

Stories We Tell (2012)

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

--Margaret Atwood

Major Credits:

Director: Sarah Polley

Writers: Sarah Polley, Michael Polley (narration)

Storytellers: Harry Gulkin, Susy Buchan, John Buchan, Mark Polley, Joanna Polley, Cathy Gulkin, Geoffrey Boyes

Cast: Rebecca Jenkins (Diane Polley), Peter Evans (Michael Polley), Alex Hatz (Harry Gulkin), Justin Goodhand (John Buchan), Seamus Morrison (Mark Polley), Allie McDonald (Joanna Polley), Lani Billard (Susy Buchanan), Andrew Church (Geoff Bowes)

Cinematography: Iris Ng

Production Background:

Stories We Tell is the third feature film by the multi-talented Canadian actress Sarah Polley, following *Away from Her* (2006) and *Take This Waltz* (2011). It was made during the five year period separating these two works. Although the film received excellent reviews and numerous international awards, it was not nominated for an Oscar for "Best Documentary," perhaps because it did not meet the Academy's requirements for the category.

Cinematic Techniques:

1. Editing: Polley and editor Michael Munn have assembled an extraordinary assemblage of "talking head" interviews, archival footage, and reconstructed footage in the service of *telling the story* (or, more properly, *stories*).
2. Reflexivity: Not only do we frequently observe the process of filmmaking (the interviews with Michael, prompted by Sarah, in the recording studio), but there are multiple films-within-the-film: the bleached-out Super-8 home movies and stage productions, *Red Dawn on Main Street*, the biographical documentary about Harry, *Marriage Italian Style*.
3. Credits: Let's just say that they continue the revelations that structure the story.

Questions for Discussion:

1. How would you define the film's genre?
2. The great American documentary filmmaker Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War*) has said that, "Truth is difficult to know. It is not impossible to know." Polley, on

the other hand, tells her brother John that “I’m interested in the way we tell stories,” in the variations produced by the storytellers. Certainly, the central truth about the story of her biological parentage has been resolved in the course of the narrative. What are the other “truths” that the film investigates, and to what degree are they also resolved?

3. The poet Pablo Neruda is quoted: “Love is so short. Forgetting so long.” How does this apothegm apply to the theme of *Stories We Tell*?
4. The one person who does not get to tell Diane’s story is... Diane. The men describe her as “a Good Time Charlie,” a woman of great spirit and vivacity. After she becomes the first woman in Canada to lose custody of her children because of adultery, however, the newspaper describes her as someone who “has allowed her desire for a career to overtop her domestic duties. She is unrepentant.” Geoff Bowes provides another surprise about her in the film’s epilogue. What kind of a portrait of Diane does her daughter construct?
5. Sarah and Michael re-stage “the moment of truth,” but when he is asked to describe his feelings on the day Diane died, Michael says, “There was no acting in that.” It’s an ambiguous line, implying that, as a professional thespian, he has been performing in front of his daughter’s camera—as he certainly does when he reads his own words as the film’s narrator. Is there any reason to believe that *Stories We Tell* (granting its artistic merits) is any more authentic as a “document” of truth than an ordinary television Reality show?