



Stories We Tell Discussion Guide

Director: Sarah Polley

Year: 2012

Time: 108 min

You might know this director from:

Away From Her (2006), Director

Take This Waltz (2011), Director

Mr. Nobody (2009), Actress

Dawn of the Dead (2004), Actress

FILM SUMMARY

STORIES WE TELL is a highly original documentary that explores how we construct our own reality through stories, drawing from both truth and invention. The film brings together Director Sarah Polley's siblings, father and friends of her family, each person weaving their own narrative threads into a complex portrait of Sarah's mother who died of cancer when she was eleven.

Combing home movies with other peoples' accounts of Diane Polley, the film begins almost as a love-letter to her parents, but quickly takes an unexpected turn as people began to ask why Sarah didn't look like her dad. Raising universal questions about memory and truth, about family and the roles we play within our families, STORIES WE TELL is an emotional journey of one young woman who in confronting her mother's past also confronts the complexity of what it means to be human.

FILM THEMES

STORIES WE TELL raises questions about the reliability of memory and the idea that one single, unified “truth” exists. Throughout the film, we get different, often conflicting perspectives about Sarah’s mother. Diane Polley springs back to life through the stories told her husband, lover, friends and children, and gradually we begin to get a complete sense of who she was.

MEMORY AND MEANING

Sarah Polley set out to discover the mother who died when she was so young. During the film, Sarah learns that Harry Gulkin is her biological father yet it doesn’t change her feelings toward Michael Polley, the man who raised her and who was believed to be her biological father. Sarah also learns new things about her mother, but in the end, none of it drastically changes Sarah’s own relationship with her mother. How Sarah experienced her mother, how she felt in her mother’s presence, is how she will continue to remember her.

“REALITY”

At a time when reality TV shows like American Idol and So You Think You Can Dance are so popular our idea of what we consider “real,” or “true” seems to be changing. Most reality shows are staged yet edited together in such a way to suggest things are happening in real time. Likewise, several of the “home movies” in STORIES WE TELL were actually created by filmmaker Sarah Polley. Actors were used to depict her characters at different periods in their lives, which raises interesting questions about the nature of “reality” in this day and age.

THE POWER OF STORIES

In creating her own home movies for the film, Sarah conjures memories into existence by creating images that can fill in the gaps of her own memory to tell a story that she can make sense of. This very human process is a big reason why storytelling is so powerful. Stories help us make sense out of the chaos, the ambiguity of life, our natural inclinations, and the scars we carry with us that we don’t really understand. Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said that “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards,” and perhaps Sarah’s exploration of the past helped her move forward in life.

HYBRID DOCUMENTARIES

Sarah made a “hybrid” documentary, one that draws on both documentary and Hollywood techniques. For part of the film, she uses actors and manipulates footage to look like “home movies”. Some people believe these films are less “true” than documentaries that rely exclusively on standard documentary techniques. Others, however, insist that one is not more “true” than the other, for all stories are crafted re-tellings that contain a certain amount of artifice.

How is it we talk and talk without conveying somehow what we’re really like?”

Michael Polley

“When you’re in the middle of a story, it isn’t a story at all but rather a confusion, a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood... It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you’re telling it to yourself or someone else.”

