interact with each other as they explore our spaces. We've particularly enjoyed seeing children who've visited with their schools, rushing into the Museum with their families at the weekend and towing their accompanying adults at top speed to show them their favourite place in the Museum. Similarly there's something very powerful about watching a grandparent introduce their grandchild to a story that they loved as a child and conversely watching a child explain to their parents what they love about a story that they've read but their parent hasn't.
4. If you build an installation for the under 5s then you also need to let your teenage visitors enjoy it. We built a giant bed with a patchwork quilt under a blanket fort to celebrate bedtime stories and our teen visitors consistently rated it as one of their favourite places!
5. Live storytelling is mesmerising. As a Museum that celebrates story in all forms, we run a full programme of live events alongside our Museum exhibitions. In 2014 I produced **The Story Museum's** first Christmas show - one performer, a very simple set and a retelling of three traditional Christmas stories. Our audiences were entranced. Parents couldn't believe how still their children sat and how absorbed they were in the language. We've repeated this winning formula for five years now and can't wait to mount our Christmas 2020 show in our new purpose-built theatre.
6. Curiosity is a superpower. The Museum is designed for people to explore in their own way. There's lots to see and do, lots to touch and feel, lots to crawl into, dress up in and engage with. There are fun touches lurking in unexpected places for visitors to find and enjoy. This sense of exploration and the delight in finding the unexpected was one of the resounding pieces of feedback that we got from our visitors, so we've done our best to preserve it in the new Museum from our bespoke Fire Exit signs to our travel posters to fictional lands.



So what's in store for visitors to the reopened Museum? Quite simply, 'a surprise around every corner'. We've taken the learnings and the feedback from our visitors on what they liked about the part-made Museum and what stories they'd like to see featured and we've wrapped it all up into a Museum like no other. We've got a Whispering Wood full of trees that celebrate the roots of story - oral storytelling across cultures, we've got an Enchanted Library where you can step into stories from classics such as **Alice** and **Winnie the Pooh** to relative newcomers like **Horrid Henry** and **Noughts and Crosses**. We've also got a whole ground floor gallery celebrating picture books - and yes, the giant bed is back with its patchwork quilt and space for several people to curl up and enjoy being read to.

And if all that's not enough we have a wonderful new theatre space ? The Woodshed - lined floor to ceiling with upcycled doors, with a great programme of events including visits from authors Julia Donaldson, Malorie Blackman, Francesca Simon, Lisa Williamson and Chris Riddell. There's a new learning studio for our school groups and holiday courses inspired by Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. We have created a new film experience ? **City of Stories** ? offering visitors a 30 minute 'flight' over Oxford's literary history. And when you come down to land you can enjoy our revamped shop and café and soak up the transformed courtyard with its beautiful skyscape and dramatic spiral staircase. We've made a host of practical improvements including full wheelchair access, more accessible toilets, insulation, better drainage and lots and lots of buggy parking.

In a time of political change and ever-growing concerns about the world our children are growing up in, surely now more than ever there's a need for places like [The Story Museum](#) [3]. Places that inspire wonder and curiosity, imagination and fun ? and that remind us all that stories lie at the very heart of what it means to be human, nourishing our creativity, helping us make sense of the world around us and feeding our imagination so that we can visualise alternative futures.

I can't wait to hear the sounds of excited voices ringing round the Museum's courtyard and corridors again and watching as new generations discover how it feels to lose yourself in a good story. Older generations too. Certainly ? after the herculean task of bringing this wonder into being ? many of us here can't wait to join those curled up on the Big Bed to listen to a bedtime story ?.and maybe even have a little snooze!

**Tish Francis** is Co-Director of [The Story Museum](#) [3].

Find out more about [The Story Museum's programme of events](#) [3].

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