

**THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD OF CANADA
and
Mongrel Media
present**

STORIES WE TELL

A film by Sarah Polley

"Stories We Tell is a movie you will want to see several times. It seems like a regular documentary, but by the end of the film the doctrine and purity of 'documentary' has disappeared. This is in every sense a 'story film' and a great one, that lives up to the Neruda quoted in it: 'Love is so short, Forgetting is so long.'"

David Thomson, film critic, *The Guardian UK*

108 minutes, Canada, 2012

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When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. 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, *Alias Grace*

About the film

This inspired, genre-twisting film by Oscar®-nominated director Sarah Polley playfully excavates layers of myth and memory to find the elusive truth at the core of a family of storytellers.

Short synopsis

Stories We Tell is an inspired, genre-twisting film by Oscar®-nominated director Sarah Polley. Her playful investigation into the elusive truth buried within the contradictions of a family of storytellers paints a profound portrait of a complicated and deeply loving family.

Long synopsis

In this inspired, genre-twisting film, Oscar®-nominated writer/director Sarah Polley discovers that the truth depends on who's telling it. Polley is both filmmaker and detective as she investigates the secrets behind a family of storytellers. She playfully 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 a lively, fun-loving past and the shadows just beneath. Polley unravels the paradoxes to reveal the essence of family: a messy, intense and loving tangle of contradictions.

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.

Stories We Tell: A new approach to storytelling

The choice of making this project with the National Film Board of Canada was deliberate because Polley wanted — and was given — the latitude to experiment.

When she first approached NFB Ontario Centre producer Anita Lee in 2008, the film's concept was undefined beyond the idea of simply exploring how families remember their own histories. The challenge was to approach the narrative in a manner that allowed Polley to investigate how and why there are typically so many varying accounts of a family's history.

"I think it's a universal thing in every family, that people have their own specific versions of pivotal events or even small memories," said Polley. "They are 100 percent certain

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that their recollections are the truth because whatever the truth is, as they recall it, has formed them and it is part of their history. Discrepancies in memory preoccupy families, and the idea of this fascinated me.”

The absence of form was unusual for Polley; she is accustomed to the rigorous discipline of making fiction films. “With this film, I was slowly discovering what I was doing as I was making it. With each interview and each shoot, I was putting together what I ultimately wanted to do,” said Polley. To arrive at this new mindset, Polley had to deconstruct the techniques she’d developed during her career—which has evolved from actress to screenwriter to director of feature films—and trust her instincts.

Choosing the film’s point of view was a significant decision for Polley. “The role I play in this is the explorer and the filmmaker. That was key for me to be able to justify it to myself,” she explained.

After starting development of *Stories We Tell* at the NFB, Polley joined the inaugural CFC/NFB Documentary Program—a unique laboratory for the development of successful documentaries that took place in the first half of 2009. “The Doc Lab at CFC was an amazing development process because I’d never made a film that wasn’t fiction. I had three really experienced filmmakers who were in the lab with me, plus all these amazing mentors, like Wim Wenders and Kevin McMahon. It was an incredible environment for making your first documentary,” she noted.

Working closely with Lee, as well as director of cinematography Iris Ng and editor Mike Munn, they divided up the editing sessions so that they could shoot for a few months, edit for several months, then shoot, then edit again. The film morphed into something completely different from the original idea, and Polley took her experimentation with tone, visuals and energy farther than she has ever gone before. It had a transformative impact on Polley herself: “I don’t know how it has changed me, but I know it has. It is by far the hardest thing I have ever done and the most rewarding in terms of the result.”

Stories We Tell is about looking back into the past, a perspective enhanced by the decision to shoot partially on Super 8. “The Super 8 film format is loaded,” said Lee. “It already comes with this notion of nostalgia and the past. It’s a medium of a certain time. We associate Super 8 with home movies lost in basements, and we literally searched through people’s basements for the right Super 8 camera.”

Sarah Polley: Filmmaking themes

Stories We Tell is Sarah Polley’s third feature and seventh film. Lee has noted a distinct direction in her work. “Her signature is to look at relationships deeply and honestly in a microscopic way, and the emotional waves these relationships have on the people around them. A deep exploration of intimate relationships at different stages was at the core of *I Shout Love, Away from Her* and *Take This Waltz*, and now *Stories We Tell* takes this territory to a new level.”

