

I'm not a robot



The Storyteller is a best-selling novel by prolific author Jodi Picoult. Published in 2013, it is Picoult's 20th novel. Picoult is a prolific author known for tackling complex social themes and is the recipient of many awards, including the 2019 Hale Award and a lifetime achievement award from the Romance Writers of America. In The Storyteller, she weaves together several different narratives, delving into complex power dynamics and exploring themes of forgiveness, morality, and freedom of choice through the relationship between Sage Singer, the 25-year-old granddaughter of a Holocaust survivor, and Josef Weber, a former SS officer who turns to Sage to carry out his euthanasia. Please be advised that The Storyteller includes depictions of assisted death by suicide and features discussion of self-harm and disturbing violence related to the Holocaust. Other works by this author include The Pact, Nineteen Minutes, and Vanishing Acts. Plot Summary Sage Singer is a reclusive woman with a large scar on her face, a relic from the car accident that killed her mother and left her orphaned. She lives in the small town of Westerbrook and works at a bakery attached to a religious shrine, where her late hours allow her to remain socially isolated. Sage is plagued by guilt over the car accident and an affair she is conducting with Adam, a married funeral home director. Sage was raised by Jewish parents but has abandoned religion in the wake of her accident. She is estranged from her two sisters, and her only remaining familial tie is to her grandmother, Minka, a Holocaust survivor. Sage meets a 95-year-old man named Josef Weber at a grief therapy group and forms a tentative friendship with him. Josef is a beloved resident of Westerbrook, so Sage is shocked when he reveals that he used to be a guard at the notorious Auschwitz concentration camp. Josef sought Sage out because he has been plagued by guilt for decades and wants her to help him die by suicide. However, he first wants her, as a Jew, to forgive him for his past. Sage reports Josef's confession to Leo Stein, a Justice Department worker who helps prosecute war crimes. As a practicing Jew, Leo is passionate about bringing the perpetrators of the Holocaust to justice. Leo is unable to identify Josef by name until he confesses to Sage that his real name is not Josef but Reiner Hartmann. When Leo investigates this name, it matches that of a former Auschwitz guard. Leo visits Sage in Westerbrook to continue the investigation. They turn to Sage's grandmother Minka for more information. Minka has refused to speak about her experience in the Holocaust since moving to America, but Leo eventually convinces her to open up. Minka and Josef's firsthand accounts of their lives are threaded throughout the narrative. Josef describes being indoctrinated into the Nazi ideology at an early age. He excelled in the Hitler Youth and went on to the SS, committing countless murders as a young officer before being promoted to a position of power at Auschwitz. His younger brother, Franz, abhorred the Nazi ideology but was eventually compelled to join the SS and stationed at Auschwitz as well. Minka grew up in a small village called d with her father, a baker, and her mother and pregnant sister Basia. She enjoyed writing, working on a story about a vampiric creature called an upir. Minka and her best friend Darja live a relatively carefree life until the growing Nazi movement arrives in their village. One by one, Minka's entire family is killed, and she and Darja are deported to Auschwitz, where Minka's story intersects with Josef's. Josef is serving as the merciless director of the women's camp. One day Minka is caught writing down her story and sent to Josef's brother, Franz, for punishment. Franz is drawn in by her story, seeing himself in her remorseful antagonist. Rather than punishing her, he employs her as his secretary, giving her food in exchange for regular delivery of new pages. One day Minka and Darja catch Josef stealing from his brothers' safe. Josef shoots and kills Darja, but Franz intervenes before he can kill Minka. Minka is sent on a death march instead, but escapes and is freed by Allied soldiers shortly afterward. In the present day, Leo outfits Sage with a wire to extract the confession that will ensure Josef's imprisonment. At their penultimate meeting, Josef confirms that he is the man who killed Darja and states that he would have also killed Minka if he could have. He also confesses that he watched his brother Franz die after choking on a cherry pit. Having heard the history of Josef's crimes, Sage decides that it is not her place to forgive him. She helps him complete suicide by baking him a poisoned bread roll. As he dies, he asks her how does it end? (455). This statement is contextualized when Sage looks through his belongings and realizes that he has lied about his identity. Josef was not Reiner Hartmann; he was Franz. He sought Sage out because of her relationship to Minka, the girl whose life he once saved at Auschwitz. His dying question was about the ending of Minka's story, which he saw as an allegory for his own life. As the novel ends, Sage conceals her role in Josef's death from Leo. By Dr. Oliver Tearle (Loughborough University) The English writer Hector Hugh Munro (1870-1916), who is better known under his pen name Saki, was a master of the short comic story and, in some ways, a missing link between Oscar Wilde and P. G. Wodehouse. What's more, Saki was that rare writer who could write humorously, for an adult audience, about children without being twee or sentimental. The Story-Teller is perhaps the most supreme example of this quality to his writing: a story in which a man entertains some young children on a train by telling them a story about a good little girl who is punished, rather than rewarded, for being so good. You can read The Story-Teller here before continuing on to our summary and