

Stories
We Tell
(2012)

WHAT KIND OF STORY IS
**STORIES
WE
TELL?**





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Intimate and revealing family documentary or self-conscious meta-narrative on the whole form...or both? Mark Ramey asks what kind of story *Stories We Tell* actually is.

Let me tell you a story.' Six simple little words that seem so innocent, and yet which, on reflection, conceal a tangled web of assumptions and motivations. Who is telling the story? Who is listening? Who do we cheer and who do we boo? How will the story end and why should we care? A story is never as simple as a beginning, a middle and an end.

Sarah Polley's 2012 documentary, *Stories We Tell*, tries to unpick this complex idea of storytelling, in terms of the mythical stories told within families. You know the kind of salubrious stuff: those skeletons in the family closet; the black sheep and fallen angels; the affairs and divorces; the crimes and misdemeanours. One such myth that Polley explores is the story of her own paternity, asking if she really is the daughter of Michael Polley (the man who has brought her up) or if she is rather the daughter of another man who her mother Diane (who died when she was 11) slept with in the 1970s. This familial story begins as a tall tale explaining Sarah's incongruous red hair but, as the documentary progresses, becomes the stuff of legend when a DNA test reveals that film producer, Harry Gulkin, is Sarah's biological father. That's a story worth telling. But where to start and from whose perspective? Indeed, whose story is it?

Traditionally 'documentary' makes claims towards objectivity, factuality and truth. This in contrast to fictional filmmaking which is largely made-up. John Grierson, the man who popularised the term 'documentary' in the 1920s, has a more nuanced view, suggesting in his famous definition that the form is 'the creative treatment of actuality'. Polley endorses this approach by suggesting the distinction between documentation and invention is, at the very least, much more complex than implied by the binary of 'fact versus fiction'.

Polley is a renowned Canadian actor, and her documentary is at heart a piece of theatre. *Stories We Tell* does not hide its theatricality. Polley shows her father acting, shows herself acting, shows her mother acting, shows her siblings getting into role for their interviews, and so on. Even the very opening shots of the film make Polley a character in her own story framed by Michael's narration. This is all evident from the first images accompanying Michael's reading of a Margaret Atwood quote:

When you're in the middle of a story, it isn't a story at all but rather a confusion... It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you're telling it to yourself or someone else.

This quotation serves as Polley's mission statement as she tries to make sense of the chaos surrounding the story of her conception – a story which foregrounds her mother, Diane. As Michael narrates, Polley presents a montage of Super 8mm home movie footage emphasising the notion of storytelling as a confusion of memories and past events with Diane central to them all.

But there is more going on here. From very early on in this documentary, Super 8mm film (a home movie format popular in the 60s and 70s) is presented as a rich seam of celluloid memory that will be mined in search of the truth. By partly using intimate home movies to tell the story, Polley is also hoping for objective clarity when she focusses her digital lenses on the main players in her drama – her siblings, her parents, her mother's friends and lovers. This use of mixed formats (digital and Super 8mm) creates a textual tapestry which intentionally never achieves perfect resolution. In her digitally filmed set-ups Polley repeatedly breaks the fourth wall, starting with Michael's recording of his self-penned, voice-of-God narration, and then frequently showing

the lighting rigs and clapsticks used to film many of the talking head interviews. She also keeps in the edit, 'off-script' asides and moments of silent reflection. And finally, and most infamously, she captures her recreation and restaging of many of the home movies featured in the documentary – images the casual spectator would have assumed to be original archive material.

Why do this? Why all this self-reflexivity? Is it merely a self-conscious deconstruction of the documentary form – a critique of its objectivity. Certainly, but Polley is striving for something else. Her documentary is more than a mere retelling of events with pictorial illustration – her documentary is much more than this. It is a resurrection. It is the poignant reanimation of her dead mother by recreating memories of possible events in her mother's life. This loving act of creation is backed up by witness testimony and, despite some inconsistent claims, bears the weight of truth, but there is more, since recreation is also shown here to act like memory. In other words, memory itself is revealed to be creative, for what is memory but the past conjured into the present? It is a psychological event that shows us ourselves as we are now, as well as what we or others were. Memory is therefore not so dissimilar to a film – images and sensations are recorded, edited and played back through the lens of our own mind. Memory is then as reliable and seductive as a mirror reflecting a mirror – multiplied perspectives receding into infinity. This is deep stuff and clearly one of the reasons for the documentary's critical acclaim: it packs both an emotional and intellectual punch.

However, the stand-out sequence in the documentary occurs towards the end of the film. It is Polley's 'big reveal' of her theatrical manipulation of the spectator. By showing us the cast and crew on various sets that we have been positioned to assume were authentic home movie locations, she not only questions the objective nature of the documentary genre but also highlights how, by telling our own stories, we can

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still say something deeply personal and true. This paradox lying at the very heart of the genre is documentary's hall of mirrors.

The sequence is found in the 10th chapter heading of The Curzon Film World Blu Ray release of 2013 and starts with Michael Polley questioning the very nature of the documentary Sarah is constructing. He suggests Sarah will end up with six hours of footage and edit it in the way that best suits her, just like her interviewees will edit the stories they tell. He further remarks that the whole process is a 'farical theatrical exercise' and holds-up extreme observational documentation as the only method that has any chance of getting close to the truth. This is a far cry from the reflexive and performative approach used by Polley.

Next comes an 'off-script' interview with Polley's eldest brother, John, who knowingly breaks the fourth wall to inquire into the process of her filming. Polley's reply is key, as she notes that her documentary is about many things such as, '...memory and the way we tell stories of the past... trying to bring someone to life through people's stories of them.' Another sibling, her sister, Joanna, then argues that the whole attempt to explain who Diane Polley really was, is ultimately illusory as so many different perspectives need to be considered.

A montage of Super 8mm footage then follows now with Sarah's voice over, reading a letter she wrote to her



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Sarah Polley
filming for
Stories We Tell

biological father, Harry: 'Hi Harry...one of the main focuses in the documentary are the discrepancies in the stories... The truth about the past is often ephemeral...many of our stories...end up with shifts and fictions in them.' It is with these last words that Polley reveals the various sets she has recreated and peopled with actors cast as her family members and most critically as lovers, Diane and Harry. These Super 8mm, non-digital recreations of plausible memories are effective not only as illustrations of testimony but also as authentic imaginings. They are moments of heartfelt homage to a mother who is now tragically absent but who is reanimated and somehow resurrected through Polley's loving direction.

The sequence ends with Harry gently criticising Sarah's vain attempt to weave stories out of a web of storytellers when only the principal players, himself and the dead Diane, can possibly provide the most truthful accounts. The truth clearly couldn't be more ephemeral despite Harry's assurances that his story is, at the very least, the most authoritative. Underscoring this Polley, whilst filming Harry on grainy Super 8mm, turns the camera onto herself in the ultimate self-reflexive, fourth wall break.

So, what kind of story is *Stories We Tell*? It's a story about telling stories: it's a documentary about making documentaries. It's about the fact in fiction, and the fiction in fact. It's about the unreliability of memory and the

genius of film to both capture the past and create future memory.

The film's final, ironic shot of another candidate to Polley's paternity throws some doubt onto the many conclusions drawn in the documentary but not the conclusion that both documentary and storytelling are at heart creative enterprises.

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 **from the MM vaults**

Are You Telling the Truth?: Self-reflexivity and performativity *Stories We Tell* – Roy Stafford, MM65