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Stories We Tell combines Polley's fascination with relationships and her desire to experiment with storytelling in the hopes of revealing the many truths that exist simultaneously. "Since I was about 19 or 20, I've been thinking about these things, which is why every short film I've ever made, as well as *Away from Her* and *Take This Waltz*, are about long-term relationships," she said. "But if I have learned anything from making this film, it is that we can't all be right and we can't all be wrong. So we must be unintentionally distorting things to varying degrees in order to feed our own version of what we need the past and history to be, and in our way, we must all be telling the truth as well."

After taking a profound journey through memory, truth and revelation to create ***Stories We Tell***, Polley has a better understanding of what makes a family. "Family is who you've had experiences with, who has been there for better or for worse."

KEY CREATIVE SHORT BIOS

SARAH POLLEY (Director) is a writer/director whose dramatic features include *Away from Her* (nominated in 2007 for an Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, and winner of the 2008 Genie Awards for Best Motion Picture and Achievement in Direction) and *Take This Waltz*, starring Seth Rogen, Michelle Williams and Sarah Silverman. ***Stories We Tell*** is her most recent film.

ANITA LEE (Producer) is a producer of award-winning films at the National Film Board of Canada. She has produced numerous documentary and dramatic features for theatrical release. Her recent projects include the critically acclaimed film installation *Road Movie* (TIFF and Berlin 2011) and ***Stories We Tell***.

SILVA BASMAJIAN (Executive Producer) has produced more than 80 NFB films that have garnered numerous awards and been screened at international festivals, including Berlin, Toronto and Sundance. Ms. Basmajian is currently an Executive Producer at the NFB's Ontario Centre and champions projects that re-define documentary, such as the award-winning and ongoing HIGHRISE, a multi-year, multi-media, collaborative documentary project about the human experience in global vertical suburbs. Most recently, she co-produced the critically acclaimed and International Emmy-winning *Life with Murder*.

MIKE MUNN (Editor) began his career editing films for Bruce McDonald (*Roadkill*) and Peter Mettler (*Tectonic Plates, Picture of Light*). Recent credits include *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* and *Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage*, directed by Sam Dunn and Scot McFadyen. ***Stories We Tell*** is Mike's second collaboration with Sarah Polley; he also edited "The Harp," an episode of *The Shields Stories* series that was directed by Polley.

IRIS NG (Director of Cinematography) has been collaborating with filmmakers and artists for over a decade. Her credits include Morgan Spurlock's *Committed: The Toronto International Film Festival*, Angad Singh Bhalla's *Herman's House*, Rama Rau's *The*

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Market, Min Sook Lee's *My Toxic Baby* and international art installation projects by Luis Jacob and Chris Curreri.

FILMMAKER BIOS

SARAH POLLEY (Writer/Director) has been writing and directing in Canada since 1999 when she made her directorial debut; she wrote, directed and produced the short films *Don't Think Twice*, starring Tom McCamus and Jennifer Podemski, and *The Best Day of My Life*. In 2001, she wrote, directed and co-produced *I Shout Love*, starring Kristen Thomson, who won an ACTRA Award for her performance. The film also won the 2003 Genie Award for Best Live Action Short Drama. In 2002, Sarah wrote and directed "The Harp," one of the episodes in the TV series *The Shields Stories*.

In 2007, Sarah wrote and directed *Away from Her*, starring Julie Christie, Gordon Pinsent and Olympia Dukakis, adapted from the Alice Munro short story "The Bear Came Over the Mountain." In addition to two Academy Award nominations (Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Actress), *Away from Her* garnered a long list of awards from the London Critics' Circle (British Actress of the Year), Los Angeles Film Critics Association (New Generations Award), National Board of Review (Best Actress), National Society of Film Critics (Best Actress), New York Film Critics Circle (Best First Film, Best Actress), and the Online Film Critics Society (Breakthrough Filmmaker, Best Actress), as well as from the Central Ohio, Dallas-Fort Worth, Phoenix, Portland, Robert, San Diego, San Francisco, Sarasota, Sedona, Toronto and Washington film critics associations. Additionally, *Away from Her* earned a Chlotrudis Award for Best Adapted Screenplay, an SAG Award (Best Actress), a Golden Globe (Best Actress), seven Genie Awards (including Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director), Best Feature Film and Best Direction from the Directors Guild of Canada and Best Feature Film from the Writers Guild of Canada. In 2010, Sarah wrote and directed her second feature, the romantic drama *Take This Waltz*, starring Michelle Williams, Luke Kirby, Seth Rogen and Sarah Silverman.

