The Ape, the Adman, and the Astronaut: Rediscovering the power of storytelling

Tham Khai Meng

With:

Malcolm Pryce

The Red Papers:™

Ogilvy

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June 2014, No. 7


TURNKEY, TELL ME A BEDTIME STORY
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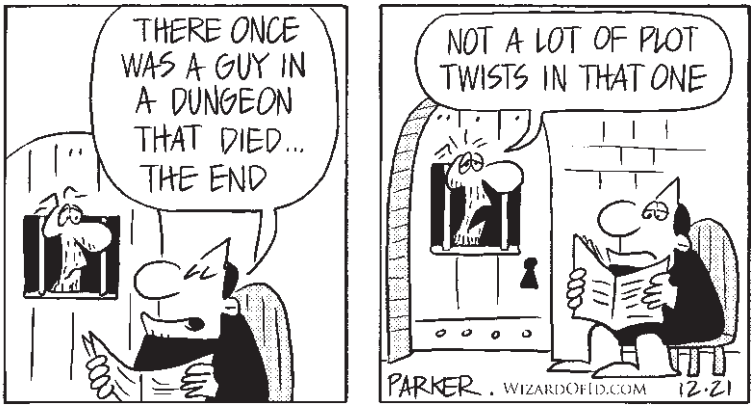

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The Adman at 11 a.m.

"The heart has its reasons
of which reason knows nothing."
—Blaise Pascal

When David Ogilvy was the AGA Khan

Once upon a time a fresh-faced young man stood on a doorstep in Scotland and attempted the impossible. His name was David Ogilvy, a rookie door-to-door salesman for the AGA Heat Ltd. company. What made his task impossible was this: it was the height of the Great Depression, and he was selling in a land where the people were world-famous for being careful with their money. And the AGA cooker was the most expensive cooker ever built. No one had told him that selling expensive cookers to parsimonious people in the midst of economic turmoil was impossible, and so he found it was not. He became very good at selling AGA cookers — the greatest salesman the company had ever known.

The inspiration behind the AGA cooker.

He could have told the housewives he met at door after door that the cooker contained a heat storage unit that utilized the principles of metallic conduction. But he didn't. Instead he told them the Australian Aborigines used the same process to bake hedgehogs. He talked about the wonder of the traditional baker's brick oven. He told them about the inventor of the AGA cooker, Swedish physicist Nils Gustaf Dalén, who won a Nobel Prize in Physics by designing special lights for lighthouses that were saving sailors' lives even as he spoke.

He told stories.

Later he collected these stories into a book called *Theory and Practice of Selling an AGA Cooker*. *Fortune* magazine called it the greatest sales training manual ever written. It's also a damn good read, even if you don't have the slightest interest in cookers, salesmanship, or Scottish housewives.

Your grandmother was right

David Ogilvy did on instinct what good salesmen have always done: He spun a good yarn. As a hard-nosed salesman, he might have been embarrassed to call himself a storyteller – a moniker traditionally associated with the nursery. In business – where the bottom line trumps whimsy – reason, facts, logic, and rational discourse are most admired. Storytelling is probably the single most popular recreational activity after sex and shopping, but it has never been considered a serious business tool.

This traditional view may be about to change. As a result of the transformation wrought in recent years by the social media revolution, people have begun to take a new look at this most ancient art – and what they are discovering is groundbreaking. Stories, today, are told in different ways. We tweet out narrations, encapsulate one thousand words in a single Instagram, and write epistolary novels on Facebook walls. People aren't just interested in telling stories anymore. They are interested in pushing them out and pulling readers in. Like all storytellers, they want to be heard, and social media has enabled that. The timeless methods of ancient storytellers – updated for myriad modern formats – are the most powerful and effective means of communication and persuasion humans have ever devised, and now we have a vast body of scientific evidence to prove it.

In short, the neuroscientists are saying your grandmother may have been right all along.

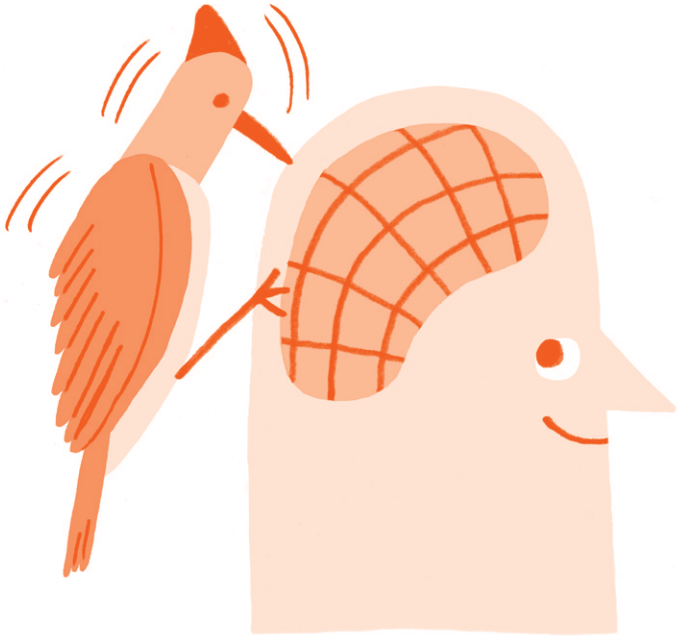
When David Ogilvy was the AGA Khan

The necromancers of Madison Avenue

It was Rosser Reeves, inventor of the concept of the USP, who embodied the rational approach to advertising in its purest form. As defined by Reeves, the Unique Selling Proposition was a specific claim a product could make and that was unique to it. It was, in effect, a claim that no one else could make. Advertising had one job: the hard-hitting dissemination of this USP. This method was not dissimilar to that used by a woodpecker to find food. Except that, instead of a tree, the hammering took place on the skull of the consumer.

Reeves outlined his thesis in a famous book, *Reality in Advertising*, published in 1961, wherein he disparaged the more creatively inclined elements of Madison Avenue. He mocked them as necromancers and shamans who "believe in ghosts," and "listen to voodoo drums, whisper magic incantations and mix in their potions, eye of newt and toe of frog."

Reeves was the spiritual heir to another empirical adman, Claude C. Hopkins, whose classic book, *Scientific Advertising*, dates from the early 1920s, a few years before David Ogilvy started knocking on doors in Scotland. Hopkins, too, promoted the rational over the emotional approach, taking issue with copywriters who "forget they are salesmen and try to be performers." Instead of sales, they "seek applause." Advertising, he said, used to be "a gamble – a speculation of the rashest sort." But thanks to the scientific principles that he espoused, "The condition has been corrected." A key means of delivering measurable success was the coupon. His description of the coupon department sounds like a scene from Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*: "In a large agency coupon returns are watched and recorded on hundreds of different lines. In a single line they are sometimes recorded on thousands of separate ads. Thus we test everything pertaining to advertising. We answer nearly every possible question by multitudinous traced returns."



Old-fashioned advertising could be a real headache!

When David Ogilvy was the AGA Khan

David Ogilvy was familiar with Hopkins and famously urged anyone who wished to go into advertising to read his book seven times. High praise, indeed, but it is doubtful that the man who put an eye patch on the Man in the Hathaway Shirt could truly be described as a disciple of Hopkins. No one would argue that advertising is salesmanship, but Hopkins does seem to have a limited view of what a salesman can attempt. His description of the ideal salesman makes him sound like a simple clerk: "Successful salesmen are rarely good speech makers. They have few oratorical graces. They are plain and sincere men who know their customers and know their lines. So it is in ad writing."

