More Praise for *Documentary Storytelling*

“Bernard demonstrates to documentarians how story can be more effectively incorporated into every level of nonfiction filmmaking from conception to development and pre-production, in the field and in the editing room. Her discussions incorporate many examples from contemporary documentaries to illustrate a variety of salient points.”

—*Documentary* (International Documentary Association)

“Sheila Curran Bernard’s *Documentary Storytelling* is an essential, pragmatic, common-sense approach to making nonfiction films for the student and/or first-time filmmaker, based on the author’s deep awareness of documentary film history and theory, and her intimate knowledge of how today’s most important documentarians formulate their works.”

—Gerald Peary, film critic, *The Boston Phoenix*

“Invaluable for documentary filmmakers as well as anyone who uses information and evidence to portray real events. But the value of this book goes beyond its service to storytellers; the consumers of documentary films and all journalism can benefit by more fully understanding the narrative structures that we all use to construct order and meaning in the world.”

—Penne Bender, Media Director, Center for Media and Learning, City University of New York, The Graduate Center

“While documentaries are nonfiction, they are certainly not objective, and even the smallest choices in writing, filming, interviewing, narrating, or scoring can drastically alter the perspective of the film, and in turn, the audience. Bernard is keenly aware of the power of persuasive images, and her insistence on complexity and integrity is a consistent theme throughout the book.”

—Alyssa Worsham, *The Independent*

“If you fancy yourself as a documentary film-maker, or simply want to improve your understanding of observational storytelling, buy this book, read it, and apply the ideas contained within.”

—Quentin Budworth, *Focus Magazine*

“*Documentary Storytelling*. That’s what this book is about. It’s about the story, how to convey that story eloquently, effectively, and ethically... This book is absolutely brilliant... packed full of interviews with award-winning documentary filmmakers offering up information, advice, and wisdom you’ll find interesting and useful.”

—Krista Galyen, *AAUG Reviews*
Praise for Archival Storytelling (with Kenn Rabin)

“I am often asked how to work with archival materials. Now I have an easy answer: Get a copy of Archival Storytelling and read it. Everything’s there—how to use archival materials, acquire them, and most of all, how to think about them. Archival Storytelling is indispensable.”

—David Grubin, Filmmaker, LBJ, FDR, Napoleon, and The Jewish Americans

“This is it, the book that will save you thousands of dollars and untold hours of frustration. It will be the single best purchase your production company will make. Archival Storytelling clearly explains the entire process of researching, acquiring and licensing archival footage and music. Included are time-tested tips and techniques for efficiently managing the work flow and negotiating rights.”

—Ann Petrone, Archival Supervisor, The Fog of War

“One of the best—and most needed—texts I have seen in a while. The challenge is to keep what is a fairly technical aspect of filmmaking interesting without compromising the quality and depth of information. The authors have done an exceptional job in this regard by the careful interweaving of interviews with researchers, filmmakers and legal experts through the factual material. There is the strong sense of being in the presence of experienced filmmakers and researchers who accept that while there are standard practices, archival use and intellectual property laws, etc. are contingent fields in which each case must be assessed and dealt with on its merits.”

—Bruce Sheridan, Chair, Film & Video Department, Columbia College

“I’ve been making historical documentaries for many years, yet I learned new things from this book. This is the definitive guide for archival research for documentary filmmakers. An invaluable resource.”

—Mark Jonathan Harris, Distinguished Professor, School of Cinematic Arts, University of Southern California, and writer/director, The Long Way Home and Into the Arms of Strangers
Documentary Storytelling

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Preface to the Third Edition

The phrase *documentary storytelling* has become commonplace since this book was first published in 2003; it describes the powerful merging of visual and literary narrative devices to enable media makers to reach and engage audiences with nonfiction content. But the need for “storytelling” is also sometimes used to justify nonfiction work that is overly sentimental or sensational, poorly researched, and poorly crafted. That’s not what this book is about, and it’s not what the filmmakers featured in these pages do.

