

From the Kitchen

1 December 2015



They come onto the train and look around. She leads the way to a group of empty seats and sits down. He sits opposite her. They're silent as the train takes off. Both have their legs leaning to the left so that their knees don't touch. She is holding her bag on her lap with both arms. He is clutching a book.

She looks through the windows at the back fences streaming past, the colourful graffiti tags indecipherable. He starts reading his book: *Life of Pi*.

They both wear school uniforms, from different schools. He looks to be three years older than she. She turns to him. "That was a cool film." "Yeah, but the book's better."

I wonder about their relationship. Casual? Romantic? Just met?

"Mum said it's your turn to walk the dog tonight."

"You've only done it once this week."

"Yeah, but I've got piano tonight."

"You use that to get out of almost everything!"

She sticks her tongue out at him.

Ah, siblings.

This is an entertaining pastime for an hour-long ride, playing the detective; or casting people in a drama of my choosing, until they do or say something that is out of character and I have to rewrite the piece in my head.

We all make up stories about other people and then we tailor our attitudes to those people based on those stories. Most of the details of the stories have little, if any, basis in the lives of those people. Unfortunately, if enough people behave towards others on the basis of such false stories, the 'characters' are likely to start acting as expected; or their behaviour will be seen as confirming the story, whether it actually does or not.

It has been shown¹ that if teachers are told that a group of students is gifted, the teachers will relate to those students with higher expectations than if they believed them to have learning difficulties. The students, in turn, learn better – or less well, as the case may be – than would 'normally' be expected of them. What their 'actual' (tested) learning ability is seems irrelevant.

Some of the story we create about another person may be based on their body language and be a totally unconscious process. We are probably more adept at reading body language than we are aware of and we may not be able to control our behaviour that is informed by this reading.

We can, however, control our behaviour which is based on the stories we believe about certain people and groups of people, even though that may take some effort. We may have been told over and over (by a parent or a teacher) that people from community X are lazy, and anyone with a large wart on their nose is a practitioner of black magic. Adherents to one

religion, or a sect within a religion, may believe that adherents of all other religions, or sects, are evil, because they have been told this repeatedly. They will behave towards those 'others' accordingly.

It has been written² that there can be more genetic difference within a 'race' than between races. It needs to be remembered that a person's genes do not dictate how they are. They are a malleable set of possibilities that can be expressed in many ways, influenced by the external and internal environments, and even by thoughts³. Therefore, the stories we tell about ourselves may be as ephemeral as those we tell about others. Being stories, they can be 'rewritten'. We could reinvent ourselves and the lives we live. We could also reinvent other people and then be surprised that they start to behave differently; after all, they are actors in the dramas we play out in our heads.

1. see for instance: http://www.intropsych.com/ch15_social/expectancy.html
2. see for instance: <http://anthropology.net/2008/10/01/race-as-a-social-construct/>
3. for a thorough examination of this, read *The Biology of Belief*, Bruce Lipton, 2005 Hay House