

Review of *The Heart's Narrative* and *Talk That Sings* by Jane Speedy

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[The Heart's Narrative: Therapy and navigating life's contradictions \(2000\)](#) and [Talk that Sings:](#)

[Therapy in a new linguistic key \(2004\)](#)

written by Johnella Bird. Both published by Edge press, Auckland, New Zealand.

A post-modern understanding of the localised nature of knowledge, alongside some debate between discursive/essentialist versions of what it means to be human, has seeped into the theoretical discussions available within most therapeutic approaches. Nonetheless the majority of therapeutic practice takes place 'as if' human beings were individual islands in the stream of life.

When I first came across the narrative/discursive therapies my heart leapt at the possibilities of working therapeutically with people in ways that practiced (rather than merely theorised) a more social, discursive and relational sense of human agency in the world.

My excitement and eagerness to travel the world seeking out education and training in these approaches and bring them back to the UK was only slightly diminished by the discovery that although these post-psychological (as in post-individualistic psychological) approaches owed much of their genesis to feminist, critical and postcolonial activity and theory, all the leading proponents and founders of these approaches seemed to be men of European origin. I would not wish to diminish the remarkable contribution of these men in any way, but, well, shall we just say that it all felt a little bit familiar? Having come across this phenomenon before many times in my working life, I began to wonder whether similar discourses were at work. I began to wonder whether there might also be people of other cultures and genders who were busy developing and teaching this practice somewhere in the world, as well as the men who were writing about it.

And then I came across Johnella Bird who has been developing a very original approach to therapeutic endeavours over the last 20 years, in her native New Zealand, and has only recently, somewhat reluctantly, published her work. This reluctance is, in part, an expression of a resistance to the creation of further orthodoxies within therapeutic discourse and strong hopes for the development of more fluid, living engagements with people. To this end these books eschew descriptions of any fixed, 'one size fits all', therapy models and provide readers with a rich, multi-storied exploration of ways of working within 'a relational paradigm'.

These two books are both densely written, the second book '*Talk that sings*' much easier to read than the first, but both are very carefully written and thought provoking contributions. Both provide myriad stories from practice and many opportunities and exercises for readers to engage with by themselves.

The first volume '*The Heart's Narrative*' is both the story of how this practice took shape, situated in the landscape and culture of New Zealand and also an introduction to the author's current practice. At the heart of the book lies the author's invitation to engage with therapy as a 'relational externalising conversational process'. By attending to how we position ourselves as therapists and 'clients' and the language we use to create meaning, we are invited into a process of continually constructing and reconstructing ourselves in a relational 'I', position rather than as the fixed, autonomous "I" of traditional western discourse.

A strong commitment to finding ways to move people beyond binary positions (such as trust/mistrust) and to opening up richer spaces for people to inhabit in their lives is articulated throughout the book as a 'feeling for words' or for 'talk that sings', which the author likens to Miss Smilla's (Hoeg, 1983) 'feeling for snow'.

'a knowledge of snow that moves beyond the binary of snow/not snow, towards descriptions that incorporate the qualities, consistencies, colour ranges, smell and shapes that support a feeling for snow'. (Bird, 2000:16)

Ms Smilla found herself 'resourced' to read the weather and engage differently with the seasons through a 'feeling for snow' and Johnella Bird suggests that by listening to 'talk that sings', to talk that provides a sense of movement and talk that discovers, contextualises and extends the meanings people give to words, people consulting therapists may find themselves similarly 'resourced' to engage differently with their lives.

The Heart's Narrative explores these ideas and encourages their practice at some length and then moves on in the later chapters to relate them, to the concepts of trust and fear, disconnection, gender relations, ethics, power and therapeutic practice through the use of stories from practice and through training exercises.

One of the ways that this book is both a 'difficult' and at the same time compelling read, is that one of the binary positions it challenges or avoids, is the either/or division between theory and practice that has so dominated the literatures of counselling and psychotherapy in the past. Thus the book is interspersed with references to complex poststructuralist ideas, works of fiction and so forth, (albeit not in a 'shopping list of references' tradition), as and when they come up in the practice narratives. This mirrors the author's descriptions of 'moving though' theory so that it sits alongside a therapist in her archive, rather than dominates the way she situates and thinks about her work.

In this way, the book gives readers a very vivid experience of the author walking her own talk, but it is sometimes quite densely written. This reader, at least, would have preferred to have had an index to take herself back and forth more easily on her own journey through the text.

The second book '*Talk that sings*' is no less complex and no less compelling, but somehow forms a more coherent whole. This text extends and enriches the explorations of relational language – making strategies undertaken in the previous work. The author states very clearly:

'I propose it is possible to make change by languaging into existence the resources people have or could have'.

And goes on to richly describe this proposal. The book is divided into three sections; the first 'relational consciousness is the difference' outlines the ideas informing the author's thinking, largely through stories from her own therapeutic practice. Her explorations and illustrations of the use of the 'continuous present tense' to open up spaces for movement in people's lives has been particularly valuable to this reader. The second part, 'relationally speaking', excavates the author's practice more extensively and demonstrates this for readers with further examples and numerous exercises for them to engage with. The last section 'illustrating the therapeutic practice', does just that by showing us how the author works with individuals, couples and families and children.

This is perhaps a more conventionally constructed book that nonetheless continues to maintain the author's strongly held commitments towards not privileging textual knowledge over clinical practice. It does so through using language with great care and by continuing to weave and pleat stories of practice and the ideas that sustained, or were generated by them in and out of the whole body of the text.

She talks extensively in this text about the commodification of therapy and eloquently illustrates her concerns with reference to Janet Frame's (1983) short story about human attempts to possess the blackbird's song, which ended with the consequence:

"They stopped singing. It was dark outside although the sun was shining. It was dark and there was

no more singing."

I see two these books as companion volumes, the one leading into the other and would recommend them both, although if I was only able to buy one of them '[Talk that sings](#)' would have to be it. Johnella Bird's own hope for her work is that it provides a temporary platform from which therapists and the people consulting them can make their own clinical and theoretical discoveries and in this, I believe, she more than succeeds.

References

- Hoeg, P (1983) *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow*, Harvell, London
Frame, J (1983) *You are now entering the Human Heart*, Victoria University Press, NZ