

# *Stories that Changed the World*

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Mary Kay Jennings



Freiburg | Los Angeles

# **Stories that Changed the World**

— An Imprint of —



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**Mary Kay Jennings**

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## Introduction

The idea of the “story” often conjures up the kinds of tales we encountered as children, ones that swept us away to different times and places, took us on adventures we could never have experienced under the protection of our families. And this may well illustrate the power of the story at its most fundamental level—to transport us out of ourselves, offer us experiences that we may otherwise never have, and allow us to empathize with the characters that have them.

Still, the act of storytelling is more complicated than it first appears. For example, in studying *the humanities*, we will encounter “stories” in many forms: in the visual arts (painting, sculpture, ornamentation), the performing arts (drama and dance), music, literature (stories both oral and written), religion, philosophy, and history. All fall under the umbrella term, *the humanities*, and all have a “story” to tell. Storytelling may be the most powerful attribute we humans possess. The ability to tell stories may be responsible for our domination of the planet Earth and our capacity to learn and pass on information from one generation to another; it may even hold the key to our survival as a species. In essence, our ability to tell stories may have been what made us “human” in the first place and what has enabled us to participate in a story told on the grandest scale: The Human Story.

The Human Story began perhaps six million years ago before our species even evolved into the creatures we are today. Since then, our storytelling ability has played a powerful role in the development of our world civilizations, in our tragedies, and in our successes. It has empowered us to build great monuments like the pyramids in Egypt over 4000 years ago and space contraptions that allowed us to walk on the moon. But it has

also enabled us to manufacture bombs—the atomic bomb and its cousin, the hydrogen bomb—that could annihilate mankind if put in the wrong hands. Storytelling carries with it tremendous responsibilities along with potential dangers if misused. In the wrong hands of greedy leaders, corporations, or technocrats, we could see our freedoms, our independent thought processes, and perhaps our continued ability to function as human beings disappear.

Which stories will we choose to tell in this century and beyond? Which stories will we choose to believe? What will be the consequences of our choices? Recognizing that stories can empower or corrupt, these are some of the questions we will entertain in our study of *Stories that Changed the World*. Unless we acknowledge the importance of storytelling, recognize the power it can exert on us as human beings, and assess the motives behind the stories we tell and are told, we become storytelling's victims, our brains given over to men or machines that will do our thinking for us.

## Part I: Becoming Human

The following is a “story” of how our species became human. It is derived from recent studies by scientists who investigate how neurons and electrical impulses in our brains connect to form patterns. This “story” is exclusively mine though I will give credit to the scientists who have contributed evidence used to formulate this story.

**Stories are hardwired.** First, we seem “hardwired” to tell stories. Evolutionary biologists have hypothesized this idea. They propose that we humans are bombarded with so much sensory information coming into our brains via our senses (seeing, smelling, touching, tasting, feeling) that we can process only a fragment of it. The initial act of storytelling (telling a story to ourselves) enables us to “connect the dots” and makes the world and our place in it more coherent. According to Michael Gazzaniga, neuroscientist and author of *Cognitive Science: The Biology of the Mind* (2014), *coherence* in the story we tell is more important than its truth because coherence produces a pattern and provides a structure for our experience; it gives our story a beginning, a middle, and an end. Thus, our brains assemble and “confabulate” a narrative to help us make sense of our experience. (“Confabulate”—tell a story—is a word that both Gazzaniga and another famous scientist, Edward O. Wilson use to explain the process by which our brains transform raw sensory data into useful patterns.)

Gazzaniga explains this process in some detail in his textbook. Having made numerous studies of the brain’s right and left hemispheres, he points out the different function of each sphere. The right hemisphere, he says, has a narrow awareness of the world and acts as a monitor, gathering

information in a mostly unconscious way and storing it in millions of microscopic physical systems. The left hemisphere acts as the “Interpreter” (Gazzaniga’s term), gathering “thousands of bits of information from all over the cortex,” organizing them into a cause-effect scenario, a “ ‘makes-sense’ narrative, our personal story” (620). The left hemisphere creates the narrative, rationalizes irrational behavior, forms beliefs, and creates goals. The left hemisphere gathers information, organizes it into a coherent story within our environment, and creates the narrative of our lives. Also, according to Gazzaniga our minds often invent events that never happened and people who don’t exist just to “hold the narrative together.”

In addition, Jason Gots, an economist and neuroscience researcher, explains in an article entitled “Your Storytelling Brain,” that storytelling is “essential to our survival” in that it enables us to “make sense of our own past experiences” and “explore possible future realities” crucial in decision-making. In other words, we imagine several future possibilities, weigh them against memories of our past experiences, and pick one that seems best. We humans confabulate; we fill gaps of memory with plausible inventions in order to preserve continuity. Evolution seems to have hard-wired our brains for storytelling because it has helped us survive. We are not stronger or faster than other species; we don’t have special sensory skills. But storytelling enables us to form memories and project future outcomes. And it forms the basis for our consciousness and makes us self-aware. And all this occurred, I am guessing, either shortly before *Homo sapiens* gained language or at approximately the same time. Perhaps our ability to tell ourselves stories was the impetus to share those stories with others.