

What's the

BY LUCY FERRISS

story?

A NATIVE AMERICAN STORYTELLER ONCE URGED ME TO TRY THIS EXPERIMENT. FIND A CHILD WATCHING CARTOONS ON TELEVISION. ASK THAT CHILD IF SHE WOULD LIKE YOU TO READ HER A STORY. SHE WILL IMMEDIATELY TURN AWAY FROM THE TV TO LISTEN. THEN FIND A CHILD LISTENING TO A BOOK BEING READ ALOUD, OR PAGING THROUGH A PICTURE BOOK, AND ASK THAT CHILD IF HE WOULD LIKE YOU TO TELL HIM A STORY. HE WILL PUT DOWN THE BOOK (AND TURN AWAY FROM THE TV, TOO, IF YOU WANT TO STICK WITH THAT LEVEL OF THE EXPERIMENT) TO LISTEN TO WHAT COMES OUT OF YOUR HEAD.

For several generations — not all that long in terms of human history, but far past our grandparents' recollection — we in the industrialized world have been a culture in thrall to books and the printed word. Literacy has been the basic goal of elementary schooling, remedial schooling and schooling for immigrant populations. Walls of built-in bookshelves have been a mark of prestige.

Then came, in turn, the radio, the moving picture, television, the videotape and DVD, the Internet, AIM, blogging, YouTube. With each of these inventions, the Death of the Book has been declared, and even the Death of Reading. Despite robust statistics from book publishers and vendors (isn't Amazon the most successful Internet business ever?), the common wisdom remains that book reading is imperiled, and that this dearth imperils our culture as a whole.

What we mean, I think, when we discuss this peril, is not a general tendency to download recipes, get instructions on DVD, or imbibe *General Hospital* rather than *People* magazine, but rather a shift away from text-based literary work. We are not, as a literate society, reading as many books of poems and stories, including literary novels, as we once did. "I need to read more," we say, as if we are lacking in virtue or letting the group down.

And how many times have you heard someone say, "That book was okay, but it's not as good as the movie?" Almost never, I suspect, because we continue to believe something precious and irreplaceable lies within the pages of a literary book, and that thing is getting sold down the river.

Well, I am here to tell you, folks, not to worry your book-loving heads. Our hunger for stories and verse is huge, insatiable and polymorphic in its taste. Long before the invention of paper, a man now considered one of the world's greatest "writers" sang his epic narratives of war and wandering to his rapt audiences. That's right: sang. Ancient Greek, Homer's tongue, was a language of pitches and rhythms, of staccatos and sostenutos, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were oral performances that scribes set down years after their first invention. Still, they contain the two basic plots of literature: either someone leaves home on a journey (Odysseus) or a stranger comes to town (Helen).

Back then, and for a very long time, we didn't have Barnes & Noble categories. History was fiction and fiction history; poetry was stories, and stories recited as poetry; autobiography (St. Augustine) was religious manifesto, and philosophy (Plato) was dramatic dialogue. Good thing they didn't have to worry about those signs on bookshelves.

Then along came Gutenberg, and suddenly — well, in the course of a few centuries — everyone in the Western world, at least, wants to be literate. Reading and writing become the great tools of democracy. No longer must we rely on those who have memorized the great epics, or on the scribes in the monasteries who decide what to set down and what it all means. We can all write and we can all read, and what's more, we can do it in that most revered of Western conditions, as individuals.

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THAT MAKES THE GOOD BOOK,"
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We feel we have discovered or invented a precious, even ennobling form of communication, and indeed we have.

Nothing, as any reader can attest, matches the experience of immersing oneself in the pages of a book or even a long magazine article; nothing reproduces the experience of one active mind — the reader — silently encountering another in the writer's words. The general failure of recent experiments in what is called hypertext highlights the unique quality of reading. Since hypertext, like an Internet search, calls on the reader to choose among various branches, links and further branches in a narrative, the role of the writer shrivels to a series of clever stunts, and most readers lose interest.



Separate Ways, Lisa Leary, Florence, MA, 14" x 15.5", gouache on paper, 1988

Yet here we are, devoted to the printed page, and feeling threatened. Recently I was asked to comment, with others, on the latest trend in non-traditional narrative, blogging. Interestingly, none of the commentators rejoiced in the form. Why not? The web log follows the tradition of a captain's log, written in the moment but with a clear eye to the accounting made later of the journey's vicissitudes. It suggests an eye turned and an ear tuned outward — not a diary or private letters, but a response to the world in which the log-maker moves and which it is her duty to record. Moreover, it gives blog-readers a chance unavailable to readers of the printed page to respond publicly, to join the conversation.

The problem, I suspect, is that we devotees of reading do not *want* conversation, not within the same space as the reading experience. It becomes noise; we cannot think. We can no longer, as the English wit Sydney Smith advised, "live always in the best company when we read."

Yet let us return to my Native American friend's experiment. What does the youngster want? To be entertained, yes. A private moment with a book, maybe. But most of all, story. That urge, to give and to receive story, remains unmitigated throughout human history. Cultures form themselves around stories. Children learn through stories. Adults reassure and challenge themselves through stories. Hypertext fails because it is not story so much as game. But reality shows, cast as games, are stories. YouTube is stories. *24*, however loathsome its premise, is a story.

Lucy Ferriss is the author of eight books, including Unveiling the Prophet: The Misadventures of a Reluctant Debutante (U. Missouri, 2005). Her essays have appeared in the New York Times and elsewhere. She is writer-in-residence at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut.

It is possible that an era existed in which the desire for story so coincided with the cultural need for individual creation and individual contemplation that reading literature (and here I include not just novels and poetry but memoirs, histories, biographies, political manifestos — everything "writerly") became the quintessential narrative experience.

It is possible that this era is coming to an end. Story, however, will go on. And possibly — even probably — the need for individual creation and contemplation will be met, though by other means. The explosion in memoir, for instance, is much maligned, but memoir has flowered in book form even as it transfers poorly to stage and screen. Perhaps an individual's grasp of his own life is best conveyed in words on the page.

In another example, educators talk about the coming generation's "graphic literacy," young people's ability to read into and beyond images with more acuity than their elders, and not surprisingly the graphic novel is burgeoning. Even yoga, that ancient and silent series of postures in which one's body creates its own lyric shape, may give its practitioners the same contemplative satisfaction as curling up with a book.

"Turn on the TV show," says the child. Or even better, "Read me that book." And best: "Tell me! Tell me the story!" We will continue to tell, by one means or another. We will continue to listen — with our ears, our eyes, our hearts and minds. Fear not. ■



MARTHA LYON
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE, LLC
313 Elm Street - Northampton, MA 01060 - 413-586-4178

design - historic preservation - planning
PARKS - WATERFRONTS - COMMONS
CEMETERIES - HISTORY MUSEUMS

All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.