

# THE SAWYER

## Telling Stories

● Beth Pocock  
Assistant Director

Humans have been telling stories since Cro-Magnon men figured out how to paint stick figures on the walls of caves. Media technologies have come a long way since cave painting, but the power of a good story remains exactly the same. One summer my mother read the story *Hitty: The First Hundred Years* out loud to my sisters and me. We were spending that summer at a cabin in Idaho that had no electricity, so we listened to her while we crowded onto a log bed with only a single candle for light. The story of Hitty is about a doll of great charm and character. When I remember that story, I can immediately relive the chill I felt when the crows attacked Hitty and carried her up to their nest. I hid behind my sisters so the crows would not find me.

Recently, I watched my very young niece listen to this same story on her mother's iPad. As the lovely British narrator read the crow episode, I watched her shiver with the same dread that I experienced. Whether candlelight or iPad, a good story is able to leapfrog the technology and create the experience in our brains. Communication theorist, Dr Pamela Rutledge, describes this ability as a story's power to make a "Direct Hit" to the brain. Neuroscientists have found that when a good story is told, the brain activity of the listener dovetails with that of the storyteller. The story creates a direct connection between speaker and listener and they actually experience the same brain patterns – regardless of the medium.

This power is the theme of our fall newsletter as various staff members recount their own thoughts concerning the ways a story can help us develop character, envision the future, relive the past and travel the world.

As you read along, you may remember stories that have had a powerful effect on your life or the lives of those around you. If you would like to write a short paragraph about how a story changed your life, email it to me at [pocock@sawyerfreelibrary.org](mailto:pocock@sawyerfreelibrary.org). If you don't have email, just write it up and leave it at the front desk marked for "Beth". I would love to collect and share those stories with you on our Facebook page so we can shiver and grow and experience those stories together.

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# The Power of a Good Story

● Justine Vitale  
Children's Services

Sometimes, a story is so good that it can take you back in time and almost make you feel like you are there. The characters begin to feel like friends. Often, if the story is really good, it can make you feel so strongly for those new friends, it can be as if you are going through their trials with them.

While planning a children's book club, we wondered if modern kids would find a book about British child evacuees during World War 2 interesting. Would the story appeal to them? Would they understand a time so different from our own, lives so different than their own lives? Rationing, food & clothing shortages, evacuations, gas masks, Anderson shelters. Would they relate to kids with no iphones, internet, & video games? If the story is really good, can it draw modern children in enough to a time and a life so different from their own that they would enjoy the book? We wondered, and we found out. Yes, it sure can!

*The War That Saved My Life* by Kimberly Brubaker Bradley is indeed a story with that power! They loved every heartbreaking page! In fact they loved it so much that they immediately read the sequel, not able to wait to find out what happens to the beloved characters! They crafted ration books and dis-cussed what they would buy with their rations. They filled out ID tags to wear while they imagined being sent away from home & family to live with strangers. They looked at photos of kids just like them, hiding in underground back-yard shelters in case of bombings. They imagined them-selves going through what Ada and Jamie went through in the book. They felt for them.

Did the power of this good story make them realize that those children were not so different from themselves? Did the power of this good story cause them to empathize with the suffering of others? Yes, it sure did! The power of a good story can do that! It can make us leave our lives of relative ease for a while and step into the experience of another. Even modern kids, through a really good story, realize that those who experienced such things (some so awful it's almost hard to imagine) were and are just like them. An amazingly good story can do that.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FOR RATIONING:

How would you feel if you were the one that had to ration? What would you do?

What people did during World War II?

by Justine Vitale



# Immersive Storytelling in Gaming

● Lewis Parsons  
Technology Librarian

Do you go back in time to let your soulmate die and live with their memory, or do you refuse to let her be hurt again; and instead let a storm destroy your town causing untold damage? This is obviously something none of us have had to do, but it is a decision the teen protagonist of the 2015 adventure game *Life is Strange* has to make, and it is up to the player to make it.

Interactive storytelling and gaming, whether virtual or on a tabletop is rife with opportunities to truly experience characters, situations, and environments that while they are often fantastical; offer deep insights into our world and our lives. They require players to make big decisions and navigate moral and ethical grey areas that reflect real world situations of personal and societal impact. Some studies suggest gamers score higher than non-gamers on the



Davis Interpersonal Reactivity Index, a stand-out “test” of measuring empathy.

