

Introduction

The Plot

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

The Story is True 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 three 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 in

1962 and a dying lifer in a Texas prison hospital two years later, to a May 2006 speech at a university commencement by Senator Charles Schumer and a birthday party dinner-table conversation a week later 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 is bracketed by an opening 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 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 two thousand 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 character and career 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 examine the O.J. Simpson story in fact, conversation, imagination and media; what really happened when (and after) Bob Dylan went electric at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival; the Western in American popular media and its larger contexts; the problem of narrative voice and representation in James Agee's and Walker Evans's multi-media Depression-era documentary masterpiece, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; and, in "Words to Kill By," how stories and diction are instrumental in the individual and official administration of death—murder, Nazi extermination camps, execution of criminals, and rationalizations of war.

Part III, “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.