analysis of Saki's story below. The Story-Teller: plot summary The story takes place on a train one hot afternoon. A woman is travelling on the train with her two nieces and nephew. Opposite where they are sitting is a bachelor travelling alone, who does not know the aunt or the children. When the children start fidgeting and misbehaving, the aunt tells them to come and look out of the window, in an effort to occupy their minds. The children keep asking the aunt questions about the sheep in the fields, and her answers fail to satisfy them. So one of the two girls starts to recite the first line of the poem On the Road to Mandalay, over and over again because it's the only line of the poem she knows. Realising she is failing to control them, the aunt tells the children to come and sit back down while she entertains them with a story. They don't seem too enthusiastic by this prospect, and they find her story dull and unrewarding; it tells of a good little girl who made so many friends through being good that, when she was attacked by a mad ball, lots of people came to her rescue. The children deconstruct the story, pointing out that the girl would probably have been saved even if she hadn't been so good, and the bachelor interjects, pointing out that she doesn't appear to be a success as a storyteller. The aunt challenges him to do a better job, claiming it's difficult to tell the children entertained with stories, and the bachelor accepts the challenge. He tells the children a story about a good little girl named Bertha, who was sent to three medals for being so good, and was allowed into the park owned by the Prince; something which was denied to other people. The bachelor describes the pigs in the park and the lack of flowers (because they had all been eaten by the pigs). Then he tells the children about a wolf which came into the park and chased Bertha. Although she hid in the bushes, the clank of her medals alerted the wolf to her whereabouts, and he grabbed her and ate her. The children pronounce the story to be beautiful, and the aunt calls it an improper story to tell to children. However, the bachelor points out that he managed to keep them quiet for ten minutes, which is more than she could manage. As he is leaving, he laughs to himself at the fact that the poor aunt will now be pestered constantly by the children for more improper stories. The Story-Teller: analysis The Story-Teller is a kind of meta-narrative: not only does it contain a story within a story, but it is also a commentary on storytelling, and specifically children's stories, which criticises those writers who believe children need to hear sentimental tales about children who are rewarded for being moral and well-behaved. Saki was an Edwardian writer, but many children's books of the early twentieth century still had a whiff of the Victorian nursery about them. When Lewis Carroll published Alice's Adventures in Wonderland in 1865, children's books were dominated by a strong whiff of morality: good children end happily, and bad children learn a valuable lesson and need to be made to be good. By rejecting this, Carroll moved children's fiction into new, more interesting directions, but a good deal of children's books continued to carry this pious streak and moral heavy-handedness. And yet, one need only open a book of the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm and other folklorists to discover some very gruesome and violent stories which date back centuries in many cases. True, in most cases the children survive, unlike the hapless goody-two-shoes told about in The Story-Teller, but in the meantime they are sent into the woods to die (Hansel and Gretel), poisoned by jealous women (Snow White), or gobbled up by a wolf (in some versions of Little Red Riding Hood). Children want to hear about such things, not because they are immoral and can't tell right from wrong, but because they can tell when they are being preached at, and because they understand that good storytelling involves conflict, tension, danger, and suspense. This is something that the bachelor in The Story-Teller Saki's stand-in or representative in the story, of course understands, and which the pious and rather clueless aunt doesn't. And because of this fact, he is able to get the children to behave while they are listening to him (ironically, by feeding them a decidedly amoral tale, he turns them into good, obedient children, at least for the duration of the story), whereas they have little to no respect for their aunt. In a characteristically witty touch, Saki's narrator introduces her as an aunt belonging to the children, rather than the other way around. And of course, the aunt has no authority because she cannot entertain the children and win their respect. They fail to respond to her simple commands not to do things (Don't is the word which begins most of the aunt's remarks, as the narrator observes) because their natural inquisitiveness is not being satisfied (most of their remarks begin with Why?). We might ask if the story-within-a-story does itself have a moral, or at least a serious message to impart. On the one hand, the bachelors' story about Bertha suggests that being good in itself does not guarantee that one will be kept safe from harm: a wolf is not going to care whether a little girl is well-behaved or not, and nobody comes to her rescue, unlike the girl in the aunts' story. Indeed, parading ones goodness (as Bertha does with her medals) can even directly lead to harm, so we might even say there is an anti-moral moral to the bachelors' story, which is that people who are overly proud and virtuous may actively attract danger and harm, for a range of reasons. Certainly, people are often more determined to expose or bring down anyone who parades their virtue and pretends to be more morally pure than others. So we can analyse the bachelors' tale as amoral (bad things happen even to good people, in a soulless, random