

The Importance of Story, and How to Make your story Important.

From the rambling thoughts of

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Origin of Story

Humanity came from somewhere. Popular belief these days suggest we evolved from less sophisticated creatures.



Modern science tries to make sense of who we are and why we do what we do.

From *The City of Words* by Alberto Manguel and from *Sapiens* by Yuval Noah Harari, and many other books, I was made to think a bit, and I came up with some opinions on the origins and value of story.

In my understanding of the way of things :



Humans were hunter gatherers before they were lawyers and computer scientists.

Every human had to harness the skill needed to survive, each and every day.

There were monsters back then.

Very large bears.

Very large elephants.

Probably a lot of other nasty things.



Thag goes hunting one day, and comes home alive, perhaps dragging a deer.

His people are happy. They want/need to know how he did that.

One can *tell* another how we do things, or one can show another. Showing almost always instills trust and belief in the storyteller.

Fact was, Thag was a good hunter, as shown by his success. So through some sort of sign language or grunts and sounds, he shows others what he did. He told them a story. They had to believe him. He had the proof.



Modern science suggests human beings are social animals, with egos.

The ego demands the individual be noted, and the individual needs to be in the company of the people they trust.

But !!

Modern science suggests that humans are capable of forming a trusting bond with between one and maybe seven others.

This is their group.

Anyone else is 'The Other'.



Humanity would not have survived if this stayed as is.

Theory is, as humans learned to cook their food, digestion became easier, and more energy was available to the thinking process.

Humans got smarter.

Language was developed.



LATER ... through language, a new and strange kind of story emerged

Gossip.



A trusted member of your group tells a second hand story of another – someone from another group. Something your trusted partner saw and believed.

Word gets around, curiosity is peaked, and perhaps important information gleaned by 'The Other' is shared with your people. While the Others remain outsiders, some bonds of trust and understanding are formed. Your community has grown.

In my mind, without gossip, without story, as a species we would not have made it.

The ability to tell a good story was important to survival.

The ability to convince others through story was crucial in developing extended social systems. Gossip evolved into more complex storytelling.

The evolution of trade through money is entirely based on story telling.



This tiny coin is worth a chicken... trust me.

The more people that believe that story, the more powerful the coin becomes, and
society changes.

That story is important.

Through storytelling - an easier form of teaching and sharing information - people learned to more efficiently protect themselves and prosper. Groups became larger, and other factors beyond language started to bind them (trade and commerce most notably)



The ability to create a fiction out of nothing and convince others to believe it is uniquely human.

When people started clustering in towns and cities with forms of governance and even religion, the monster from beyond the walls became less a concern to the average layman compared to those thousands of years previous.

But for so many people to exist so close together, some sort of common understanding and trust had to be managed and maintained.

Rules were formed – some based on the obvious (do not kill each other, do not steal) – and others based on suggestion of dire consequence.

Fostering fear of the unknown - generated through story.

Story was used to suggest the monster was still out there. People needed story to make them feel they were being protected and they were safe if they followed the guidelines set out by someone more 'successful' than themselves.



In the grand scale of human development, cities are relatively new.

For the two hundred thousand years before very large cities, story was super important for survival in one's relatively small social circle.

More recently, cities and story evolved into something far more complex.

Story gives a reader a unique understanding of what it's like to be not themselves, but someone else.

To help them believe they're part of something bigger.

To take the pressure off of their daily grind... doing it all themselves.

Maybe, you can call it -

Escapism ?



Today, we exist in the real world, but we also exist with our fantasies. And these fantasies, the story, have become the driving force that determines the actual fate of the real world and of ourselves.

The master story teller – the politician, the cleric, the state (a fictional thing that builds monuments to its own story) - sets the stage for what we do and how we do it.



Fort Knox.... WTF...

Story is one of the most important forms of communication we have.
Probably, it's the ONLY form of communication we have, certainly when reaching
outside the walls of our intimate social group (consider what a resumé is)

So ... Story is Important.

Being a story teller is important.

A story teller had to be trusted (once upon a time) to tell some form of truth.



Today, however, we've arrived at that place where we don't need the truth
(all of the time).



As long as the story teller can suspend our disbelief, we are more than happy to be taken on a jaunt to elsewhere.

Why?

Probably because it's burned in our blood.

We need to see beyond our horizon, and believe anything could be true.



We can imagine ourselves, perhaps, better than we truly are.



So – are we story tellers?



Yes we are.