One reason games can have such a powerful impact is the length and depth of the experiences. Tabletop

role-playing campaigns can last months or years, and role-playing video games can last 40 hours or more; hours packed with dialogue choices, character development decisions, and professionally written plot and narrative. A gamer can feel a connection to a carefully crafted character on a deeply personal level.

While confronting these situations, game systems are designed to elicit strong reactions from players; the sense of control, development and freedom games provide heighten the thrill of victory, or the mixed emotions of a bittersweet ending. Gaming allows you to experience and create some of the most immersive storytelling experiences in media.

## Immerse Yourself in These Games



# Why We Love Dystopian Stories

● AnnaKatherine Amacker  
Community Librarian

Let's set a scene. An empty city street stands strewn with the detritus of what used to be human life – paper floats in the breeze, abandoned cars stand rusting with their doors open, glass glitters on the dirty sidewalk from the broken windows to looted storefronts. Our scrappy hero or weathered heroine, or perhaps a ragtag group looks cautiously for whatever they can scavenge, as they are ever wary of the menace that has torn apart their world. Be it plague or vampires or zombies or alien invaders, this is a scene that could fit into any post-apocalyptic dystopian book or film. But it's not always the end of the world; any dystopian fiction might just as easily feature that city as sleek, high tech, a place where everything seems right, except there's something very wrong. The question is "why do we love dystopian stories so much?"

From 1984 to *The Hunger Games* to *Oryx and Crake*, dystopian fiction has been a fixture in our literature for ages, and these stories are not only reflected in what we consume for pleasure but also in our religious texts and the fabric of our governing structures (see ABC's hit show "Designated Survivor," for example). These stories resonate with us so much that we continue to produce and consume them only to continue producing, consuming, and remaking them some more.

The first, and perhaps simplest, explanation may be that dystopia makes a good story. They're exciting, and most of them feature the journey of a hero or heroine that we can get behind. That hero or heroine just happens to be living their struggles in a dystopia, which provides ample space for tension and danger. These stories give us hope that humanity can get through these situations just as much as they give us someone and something to root for. We can get lost in them just as we might science fiction or fantasy or any other story that transports us from our ordinary lives.

Though, there's something much more satisfying about dystopian stories than mere entertainment value. For many, these stories give us a glimpse at every "worst

case scenario," whether real or imagined. And in a world where certainties such as climate change lead us to look towards uncertain futures, consuming dystopian stories can be cathartic or validating. We continue to invent and even reinvent dystopian stories not only because we want to be prepared for the uncertainties of the future but also because we want to find an escape from the reality of right now.

Dystopian stories aren't going anywhere.

**Dystopian Books to Get Lost In**

Expiration Day  
WILLIAM CAMPBELL POWELL

STATION ELEVEN  
A NOVEL  
EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL

INTRODUCTION BY MARTIN AMIS  
**THE DROWNED WORLD**  
A NOVEL  
J.G. BALLARD

THE PASSAGE  
JUSTIN CRONIN

An Unkindness of GHOSTS  
Rivers Solomon

Find even more online in our OverDrive and Hoopla Digital Collections

# Read Globally

● Alex Jones  
Customer Service Specialist

Read Globally. Check out a book or film by someone from a different place or culture. Read about a global issue or topic. Seek out new and diverse media. Something from far away. Something translated. Something different. It can change your thinking in many ways. Here are just a few:

## Gain New Perspective

By reading a story told by a new perspective, from another place, it gives us a better understanding of our place in the world. Author Terry Pratchett once said that the purpose of traveling is to “see the place you came from with new eyes and extra colors.” That applies to books, too. Not only will you have a better sense of our wider world, you’ll see home in a new way, too. Reading globally gives us perspective.

## Read Beyond Headlines

I skim headlines. It’s a bad habit, because it only gives me a sliver of any story. That’s where a good book comes in. Are you interested in what’s happening in Syria? Reading those headlines can be draining without teaching you much of anything. Instead, grab a book about it to get the real, human story. Reading globally gives us the whole story.

