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**Susan Strauss**. *The Passionate Fact: Storytelling in Natural History and Cultural Interpretation.* Golden, Colo.: North American Press, 1996. viii + 152 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-55591-925-2.

**Reviewed by** Monique Bourque (University of Pennsylvania)

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In *The Passionate Fact*, professional storyteller Susan Strauss contemplates the meaning of the Information Age, disassembles stories to examine what makes them effective both as events and as teaching tools, and provides a wealth of helpful hints for curators, storytellers, and other professionals seeking to make more effective use of narrative in reaching out to the public. The book is aimed at environmental educators, but it is easy to imagine that some of Strauss's strategies would be useful to educators in any type of cultural institution or historical organization. While academics may find some of her language unsettlingly personal, the book nonetheless has much to offer in suggesting ways to think about how information is presented and how facts about the natural world are shaped by cultural assumptions and reflected in narratives about the world.

Strauss's first task is to redeem the story as a legitimate vehicle both for teaching audiences important factual material about the natural world, and for conveying particular messages about humans' relationship to the world. She begins by examining what distinguishes giving information from telling stories, and describing the different forms that stories can take, including anecdotes, legends, "stories that might be true," oral histories, and "factual stories." Strauss analyzes the structure of stories to explain what the components of an attention-getting and memorable narrative are; most important, she argues, are those stories which excite an emotion and enable the listener or reader to make a personal connection to something in their own experience. Scientists and historians, the primary practitioners of "factual" storytelling, often refuse to recognize their work both as narrative and as dependent upon narrative; this is a mistake, Strauss argues, because such a stance fails to recognize that data are the essential building blocks of the factual narrative. Stories well told "can inspire in their audience a lifelong devotion to the subject" (p. 15), as well as teaching them something about the subject at that moment.

The most valuable sections of the book are those which encourage the reader to carefully consider the structure of narratives. In the three chapters at the heart of the book, Strauss seeks to rehabilitate myth as a vehicle for fundamental truths about the natural world and humans' relationship to it; to connect myth, story, and scientific narrative and suggest ways in which they reflect one another; and to outline ways to present scientific information in a narrative form. Strauss asserts forcefully that myth is a much-maligned form of relating to the natural world, and analyzes several myths to suggest a factual scientific basis for the relationships outlined in them. Strauss argues further that scientific relationships (for example, the role of microorganisms in soil in promoting tree growth) can be expressed in narrative terms most effectively by examining them for their mythic or archteypal content: seeking out the most basic truths to be communicated to an audience reveals the bones of a factual narrative. Clothing that narrative in more facts, balancing the flow necesssary to a good story with the need to present facts undistorted, is the conscientious storytellers' great challenge, and the audience is an important part of that process. Strauss reminds us that a story can carry multiple messages, not all of them intended by the narrator, and that for fullest effect the "moral" of the story is best suggested rather than stated. The interaction between audience and storyteller, Strauss argues, shapes both the audience's experience of the story and the narrator's understanding, often in unexpected ways: the most important learning (and the most complete audience involvement in the storytelling as a mutually absorbing process) takes place when the listener brings something to the story, and draws some conclusion of her or his own from the narrative. The storyteller's most significant accomplishment is the creation, with the cooperation and participation of the audience, of a moment of "beauty and an authentic experience of the natural world" (p. 49); that moment produces in turn a reverence from which is born the respect for the natural

world which is necessary to the success of any environmental ethics movement.

The work closes with three chapters of practical advice to storytellers seeking to begin a career or to refine their technique. In the first of these concluding chapters Strauss discusses how to research a story in order to tell it effectively; this process involves both "head" research (reading in folklore texts and other printed and oral sources to come up with multiple possible versions of a given tale), and "heart" research (examining the story for its underlying emotional power and structuring the version the storyteller will use to highlight the aspects of the story she or he considers the most important). In the final two chapters, Strauss recommends techniques for using the voice and the body to effectively draw listeners into a common experience of the narrative and to communicate the larger message(s) inherent in the story. She also provides an appendix listing storytelling organizations and workshops.

Liberally sprinkled with stories selected to illustrate specific points, Strauss's book is an engaging read. While it is not a scholarly work, it has much to offer the scholar interested in thinking more broadly about the role of narrative in academic discourse.

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