universe) or even as anti-moral (being overly virtuous can lead to ones undoing). In either case, the children respond favourably to the narrative, not least because they already recognise it as somehow more true than the aunts' overly saccharine tale about goodness being rewarded. Another twentieth-century short story, written decades after Saki's, which would be productive to pair with The Story-Teller for a comparative analysis, is Shirley Jackson's The Witch, which also sees a strange man entertain a child on a train while the child's female guardian (in this case, his mother) looks on in horror at the inappropriately gruesome tale the stranger tells her son. Both stories end with the male visitor leaving the train having sparked the child's (children's) interest, and in both stories the children are extremely inquisitive and imaginative. Subscribe to our latest posts sent to your email. In order to continue enjoying our site, we ask that you confirm your identity as a human. Thank you very much for your cooperation. Best summary PDF, themes, and quotes. More books than SparkNotes. Home Study Guides The Storyteller Themes The Storyteller H. H. Munro was born in Burma under the British Raj but moved to England to be raised by his aunt and within the English education system after the sudden death of his mother. Munro remained part of English society into adulthood and participated in society in many ways. However, under the pen name "Saki," his short stories often criticized and satirized society in Edwardian England, especially from the point of view of children and outsiders. In "The Storyteller," Saki satirizes society's values with regard to raising and educating children, especially through the character of the aunt who cannot control or answer the questions of the children she watches over. Saki's satire of Edwardian England often went hand in hand with the theme of questioning authority. In "The Storyteller," this can be seen most importantly through the children asking questions to their aunt and telling her directly when they think her answers are unsatisfactory. In addition, the character of the bachelor shows how adults can also question and disrupt existing structures of authority and power. In "The Storyteller," a large contrast is drawn between children and adults. The adults seem to have a responsibility to raise the children in a certain way, but they do not agree on what this role is or what the children should be learning. The children are shown to be full of natural energy and curiosity, but are also shown to be shaped by the adults they interact with. This can be seen in the children and aunt being described as behaving similarly in the beginning of the story ("Both the aunt and the children were conversational in a limited, persistent way" [1]), Bertha (the little girl in the bachelor's story) behaving the way adults have instructed her to and rewarded her for, and the children changing their behavior after the bachelor's story. Saki, who grew up in Burma with his parents and then was sent to England to live with his siblings and aunt after the sudden death of his mother, believed that one's childhood has a large impact on one's adult life, and shows this both through the children in the story and the adults' differing view on how best to raise children. The defining feature of the children in the train carriage throughout the beginning of "The Storyteller" is their curiosity. They are described as asking questions beginning with "Why?" (1) constantly, such as "Why are those sheep being driven out of that field?" (1) and "Why is the grass in the other field better?" (2). Saki shows that the aunt does not encourage this curiosity, giving the children unsatisfactory answers and then trying to quiet and distract them with a story. The bachelor also does not seem pleased with the curiosity of the children, finding their incessant talking annoying. It is hard to say whether Saki himself takes a stance on curiosity, but he makes it clear that it is an integral part of childhood, especially in developing how children interact with adults and understand the world around them. Goodness is the quality the aunt seems to want to encourage in the children. This vague quality of "goodness" is what the aunt espouses in her story, as she says that the child in her story was saved from danger because the people in her village knew and appreciated how "good" (4) she was. The Bachelor parodies and undermines this quality in his own story, in which a "little girl named Bertha, who was extra-ordinarily good" (5) ends up dying because of the medals given to her for this goodness. Saki asks the reader to question what true goodness means, especially in the moral education of children, and whether it will truly result in good fortune. A value Saki seems to believe is more important than goodness is imagination. The aunt is scorned by the children and the bachelor for not being able to come up with good, even imaginary answers to the children's questions. In contrast, the bachelor is able to answer all of the children's questions about his story with elaborate, imaginative answers that impress both the children and the aunt. The reader might remain critical of this trait, however, as the bachelor does not seem to care about the children learning the truth about the world. Another value Saki seems to find natural in children and perhaps all people is pride. In the main story in which the children, aunt, and bachelor ride on the train, one of the young girls is very proud of the piece of poetry she has learned (somewhat) and she recites it over and over, perhaps trying to elicit more praise from her siblings or the adults. Furthermore, within the bachelor's story, Bertha is shown to be proud of her goodness, especially of the praise and awards she has gotten for it from adults, but her wearing her medals with pride is what allows the wolf to find and kill her. Saki also