



**Just the facts:** The true storytelling movement provides live entertainment that, unlike mock reality TV, is not downloaded and watched alone

## The times of their lives

*The new storytellers are real-life raconteurs who tell not-so-tall tales*

“THE GIRL WAS hard to hate,” deadpanned Jessica Salomon, talking about her main rival growing up in Montreal. “She had long blond hair. She had a boyfriend and, as if that wasn’t enough, she actually lived in the Queen Elizabeth hotel, like Eloise!”

Childhood frenemies, nasty breakups, family squabbles—it’s all fair game on storytelling night, a popular pastime for audiences craving something more authentic than staged reality television. Salomon, a comic and former war crimes lawyer in The Hague, was one of six people performing recently with *This Really Happened* at the Blue Metropolis literary festival. Not all were professional performers: there was a teacher, a novelist, a nanny and a social worker, too.

The storytelling group, founded in 2007 by documentary filmmaker Tally Abecassis, has six events under its belt. She selects the evening’s stories, which must be told without notes. *This Really Happened* is just one of several Canadian groups, like *Confabulation* in Montreal and the Toronto-based *Raconteurs*, inspired by the *Moth*, a true storytelling movement in New York. Likeminded events in Toronto include the *Real Secrets Show*, where audience and storytellers sign non-disclosure agreements and wear masks, and the monthly *Awkward* evening at Comedy Bar. Audiences are happy to cringe and commiserate with the brave people on stage.

“To hear something collectively that’s not downloaded and watched alone, later, is really special,” said *This Really Happened*

audience member Charmaine Lyn. “That analog, imperfect moment is hard to find.” As Sage Tyrte, a podcast producer who hosts *True Stories, Made Up Plays* every month at the Black Swan Tavern in Toronto, says: “We’re part of a movement of people who want something to do together that doesn’t involve watching a flat screen.”

*Confabulation* founder Matt Goldberg, an English teacher and sketch comic, says the audience for the monthly event has doubled to 100 people in two years. “It has a totally different vibe from stand-up, where the audience sits back and says, ‘Make me laugh, funny man.’” It’s not like therapy, either. “The hard part is finding the right balance of funny and serious stories. We’re already seeing local storytelling celebrities emerging, doing the circuit.”

That would be Taylor Tower. “If my life was a John Hughes film, this would be the part where the music swells and my friends come out of their classrooms to cheer me on,” said Tower, partway through her story about middle school. “Instead, I got suspended.” Tower also has a tale about a first date, where she finds a drawing of the guy’s “dream girl” who, just like her, has a lazy eye. “People groan sometimes, not quite believing it, but why would I make this up? I’m brutally honest about being at war with

my lazy eye, and everything else.”

When it comes to veracity, storytelling works on the honour system. Some can sound pretty tall, involving electrocuted squirrels, Jewish dads pretending to be Italian, torn hip cartilage at yoga class and an exploding car on the 401 highway that triggered a breakup. “I have lots of witnesses!” laughed *Confabulation* performer Joel Fishbane, about the burning car. “People are amazed it really happened. I assure them it did.”

Truthfulness in personal storytelling has been a hot topic since James Frey was busted in 2006 for lying about his past in *A Million Little Pieces* and *The New Republic* revealed in 2007 that David Sedaris’s stories were

exaggerated. “Once, a performer brought in a copy of the *Montreal Gazette* to prove their story really happened, but the crowd has a built-in bulls--t detector anyway,” says Goldberg of *Confabulation*. Audience

**‘A performer brought in a newspaper to prove their story, but the crowd has a bulls--t detector anyway’**

regular and book reviewer Anne Chudobiak assumes the performers “craft” their words. “I have a reasonable expectation of embellishment,” clarified Chudobiak, a self-described eavesdropper and reality television enthusiast. “I’m not worried about the *Million Little Pieces* factor,” said *Awkward* event founder Erin Rodgers. “Nobody’s getting a book deal out of this yet. And your memory will honestly play tricks on you.” **JOANNE LATIMER**