Plain and sincere men armed with their USPs can take you only so far. As David knew, you have to sell a vision of a better life, not the principle of metallic conduction. All rookie salesmen learn the acronym AIDA, which stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, Action. These are the four stages of a successful sales call, but Desire is where the magic happens. Salesmen move consumers to action. Advertisers kindle desire. It will be argued in this essay that Story is the most potent means of generating emotion, arousing desire, and touching the heart – far more vibrant than the rigid adherence to rules.

Rosser Reeves insisted that advertising needed "facts, not fables." We will demonstrate the opposite to be the case. Fables knock facts into a cocked hat. Reason and logic, pie charts, and graphs turn out to be very inferior agents of desire and means of persuasion.

We will consider what stories are and how they work. We will draw on the wisdom of both the modern neuroscientist and of that renowned expert on the human heart – your grandmother – to show that stories are, in fact, the most effective and powerful means of persuasion yet devised.

We will also show you how to write one.

Successful salesmen are rarely good speech makers. They have few oratorical graces.

The world's oldest profession: Storytelling

There is no doubt people love stories. They queue up around the block to see the latest movie. This is a problem. If something is enjoyable, like an eclair, we tend to feel it can't be good for us, particularly in quantity. Pie charts, on the other hand, are the equivalent of eating your greens. This view became especially pronounced during the 19th and 20th centuries, an epoch when folks stopped listening to their grandmothers and consecrated scientists into a new priesthood.

The original book club, circa 100,000 BC.

And yet, in parallel, when anyone really wanted to persuade and move people, they still automatically turned to story – teachers, politicians, lawyers, salesmen, and Fascist dictators alike.

The world's oldest profession: Storytelling

The reason is simple. We are hardwired to process the information that comes into our minds from the outside world using story structure. For more than 100,000 years it has been the method we use to comprehend the world.

Story may be even older than "telling." Language is a relative newcomer on the evolutionary scale of things, but recent neurological research suggests that a predisposition to understand the world through narrative may be hardwired into neural circuitry that evolved over millennia.

Kendall Haven's seminal book on storytelling, *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*, draws on the works of neuroscientists Steven Pinker (*The Language Instinct*, 1994) and H.P. Newquist (*The Great Brain Book*, 2005). Haven writes, "It is also interesting to note that the frontal lobes, which house the circuitry for decision making and conscious thought, are not directly connected to the brain areas that process raw sensory input." That is to say, raw sensory input – sounds, sights, smells – goes first to intermediate processing areas of the brain, and these parts are "the exact areas [of the brain] that are activated when humans create stories." This is remarkable. We do not comprehend directly what our eyes or ears perceive. Before we register it, sensory information is intercepted and taken away to a part of the brain tasked with shaping it into proto-story material. Only then is it passed on to consciousness. The sensory data is like Play-Doh®. It is shaped first before the conscious mind gets to examine it. Noam Chomsky has shown that the structures of grammar are hardwired into the brain, and it appears the mechanisms for a "grammar of story" are similarly hardwired into the brain's structure. These neural structures are then repeatedly reinforced and strengthened in a child's first years through an endless diet of stories.

Teachers, politicians, salesmen, and Fascist dictators often turn to narrative.

Three dots and a line: A gripping tale of heartbreak and triumph

The world's oldest profession: Storytelling

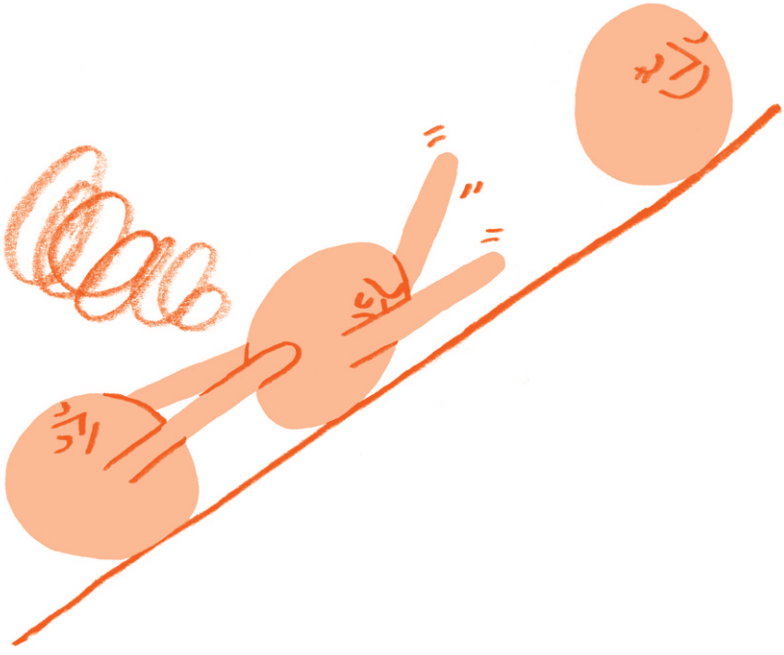
In a classic experiment first conducted in 1963, some children were shown an image of three moving dots on an inclined line. The first dot moved up the incline, the second impeded its progress, and the third seemed to assist the first to reach the top.

When asked what they thought was happening, the children said the first dot was trying to climb to the top of the hill and the second one was trying to stop it. And the third was helping it. A story.

Clearly three dots on a screen do not have feelings, goals, desires, or motivation. But the children instinctively imputed these very recognizable human characteristics to the dots.

Man has been telling stories ever since he domesticated the wolf, but definitions are a bit slippery. We won't waste time getting lost in the thickets of semantics. We will say that stories contain all or most of the following features:

A story always involves a protagonist, a hero. As a screenwriter replies when asked for an elevator pitch, *It's about a guy who*…. The heroine or hero has a goal and encounters obstacles to achieving it. Inevitably there is some sort of trouble. If there isn't, you don't have a story – you have an account. The events happen in a causal sequence. They are embedded in a narrative filled with sensory detail and – crucially – emotion. It moves us and touches the heart. Finally, all the sound and fury signifies something. The material of a story is shaped to deliver some sort of meaning.



Dots have feelings, too.

The world's oldest profession: Storytelling

Not all of these criteria have to be satisfied every time, but most of them are, most of the time. Even something as simple as the story of the three dots fulfills these criteria. The first dot has a clear goal: to reach the top. We can call her Climber Dot. Her motive is clear: it is a universal human desire to want to climb to the top of the hill. It symbolizes human aspiration. The conflict appears when dot two, Bad Guy Dot, strives to stop Climber Dot from reaching the summit. True, there is little in the way of sensory detail here – we have after all stripped this one right down to a proto story – but is there emotion? You bet! How do you think plucky Climber Dot feels when Bad Guy Dot thwarts her? You can almost hear the audience hiss. How does she feel about Helper Dot? How do you feel? When Helper Dot intervenes and Climber Dot attains her goal, don't you want to cheer? Aren't you just waiting for Policeman Dot to arrive and take Bad Guy Dot away? Is there a potential love story subplot possible between Climber Dot and Helper Dot? Do they marry, live happily ever after, and have ellipses?

And what is the meaning? This could be an uplifting story of triumph over adversity. Maybe it is parable about aspiration, the power of belief and persistence and guts, and the triumph of good over evil. Climber Dot is us, is she not?

