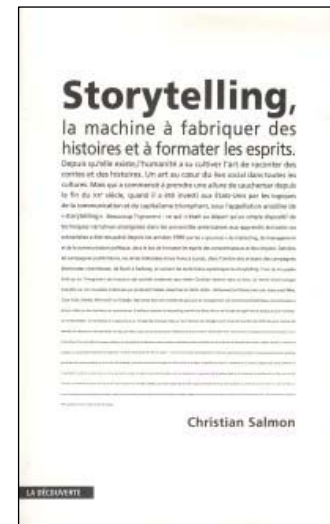


## Book reviews

Reviewer	<a href="#">George Simons</a> , SIETAR member
Review	August 2008
Author	Christian Salmon
Title	Storytelling, la machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits.
Publisher	La Découverte, Paris
Details	Published 2007 ISBN-978 2 7071 4955 8



In English the title of this book is (my translation), *Storytelling, the engine for manufacturing stories and shaping minds*. Unfortunately the book doesn't exist in English but I am compelled to tell you about it, nonetheless. I stumbled upon it during serendipitous moments at the FNAC in Cannes and have been unable to keep it out of my mind ever since. If there is something akin to a personal paradigm shift, this book has provided one for me.

Some years ago I discovered what I felt was the best yet definition of what culture is and how it functions in, of all places, a children's book, *Crow and Weasel*, by Barry Lopez:

“The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And, learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves.”

Culture is created and maintained by storytelling. *Grosso modo* it largely consist in the stories told to us in our various cohorts and the stories we learn to tell ourselves about how to survive and succeed in the environments in which we live, operate and cooperate. I found Lopez' definition far more human than the many attempts to scientifically define culture and, from a linguistic and cognitive perspective at least, plainly descriptive of how culture works. Many years earlier I remember being enchanted by the closing line of a Hasidic parable that Elie Wiesel used to preface his novel, *The Gates of the Forest*--“God made man because He loves stories.” The line took abode in my heart, but I didn't know what to do with it.

Nonetheless the whole story of storytelling didn't fully penetrate my consciousness until the present reading, which walks me through the full impact of storytelling management in the contemporary world. The author starts with an analysis of the function of storytelling in the commercial context, describing the evolution of branding from brand names and logos to the brand story—the myth created to compel consumers to buy as well as the damage control stories which need to be manufactured on the spot when a Bhopal occurs or when Nike is discovered exploiting child labor.

Gathering, shaping, and retelling stories is now the big business of big business and the history of the creation of storytelling management is well documented in the second chapter of the book.

If it ended there, we might have a chuckle at the extreme efforts made by marketers to encourage us to part with a few of our hard earned coins, however this is just the beginning. Salmon goes on to address the role of the story in creating “fictional economy,” everything from the Indian call center inmates whose bodies may be in Chennai but whose souls and identities live in Los Angeles and elsewhere. Here the French says it best; they are “*émigrés sur place*,” those who emigrate without leaving the spot they are standing on. These are the thousands who now live, work, think and speak as well as eat and sleep other cultural stories, and whose formation must therefore include the immersion in them, including the horror of daytime television and weather reports of their “destination” country.

Corporate policy now demands propagation via storytelling. Fictions of endless change make commercial layoffs and selloffs palatable supposedly even to the victims of bottom line maneuvering.

One need not look further than Enron for evidence of the fictional economy. There will also perhaps come a moment when the fictions of the current US economic structure will be laid bare—though we hope and pray for steps that will rectify it. The influence of stories on the stock market is also an indicative phenomenon. In fact the world economy is largely decided by casino type entities whose bets are played to the moods generated by endlessly fabricated stories.

It gets worse when we move from the fictions of Renault and General Motors to the world of politics, where it has become clear particularly in these pre-election days that “the key to the US presidency in postmodern times is the ability to direct or fabricate public opinion.” We live in the time of the “Greatest Story Ever Sold.” The issues are irrelevant; the story is what counts. When a story collapses, e.g., WMD, it needs to be repeated until it is part of perceived reality and other stories are generated to rescue or replace it.

The term “war stories” used to describe tales of experience. Today the military industrial complex has been transformed into a “military entertainment complex,” where stories are acted out in virtual reality as a normal part of training for the military and online battle games are downloadable as a recruitment strategy. The established partnership of the Pentagon with Madison Avenue and Hollywood has produced and are now in control of the “arms of massive distraction.” As Steve O’Hagen, journalist for the *Guardian* noted, we are faced with the largest militarization of an adolescent population since the *Hitler-Jugend*. While we protest the use of child soldiers as a human rights violation, little attention is paid to the free market promotion of the fun of killing in our own children’s bedrooms. Unlike the military industrial complex of the Cold War Era, the military entertainment complex is largely invisible, penetrating daily life everywhere.

The Story Drive Engine and training simulations developed by Paramount Digital Entertainment for the DOD training agency are meant to prepare commanders and troops for decision making on distant battlefields. Unnoticed seemingly is the existence of real people on the ground. Not too long ago a Norwegian tank commander who was being trained in simulated cavalry battles remarked to me, “...the world is quite different when you can open the hatch and stick your head out.”

No need to return to the battlefield to re-experience the scene of the trauma. Simulations of this sort can even be used to treat Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome in military hospitals.

The use of the story to hijack our reality is perhaps no more significantly stated than by the author's reminder that US Supreme Court justice Scalia used fiction to defend the use of torture. Rather than citing legal theory or precedent, Scalia argued from the behavior of Kiefer Sutherland as Jack Bauer in the TV series *24* using torture to save California from terrorists. Scalia, though sworn to uphold the US Constitution and should know better, is not alone appropriating fiction to promote human rights violations in reality. The use of torture in Bauer's story lines has become an inspiration for CIA interrogators. Is the lack of public outrage due to the fact that the US public sees these things as only fiction or due to the fact that they don't?

Finally the author brings it all home to France by a look at how taking a story line à la George Bush contributed to the political success of Nicholas Sarkozy. While perhaps largely propagated in the USA, storytelling has a longer pedigree as well as a market wherever.

Stories may be the antidote to other stories in some cases, and the emergence of alternative media such as internet blogs may be the battle field of stories, but the author in his closing words chooses *fuzziness, not paying attention*, as the strategy of choice. Quoting cineaste Lars von Trier, Salmon asserts, "The ultimate challenge of the future is to see without looking, to 'unfocus'! In a world where the media prostrates itself before the altar of clarity and in doing so empties the life out of all of every part of life, the person who is able to NOT PAY ATTENTION will be the communicator of our era—nothing more, nothing less!"

For those who don't read French and would like to see a part of the book's text in English, here is an article that was included in the book: "Scheherazade in the White House: How George Bush's wartime administration used a magician, Hollywood designers and Karl Rove telling 1,001 stories to sell the invasion of Iraq." <http://mondediplo.com/2008/01/04scheherazade>.

In addition French listeners can hear 3 short video clips of the author addressing story issues at: [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3h4ta\\_christian-salmon-13\\_creation](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x3h4ta_christian-salmon-13_creation).

In conclusion, as I am reviewing primarily for my fellow interculturalists, I strongly suggest that we look at how the storytelling phenomenon is both based in our culture and has the capacity to teach us something very valuable about how culture is now created and transmitted. There is more to come as we look at *Homo Sapiens 2.0*, the next book which has already come off my shelf which raised the question of cultural equivalents of the genes that determine our biology. Tune in again. Coming soon.