



UNDER *the* Umbrella

GETTING INTIMATE WITH A CROWD OF STRANGERS

Live storytelling is booming, offering new opportunities for nonfiction writers to hone their craft and connect with audiences. In this issue, **PAULA CARTER** explores the reasons behind the form's exploding popularity, and **GRAHAM SHELBY** reflects on lessons he learned while preparing for a turn in the spotlight at The Moth Mainstage.

PAULA CARTER

Tell Me a Story: Is This a Golden Age of Live Storytelling?

IT IS MONDAY NIGHT, but the upstairs room of the bar is packed. The lights are low, making it easier to see Bobby Biedrzycki, who is sitting on a stool, framed by a spotlight. He has an array of tattoos and earrings in both ears, and he is telling a true story about love—about a moment when he thought he had found the one and then thought better of it. He keeps using the refrain: “If you would’ve asked me what love was at that moment, I would’ve told you. ...”

The audience is silent. The story is wistful, about the many times Bobby

has felt he finally understood love, finally had a handle on it, only to find there was more to learn. People sip wine at tables in the glow of candlelight. If you would have asked us in that moment what love was, we would have told you it was listening to someone tell us a story.

As they file out after the show, a monthly event that is part of 2nd Story, a Chicago storytelling collective, members of the audience find their way to Bobby to tell him how much they liked the story or to relate their own tales of lost love. Bobby—who has been involved in the storytelling scene in Chicago for nearly a decade and who teaches a story and performance class at Columbia College—is beaming, in his element. When I speak to him later, he explains what motivates him to share intimate details of his life with a crowd of strangers.

“I came through a creative writing MFA program. I was used to sending a story off into the world. Sometimes it was published; sometimes it wasn’t,” Bobby says. “But that was kind of the end of the life of that story. When I did 2nd Story for the first time, there were ten people who wanted to engage. There was an interaction with the piece, an immediacy.”

It is this desire for connection—both for the teller and the audience—that many people cite as the reason live storytelling is booming.

And it is booming. The Moth—widely considered to be the originator of the current live, nonfiction storytelling movement—now has regular StorySLAMs in more than a dozen cities and tours all over the country with The Moth Mainstage, selling out venues of three thousand or more. But The Moth isn’t the only game in town. From it and

alongside it, hundreds of other shows have emerged in recent years. In cities like Chicago and New York, it's possible to find a live, nonfiction storytelling event almost any night of the week. There are themed shows, open mic nights, and shows specifically for new storytellers; shows that pit two storytellers against one another to battle it out; and shows that nurture performers through the process with development sessions and rehearsals.

Among the series making names for themselves is RISK!—motto: “where people tell true stories they never thought they’d dare to share in public.” Hosted by Kevin Allison, who made his name as a member of the short-lived but beloved MTV sketch-comedy show *The State*, this series originated in New York and has expanded to cities including Boston, Philadelphia, and L.A.; it also has a wildly popular podcast. *2nd Story*, in Chicago, is a more refined affair, with each event featuring, on average, four storytellers presenting pieces that have been honed and rehearsed. In Washington D.C., *Speakeasy Storytelling* offers live events, classes, and narrative consulting for companies. Smaller shows, like *Story Department* in Austin and *Ex Fabula* in Milwaukee, present equally magical nights, month after month, in bars, restaurants, and bookstores.

I asked Adam Wade, an eighteen-time *Moth StorySLAM* champion who has graced most of the storytelling stages in New York, why he thinks storytelling series have become so popular; he said simply, “People desire authenticity.” On stage, Wade has a meandering and hapless style that is endearing—and that is pretty much who he is offstage, too. “At first, I was nervous, so I was a caricature of myself,” he told me. “But after a while, I was able to peel back those layers. I realized the audience just wanted me to be me, and I was like, thank God.”