Not bad for three dots and a line.[1]

[1] An interesting codicil to this story is the animation *A Boy and His Atom* produced by Ogilvy & Mather for IBM in 2013. The film, shot at the atomic level, told a story in which the "actors" were carbon monoxide molecules magnified 100 million times. It was officially certified by the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the smallest movie ever made and became an Internet sensation, garnering more than a million hits on YouTube in the first 24 hours. The serious purpose behind the film was research into the (perhaps dry) subject of data storage. The fact that such a relatively obscure subject could become an Internet hit like that is due in no small part to the power of story.

The storytelling ape

Why did we do that? Why did we turn three dots and a line into a story? We cannot help ourselves, it seems. We are hardwired to tell stories; it is how we process the information that the world imparts to us. Picture yourself as Captain Kirk sitting at the control panel inside your own brain. At any given time there is a chaotic typhoon of incoming sensory information. Sight, sound, touch, smell … the human brain is being bombarded every second. How to make sense of it all? In order to function in this pandemonium, the mind needs to organize the data into some sort of picture. Only when you know where you are and what is going on can you make choices about how to proceed.

Are those lurid orange and black stripes, for example, the flag of Zambia or a tiger? What is that noise that sounds like, "Help! He's going to eat Johnny!"? What is that blue metal box on wheels marked "Zoo" and who are those men carrying rifles? All those elements might be totally unconnected, random events, but already the brain has highlighted connections and offers an interpretation: The tiger has escaped from the zoo and is about to eat Johnny.

The mind shapes the material into a picture in numerous ways, but the preeminent one is causality. If B follows A, the mind reasons that A caused B. Once you have a notion of causality you suddenly have a method for understanding the world. It makes sense.

As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio puts it in *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain*: "The problem of how to make all this wisdom understandable, transmissible, persuasive, enforceable … was faced and a solution found. Storytelling was the solution…."

Being John Malkovich.

The world's oldest profession: Storytelling

Some very eminent neuroscientists, among them Steven Pinker (author of *How the Mind Works* in addition to other extraordinary books), claim as a result of all this that narrative fiction represents some sort of flight simulator for our journeys through this world. They are handbooks on how to react if we ever find ourselves in similar situations. They reason that by practicing the role of the protagonist from the safety of our own armchair, we acquire the understanding of how to proceed in a similar situation.

This seems improbable in any straightforward way. If you ever find yourself in the unfortunate position of having slept with your mother and murdered your father, will Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* be of much help?

It seems far more likely that storytelling is what is known as an *epiphenomenon*. That is to say, it is a development that has no real survival value but expropriated the circuitry that does. Evolution initially designed our brains to shape and interpret the world using story templates. Later we discovered – like sex! – that we could do it for fun, too. In the same way that the ear developed its sophisticated mechanism to help work out where the howling wolf was hiding, we learned to listen to Beethoven.

What is not in doubt is the fact that we like stories. Pinker says it makes no sense to ask why we enjoy them. We enjoy stories for the same reason we enjoy life. In fact, stories *are* life: flight-simulator experiences where for the price of a movie ticket we can vicariously seduce, go to war, explore space, and have numerous other experiences while safely eating popcorn.

The neuroscience of story

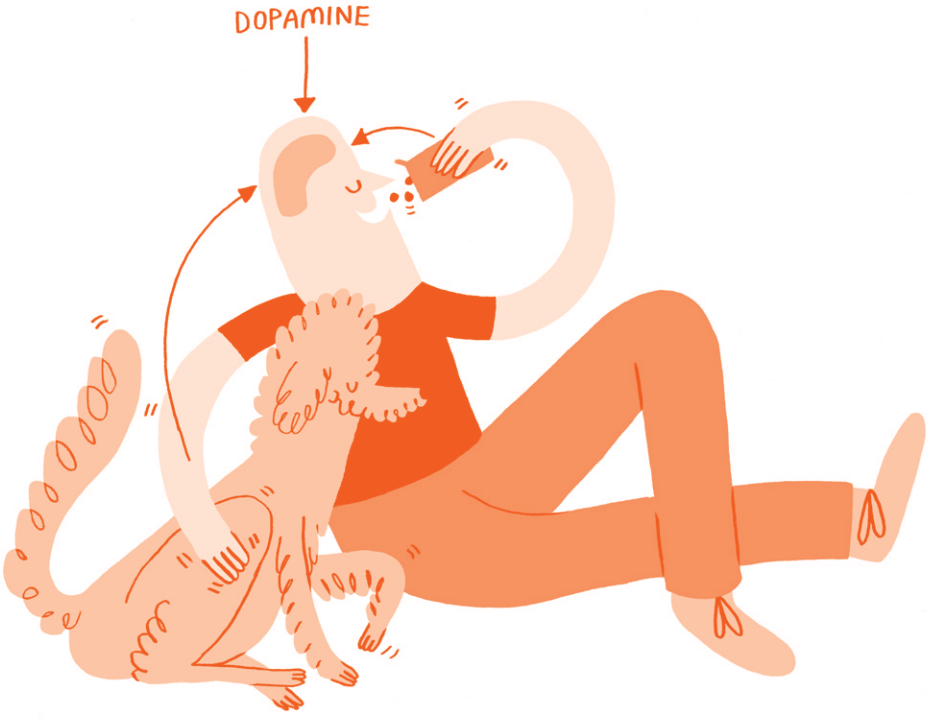
Storytelling involves the brain's dopamine reward system. Dopamine is the neurotransmitter that is released when we engage in pleasurable activity, such as eating chocolate or laughing, or patting a dog. Dopamine is released when we receive rewards, but crucially also when we anticipate a reward. That is to say, curiosity – wondering what is going to happen next – stimulates the release of dopamine. There are good biological reasons why this should be so. For the caveman, curiosity to explore the world, try new foods, or rub sticks together to make fire had obvious survival value. The incurious caveman may have stumbled upon the wheel, but he would not have thought up any uses for it.

Brian Knutson of Stanford University and Gregory Berns of Emory University put test subjects in a functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) scanner and presented them with a simple mystery. When they did, the test subjects' brains lit up in an area dense with dopamine receptors. "In study after study, scientists have found that the *[corpus] striatum* lit up like an inferno of activity when people didn't know exactly what was going to happen next, when they were on the verge of solving their mystery and hoped to be rewarded – it was more active then, in fact, than when people received their reward and had their curiosity satisfied."[2] The same process also lies at the heart of our enjoyment of music. The patterns of sound evoke an anticipation that is teased and not fulfilled until the end of the piece. Jonah Lehrer in "The Neuroscience of Music" says that Beethoven "begins with the clear statement of a rhythmic and harmonic pattern and then, in an intricate tonal dance, carefully avoids repeating it. What Beethoven does instead is suggest variations of the pattern. He is its evasive shadow. He wants to preserve an element of uncertainty in his music, making our brains beg for the one chord he refuses to give us. Beethoven saves that chord for the end."[3]

[2] Todd Kashdan, "Wired to Wonder" on the website Greater Good: The Science of a Meaningful Life, University of California Berkeley

[3] Jonah Lehrer, "The Neuroscience of Music," *Wired Science*

Dopamine is released when we receive rewards, but crucially also when we anticipate a reward.



Getting a dopamine fix.

The willing suspension of disbelief

We have said that facts and logic, despite being accorded high status, are not well suited to the art of persuasion. This is because the mind in rational mode is skeptical and analytical. It demands evidence and proof, which it then weighs critically. It is, in effect, resistant. Contrast that to what happens when one enters a story world. It was the English Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge who coined the term "willing suspension of disbelief" to describe what goes on when we enter a story world. We willingly accept the rules of the world even though they might be implausible.