shows that not only children can be proud of their skills, as the bachelor is clearly proud of his storytelling abilities and perhaps even of the fact that he taught the children to question authority and demand more imaginative stories. Next Section Quotes and Analysis Previous Section Glossary Buy Study Guide Cite this page The Question and Answer section for The Storyteller is a great resource to ask questions, find answers, and discuss the novel. Asked by Joseph M #1359274 Answered by Jill D #170087 on 3/24/2025 7:48 PM View All Answers Asked by Artie J #1322036 Answered by Aslanon 10/4/2023 2:30 AM View All Answers Asked by Kaylee D #1317712 Answered by Jill D #170087 on 8/25/2023 7:31 PM View All Answers Ask Your Own Question The children do not respond well to the aunts' story, not merely because it is boring but because on a fundamental level, it is dishonest: It is not true. Though the children cannot articulate this in words, it is clear they feel this lack when they compare it to the truth they feel in the bachelors' story. When he describes Bertha as horribly good, the children feel that description contains a truth that is absent from the aunts' tale of infant life (Paragraph 31). Where the bachelor tells a story they believe contains some kind of honesty, the aunts' story relies on trite platitudes about the external rewards of good behavior. Instantly, the children (and the bachelor) can dissect the untruth of the aunts' story. Where the aunts' story argues that the little girl is only saved from a rampaging bull because the people admire her goodness, the bigger of the two girls demands: Wouldnt they have saved her if she hadnt been good? (Paragraph 15). The girl, like the bachelor, surmises that most people would not let a little girl be killed by a bull, whether she had been good or not. Therefore, her goodness has very little bearing on the story's outcome, and the aunt's implication that only goodness will be rewarded is false and worthy of their derision. Hansel and Gretel, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella. What do all of these stories have in common? Besides being fairy tales, they all seem to have a happy ending. The witch gets burned alive in the cauldron. Little Red Riding Hood and her grandma gets saved from a wolf by a hunter. Cinderella marries the prince. However, some stories take a completely different direction. Take "The Story-Teller" by Saki for example. In his story, the bachelor tells a story to 4 kids about a girl named Bertha, who was so good that the prince of her country allowed her to go to his castle. Suddenly, a wolf attacks. The wolf, ready to hunt a pig, finds Bertha. Bertha then hides in a bush, but her medals started to clink as she gets scared, the wolf hears show more content The first example is on Page 95, in which the bachelor says: "but she was horribly good.", in reference to Bertha, the main character in the bachelor's story. Even though this doesn't contribute to the theme, it's an example of how irony is used in the story. An example that does contribute to the theme is on Page 97, near the end of the story, in which the bachelor said, "Bertha was trembling very much at having the wolf prowling and sniffing so near her, and as she trembled, the medal for obedience clinked against the medals for good conduct and punctuality.". After the wolf hears the medals hit each other, the wolf dives into the bush that Bertha was hiding in and eats her alive. The irony here is that instead of the story ending happily, the story finishes with a very gruesome ending, with the main character being eaten by a wolf. Finally, there are also examples of the conflict and resolution in the story also contributing to the theme. In The Story-Teller, the central conflict is between the aunt and the bachelor over the fact that the kids did not find the aunt's story good. The example of this was when the bachelor said: "You don't seem to be a success as a story-teller." on Page 94. The resolution ends up being that the bachelor tells a story that got the children to stop making a raucous for ten minutes. Proof of this is on Page 98, after the aunt comments on the bachelor's story, he says to the aunt "I kept them! The story opens on a hot summer day with three small children and their aunt sitting in a railway carriage on the way to Templecombe. Together with them in the carriage is an unknown man who observes their behavior. The children are bored and ask their aunt various questions. She tells them to observe the surroundings, but that encourages even more curiosity. In order to keep the children quiet for a while, the aunt decides to tell them a story. She comes up with a conventional, moralistic tale which fails to capture the interest of the children and creates even bigger discontent. As he also heard the story, the unknown man decides to point out its flaws. The aunt takes it as an offense and challenges him to tell a better story. The man invents a story that begins like the previous one. He tells the children about a girl named Bertha who is so "horribly good" that she even has three medals for that. One day the prince notices how good Bertha has been and decides to reward her. Bertha is allowed to take a walk in the prince's gardens, where normally no children are permitted. She enjoys her walk until the wolf shows up. Bertha hides behind a myrtle bush and almost manages to escape, but her medals clicking against each other give her away and the wolf eats her at once. The children love this story, even though in the beginning they thought it would be horrible, as it started like their aunt's story. They appreciate the realism of the story that lacked in the tale of their aunt. The aunt, however, finds the story "most improper" to tell to young children. The man points out, that unlike her, he was at least capable of keeping the kids silent for ten minutes.

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