Like the narrative nonfiction essay, live stories reveal the truths of who we are. They air the unspoken, make fun of idiosyncrasies, and demonstrate our common humanity. Unlike at a comedy show, or even a theater production, audiences are asked to connect directly with the person on stage. Spectators fail and fall in love and overcome obstacles along



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with the storytellers. We see ourselves in the stories. We’ve been there. Because the tellers are mostly everyday people, and not professionals, the audience can even imagine getting up on stage. Stars—like Adam Wade—are starting to emerge in the genre, and certain performances are more successful than others, but really anyone can do it; everyone has a story to tell. Perhaps for this reason, a relatable, natural style prevails. For many storytellers, the goal is to make it feel as if you are sitting at a bar, telling a story to friends—it just happens to be one hundred friends.

Deanna Moffitt, who runs the Chicago-based consulting firm *Luminant Leadership*—tag line: “igniting your stories”—says, “We are hardwired for stories. And now because of this—” she points to her phone, “—it is just so rare that we sit down and share our stories. There is just so much coming at us all the time. So the moment it is happening and a story is well told, we want to stop and listen.”

We are hardwired for stories. Telling stories is the primary way we communicate and have communicated

for ... well, forever. Perhaps a sense that modern technology is leaving us feeling oddly unconnected is behind the current storytelling culture, but the resurgence has been building for decades.

A storytelling revival began in the 1970s with the *National Storytelling Festival* in Jonesborough, Tennessee. At that time, “storytelling” meant raconteurs relating American folktales or myths from around the world. The festival—which had about sixty attendees its first year and now hosts thousands of people—launched a generation of professional storytellers who traveled to schools and events to tell their stories and to teach the art of storytelling. According to longtime storyteller Beth Horner, in the 1990s storytelling began to shift and incorporate a wider variety of genres, from fiction to humor to personal narrative. Issues with copyrighted material and a desire to be unique inspired the shift.

Then, in the late 1990s, *The Moth* appeared in New York. George Dawes Green, founder of *The Moth*, grew up in Georgia; he says he started the show as

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an attempt to recreate summer evenings back home, sitting on the porch with friends telling tales. He wanted to move beyond formal storytelling and give people space to get up and share experiences from their lives.

The show's focus on true personal stories—and the way nonfiction storytelling has spread like wildfire—may be a sign of the times. With the onslaught of social media, the line between public and private has become less clear, and a willingness to share all manner of personal details online has paved the way for this resurgence of storytelling—people are ready to bare it all in public. And yet, the current zeitgeist is also a reaction against the airbrushed profiles so common to electronic media.

“We shape our stories online so either we are the hero or the victim,” says Deanna Moffitt. “I think we’re missing that middle ground. The struggle.”

Whatever it is, live nonfiction storytelling is hitting a nerve. Audiences are showing up all over the country, and even more are listening online,

looking to enjoy some real-life struggle vicariously—or, for that matter, to tell their own personal stories. As the scene continues to grow, it is becoming clear that this *is* a golden age of storytelling, and it is something to relish—maybe even to love.

PAULA CARTER is a Chicago-based freelance writer and is currently in love with all things storytelling. Her essays appear or are forthcoming in *The Southern Review*, *The Rumpus*, *The Kenyon Review*, and *Salon*. She holds an MFA in fiction from Indiana University.

GRAHAM SHELBY

What was my first line again?

PLEASE WELCOME . . . *Graham Shelby!*

The emcee gestures toward me, and the applause begins.

I don't normally get stage fright. Never have. I don't even entirely understand it. But this situation is a

little different: here I am, a guy from Kentucky, about to take the stage at The Players, a Manhattan club co-founded by Mark Twain in the 1880s. The room is full of New Yorkers, some of whom have paid as much as \$400 to hear me and four other tellers perform ten-minute stories

This is The Moth Mainstage, the flagship series for the Peabody and MacArthur award-winning nonprofit. My story will be recorded and maybe someday broadcast to the roughly one million weekly listeners of *The Moth Radio Hour*.

What was my first line again?

Live storytelling may be humankind's oldest art form, but that doesn't mean it's simple. If my Moth experience is any guide, storytelling still offers writers valuable lessons in craft and discipline, because to tell a live story well demands equal measures of courage and restraint, balance and abandon.

I should note that I may be new to The Moth, but I've been telling stories in front of live audiences for fifteen