When a man dresses up as Santa Claus for a kids' party, the adults don't point out the obvious fact that the beard is false. For that would be to violate the accepted rules of the game. The kids don't point it out either, even though many of them will be sophisticated enough to spot the subterfuge. When your friend tells you he has met the most beautiful girl in the world, what do you think? If you like him you probably smile inwardly, make a suitably congratulatory comment and think to yourself, "Wow, George has got it bad this time!" You don't entertain for one moment the possibility that he really has met the most beautiful girl in the world. Contrast that with what happens when you listen to Granny reading "Snow White." You don't doubt that Snow White was the fairest of them all. It's a given, part of the story ground rules that you are hardwired to accept. When someone says, "Once upon a time there was a big bad wolf," no one – not even the most cynical and jaded misanthrope – says, "No there wasn't. It's all a lie."

The willing suspension of disbelief

What this means is, we are uniquely susceptible to persuasion when we are in story mode. We are credulous, in fact.

This is crucial. Information embedded in a story is less susceptible to challenge. We enter a mental realm, an altered state where our skepticism is defused. Belief is enabled by entry into this world.

The willing suspension of disbelief.

"Help!
I'm drowning in a great book!"

Perchance to dream

In the classic book about ludic reading (reading for pleasure), *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, Victor Nell likens the altered state of a reader to a hypnotic trance. Quoting F.W. Hildebrandt and W.H. Gass, he says, "when we fall asleep, our whole being, with all its forms of existence, 'disappears, as it were, through an invisible trapdoor.' This is also the experience of the ludic reader, who sinks 'through clamorous pages into soundless dreams.'"

The willing suspension of disbelief

Psychologists call it *narrative transport*; writers call it the *fictive dream*. It's worth digging deeper to consider what exactly is going on here. In the movie *The Piano*, directed by Jane Campion, there is a memorable scene in which the British settlers in 19th-century New Zealand perform an amateur play on a makeshift theater. Sitting in the audience are some Maoris. At one point, the heroine on stage is stabbed with a knife. Assuming they are watching a real murder, the Maoris storm the stage to save the girl. There is no willing suspension of disbelief here.

Clearly, entering the dream world is an acquired skill. For those who understood the rules of the game, the events on stage were believable, but at the same time they knew it was all fiction. This really is a curious trick that the mind has learned to play upon itself. When we watch a good movie or read an engaging book, our pulses race with fear or joy or love or anger. We get transported and react physiologically exactly as we would if this were a real situation. And yet all along we also know it is not real. We tremble with terror watching the movie *Psycho*, and sometimes we cry out in horror at the ghastly scene, yet we are not concerned at all because part of us knows that it isn't real. The fictive dream unfolds in a walled garden, hemmed in by the rational mind.

A communicator, or someone with a message to impart, can find no finer place to put the message than in that walled garden.

In this sense, an entertaining advertisement is like a Trojan horse passing through the gates of the citadel.

We're not in Kansas anymore

Further proof of the primal function of story is how often the same ones crop up. *Cinderella*, for example, is known as *Cendrillon* in France and *Aschenputtel* in Germany and appears all over the world. In 1893 Marian Roalfe Cox, under the auspices of the Folk-Lore Society of Great Britain, found 345 variants. In the first century BCE the tale appears in Greece as the story of Rhodopis, the slave girl whose slipper is stolen by a falcon. The falcon drops it into the lap of the Egyptian king who sends his servants throughout the land on the hunt for the girl whose foot fits the sandal. There are several versions in *The One Thousand and One Nights*. The Indonesian and Malaysian story *Bawang Merah Bawang Putih* features many of the same motifs, and the fairy godmother is a fish. The earliest known occurrence of the story is the Chinese Ye Xian, first published in the ninth-century compilation *Miscellaneous Morsels from Youyang*. In this version the slipper is made of gold.

Cinderella is an archetype, and literature so abounds in them that psychologists such as Jung believed them to be part of our collective unconscious. Anyone who studied folk legends from around the world soon notices the recurrence of certain archetypes.

The fictive dream unfolds in a walled garden, hemmed in by the rational mind.

Have you ever noticed the similarity between Gandalf from *The Lord of the Rings* and Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi from *Star Wars?* They are all examples of what has come to be called the Mentor figure: an older, wiser, very experienced person – often wearing a robe – who gives counsel and help to the hero on his journey. Other archetypes include the Shadow (= bad guy), Shapeshifter, Trickster, and Threshold Guardian. All these archetypes were initially catalogued by Joseph Campbell in his seminal book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. It's a great book based on a lifetime's research into the world's stories. People in Hollywood don't have time to read books that big, so they commissioned Christopher Vogler to summarize it. His work, *The Writer's Journey*, is probably the most widely read of any book in the big studios. It identifies various stages that seem common to most stories. The Hero gets the call to adventure and initially refuses it; then something happens to change his mind and catapult him into the adventure. When Russell Crowe in *Gladiator* came home to find his homestead on fire and his family cruelly murdered, it felt like a scene you must have seen a thousand times before. You have.

The willing suspension of disbelief

Wise old men, in robes they are.

Music is the literature of the heart

There seems no limit to the ways in which the storytelling urge expresses itself.

The willing suspension of disbelief

The mournful lyrics of the blues, country and western, torch songs, and high opera are part of a long and very distinguished tradition of men and women singing their troubles. When the going gets tough, the tough start singing, as the great folk tradition attests: from Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Joan Baez, and Willie Nelson to hip hop artists like Tupac Shakur who said of his studio album *Me Against the World*, "It was all my fears, all the things I just couldn't sleep about.... I get to tell my innermost, darkest secrets." Shakur also proclaimed, "Shakespeare got it right, man. This is good ghetto shit."

Alphonse de Lamartine once said, "Music is the literature of the heart; it commences where speech ends." In that sense, music has traditionally been the route through which people, particularly the disenfranchised, chose to distill the contents of their hearts. The huge blues tradition grew out of the African-American communities of the Deep South in the United States, springing forth from spirituals, work songs, and ballads. For this reason the blues were considered disreputable by elites. But the elites, in turn, liked to visit the opera to hear songs of love, life, and death … long, drawn-out death.

Everyone has a heart. Because the heart (and the things that move it) is the same the world over, we find the same storytelling themes recurring over and over again, and quite often completely independent of each other. China, for example, has a huge storytelling tradition that contains innumerable classics, many of which will sound very familiar to readers in the West, even though they evolved independently.

The 18th-century classic *A Dream of the Red Chamber* provides a vivid portrait of China in that era and the complex relationships between the various members of an upper-class household. Some people have called it the Chinese *Anna Karenina*, although of course one could, with greater justification, call Anna Karenina the Russian *A Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Narrative storytelling forms the basis of the venerable Chinese performance art of Pingtan. Talking, joking, instrument-playing, singing, and acting are combined in the service of telling long-form stories. One of the most popular is the *The Butterfly Lovers*, which tells the tale of a boy and a girl whose love, as with Romeo and Juliet, was opposed by their parents, and who were united finally in the grave.

Perhaps one of the most famous works of Chinese literature is *Water Margin* – a sprawling tale of 14th-century mayhem and derring-do about a band of outlaws. At first glance it sounds a bit like *Robin Hood*, but if so, it's *Robin Hood* on steroids.

The exact authorship is disputed, but whoever wrote it knew what an audience liked. Not the bland, squeaky-clean, do-gooder *Robin Hood*. Instead, readers got a bawdy roller-coaster ride full of violence, murder, gang warfare, drunken revelry, beautiful women, temptation, sex, plot twists on every page, lashings of blood, viscera, explicit advice on seducing virgins, and – something you won't find in *Robin Hood* – lots of farting.

