

TELLING TALES OUT OF SCHOOL

Chris Lowe and friends

Number 2

Once upon a time when I was running a course on 'Keeping Children Safe in Schools' a Yorkshire junior school teacher told me a wonderful story about one of her classes. She told it in a style reminiscent of the incomparable Joyce Grenfell, whose radio monologues used to fill very happy hours in the post-war years. I cannot possibly reproduce the comic effect of the telling, but the story itself is worth preserving. It demonstrates the primary school pupil's determination to 'tell it how it is' that can be as uncomfortable as it is engaging and challenging.

On the Rocks

(Evie, approaching the teacher's desk)...Miss, my mum told me the law says you don't have to have sex in primary schools. Do we have to have sex, miss? It's scary.

*It's not scary, Evie. Anyway, it's not 'sex', it's 'sex **education**'. You will learn all sorts of interesting things.*

What interesting things, miss?

Er....Lots....I haven't got time to go through them now.... But, for example, you will learn how babies are made.... That's interesting, isn't it?

I don't want to know that! Not if it has got anything to do with that serpent thing in the Bible, you know, in the Book of Genitals.....

Book of GENESIS, Evie.

That's what I said....Anyway the serpent is in that man's garden. Wound all round a tree.... A serpent is a snake, isn't it, miss? It gets the bloke and his girl. And she's named Evie, like me. That's why it's scary! Why does it have to be a snake, miss? I'm scared of snakes. Can't it be a little lamb... like the lamb god's got?

No, it can't Evie.

Why not? It would be a lot nicer. You can cuddle a lamb.

Because it is a story and the serpent is part of the story.

Well, if it is a story it can be changed. You are always asking us to write our own endings to stories. So, I'd like to write a new beginning of the Bible....no snakes.... No scary things at all.

I'm sure it would be a very interesting story, Evie, but it would not be....er...the same.

You are right there, miss. I wouldn't have any of those nude people eating apples. You don't have to take your clothes off to eat an apple. It's daft!

Evie, you have strayed into Religious Education lessons now. That isn't the sex education lesson.

Well, my mum says no-one in a primary school wants sex, miss. Arjun doesn't, do you, Arjun?....see miss, he doesn't.

But Evie, Arjun did not say anything....

He doesn't have to...it's obvious.

Well, that's quite enough, Evie. I do not want to hear any more about sex....er, I mean sex education. It is not appropriate now.

Why not, miss?

Because this is the MUSIC lesson!.....and I have to teach you all a song for the end-of-term concert...and it's got nothing to do with sex education.

What's the song, miss?

It's.....o dear!....I had quite forgotten..... it's 'Rock-a-bye baby'.

(Evie - thrusting her hands on her hips) Well! My mum says that is a cruel song, miss. She never sings it.

Well....I....

Stringing a baby up a tree isn't right. And in the wind an'all. Definitely not right.

I...don't think the song means quite....

Would you do it, miss? Fasten you baby up a tree in its cradle? I bet you wouldn't. You are too kind. And you would have to buy a new cradle to replace the broken one, an'all. Have you thought of that?

O dear.....since you feel so strongly about it perhaps we had better change it....how about 'Ring a ring o' roses'?

Miss! We can't sing that! My mum says it is about children falling down dead of fever! We couldn't sing it because it's 'orrible and we would all be crying, and we wouldn't get to sleep at night!

Evie, It does not necessarily mean.....

I'm beginning to cry already, miss.

O dear, Evie.... well, have you got any suggestions of your own?

(Graham now pipes up)

Miss! Let's all sing 'Three Blind Mice'! We can all yell our heads off, and run up and down on the spot, and make cutting actions! Great!

(Evie screams)

How could you agree to that, miss? It's terrible! Ugh! I'll tell my mum, miss. She won't like it. Not one bit! You'll be for it!

Evie! I haven't agreed to it, and I'm not going to.....CLASS! Get ready to sing 'Twinkle, twinkle'. You all know it.

(Class all together)

Oh no! Not again!

(Eviewith hands once again on her hips) That song is out-of-date, miss....it says 'how I wonder what you are,' and my mum says we know what stars are now. We should NOT be singing out-of-date songs. It's not right!.....

(Miss is beginning to harbour uncharitable thoughts about Evie's mother. She throws her arms up)...

OK..OK...You don't like my choices....so here's what we are going to do.....get yourselves into groups of four.....(sounds of scraping chairs and animated chatter)no, Stella, FOUR..I don't care that you've got five friends...I said FOUR....now write down on the paper in front of you the name of one song you would like us all to sing... Robin, you do not do that with a pencil, it's not nice....Abigail! That's Anil's chair; he got there first....yes he did....because I say so, dear, so just let go....Then you must all discuss your choice and decide which one the group round the table likes best....OK?... Then we will get the whole class to vote for the class song. Right, off you go. I will come round and answer any of your questions....eventually.'

(Miss saunters from table to table listening to the arguments amid raised voices. Behind her she could hear a high-pitched orator).....

My mum says.....(interrupted by a deeper tone from one of the boys).... Well, my dad says different, our Evie, and he's bigger than your mum.....

(Miss smiles contentedly at the success of her strategy)....they don't teach you that at college!
