

INTRODUCTION

THE PLOT

Without an informing idea, the details of real life are clutter, noise, chaos. We need an idea to be given form for things to make sense. And that's what stories are: ideas given form, ideas given breath.

The Story Is True, an expanded and revised version of a book originally published in 2007, is about making and experiencing stories as something people do, as one of our basic social acts. It is about how stories work, how we use them, how they move about, how they change, how they change us. It is about stories we tell friends, family, and strangers, and it is about stories made for us at a distance, such as movies, television programs, newspapers, and books. It is about when it is appropriate to tell what kinds of stories, and when it is permissible to tell stories that don't make sense, stories that are crazy or incoherent or disconnected.

It consists of four interrelated sections. Part I, "Personal Stories" is primarily about stories we tell one another, stories told in the human voice. Many of the stories and storytelling events in this section are out of my own experience, ranging from conversations I had with the poet Steven Spender, with a dying lifer in a Texas prison hospital, a university commencement encounter with Senator Charles Schumer, and a birthday party dinner-table conversation with family and friends about where we were when the towers went down.

My friends and family turn up frequently in these pages. If I were writing about Shakespeare, the plays of Shakespeare would turn up a frequently, but I'm writing about the way stories work in ordinary life, and it seemed reasonable to work as much as possible with the life to which I had the best access. We could do the same things with your stories, your life.

Most of part I is about oral narrative, but it opens with a chapter that touches on aspects of all kinds of storytelling that will be explored

in the rest of the book and ends with an examination of the ways four masters of print fiction—Homer, Mary Shelley, William Faulkner, and Dashiell Hammett—incorporated, utilized, or explored the kinds of personal storytelling techniques I discuss in the preceding chapters. (Yes, I know Homer is presumed to be an oral poet, but no one in well over 2,000 years has experienced *Odyssey* or *Iliad* as an authentic oral poem: our experience of them is every bit as literary as our experience of *Gone with the Wind* or *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*.)

Part II, “Public Stories,” is about the characters and careers of several key stories that took life in the public sphere, but which continued in the interpersonal. I begin with a look at a few situations in which stories are exempt from the rule of reason and common sense, and then the problem of narrative voice and representation in James Agee and Walker Evans’s multimedia Depression-era documentary masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. In “Words to Kill By,” I look at some of the ways stories and diction are instrumental in the individual and official administration of death—murder, Nazi extermination camps, execution of criminals, and rationalizations of war. Then I examine the O. J. Simpson story in fact, conversation, imagination, and media, and what really happened when (and after) Bob Dylan went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival.

Part III, “Seeing in the Dark,” is about movies. “Silver Bullets” locates Westerns in a deep and long narrative tradition. “Loose Ends in *Night Moves*” examines a film about a detective never quite figuring out what story he’s in. “Making War, Making Movies: *The Fog of War*” is about truth, lies, and self-deception. “Filming *Gatsby*” looks at how and why so many filmmakers couldn’t find the right voice to translate F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel to the screen and how one did. “Fellini’s Memory: *Amarcord*” examines how Fellini melds personal and shared memory, legend, and fiction in one of his best films.

Part IV, “The Story Is True” (which takes its title from the final line of Robert Creeley’s poem, “Bresson’s Movies”) consists of one long chapter (“The Storyteller I Looked for Every Time I Looked for Storytellers”) and one short chapter (“Farinata’s Silence”). Both deal with the incorporation of stories into our lives. The first is about lies that became something resembling truth. The second is about the place of stories, whether true or not, in the lives of every one of us.

The coda, “Donald Trump’s Big Lie” is a brief look at the place of profound mendacity in current American political life. Lies which, oddly, have their own truths.

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