Similarly, in the classic 16th-century Chinese novel *Journey to the West*, a man undertakes a journey fraught with danger and adventure in search of a prize in a far-off realm. Along the way he is helped by a talking monkey, a half-man half-pig, and numerous other companions. Meanwhile, in a galaxy near you, a boy named Luke Skywalker, aided by two talking robots, heads off in search of … and then, from Kansas, a little girl named Dorothy, in the company of a talking lion, scarecrow, and half-man half-tin-can….

Are there really millions of stories, or is there just one?

No, Mr. Bond, I want you to die

It is striking how it always seems to be the same handful of stories told over and over again. Some people talk of the seven basic plots. Others say there are 20, while still others talk of 36. The number is not important; what is interesting is the way almost every story ever told seems to boil down to the same structure. One of the so-called "basic" plots, for example, is Rags-to-riches, which is the paradigm for *David Copperfield*, *Great Expectations*, and ten thousand more. Another is the Quest, which includes the *Odyssey* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Another is Journey and Return which includes, among a million others, *The Lord of the Rings*.

The willing suspension of disbelief

OK, what about James Bond, you say. Well, James Bond stories portray Overcoming the Monster. In this, the hero gets the call to adventure – a bad guy in a far-off part of the world is making life hard for the common folk. So off the hero goes to sort the monster out. The monster conventionally lives in a cave and is all-powerful. The dragon Smaug in *The Hobbit*, for example. In the Bond movies it is usually some Blofeld type who operates from a dramatic underground cave complex with a screen showing the world he wants to take over. The hero must fight and symbolically lose his life – remember the sequence when Blofeld has Bond strapped to a table with a laser pointing at his private parts? The hero will escape and be symbolically reborn, defeat the monster, and be rewarded for his pains. What is the reward? A thousand years ago it was a Golden Fleece. With Bond it is a blonde in bed. Have you ever seen a Bond movie in which he didn't end up with the girl? You might think nothing could be more dissimilar to an ancient Greek myth than James Bond, and yet stripped of the surface detail they are uncannily similar. Consider the ancient hero Perseus, who goes off to fight Medusa. Before setting off, the gods give him some magic talismans to help: a pair of winged sandals, a sickle, and a reflective shield. What does Bond do? He goes to see Q, who gives him a rocket pack and a car fitted with a smokescreen device.

Nice shoes, Q, but wouldn't those be a better fit for Perseus?

The golden road to the big aha!

These stories may all be very well suited for TV commercials but surely not for press ads. Surprisingly, even in the most minimal press ad, if it is well conceived, there can be discerned a story.

It was Aristotle who first pointed out that stories have three acts. Beginning, middle, and end. Or beginning, muddle, and end. Or, as they say in Hollywood:

The willing suspension of disbelief

Act I: Get the monkey up the tree.

Act II: Throw rocks at him.

Act III: Get the monkey down from the tree.

Jokes follow the same paradigm:

Set-up: I say, I say, I say, my dog's got no nose.

Development: Your dog's got no nose? How does he smell?

Payoff: Terrible!

Why is this relevant? Because creative ads follow the same paradigm. In recent years it has been the fashion to eschew body copy and many of the traditional elements of a layout. To strip ads down to some sort of visual pun, like a hieroglyphic. But even these ads contain a three-act story. It goes like this:

1. Huh?

2. Whirr, whirr, whirr.

3. Aha!

As they say in Hollywood: 1. Get the monkey up the tree.
2. Throw rocks at him. 3. Get the monkey down from the tree.

The reader is first arrested by a visual that seems strikingly incongruous. Something is not right. The reader then cogitates, trying to work it out, like a cartoon. Whirr, whirr go the mental cogs. And then the penny drops with the big *Aha! I get it!* It all happens in a fraction of a second.

In 1959 Doyle Dane Bernbach revolutionized the advertising landscape with an ad featuring a headline that simply said, *Lemon*.

The willing suspension of disbelief

A single word. And yet encoded within it was a long story about German engineering, about meticulous, obsessively Teutonic quality control. You wouldn't want to be stuck in an elevator with these guys, the ad suggested, but you sure will be happy to have them build your car.

In fact, that same structure works in every form of advertising. Take the current well-founded mania for branded content. When the stories brands tell are indistinguishable from those told for no selling purpose, does that mean they are less effective for brands? Hardly. Just as a single word encoded the story of German engineering, the subtle connection between brand and great narrative lets the viewer draw her own conclusion. And the viewer of *Horizons* on BBC solves the puzzle quickly: DuPont is interested in and capable of making the world a better place, even though DuPont never said anything like that. They just told stories.

The point is, people do not doubt or challenge things they have worked out for themselves. Because the *Aha!* moment is accompanied by a release of dopamine. A reward for that mental effort. And when you get rewarded you tend to like the experience.

The bitter tears you shed for Bambi

At the heart of the power of story lies perhaps the mind's greatest trick of all. Not only can we feel our own pain, but we can feel someone else's. We are so familiar with this capability – it is a fundamental part of being human – that we seldom stop to reflect on how strange it is. It's called *empathy* and we have a whole set of neurons in the brain that enable us to do it. They are called *mirror neurons*. So when we see someone in a particular emotional state our brains respond by activating the same neural circuits – the mirror – in our own minds, causing us to feel a similar emotion. That's why story can work at all – why we can become involved in the fate of other beings, both on and off the page. If these processes didn't exist, how could we care for others? And we can care just as intensely for fictional beings. It's why we cry at movies.

This is another marvel of the fictive dream. The reason authors are always enjoined by creative writing tutors to "show, don't tell." When you tell someone about something, the experience is secondhand, like something you read in the newspaper. When you show it, you create it live in front of the eyes of the reader or viewer. Usually in what is called a *scene*. You make the reader a witness, a participant. Here is the crucial wonder: the reader experiences the same physiological reaction – racing pulse, pounding heart, dry mouth of fear – as if it were real.

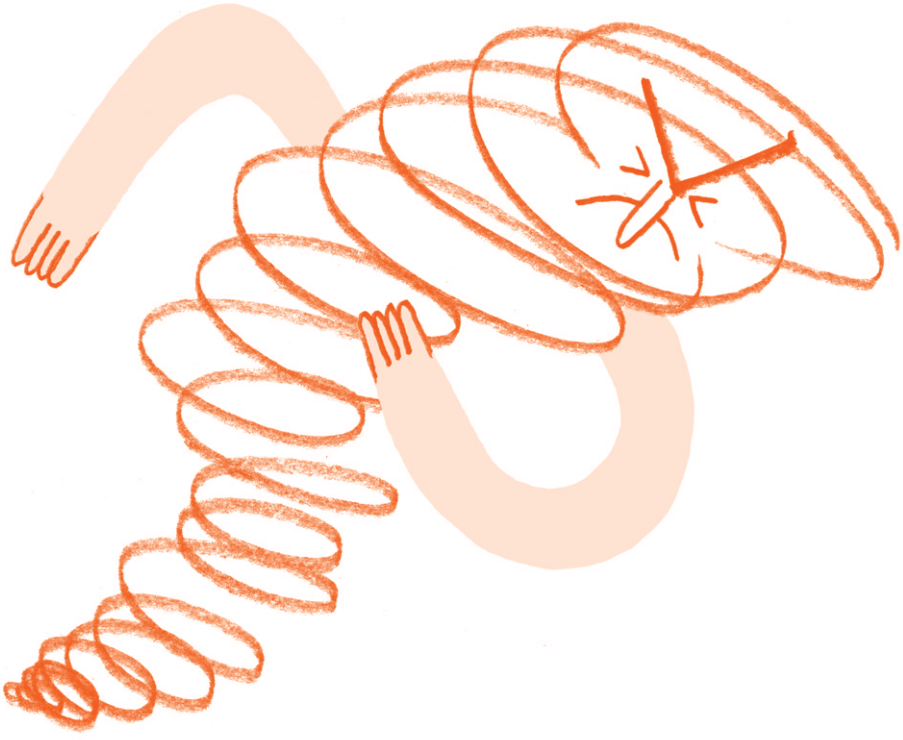
Mr. Spock, you're fired! It's only logical