Instead, it’s about an organic and often time-consuming process in which a filmmaker approaches a subject, *finds* (as opposed to imposes) a story within that subject, and then uses a wealth of narrative devices—structure, character, questions, point of view, tone, stakes, and more—to tell that story truthfully and artfully, so as to attract and actively engage an audience. In this way, the documentary filmmaker joins the ranks of other master storytellers, whether they work in fiction or nonfiction. The astonishing work of directors like Alex Gibney, Ari Folman, James Marsh, Deborah Scranton, and many others continues to set a high bar for those seeking to work in nonfiction media. *Documentary Storytelling,* in this and previous editions, puts the tools used by these filmmakers into the hands of anyone seeking to tell nonfiction stories, whether for broadcast or theatrical release or use in educational and community settings.

With this new edition, I hope to challenge the use of the term “documentary” to describe any and all forms of nonfiction audiovisual programming. For an analogy, consider the nonfiction section of a bookstore or library. There are books with advice on cooking and gardening and pet care; graphic novels and how-to manuals and celebrity tell-alls; histories that are scrupulously researched and histories that appeal primarily through images and sentiment; rigorous science alongside pseudoscience. Go a step farther, and include in this list the glossy brochure that advertises your dentist’s practice, the report published by a particular charity to attract supporters, or the incendiary flier put out on behalf of a controversial cause.

We would never lump all of this nonfiction material—as different as it is in quality, purpose, audience, format, and form—together as one thing (*docubooks,* perhaps). Instead, we’ve learned, as readers, to recognize these differences. Similarly, we need to learn, as viewers,
to better recognize the range of media presented as nonfiction. And so for this edition, I’ve chosen a subtitle that sets documentary films alongside a particular form of nonfiction prose, “creative nonfiction.” The intent is to start with the best in documentary and explore it as the model for any kind of production, even those that more accurately would be billed as the audiovisual equivalent of tabloid, magazine, or vanity pieces, and perhaps advocacy, public relations, and even advertising.

This new edition has been restructured and contains more than 20 percent new material, including an examination of new films, new conversations with award-winning filmmakers (Brett Culp, Alex Gibney, Susan Kim, James Marsh, and Deborah Scranton), and a closer look at the use of story as a tool for analysis (not prescription) at every step of production, from research through editing. Unfortunately, this meant that some material from the previous edition had to be dropped, including the interview with archivist, filmmaker, and writer Kenn Rabin, with whom I worked in 2007 and 2008 to jointly author Archival Storytelling: A Filmmakers Guide to Finding, Using, and Licensing Third-Party Visuals and Music (Focal Press, 2008).

With only a few exceptions, works discussed in this edition are easily bought or rented through major vendors. Some films that are aired on television series, such as BBC’s Storyville and PBS’s Frontline and American Experience, may also be available for online viewing.
Acknowledgments

My thanks to Focal Press for shepherding not only three editions of this book into print but also overseeing its publication in Portuguese (2008) and Chinese (2010). Elinor Actipis, Michele Cronin, Dawnmarie Simpson, Laura Aberle, and their colleagues are the kind of publishing team any author would want. My thanks also to Cathy Gleason and Deborah Schneider for their ongoing counsel; to proposal reviewers for this edition; and to transcribers Amanda Burr and (especially) Johanna Kovitz for amazingly fast and accurate turnaround. Thank you to friends and colleagues at Princeton University, the University at Albany, and Goddard College, and to a community of nonfiction filmmakers worldwide for work that challenges, inspires, and informs.

I owe a special thanks to the many filmmakers interviewed for this and previous editions; a list can be found in Part IV. For everything else, as always, I thank my parents, David and Kathleen Bernard; my friends and family; and, of course, Joel and Lucky.

Sheila Curran Bernard
September 2010
About the Author

Sheila Curran Bernard is an Emmy and Peabody Award–winning media maker and consultant whose credits include projects for prime-time national broadcast, theatrical release, and community and classroom use. She has taught at Princeton University, Westbrook College, and the University at Albany (SUNY), and lectured on documentary storytelling at the Niemann Conference on Narrative Journalism, Christopher Newport University, the Pennsylvania College of Technology, and elsewhere. With Kenn Rabin, Bernard is also the author of Archival Storytelling: A Filmmaker’s Guide to Finding, Using, and Licensing Third-Party Visuals and Music (Focal Press, 2008).