Do we want to tell a good story?

Yes we do.

Should the story be important ?



Maybe...

After thinking about this a lot, after seeing tons of examples in the arts, it seems that a successful creation of art can often come as a surprise, and very hard if not impossible to duplicate if you can achieve it.

Many artists have proclaimed the biggest mistake you can make is to try and recreate what came before.

They suggest be grateful your work received the accolades it did – and move on.
Create something different.

Depends on what you call success. Making money? Having fans?



Or writing a damned great story.

For me, success is enjoying what I'm doing, every day. I'm lucky enough to exist in a place where I can do that. I love to write, and success means I still love to write.

I think when an artist loves their work, it's obvious to their fans and the public that they are on to something.

The writer creates the story out of an inner and personal passion.

The public recognizes that passion which helps to make the story important. A shared sense of something to come...

Caveat : if selling a million copies and becoming rich and famous is what you think is important, feel free. Join the ranks of the few and do that consistently and see how that goes.

Caveat : using the social hot buttons of the moment as fuel for drama in your story may get you noticed. But the story has to be good, it has to be relevant, and it ought to have something there that transcends the politics of the day.

People want to be told a story.

Everyone wants to tell a story.

Sounds easy enough to do.



Use of Story

Jordan Peterson (a Canadian clinical psychologist) suggests we ought not ask the government to fix things. Individuals have the power to make changes if they actually want to do it. He suggests the most important way to foster change and social justice is empower ourselves by educating ourselves and staying healthy.

Educate your children.

Be a teacher.



As writers, we can show our readers how the world might be different and even better.
We do it subtly, gently, gracefully.

But know that a writer has the potential to make a difference in a reader's life.
Maybe they smile, maybe they cry, maybe they get a knowing shiver of understanding
or recognition of something they know about themselves.

Maybe they want to tell a friend what they discovered in that story.

In your words.

How did you do that ?

Do you even want to do that?

Entertainment is fine. Escapism is fine.



But if you're going to all that trouble to tell the best story you can – do you know where
to draw the line? Do you care?

As a writer, you write because you make the choice to write - and you can take a very,
very long time to give birth to that story.

Precious time.

Your story, your choice.

But in the end you're telling that story to someone else.

Really, all that matters is how you touch your reader.

Suzi Vadori had a great talk at WWC on the WHY of writing. Why do we write?

She got a ton of responses, but kept asking us to go deeper and look for the deeper why.

If you know why you do something, and you know you love doing it, this cannot help but show in your product and in your personality.

Many readers are curious about the creator of that story, and your personality can become a factor in your success.



So – why do we need to tell that story?

For your own reasons, for sure, but it's probably an important reason.

Process and routine, having a purpose, honing your craft, venting your imagination - all
important.

But in the end it's not you, but your story the world sees.

If it was that important for you to spend the time to get it out there, it ought to be
important to the reader that reads it.

So let's write a story, and make it as important as we can by using elements we find
interesting and compelling to ourselves.

Let's see if we can love that story.

The story game

In my writing, I most often start with an emotion. I see something in the world that moves me, and some sort of story evolves before I even comprehend what the truth of the matter actually is.

So, if TRUTH can be set aside for now, we can invent something, by :

Picking a Theme :

Eg: Genetic Engineering

Why? I feel that science is amazing, and humans love to discover new things and ask big questions – but sometimes my gut says ... 'Some things ought to be left alone'

Pick a Premise (the hypothesis – the point of the story that is proven through the story arc):

Eg: Just because you can do a thing is never reason enough to go ahead and do it.

Why? There is a difference between knowledge and wisdom – and it's sometimes difficult to see that, but it is so very important.

Pick a genre :

Eg: Science Fiction

Why ? The science fiction of yesterday has become the reality of today, and exploring the consequences of applied science can raise awareness and stimulate critical thinking.

And if making money matters, pick a genre that people read.

Pick a Character

Eg: Middle Aged Male Genetic Scientist

Why ? Men can be easily stereotyped as bull headed and stubborn, and it could be fun to watch one of them get what's coming to them – until we find they maybe he's the good guy.

Pick a Place/Setting

Eg : Anyplace on Earth

Why ? Make the story universally appealing, and not so much about the place as to the consequences to that place and those that live there.

Pick a time:

Eg: Very Near Future (within fifteen years)

Why ? We can easily suspend our disbelief on alternative views to current understandings, and dire consequences projected within the readers lifetime could be quite compelling.

