

*Storytelling*  
in the  
21<sup>st</sup> Century

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Mary Kay Jennings

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# ShortWorks Humanities Issue

## Editor's Note

The health and survival of a democratic society inevitably resides in a fully-informed and educated electorate. It is natural, then, that countries that identify with this form of government should also have a healthy and open discussion about what education means, in theory, and more importantly, in practice; the future of a democratic country depends on such fundamental issues. In the United States, the recent discussions regarding education tend to focus heavily on the practical ends of education, such as producing a strong workforce. But if we only focus on the ends, that is, teaching a trade, rather than teaching a method of learning, then we are only doing half the job.

Mary Kay Jennings takes a unique view on this discussion, and in order to do so, she begins far back in our human evolution with the earliest information we have on *Storytelling*. We discover that storytelling has more to do with our education, and perhaps even our future survival as a species, than we previously knew. From the earliest traces of human development up to the modern era, Mary Kay Jennings reveals the powerful role storytelling has played in the development of our world civilizations, our successes and our tragedies, and the potential danger of its misuse by leaders, as well as corporations, to ultimately limit our freedoms and rights. By the end of her argument, it becomes clear that our concern should perhaps not be whether we have enough computer programmers, but rather, if we can understand, and then pass on to future generations, the unfolding story of our human character.

# **Storytelling in the 21st Century**

Mary Kay Jennings

We are fifteen years into the twenty-first century and it's time to take stock of how we, members of the human race, are defining this remarkable sliver of time. Technologically ushered in by Google and Apple and bombarded by bytes of information so profuse and dense that individuals are at a loss as to what to process and how, the meaning of the "century" as a time marker mutates as the human life-span is projected to pass the centenarian mark. When we survey centuries past, we observe that the speed of change leaps forward with each major technological development, far surpassing the pace of evolution. In twenty-first century's pubescence, we find ourselves immersed in the technological revolution, catapulted into a century that seeks, among other advances, artificial intelligence, Google's ultimate goal. The concept sounds alarms to minds as nimble as that of Stephen Hawking who told the BBC in December 2014 that the "development of full artificial intelligence could spell the end of the human race." In a world that actively seeks and may well develop "full artificial intelligence" in this century, what's a human being to do? Re-acquaint ourselves with storytelling, I say. Science itself has recently suggested that storytelling is integral to every human endeavor. Unless we acknowledge the art and science behind storytelling, recognize the enormous power it exerts on human beings, and assess the motives behind the stories we are told, we become storytelling's victims, our brains given over to men or machines that will do our thinking for us. We will lose both our individuality *and* our humanity—without any help from AI.



# Storytelling

First let me clarify what I mean by “Storytelling.” Because of revelations about storytelling from recent scientific studies, MRI results, and speculations of evolutionary biologists I am guessing that every human being who has ever lived since the ascendancy of *Homo sapiens* has at least one story. Out of curiosity, I searched the internet to discover how many human beings have lived on this planet and surprisingly found a number: 108 billion, a blog attached to *Discover Magazine* said, citing the “Population Reference Bureau” as its source with 50,000 B.C. as the starting point. Approximately 108 billion individuals have “lived” and “imagined” their own stories with many telling other “stories” in the form of visual arts (painting, drawing, sculpture), performing arts (music, drama, dance), oral and written literature, philosophy, architecture, history.

Two books that couldn't be more different from each other influenced the evolution of my ideas about storytelling and its importance. The first I encountered as a graduate student at Rice University: Raymond Williams' *Marxism and Literature* (1977), a highly specialized, dense work of literary criticism. I took away what was to me a unique idea at the time (though I had read earlier T. S. Eliot's “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” it did not resonate in the way Williams' book of Marxist criticism did): the concept of a literary time-line going backward into the past toward prehistory and forward toward a future that had yet to unfold. On that time-line was William Faulkner whose selected works we were studying from different critical stances. The whole idea that Faulkner's literary works were in one sense a “product” of all works that preceded him, and in turn joined the throngs of

other literary works to become the impetus for future writers was for me both an epiphany and a comfort. I felt connected as a human being, not just to my contemporaries, but to the great minds of those who died before I was born. I longed to belong to that group. And then somewhere along the line I read *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility* (1986) by James P. Carse, now Professor Emeritus at New York University. These slim volumes made me see storytelling in a new light. The best stories, I realized, are not told as an end in themselves (to sell copies, make money, get recognition)—but as part of an infinite story that is meant to enable the conversation to continue. The best stories are part of a larger story, perhaps one that will never end. We live them, we write, perform, sculpt, and compose them in order to keep the story going.



# The Science of Storytelling

What, then, is this “scientific evidence” that supports the assumption that storytelling is an essential part of our humanity, occupies the bulk of both our conscious and unconscious mental activity, and continues to have such a profound effect on both individual and group behavior?

**Evolution.** If storytelling is an endeavor that binds together all humans throughout time, what value, what edge has this storytelling ability given to us humans? How has this penchant for tales endowed or privileged the human species? In a blog feature entitled “Your Storytelling Brain,” Jason Gots highlights the research of Michael Gazzaniga, cognitive neuroscientist and pioneer in the study of split-brain research. Gazzaniga maintains that storytelling is “essential to our survival”: it gives coherence to our lives, helps us make sense of the plethora of sensory data we encounter daily, assists us in finding our bearings in a chaotic world. Storytelling enables us to “make sense of our own past experiences” and explore “possible future realities” crucial for our survival and domination of the planet. Narrative is also a basic organizing principle of memory, according to Gazzaniga. And in this sense, it seems, accuracy is not the important factor; coherence is. Consequently our minds invent events that never happened and people who don’t exist just to “hold the narrative together.” We humans confabulate; we fill gaps of memory with plausible inventions in order to preserve continuity. Quite simply, evolution has hard-wired our brains for storytelling. On the most basic levels, storytelling may explain our shared evolved human psyche and

offer us a structure (beginning, middle, end) we can count on and trust.



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