Margaret Atwood

FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. What were your initial thoughts and reactions to the film?
2. This film opens with a quote from Margaret Atwood, "When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion... It's only afterwards it becomes anything like a story at all." What is your interpretation of this quote? Do you agree with it?
3. Do you think Sarah solved the mystery of who her mother was? What do you think Sarah learned most while piecing her mother's story together?
4. Was there a moment in the film when you began to question the people telling the story and wonder if perhaps everything was not as it initially appeared?
5. Reality TV presents stories that appear to be true but are, in fact, fabricated for a television audience. Do you think Sarah Polley's use of actors and created "home movies" undermines the truth she is trying to capture in *STORIES WE TELL*? Do you think the film can still be called a documentary? What, exactly, is a documentary about: telling the truth, or telling a story?
6. This film reminds us that there are many different kinds of "truths." Our memories are distorted, our stories are manipulated, our voices change. Do you ever contradict yourself? Is this what it means to be human? Nobel Prize winning author Doris Lessing said, "There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth." Do you agree?
7. Towards the end of the film, Michael Polley says he feels sorry for Harry Gulkin even though the DNA test reveals Harry to be Sarah Polley's biological father. Do you share Michael Polley's view? What were your own feelings toward Harry Gulkin?
8. Have you ever tried putting your own family history together? If not, do you think you will some day? If so, can you talk a little about what it was like, what you learned, if it was easy or difficult, etc.?
9. Share a little about your experience with stories. Which stories have made the greatest impact on you? Have you ever tried writing a story of your own, fiction or non-fiction?
10. During this film, Sarah learns that her father is not really her biological father. Have you ever had an experience like this, where you found out that something you always believed to be true was, in fact, not true? Talk about your experience.

NOTES:

FILM FACTS:

- **STORIES WE TELL** premiered at the 2012 Venice Film Festival. Its North American premiere followed at the Toronto International Film Festival. It was named the Best Canadian Film of the Year by the Toronto Film Critics Association.
- The Toronto Film Critics Association awarded **Stories We Tell** the \$100,000 prize for best Canadian film of the year.
- Sarah Polley made her screen debut at the tender age of four, playing Molly in the Disney film "One Magic Christmas." She shifted into high gear, from being a child actress, with her role in the 1989 TV film "Lantern Hill," which she won a Gemini Award for.
- In 2007, Sarah Polley served as a member of the Cannes Film Festival jury.
- Sarah Polley made her directorial debut with "Away From Her," based on Alice Munro's story, *The Bear Came Over the Mountain*. It starred Julie Christie as the woman with Alzheimer's disease.
- Sarah Polley met her current husband David Sandomierski in 9th Grade and again at a high school reunion.
- **STORIES WE TELL** is Sarah Polley's seventh film, and her third feature-length film.
- Sullivan cast Sarah in lead role of Sara Stanley in the 1990 TV series "Avonlea", based on Montgomery's work. This role catapulted Polley into the league of top-ranking Canadian TV stars. By the age of 14, she was independently wealthy. But at age 12, she wore a peace sign protesting the Gulf war to an awards ceremony. The Disney executives told Sarah to remove it, which she refused. This embittered her relationship with Disney, and in 1994, she moved out of "Road to Avonlea".
- Sarah Polley says she was happy to have sorted out her family origins by the time she gave birth to her own first child. "I finished editing the film probably weeks before I found out I was pregnant," she remembers, "and I'm glad that it was out of my system [so] I can focus on somebody else's childhood for now."
- When **STORIES WE TELL** was about to screen for the first time, Sarah Polley published a blog post to let everyone know that she would not be taking any interviews, at least not until the film was released theatrically. During the festival tour, she wanted the film to speak for itself.

WAYS TO INFLUENCE

1. Share this film. Give others the opportunity to be moved by this story that we can all relate to.
2. Consider doing an oral history project with friends and family about someone you were close to but who is no longer alive. See how your memories compare and contrast. See what you learn about the person. See what you learn about yourself.
3. Remember to be present with the people in your life, your family and your friends. Be interested in them. Ask questions. Share about yourself. And don't forget to express your gratitude for the things they give you.
4. Make a time capsule that you can hide away for future family members. Include a letter that shares about your passions, fears and secrets. When they discover it, it will be a revealing and exciting window into person you are today. Everyone has a story to tell, including you.

We believe a good documentary is just the beginning...

In a world of sound-bites, documentaries provide an opportunity to think, understand, share, and connect with the world.

They are controversial, divisive, fascinating, unexpected, and surprising. They can be thrillers, dramas, comedies, romance, tear-jerkers, and horror films.

Documentaries provide the perfect topic for meaningful conversations. If you want to talk about the things that matter with people that matter then pick a film, invite your friends, and watch & discuss together. It's as easy as that.

Influence Film Club – We are the conversation after the film.