Emotion is the fuel that drives all human behavior, despite what the pointy-eared Vulcan from Star Trek might say. Anyone who thinks he or she is a purely rational being is deluded. It's not just that emotion colors human behavior; it would seem humans can't behave at all without it. We decide things emotionally and then spend a lot of time afterwards thinking up plausible, rational explanations for our conduct. Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* discusses the extraordinary case of Phineas Gage. He was an American railroad construction foreman who had an iron rod accidentally driven through his brain and survived. Subsequently he had great difficulty experiencing emotion and found it very difficult to make even the simplest decisions, such as what to eat. Contrary to popular belief, Spock would have been a pretty useless member of a starship's team. Stuck in the world of logic, he would have struggled to decide which shoe to put on first each morning. After all, there is no logical difference.

The willing suspension of disbelief

Emotion has traditionally been thought of as a hindrance to good negotiating and decision-making, but the neurobiology tells us that, without the presence of emotion, we cannot even make decisions.

Phineas Gage survived!



A furious storm: Like a linebacker on the blitz.
(In case you didn't notice, this caption contains a metaphor.)

The power of metaphor

Emotion is the foundation of stories. Stories achieve their effects by guile, they charm and disarm, and above all they touch the heart.

Just how easily we can be manipulated by story and its elements is strikingly evident when we consider metaphor.

As is well known, metaphors are the building blocks of fictional worlds. A metaphor, in simple terms, is when one concept is understood by comparison to another. A velvet voice, a leathery hand, or an angry storm, for example. Can a storm be angry? No, of course not; only a person or animal can experience anger, but the fury of the storm is better communicated by analogy with a furious person. This is well known. What is perhaps less well appreciated is how fundamental the use of metaphor is to mental processes. It is estimated we use six metaphors in every minute of speech. We are not aware of this because most of the time we have forgotten the metaphorical origins of the words that spring to mind. If we ride "roughshod" over someone else's ideas, we almost certainly do not stop to imagine the origin of that phrase, namely, the idea of riding a horse without shoes. When we complain about "red tape" we do not generally realize this image is derived from the red tape that was used to bind up lawyers' scrolls.

More important, when we use a metaphor, the part of the brain that equates to the sensory origin of the phrase becomes active. According to "Your Brain on Fiction" by Annie Murphy Paul in the New York *Times*, "words like 'lavender,' 'cinnamon,' and 'soap,' for example, elicit a response not only from the language-processing areas of our brains, but also those devoted to dealing with smells."

More startling is the discovery of how easily we can be affected in profound ways by this. In a study by Lawrence Williams of the University of Colorado and John Bargh of Yale, it was discovered if you ask research subjects to evaluate a given person and make them hold a cup of hot coffee (versus iced coffee) while performing the evaluation, they will judge the target person as being warmer.

Is this the end for Batman and Robin? Tune in next week

Stories also have an inbuilt method of making you pay attention. When watching a PowerPoint presentation or similar sequence of slides, it is easy for your attention to wander, to drift off, even for you to nod off. Not so with story. The master practitioners of the art worked out thousands of years ago how to prevent that, how to keep the viewer glued and totally attentive. There are many tricks in the storyteller's arsenal, but the chief one is curiosity. All stories are, at heart, founded on a simple premise: tantalize the reader. Ask questions and don't answer them, or at least not immediately. If one phrase could sum up story it would be "delayed gratification." When you arouse curiosity you put the recipient in a state of tension, with an overwhelming need to have the answer. When it arrives it triggers a little burst of pleasure. By that time, of course, the skillful tale-teller will have set up other questions. The trick is simple but powerful. Ask questions, delay the answer, and in the meantime ask more so that the reader is kept riveted to the final curtain.

The willing suspension of disbelief

Thanks for the memory

Story is persuasive, immersive, pleasurable, gripping, and somehow manages to bypass our skeptical defenses.

That's already a pretty good tally. But there is one other vital area in which it outperforms a more analytic approach to presenting information. It's more memorable. Professional memory artists have long known this. When faced with the daunting task of memorizing a list of random facts and figures, they generally turn the facts into a narrative such as a mental journey to a familiar place. This might be to their local high street, in which they visualize the journey with the facts to be remembered placed at specific locations along the journey. Science has shown that facts remembered in isolation get lost in the memory whereas those contained within a narrative framework are more readily remembered and more easily retrieved. One reason for this is the abundance of sensory detail. Details, it seems, are the handles that the mind uses to retrieve memories, and the more handles there are, the easier they are to grasp. A mass of detail is one method that storytellers use to create their fictional worlds. And heartfelt emotion is the tool that the storytellers use to fix their stories in memory.

I'll never forget the day you broke my heart

For thousands of years, in just about every culture under the sun, the heart was regarded as the seat of emotion and of true wisdom. Language is often a good repository of folk wisdom accumulated through the ages, and this is certainly true with respect to beliefs about the heart. There are literally thousands of phrases that point to the central role the heart was thought to play in love, judgment, and motivation.

My heart wasn't in it.

Follow your heart.

Heartbroken.

Heartfelt.

Make your heart sing.

It wasn't until the latter half of the 19th century and early 20th century that the world dethroned the heart. Reason and wisdom were relocated to the brain, and the heart was nothing more than a pump. But recent research is turning the tables. We now know that the heart contains its own brain: a network of over 40,000 neurons in two-way communication with the brain. It has something else, too: an oxytocin gland. Oxytocin, the love hormone, is responsible for pair-bonding and much else. If you want to move someone, you really do have to touch the heart.

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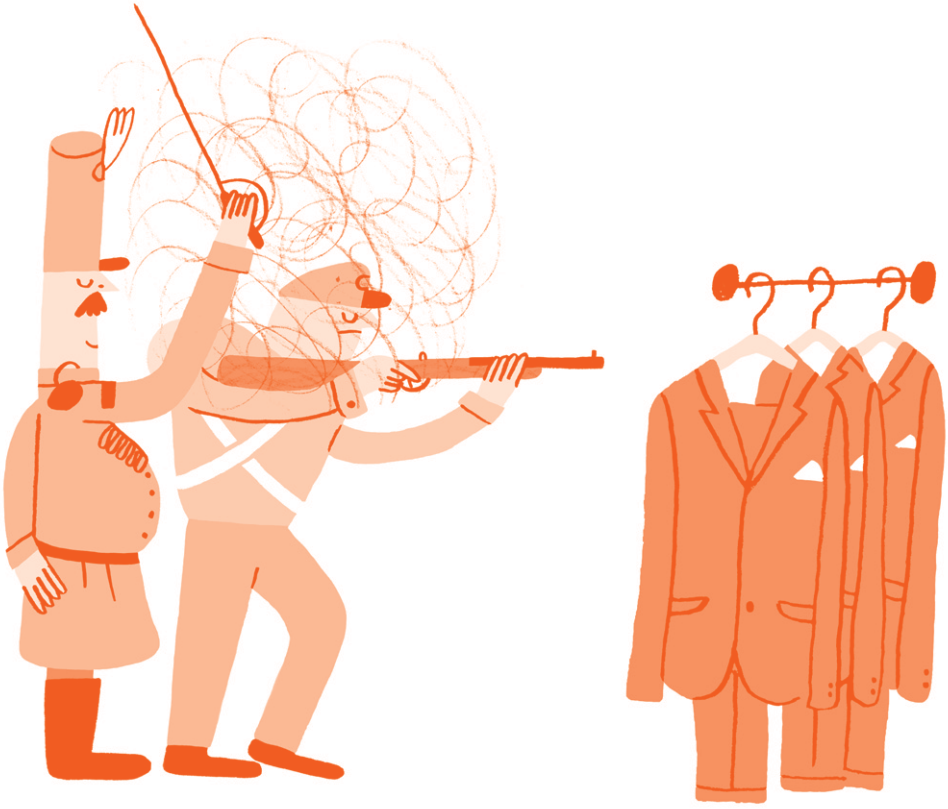

Suits on the firing line?