ANITA LEE (Producer) is a producer at the National Film Board of Canada. Since joining the NFB in 2005, she has produced a slate of award-winning films, including *The Bodybuilder and I* (winner of Best Canadian Documentary Feature, Hot Docs 2007, and Best Canadian Feature Documentary, Atlantic Film Festival 2007), *FLicKeR* (winner of the Jury Prize for Best Canadian Feature Documentary, Hot Docs 2008, and the Prize for Best Film: Films on Art, Era New Horizons International Film Festival 2009, and nominated for the 2009 Best Arts Documentary Gemini), and *Tiger Spirit* (Gemini winner of the 2009 Donald Brittain Award). She also co-produced Deepa Mehta's dramatic feature *Heaven on Earth* (TIFF world premiere 2008, selected for Canada's Top Ten 2008). Lee has also been a lead producer of interactive projects at the NFB such as *Late Fragment*, an interactive dramatic feature (TIFF world premiere 2007, SXSW 2008) co-produced with the CFC New Media Lab. Lee recently completed *Act of Dishonour*, a dramatic feature by Nelofer Pazira, produced with Danny Iron and theatrically distributed by E1. Previous to joining the NFB, Lee was an independent producer of critically acclaimed films that screened at major festivals such as TIFF, Sundance, Berlin

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and Pusan, including *Proteus* by John Greyson (TIFF world premiere 2003, Berlin 2004). In 1997, she founded the Toronto Reel Asian International Film Festival and continues to serve on their Advisory Board. Her recent projects include Elle Flanders and Tamira Sawatzky's film installation *Road Movie* (TIFF and Berlin 2011), Maya Gallus's *The Mystery of Mazo de la Roche* (Golden Sheaf Award: Documentary Social-Political, Yorkton Film Festival 2012) and the dramatic feature *Home Again* by Sudz Sutherland.

SILVA BASMAJIAN (Executive Producer) has produced more than 80 NFB films that have garnered numerous awards and been screened at more than 200 international festivals including Berlin, Hot Docs, IDFA and Sundance. As Executive Producer of the NFB Ontario Centre, Ms. Basmajian oversees English-language production. Since her appointment in 2004, she has championed cutting-edge projects like the groundbreaking NFB Filmmaker-in-Residence project at St. Michael's Hospital, the award-winning mobile series *Shorts in Motion* in co-production with marbledmedia, and North America's first interactive dramatic feature film, *Late Fragment*, co-produced with the Canadian Film Centre. She continues to champion projects that re-define documentary, such as the award-winning and ongoing HIGHRISE, a multi-year, multi-media, collaborative documentary project about the human experience in global vertical suburbs. Recently, Ms. Basmajian co-produced the critically acclaimed and International Emmy-winning *Life with Murder*. She is also the executive producer of *Surviving Progress, Paris 1919* and *Examined Life*, as well as the 2009 Hot Docs award winners *Waterlife* and *Invisible City*.

MIKE MUNN (Editor) is a graduate of the film program at Ryerson University (Toronto) and began his career editing films for Toronto New Wave directors Bruce McDonald (*Roadkill*), Peter Mettler (*Tectonic Plates, Picture of Light*) and Srinivas Krishna (*Masala, Lulu*). Over the past several years, Mike has edited features for directors such as John Greyson (*Law of Enclosures*), Richard Kwietniowski (*Owning Mahowny*), Daniel McIvor (*Past Perfect, Wilby Wonderful*) and Bruce McCulloch (*Comeback Season*). In addition to dramatic features, Mike has worked on several documentaries, including the award-winning feature docs *Metal: A Headbanger's Journey* and *Rush: Beyond the Lighted Stage*, directed by Sam Dunn and Scot McFadyen. **Stories We Tell** is Mike's second collaboration with Sarah Polley; he also edited "The Harp," an episode of *The Shields Stories* series that was directed by Polley.

IRIS NG (Director of Cinematography) is a freelance cinematographer with a background in fine arts and a BFA in Film and Video Production at York University. Iris has been collaborating with filmmakers and artists for over a decade on a variety of narrative, art, and documentary films that have taken her to dynamic locations in Asia, Africa, Europe, and across North America, in addition to working on commercials, music videos, and series television. Her credits include Morgan Spurlock's *Committed: The Toronto International Film Festival*, Angad Singh Bhalla's *Herman's House*, Rama Rau's *The Market*, Min Sook Lee's *My Toxic Baby* and international art installation projects by Luis Jacob and Chris Curreri.