Articulate the Ending (the story is all about the ending)

(denouement if possible - the story that comes after the story is over – what the readers take away from the story, questioning themselves or their understandings)

Note: some definitions call this a resolution to the conflict – perhaps, but I like to discover something further, to show in more depth a more global consequence to the story.

Eg: A genetic experiment results in unforeseen consequences, exterminating all but a few small clusters of humanity. Enough have survived, and our species has a fighting chance. But across the entire planet, ecosystems are recovering extremely fast, and what was a toilet bowl of a habitat is becoming a deadly paradise – and the survivors have to learn a new way to exist.

At this point, IF you've asked yourself why you've made these decisions, and IF you're passionate about your answers, the story will most likely simply flow from your mind to the page. The rest is simple writing – plot points and decisions and consequences going 'round and 'round. What writerly tricks can we use to lead our readers down blind allies, make them smile or frown, make them think?

As an aside – what story was described above? Maybe Jurassic Park (except for the ending)?

In that story, for that medium, marketing and producers used 'click bait' to attract an audience. Easy to do with multi-media. Dinosaur monsters, the woman in danger, children threatened, the mad scientist...

The theme of genetic engineering - IMO - was a little drowned under eye candy and action as the story unfolded. Still – a pretty good movie.

In a book, click bait is probably a bad idea.... What always works is great hook at the beginning and a great ending and everything in between to support both.

Now, if I were to have written Jurassic Park, let's just say ...



So, without the help of computer graphics and car chases and scary noises and loud music ...

Let's try to write a story ?

Pick a Theme : Trust

The nature of service and servants

Why? Servants can get tired and maybe take over

Pick a Premise (the point of the story that is proven through the story arc) :

Why? An Ai who realizes he's powerful gives up servitude to become a ruler – and discovers that power sucks.

Pick a genre : YA SF

Why? A young AI

Pick a Character: nascent AI

Why?

If you can answer some or all of the questions below regarding character before you start, it'll help immensely.

What does the POV protagonist think they want?

How will they try and get it?

Who will interact with the character to help or hinder?

What does the antagonist think they want?

How will they try and get it?

Do the characters get what they thought they wanted?

What did they discover?

How did that discovery change them?

How did that discovery change their world and the world?

Pick a Time:

Why?

Pick a Place/Setting:

Why?

Try and articulate the ending (the denouement)

Food for thought:

Literature genres :

Poetry - obvious

Prose – story telling that is not poetry

Drama (story to be acted out – a play)

Non-fiction – can be a story (autobiography for example), but the main purpose is to pass on information

Media – passing along story/idea/information through anything other than the written word on page (generally)

Forms of story

- History

- Propaganda
- Knowledge transfer
- Idea exposition
- Character exposition

Genre form of story requires something extra :

More focus on –

Plot / setting / character / conflict / theme / POV / tone (protagonist mood, for example) / style (voice / pacing / sentence structure / weight applied to story elements)

Drama requires

- Conflict
- Tension

- Surprise
- Extraordinary characters or character behaviour
- Controversy
- Mystery
- Suspense

Believable characters benefit from :

- Unique voices, personas and expressions
- Intriguing (or baffling) goals and motivations
- Flaws and weaknesses as well as strengths
- Distinctive appearances (including body language, gait and mannerisms)

Story elements need to be effective (as opposed to filler, which can be used sparingly if at all)

- Introduce new characters who help or hinder your primary character(s)
- Add subplots that supplement your main story arc
- Reveal why your characters have the goals you establish for them
- Increase narrative tension by increasing what's at stake for your characters

Make dialog count – what the character says needs to be important to the goals of the story. While the story may be about the character, what the character says tells the story.

Immersive setting – each detail matters to some important aspect of the story.

Otherwise, leave it out. That said, a story that has descriptive setting as the main style point, then layered setting elements would be consistent with that style. (high fantasy for example)

Conflict and tension - I think this is important , if done well, to engage the reader's emotions. But the reader must first be engaged !

A great beginning is almost always needed.... but the story is all about the ending, so use the beginning to promise the reader a good story, and then make a great ending to prove it. Everything in between supports the beginning (reader's expectations) and the ending (fulfilling the contract)

- The reader most always wants to participate in the story (via POV character).
- The story unfolds to surprise or support the reader with the choices and consequences the character makes
- The story begs the reader to ask why or how
- The story leaves the reader with a sense of something learned or understood (probably about themselves and how they feel about a personal situation)