Viewing *The Stories We Tell*

In this inspired, genre-twisting new film, Oscar®-nominated writer/director Sarah Polley… is both filmmaker and detective as she investigates the secrets kept by a family of storytellers. She playfully interviews and interrogates a cast of characters of varying reliability, eliciting refreshingly candid, yet mostly contradictory, answers to the same questions. As each relates their version of the family mythology, present-day recollections shift into nostalgia-tinged glimpses of their mother, who departed too soon, leaving a trail of unanswered questions.

Polley unravels the paradoxes to reveal the essence of family: always complicated, warmly messy and fiercely loving. Stories We Tell explores the elusive nature of truth and memory, but at its core is a deeply personal film about how our narratives shape and define us as individuals and families, all interconnecting to paint a profound, funny and poignant picture of the larger human story. - Written by The National Film Board of Canada

This film is the basis of our unit 2 project which is meant to have you examine the nature of perspective and the influence perspective has on our understanding of the truth and of reality. Just as Polley examined an event in her life, you will be examining an event in your life. So be thinking about what event you’d like to examine and who you will be interviewing to discover their perspective on the event.

As you view the film, keep in mind that it is rated PG-13. There are a couple instances of profanity, but honestly, you’ve heard worse in the hallways and at lunch. There are also a couple references to sex, but you have to examine the context of the reference and WHY the filmmaker would keep those references in the film. They are just REFERENCES – you don’t get to see anything. The movie has received a 95% rating on *Rotten Tomatoes* which indicates that people like this film.

As you view the film, there are questions for you to answer in the left side. The right side is for you to make notes of things that stand out for you. Maybe recurring images, surprising images, questions that arise, discrepancies between interviewees, or just any other questions or notes that you want to make to help you understand what Sarah Polley’s message is about truth.

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| Questions to answer and to help you with the film | Your thoughts and notes on the images, on any questions which arise, on discrepancies between interviewees, etc. |
| 1. The opening voice-over monologue begins with “When you are in the middle of a story, it isn’t a story at all but only a confusion… like a house in a whirlwind.” Why would Polley begin with this statement? What point is she making? |  |
| Questions to answer and to help you with the film | Your thoughts and notes on the images, on any questions which arise, on discrepancies between interviewees, etc. |
| 1. The next couple of scenes show people getting ready to be recorded. Why show this footage instead of only showing the polished edited takes of the interview? How does this help us gain a perspective on the interviewees? |  |
| 1. The blond woman in black and white is Diane Polley. Take note of how she is portrayed and when she is portrayed. |
| 1. Sarah Polley’s father, Michael, states that he was born completed. Why would Polley begin with her father’s beginnings if the film is a search for her mother’s story? |
| 1. 7:03. “This one thing that happened and how it’s refracted in so many different ways, so many different angles.” What comes to your mind when you heard this sentence? |
| 1. What is the first trait we learn about Diane Polley from the interviewees? Why would Sarah Polley choose to portray her mother in such a way so early in the film? |
| Questions to answer and to help you with the film | Your thoughts and notes on the images, on any questions which arise, on discrepancies between interviewees, etc. |
| 1. 13:00 People seem to have different views of Diane. Some say she had no secrets, nothing to hide. Others say she did have something to hide. BE CAREFUL HERE. Why would Sarah Polley show these differing perspectives so close together in the film? IF you weren’t paying attention, you might have missed the juxtaposition (the contrast). |  |
| 1. 13:53 The film talks about how Diane yearned for more demonstrative affection from Michael. Then you have this very random commentary from Mark Polley about his parents’ attitudes towards sex. Why would Sarah Polley include such a taboo topic in her film? |
| 1. 14:50 The parental duties are discussed. Sarah Polley has been contrasting the traits of her parents. What could she be foreshadowing at such an early point in the film? |
| Questions to answer and to help you with the film | Your thoughts and notes on the images, on any questions which arise, on discrepancies between interviewees, etc. |
| 1. Around 20:47, Michael plays with the idea of mirrors. He states “You know it’s a delusion. It’s all done with mirrors they used to tell me. The mirrors in which you can see yourself clearly. The mirrors through which you can see what you really look like,” What seems to be Michael’s point about Diane’s Montreal trip and his visit to see her after the second rehearsal? | This Montreal trip becomes pivotal in the film. Pay attention. |
| 1. What do we learn about Sarah Polley’s birth? Why DOESN’T she include the birth stories of her four older siblings? |
| 1. People had different perspectives on whether or not Diane knew she was going to die from cancer. Why show these different views? |
| 1. What secret seems to emerge after Diane’s death?   How does this information seem to change the direction of the film and the story? |
| 1. How do the interviewees reveal this information? What seems to be their tones? |
| Questions to answer and to help you with the film | Your thoughts and notes on the images, on any questions which arise, on discrepancies between interviewees, etc. |
| 1. What is Geoff Bowes’ perspective on Diane? Whom do you believe? |  |
| 1. What does Sarah Polley discover in Montreal? Why does she have other people recount this information instead of telling it herself? |
| 1. 45:00 How does Michael’s encounter with the two friends of Diane relate to his earlier statement about mirrors? |
| 1. 46:00 We find out Diane has been married once before and that two of Sarah’s siblings, Susy and John, are from that marriage. Why would Polley add this information AFTER she reveals Diane’s affair with Harry Gulkin? |
| 1. 48:43. We hear Diane’s voice for the first time. Why would Polley wait until now to do to this? Think about what we just learned. |
| 1. 1:05:00 What point does Polley make through revealing Harry’s affair and her parentage? Why have Michael narrate this section? |
| Questions to answer and to help you with the film | Your thoughts and notes on the images, on any questions which arise, on discrepancies between interviewees, etc. |
| 1. “A truth like that opens up, [it] kind of begets other truths and when you discover truths like that, how you think about truths within that are concealed…” What is the view of truth that Polley is presenting? (This is a generalization about the nature of truth. Not the truth which the siblings are discussing) |  |
| 1. How does Michael react to Sarah’s news about Henry?   How does this relate to Sarah’s decision to have Michael narrate the film? |  |
| 1. 1:18:26 Michael states “Why is it that we talk and talk… without conveying what we really like?” What does he mean?   How does the choice to tell this story using interviews and film footage address this concern? |  |
| 1. 1:24:00 Harry describes a view of events.     You have the surrounding circle of players who were affected tangentially.  You have the principal players to the event.    He states that all have different narratives shaped by their relationships to those who told them about the event, by the event, and by their loyalties.  You have the next layer of players who were told or heard of events by the principal players. | |
| 1. Based on Harry’s diagram, how does he believe we get to the truth? |  |
| 1. What is Michael’s view of editing and of the truth? |  |
| 1. What does Sarah Polley think she is looking for by making this film? |  |
| 1. When you take the sum of the images and the interviews, what seems to be the main idea of the film? (NOT asking for a summary here. Asking for the message or the point or the THESIS or the claim) |  |
| 1. In the credits, we learn something that might be surprising about the film. How does this revelation change your perspective of Polley’s thesis? (I’m not talking about the footage of Geoff Bowes at the end – you have to read the credits to see what I’m asking about here) |  |