The necromancers fight back

Creative artists have always understood this about the heart. But they have struggled to explain the mysteries of their own craft, perhaps because a lot of the time they don't know what they do. Since the early Sixties, when Rosser Reeves disparaged them as necromancers, the battle lines between the rational actors and the gut players have been drawn. The people caught in the middle, on the firing line, of course, were usually the Suits. Now it appears a truce may be possible. The necromancers can point to neuroscience to provide the scientific underpinning of their craft. They can show that, for the human mind, everything is story. They can show the bits of the mind that light up when they listen to a story; they can point to the growing body of research that shows emotion lies at the heart of human motivation and decision-making.

And they can also now provide evidence in language the bean-counters trust: pie charts. Recent research that amalgamates two databases, the Gunn Report and IPA Effectiveness awards, has revealed the incontrovertible truth about storytelling. Ads that win both effectiveness and creative awards outsell by a factor of 12 those that just win effectiveness awards. Put plainly, the pie charts show that necromancy sells harder. Not only that, but this effect is becoming more pronounced. As the years pass, creative ads are progressively more effective. The reason is not hard to find. It's the rise of social media: a brave new world where marketing nirvana or the abyss is only a click away. To survive and flourish you have to tell great stories and touch the hearts of consumers, or they will condemn you to oblivion with the stunning exponential power of a million connected mouse clicks. Eighty years ago David Ogilvy wrote in his sales training manual, "The worst fault a salesman can commit is to be a bore." Back then it was considered to be bad manners; today it is a form of self-annihilation.

Once upon a time: The director's cut

So, now for the easy part. How to write a story. OK, maybe it is not easy to write a great one, but the fundamentals are easy to understand. In this section we will consider the process in two parts. The first will give the big picture about what a story aims to achieve. Think of it as a map of the entire journey. In the second part we will consider the storytelling tricks of the trade – the practical details of how you make the journey.

Part I: The big picture

Well, as we said earlier, *It's about a guy who....* Or a gal. This is fundamental. Before anything else, we need someone to root for, and you can't root for a tree. Yes, there have been plenty of stories about inanimate objects – trains, for example. But invariably the train has two eyes and a nose. The tree speaks. He gets annoyed about things. In *The Lord of the Rings* he goes to war. He's just like us. In fact, he's not a tree at all; he's one of us in the shape of a tree.

Once upon a time: The director's cut

This is your hero, and your hero must want something. If he doesn't want something, there is no story. It can be anything – taking a special ring of power to a faraway volcano, or finding a new hat. The important thing is that this goal is important to the hero.

Next we stop him from getting it. We add some conflict. Without conflict there is no story. The hero has to struggle to achieve the goal. So the author makes it difficult and puts obstacles in his way. Natural hazards, bad guys, bad luck, trouble with the cops, anything goes.

Here's the paradox: in life we avoid trouble, but in stories we love it. And even more paradoxical: we root for the hero and care about his quest, but somehow we enjoy his suffering.

The author's job here is to give the hero hell. Torment him so that at every stage he seems even further from his goal.

In the mythical structure identified by Joseph Campbell, the series of trials and tests will culminate in the ultimate test. If the hero is a cop and all seems lost, he will go to the bar, get drunk, and get into a fight. In *Thunderball*, James Bond narrowly escapes being eaten by a shark. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo ends up in the web of a spider called Shelob. He will die symbolically and be reborn a new man who will go forth for the final battle and win the prize.

Either way, after undergoing the ordeal and emerging with the prize, the hero has changed from the man he was at the start. He has learned; he has grown.

Growth is good. Instructive. It teaches us things about the human condition.

This, then, is the overarching paradigm; but in order to move the reader along from beginning to triumphant conclusion, there is one great danger to be avoided: the reader falling asleep (or throwing the book away in boredom).

This is where the craft of writing a story comes in.

Part II: Storytelling tricks of the trade

Over the years, storytellers have evolved a specific set of tricks to keep readers or listeners hooked. The foremost of these is curiosity. This is the thread that draws the reader on through a tale and makes sure she doesn't bail out early. Consider this first line to a novel by Ann Quin: "A man called Berg, who changed his name to Greb, came to a seaside town intending to kill his father...." As soon as you read that line a number of questions form in your mind. Who is this guy? Why did he change his name? Why did he want to kill his father? Did he succeed? Why the seaside town? Which seaside town? This, in essence, is the art of storytelling. Raising questions and not answering them. All stories use the reader's curiosity ruthlessly in this manner. Imagine a character in a novel walking into a room and finding a letter on the desk. She opens it, reads it, and gasps in horror. She faints. From that moment on you, as reader, are in agony to know what was in the letter.

Once upon a time: The director's cut

In the 19th century, novels were serialized and published bit-by-bit in periodicals. Thus the novelists, such as Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens, had to put something juicy at the end of each installment to keep the reader on tenterhooks until the next issue. The juicy incident became known as a "cliffhanger" after a character in Thomas Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was left hanging from a cliff face at the end of an installment. Nowadays the commercial break fulfills the same function, but the rules are the same. Make something dramatic happen so that the reader or viewer can't wait to find out what happened next. It's why old-time villains spent so much time tying girls to railway tracks in the silent movies. Will the hero arrive and rescue her in time? Or will the beautiful maiden get run over by a train? Funny thing is, you already know the answer. There is no way the girl ever gets sliced in two by the train, but the part of your brain that responds to story still somehow believes it might happen and responds with a faster heartbeat.

If curiosity draws you in at the micro level, it also does at the macro level. All stories essentially revolve around a central story question: Will Romeo and Juliet get together? Will Ahab find the whale? Will Red Riding Hood be eaten by the wolf?

Ahab: "I see the white whale!"

Promising interesting things to come is an age-old storytelling device. But it is equally effective if you promise something bad is going to happen to the hero. This is called suspense. First the writer gets us to like the protagonist, and then he gives him hell and lets us know it. There are lots of ways to do this, but self-deprecating humor always works as a way to make us like the hero. Remember Mel Gibson at the beginning of *Maverick*? He's sitting astride a horse beneath a tree with a noose around his neck. A cackling, unshaven bad guy has a bag full of rattlesnakes that he is about to throw at the feet of the horse. Mel Gibson says, "It had just been a shitty week for me from the beginning." Who can resist such composure in the face of imminent death? From then on we like him, and so when bad things happen to him we suffer on his behalf. And we somehow enjoy the suffering.