## Become a World Citizen

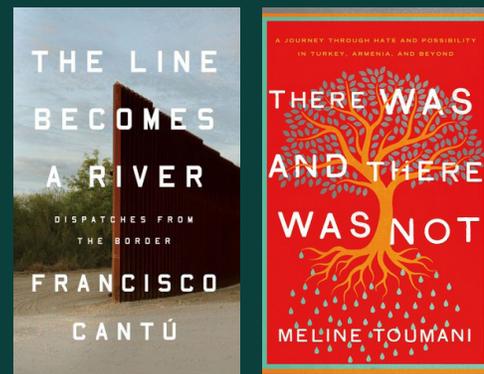
The great paradox of our time is how isolated and connected we are at the same time. We can speak to anyone in the world with an internet connection. At the same time, we can find a group of people who share our opinions and never venture outside of that bubble. By reading more broadly, we gain more things to talk about with more people. It builds a community in and of itself. Reading globally keeps us connected.

There are dozens of reasons to diversify what we read. The library has books from around the world, and we encourage you to explore them. Whether it’s a novel,

memoir, or a movie, gain a global perspective. I host the Global Forum Book Group here at the library for this reason (which anyone is welcome to attend!). We’re constantly exploring new possibilities ourselves, so keep an eye out for new global programs.



## Gain a New Perspective



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# The Library's Strategic Plan: A Story

● Deborah Kelsey  
Director

Every five years it falls on the Library Board of Trustees and the Director to write a Strategic Plan. It is a plan that maps out what will happen in and with the library going into the near future. The plan is more than just a collection of statistics, it is a story, and we, as human beings, are wired for story. The Sawyer Free Library is a really good story.

A colleague sent me an article from *The Atlantic* August 10, 2015 by Julie Beck : "Life Stories: How you arrange the plot points of your life into a narrative can shape who you are – and is a fundamental part of being human." Does this mean that each institution created by humans also has a narrative that shapes what it is and why it exists? Without a narrative arc – beginning, middle, and end – is the Sawyer Free Library in an existential crisis at this point in its existence? It is very lean, understaffed, aging physically, stuck....

We are at a turning point when it comes to programs, services, collections, facility – the old story versus the new story. We need to tell a new story of adaptation to a new world – context, changing technologies, and an evolving culture with programs and services that Gloucester needs and deserves.

In telling the story of the library – how it became the public library for Gloucester – what it is on the way to becoming as a result of the strategic planning process – the story itself becomes part of what the library is and will be. "Everyone has a book inside them," an old adage. It is literally and figuratively true of the library as well. In fact, all lives are incredibly complex, therefore the story of the library's life is really multitudes of stories – a whole library, so to speak. Or as Julie Beck said: "It's a Mobius strip: Stories are life, life is stories."

What are the developmental aspects of the library's self? As an actor within the community, what role does the library play? How does the library interact with the rest of the community? What are its traits? As an agent, what actions does it take to produce the desired outcomes?

And as an author, what ideas are bundled together with experiences from the past and present to form the narrative future self, i.e. the strategic plan?

What is distinct – unique – about Gloucester – the land and sea, history, arts and culture, people? The Lyceum was a sounding board for people like Emerson and Thoreau and helped usher us into the first industrial revolution.... The people of Gloucester are reflected in their fishermen's history and are brought home with books like *The Perfect Storm*.... Gloucester is a city with an amazingly diverse population with people at both ends of the economic spectrum.... How can the library bridge all of these pieces?

We have analyzed the statistics. We have talked to people across the many different aspects of the community that make up Gloucester. We have tried to capture and understand what really matters. How do we stay true to all that is valued, but reinterpret it in the context of today and tomorrow? The consequences of telling, rather than not telling the story, are the enriching conversations and deepening relationships stimulated by the storytelling. "There is redemption, a particularly American narrative," according to Dan P. McAdams in *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By 2006* – "atonement, emancipation, recovery, self-fulfillment, and upward social mobility" – of optimism provided by the endless possibilities of ideas, information, and opportunities offered by the public library.

Gloucester is a community of people who care. Highly generative people – people who are forward-looking and committed to helping future generations – remember individuals and institutions that helped them. They remember the library and its librarians providing opportunities and supporting them to discover, overcome, improve, and thrive. Telling the story of the library and the community is a way to understand both and envision our shared future. One naturally leads to the other. We are writing the story of our future together - the library and the community in partnership.