LEA CARLSON (Production Designer) is an award-winning costume designer and production designer whose talents have enriched many Canadian independent film productions. Most recently, she designed costumes for Sarah Polley's *Take This Waltz*,

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which screened at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival. Her work includes several projects with Bruce McDonald: *Picture Claire* (costume design, 2001), *The Tracy Fragments* (costume design, 2007), *Pontypool* (production design, 2008) and *This Movie Is Broken* (production and costume design, 2010). Carlson also costume designed Don McKellar's feature *Last Night* (1998). She has just completed the first season of *Michael, Tuesdays and Thursdays*, a new series for the CBC directed by Don McKellar, Patricia Rozema and Alison Maclean, and the feature film *Cottage Country*, directed by Peter Wellington. She is a four-time Gemini nominee, for her work in *Twitch City* (1995 and 1996 seasons), directed by Bruce McDonald, *Heyday!* (2006), directed by Gordon Pinsent, and *Slings & Arrows* (2003), directed by Peter Wellington. She was also a Dora Mavor Moore award nominee for the production *Claudius* (1993), directed by Ken Gass. Carlson is the first film costume designer to receive the Virginia and Myrtle Cooper Award, an honour previously only given to theatre designers.

SARAH ARMSTRONG (Costume Designer) is a Toronto-based costume and installation designer. Her work focuses on textiles and the way in which they can contribute to the telling of a story. Whether designing a character and projecting personality through the wardrobe of that character, or filling a space with various textiles to project light, sound and images to tell a narrative, Sarah is continuing to explore and develop new uses for fabric and textiles.

Sarah studied theatre design at York University in Toronto. From there she continued her training in Vancouver, and then returned to Toronto to develop her skills as a costume designer for film and television, theatre, opera and performance/installation art. She has worked in Canada and the US and has also studied and worked as a dyer and breakdown artist. Her work has appeared on stages across Canada and in New York.

Sarah has been nominated for several prestigious awards. She is a four-time nominee for a Dora Mavor Moore Award and won once for Costume Design. She has also been nominated for a Genie Award for Costume Design and has twice been nominated for the Virginia and Myrtle Cooper Award in Costume Design.

Sarah continues to live and work in Toronto and is now pursuing various projects, in particular collaboration with performance artists such as Tanya Mars, Jess Dobkin and Istvan Kantor. Her passion for textiles is leading her to explore methods of using them to create space and narratives that make a greater impact.

Short Credits

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **SARAH POLLEY**
PRODUCED BY **ANITA LEE**
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER **SILVA BASMAJIAN**
EDITOR **MICHAEL MUNN**
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **IRIS NG**
PRODUCTION DESIGNER **LEA CARLSON**

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COSTUME DESIGNER **SARAH ARMSTRONG**
SOUND RECORDIST **SANJAY MEHTA**
MUSIC ARRANGED BY **JONATHAN GOLDSMITH**
CASTING BY **JOHN BUCHAN C.S.A. & JASON KNIGHT C.S.A.**
NARRATION BY **MICHAEL POLLEY**

FILM CLIPS

Anna Christie
Directed by Clarence Brown, © 1930 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer

Marriage Italian Style
Directed by Vittorio De Sica, © 1964 Films Concordia & C C Champion

Alias Grace
Written by Margaret Atwood, © 1996 by O.W. Toad Ltd.
Published in Canada by McClelland and Stewart Inc.
Published in the US by Talese Books, Doubleday/Random House

MUSIC

"Tranquility"
Composed and recorded by Abraham Lass from PLAY ME A MOVIE (Folkways Records/AH 3856)
Courtesy of TRF Production Music Libraries and Alpha Music Inc. and Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.
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"Skinny Love"
Written by: Justin Deyarmond Edison Vernon
Performed by Bon Iver
Courtesy of Jagjaguwar
100% obo Justin Deyarmond Edison Vernon
c/o April Base Publishing (ASCAP)
Administered by Kobalt Music Publishing America, Inc.

"Horses! Horses! Horses!"
Composed and recorded by Abraham Lass from PLAY ME A MOVIE (Folkways Records/AH 3856)
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"Dancing"
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"Tender, Sentimental Love"

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"A Funeral Procession"

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"The Light Fantastic Toe"

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"The Gay 90s"

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"Out Into the Storm"

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"Storm at Sea"

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"Demon Host"

Written by Taylor Kirk (SOCAN)

Performed by Timber Timbre

Courtesy of Arts & Crafts Productions

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"An Eighteenth Century Formal Ball"

Composed and recorded by Abraham Lass from PLAY ME A MOVIE (Folkways Records/AH 3856)

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"Ain't Misbehavin'"

Written by Thomas "Fats" Waller, Harry Brooks and Andy Razaf

Performed by Paul Weston and Jo Stafford

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About the NFB

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