Once upon a time: The director's cut

The next device is to keep making things worse by upping the ante. Setbacks, reversals, twists, turns.... Look at what happens in *Jurassic Park*: the guy and his assistant go to the park, the raptors get loose, the last boat leaves trapping them on the island, a storm blows up, the power goes down, the electric fences corralling the *Tyrannosaurus rex* cease to operate, etc. If it can go wrong, it does. It's horrible; viewers can't bear it. But they love the pain!

We as readers respond emotionally as we read. When the hero is in jeopardy it is our heart that beats faster. Storytellers make this happen by creating experience, rather than imparting information. By doing this you arouse the same emotions in the reader that would appear if he or she were witnessing it in the real world. You don't tell them about the place; you take them there. You do your best to make them touch it and feel it, smell it.

In fiction we do this by writing in scenes. A scene is a piece of action presented to us, unfolding in real time before our eyes. A scene is a fundamental component of the fictive dream.

How do we do enhance the emotional experience? There are number of requirements.

Detail – particularly sensory detail – is what makes the dream seem real. You must build a world that appeals to the reader's five senses.

For example, in the short story *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, an angel falls to earth, but he is a very dilapidated angel. We are told he was "dressed like a ragpicker" with "only a few faded hairs left on his bald skull and very few teeth in his mouth.… His huge buzzard wings, dirty and half-plucked…." But the one detail everyone remembers, which brings this image to life with startling force, is the line "the back side of his wings was strewn with parasites."

Or consider food writer Anthony Bourdain's description of the durian fruit. He said that, after eating it, "your breath will smell as if you'd been French-kissing your dead grandmother."

In summary, to tell a great story you tell the tale of a hero who wants something and spends a long time not getting it. The obstacles get bigger until the climax, when his very life appears on the line. His ordeal takes place in a world powerfully imagined, a landscape full of sensory detail. By some unknown magic, the reader also inhabits this world, receiving a powerful emotional experience – and she stays with it because of the irresistible power of curiosity.

Or, as the 19th-century novelist Wilkie Collins famously said, "Make 'em cry, make 'em laugh, make 'em wait – exactly in that order."

The aliens are going to love "Johnny B. Goode."

The golden record

One thing seems certain: as long as there are people there will be stories to tell, but will there still be stories after there are no longer people?

On August 25, 2012, the Voyager 1 Space Probe crossed the heliopause, which marks the boundary of our solar system, and entered interstellar space. This was the first human-made object to do so. It carries with it a gold-plated phonograph record containing a record of the multifarious aspects of life on Earth, including images, text, and sounds – both man and animal. From the music of Bach and Beethoven, to Chuck Berry, Blind Willie Johnson, and also cricket sounds. According to NASA, it will communicate the story of humankind to extraterrestrial civilizations. In about 40,000 years, it should reach the star Gliese 445, in the constellation Camelopardalis (The Giraffe). Who knows? If there are beings living there and they can figure out how to make a record player, they could be listening to Chuck Berry.

Which means that, long after we have perished as a species, in some far-flung corner of the Universe our stories may still survive.

It's an intriguing possibility. Story might be the one invention that outlasts us.

Not The End

World's shortest story, purportedly by Ernest Hemingway.

Key takeaways

There has been a longstanding split in the communication business in terms of approach.

Right brain/left brain. Gut feel versus logic; intuition and emotion versus facts and figures.

In the red corner were the creatives. Noisy, boisterous, scruffy. Full of passion, hard to control, and quite often rude.

In the blue corner were the tie-wearers. Rational, dispassionate, levelheaded, logical. Usually polite.

The red corner was indulged, but the blue corner was taken seriously.

The wares of the red corner were used – prized, even – but never entirely trusted.

When it came to telling their story, the blue corner didn't use story, they used PowerPoint.

This was despite centuries of evidence that clearly showed man to be an emotional and irrational being. That the way to persuade him was to speak to his heart, not his head.

Over the past 30 or so years the supremely rational neuroscientists have been accumulating the evidence to back up the red corner's case.

Man is a storytelling ape. He understands the world through story, and this is the way to move him.

The debate is no longer academic, if it ever was.

The rise of social media has changed the landscape for good. It is no longer just desirable to use storytelling – it is mandatory. The audience has formidable power. They won't thank you for boring them.

Now more than ever, they want great stories that touch the heart.

Further reading

Books

The Art of Fiction by David Lodge

Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain by Antonio Damasio

How the Mind Works by Steven Pinker

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die by Chip Heath and Dan Heath

Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need by Blake Snyder

Story: Substance, Structure, Style and the Principles of Screenwriting by Robert McKee

Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story by Kendall Haven

The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human by Jonathan Gottschall

Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide to Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence by Lisa Cron

The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers by Christopher Vogler

Writing for Emotional Impact: Advanced Dramatic Techniques to Attract, Engage, and Fascinate the Reader from Beginning to End by Karl Iglesias

Articles

"This Is Your Brain on Metaphors"
by Robert Sapolsky
http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/11/14/this-is-your-brain-on-metaphors/

"Your Brain on Fiction"
by Annie Murphy Paul
http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html?

About the author

Tham Khai Meng

Worldwide Chief Creative Officer & Chairman, WW Creative Council/ Ogilvy & Mather

As Worldwide Chief Creative Officer of Ogilvy & Mather, Tham Khai Meng made history by leading the agency to win Network of the Year at Cannes for two years running in 2012 and 2013. In the process of winning the 2013 title, O&M broke another record by becoming the first network to win more than 100 Lions, with a haul of 155, including four Grand Prix. The same year, client Coca-Cola was named Creative Marketer of the Year at Cannes.

Ad Age has called Khai "One of the world's most influential people in the communication business."

Khai's story began at Central St. Martins in London, where he graduated with a BA First Class Honours. This led to a scholarship to pursue an MA in Film at the Royal College of Art in London.

Upon completing his studies, Khai went into advertising and revealed an early aptitude for big brand work, first at Leo Burnett London and then Chicago; and later in Singapore with stints at McCann Erickson and Batey. He joined O&M in 2000 as Regional Creative Director of Asia Pacific and led them to win the Agency of the Year title for eight straight years. Following this, Khai took on the additional role of Co-Chairman Asia Pacific. He was also inducted into the Campaign Brief Hall of Fame during this time.

In 2009, Khai moved to New York to assume the role of Worldwide Chief Creative Officer. He now oversees the work of the entire O&M worldwide network, including all of its global offices.

One of his first moves was to inculcate "Pervasive Creativity" throughout the company – a concept he originated in which everyone in the organization, regardless of title, has the responsibility to be creative.

The storytelling ape carries our stories to the far-flung corners of our Universe.

As one of the most highly awarded creative directors of his generation, Khai has served on numerous juries. He was President of both the Film and Press juries at Cannes in 2012 and has chaired juries at D&AD, One Show, the Clios, and London International Advertising.

A frequent speaker within the industry and beyond, Khai has spoken at the World Economic Forum, and taught master classes at St. Martins and Royal College of Art in London. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of the Arts.

He is a member of the Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide Board and Executive Committee, and is Chairman of its Worldwide Creative Council. Khai also serves on the board of directors at Miami Ad School, Berlin School of Creative Leadership, and Future of Storytelling New York. He recently became involved in the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

After a lifetime of fighting fires (and starting a few, too) Khai now lives in an historic 19th-century firehouse in New York City – a building that was once home to another ambitious creative when he first arrived in the city: Andy Warhol.

Colophon

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Design
Ogilvy 485, Branding & Graphic Design

June 2014
Issue 7

The Red Papers are published by Ogilvy & Mather

Edition 1:
3,000

Ogilvy