FILM SUMMARY

Highly original and emotionally generous, STORIES WE TELL explores how we construct our realities and capture our memories through stories. The film brings together director Sarah Polley’s siblings, father, and friends of family, each person weaving his or her own narrative thread into a complex portrait of Sarah’s mother, Diane.

Diane Polley passed away when Sarah was eleven, and the film begins as a collective love letter to her, as well as an excavation of the past and a reclamation of a lost mother. But from the start, the film hints at a more complicated subject. Sarah’s father Michael Polley reads and records a story he’s written about his wife, as his daughter films and directs him. When asked why this scene is also being filmed, Sarah explains that this is also an interrogation, for in trying to solve the mystery of her mother, the filmmaker unravels conflicting stories, digs up buried secrets, and uncovers a past that is mutable and ultimately unknowable, yet ever-present in haunting memories and consequences wrought by old deeds.

STORIES WE TELL explores the power and unreliability of memory. It explores the bonds of family and the roles we play in them. It shares the emotional journey of a woman and artist who, in investigating her mother’s past, confronts the complexity of what it means to be human.
**FILM THEMES**

The film explores how we try to understand our past and capture its truth through art and our subjective memories.

**NARRATIVE OWNERSHIP AND CONTROL**

Sarah is prompted to finally tell her father Michael about Harry Gulkin because a reporter plans to write a story about them. The news inspires Michael to write about his memories. Instead of allowing Harry to publish his own story of Diane, Sarah pushes for her film, STORIES WE TELL, which includes the perspectives of all involved directly and indirectly. The film is not about an individual’s account of Diane Polley. Sarah doesn’t lay claim to her mother, but invites others to share their memories and interpretations. As a filmmaker, this multi-perspective approach is her artistic attempt at understanding Diane. Still, Sarah has narrative control in interviewing, editing, and assembling the final cuts. Towards the end, we watch as Sarah ‘directs’ her father in the recording studio. The film appears to be everyone’s story, but perhaps it’s just one of many.

**STORYTELLING AND MEMORIES**

In creating her own Super 8 style home movies for the film, and blending them with actual archival footage, the filmmaker questions the veracity and reliability of memories. It also allows Sarah to conjure memories that reflect her own longing, curiosity, and imaginative interpretation of the past. By doing so, she is filling in the gaps of her memory and crafting a narrative she can make sense of. This very human process is one reason why storytelling is so powerful. Stories help us makes sense out of the chaos, the ambiguity of life, and the scars we carry with us that we don’t really understand. As Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard said, “Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

“**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

**HYBRID DOCUMENTARIES**

Sarah made a hybrid documentary, drawing on documentary and fiction film techniques. For part of the film, she uses actors and manipulates footage to look like “home movies,” matching them with real footage so that the boundaries are blurred. Some people believe these hybrid films are less “true” than documentaries that rely exclusively on standard non-fiction film 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. When the re-creations are revealed at the film’s end, the viewer is left feeling amazed by the attentive detail and seeming authenticity, and puzzled over how to separate reality from imagination. Ultimately, this reflects our own relation to our past, our memories being fictions that blend with elusive truths.
FURTHER DISCUSSION:

1. 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? Why or why not?

2. Have you ever had an experience like Sarah, where you found out that something you always believed to be true was, in fact, not true? Share about your experience.

3. 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?

4. Do you think Sarah Polley’s use of actors and “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’s aim: telling the truth, or telling a story?

5. Author Doris Lessing said, “There is no doubt fiction makes a better job of the truth.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

6. 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’s view? What were your own feelings toward Harry Gulkin?

7. Do you think Sarah solved the mystery of who her mother was? What did Sarah learn most while piecing together her mother’s story?

8. Sarah is not present as others are in this film, neither as interview subject nor as narrator. What is the effect of this absent presence? What about her mother’s presence?

9. Have you ever tried putting your own family history together? If not, do you think you will some day? What do you hope or fear or worry you will discover?

10. 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?
FILM FACTS:

- Sarah Polley made her screen debut at the age of four, playing Molly in the Disney film One Magic Christmas. She shifted into high gear with her role in the 1989 TV film Lantern Hill, for which she won a Gemini Award.

- Kevin Sullivan cast Sarah in the lead role of Sara Stanley in the 1990 TV series Avonlea, based on L. M. Montgomery’s work. 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 dropped out of Road to Avonlea.

- STORIES WE TELL is Sarah Polley’s seventh film as a director, and her third feature-length film.

- Sarah Polley met her current husband David Sandomierski in 9th Grade and again at a high school reunion.

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 your passions, fears, and secrets. When they discover it, it will be a revealing and exciting window into the person you are today. Everyone has a story to tell, including you.