

Telling our stories to others by telling them to ourselves

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, that well-known English poet and drug addict, describes the difficult process of telling a story to a reluctant listener like this:

*It is an ancient Mariner,
And he stoppeth one of three.
"By thy long grey beard and glittering eye,
Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?"*

*"The Bridegroom's doors are opened wide,
And I am next of kin;
The guests are met, the feast is set:
May'st hear the merry din."*

This guy is with his mates and they're off to a wedding party. The last thing he wants to do is listen to an old coot's sea shanty.

The old mariner tries to force the wedding guest to stop and listen.

*He holds him with his skinny hand,
"There was a ship," quoth he.
"Hold off! unhand me, grey-beard loon!"
Eftsoons his hand dropt he.*

And then in desperation, the ancient mariner fixes the young man with a stare – and in that look – that passion, he engages his listener.

*He holds him with his glittering eye --
The Wedding-Guest stood still,
And listens like a three years child:
The Mariner hath his will.*

Hi everyone, I'm Steve La Hood, a director of Story Inc. We're a Wellington based company that produces visitor experiences – for a wide range of clients from corporate visitor centres to tourism venues to theme parks, and of course museums.

Museums, we all agree, are changing their visitor offering all over the world. Visitors want more than to read labels and erudite, curatorial text - they want a story. They want the authority and authenticity they expect from a museum, but they want to be engaged, involved, somehow moved, before they'll learn anything, before they'll forgo the distractions available to them in this dizzying world of portable information overload.

Tourists are looking for stories too. That's why they go to museums.

Who are these tourists? How do we define them? They're folk who are not from these parts. It's unlikely that they'll have any idea about the culture and history of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Why have they come here? To experience what we have; tucked away here at the bottom of the planet - last, loneliest, loveliest.

They want the real thing – authenticity matters. They haven't come all this way to get a re-heated tourist cliché of New Zealand.

In the museum context, delivering the 'real thing' depends on how well we tell our stories.

What we are saying is that the BEST way of telling our stories to others is to tell them to ourselves first.

We have to hold our guests with the kiwi equivalent of the Ancient Mariner's passion.

Brutal as it may sound, in New Zealand, we need tourism, it's our biggest single industry now, bigger than milk! – so, to do it right we have to tell our stories in a particular way...

I guess one way of thinking about it differently is to avoid that word "tourism" which is so 20th century and money-grubbing, and think about visitors... and about stories... and about ourselves.

Greg McManus's museum, here in Rotorua, is a fine example of a museum that understands its dual role as a Whare Taonga (house of treasures) for the local community – *and* as a tourist attraction. The museum's sub-title is "where great stories begin" and the museum has moved more and more towards a narrative-led visitor experience.

Ten years ago, Greg approached us to make him an object theatre experience that told the quintessential stories of Rotorua in an active, theatrical way.

Together we built an AV theatre where the seats move and shake to correspond with the volcanic earthquakes and eruptions on screen. It's a complicated piece of technology and control system that is currently undergoing a refit to make the seat actions more responsive and intuitive.

But despite the technology, the story's the thing! – so we spent a long time talking to local folk, especially Maoriora Kingi, Auntie Bubbles Mihinui and Don Stafford on the one hand, and geology experts like Dr Hamish Campbell on the other hand.

We listened to the way they told their stories, not just the plot structures, or the parts of the stories they found interesting, but the actual words they used, their intonations, phrases, humour and excitement in the telling.

That led us to produce a film like nothing we'd ever attempted before. A curious cross between documentary and drama, factual natural history and legendary accounts realized in full special effects.

We cast local hero Temuera Morrison in different roles from different periods in Rotorua's history, so that he could be our guide through the story, and we gave him a direct dialogue with the audience, not a curatorial spiel, a local-vernacular conversation.

Play video

Temuera speaks the way a local Rotoruan would speak, and locals have flocked to the Museum to experience the show time and time again because it's in their voice, because it's familiar and they're proud of it.

The show is equally popular with tourists. There's obviously a lot more going on than they can possibly understand from the movie, so they're motivated to investigate the rest of the museum to flesh out the stories they've heard in this show.

For Maori, stories are Taonga (treasures) in exactly the same way we consider priceless or iconic objects to be. The very local stories that Rotorua Museum tells are just as valuable as the artifacts on display – and we, as storytellers, must acknowledge that we don't own these stories, we just provide a service to help tell them – in their local voice.

During the Second World War, some 40,000 United States Marines were stationed in New Zealand (mostly in Wellington and Auckland) for rest, hospital care and recreation.

“Overpaid, oversexed and over here” we said, nevertheless New Zealand opened its collective heart to these boys. 4,000 of them married kiwi girls and returned here after the war... many more married kiwi girls and took them home to the United States. So, so many of them died in the Pacific.

Last year, the US Embassy and the Historic Places trust engaged us to do a little commemorative exhibition inside Old St Paul’s church in Wellington. Families who cared for the marines had taken them to this church to pray. And considering the coming battles at Tarawa and Guadalcanal, it’s not surprising that the Marines were frequent visitors to the church.

The exhibition was constrained by a miniscule budget and the historic building we had to place it in. We couldn’t put a single screw into the place. As well, there were precious few objects that could carry the emotional weight of the stories. So we designed a simple two-screen display with a selection of stories.

In this exhibition, the stories are both “ours” and “theirs” – a collection of shared memories, priceless to the Marines and to New Zealanders and the families.

Here’s one of the stories:

Play video 3:00

Good storytelling is like those two lovely ladies. We tell stories ALOUD - to others. The aim is to define oneself or ones group, and to offer and look for connections with the audience, things that will resonate with their own stories. And they do – don’t they?

In 2006, Story Inc won the contract to produce the National Discovery Museum of Thailand. It’s now called the Museum of Siam and it opened to the public in April this year.

Now in Thailand, the official history has always maintained that Thai people descend from a unique race of people, probably from southern China, who came south and settled along the Chao Prya River system. This fictional account supports the monarchic lineage of the country – and while it's true that Thailand is one of the world's oldest monarchies – it's simply not true that Thais arrived as one separate cultural group at a specific time in history.

The new museum wanted to use Science-centre type discovery methods to re-investigate the concept of Thainess – of identity. So you can imagine the complexity of the storytelling here – on one hand revising the accepted history, on the other hand encouraging young visitors to enquire, to contribute opinions, even to challenge.

The Museum project was a political football to say the least. And we were in the middle of it all, doing our best. We wanted to make sure the Museum's voice was a young person's voice, talking in today's language.

So we invented 7 characters from modern day Thai life and (in true Buddhist fashion), we 'de-incarnated' them back through lives they'd had in earlier times. This was to re-inforce our argument that Thailand had been continuously inhabited since the earliest humans existed and "thainess" is the result of this long continuity.

So a female politician from Bangkok in 2008 becomes a village sorceress and matriarch from 2,500 BC, a street food vendor becomes an iron-age weapons manufacturer, a hotel tourism host from Phuket becomes Marie Guimar in the court of King Narai at the height of Ayutthaya's "golden age".

We meet these characters frequently throughout the eleven separate galleries. We carefully avoided chronology, focusing on the daily lives of ordinary people in the ever-changing history of this ancient place.

Alongside these stories of everyday life in different periods of Thai history, the museum offers games for younger visitors.

The games require input from the visitors – an opinion, a response. This takes the storytelling a step further. The Museum of Siam asks questions. It's not a comprehension test, it's a challenge to react to the story.

In the final gallery entitled “Thailand Tomorrow” – visitors are asked “if you were prime minister of Thailand, what would you do?” You write your idea on a computer tablet and it appears on the wall as a thought bubble that follows you around. Provocative? Exactly!

Despite the fractious and frankly oppressive politics of Thailand, so far at least, the responses of the visitors have not been censored.

The Museum of Siam speaks directly to young Thai people, and it has been a huge success, both critically and in terms of local visitation. And already there is a growing profile of tourist visitors to the attraction. And this visitation from farang (foreigners) comes despite the complete lack of promotion in the regular tourism channels of Thailand.

Of course we're delighted with this result. Having struggled to tell stories from a completely different culture, to the youth of that society, in a modern and challenging voice, and in the face of political censorship – it's rewarding, to say the least, that their overseas visitors find the stories engaging too!

I think everyone here will have had this experience – you create an exhibition or attraction and some really unexpected thing happens - someone is moved by or amused by or angered by some aspect of the show that you really didn't expect.

There's a richness in your story creates a resonance, allows the audience to tap into your story on different levels or in unexpected ways.

The stories we tell in our museums are the 21st century version of this basic human need – to make connections, to resonate emotionally, to create links and to highlight our differences.

And that's a good thing, ladies and gentlemen, it's both a joy and a responsibility. Museums that tell stories in their own voices, to their own communities, so that visitors from abroad can connect and engage, are a force for good on our troublesome planet.

No reira nei au e mihi ki a koutou
Otira ki a tatou katoa

Thank you