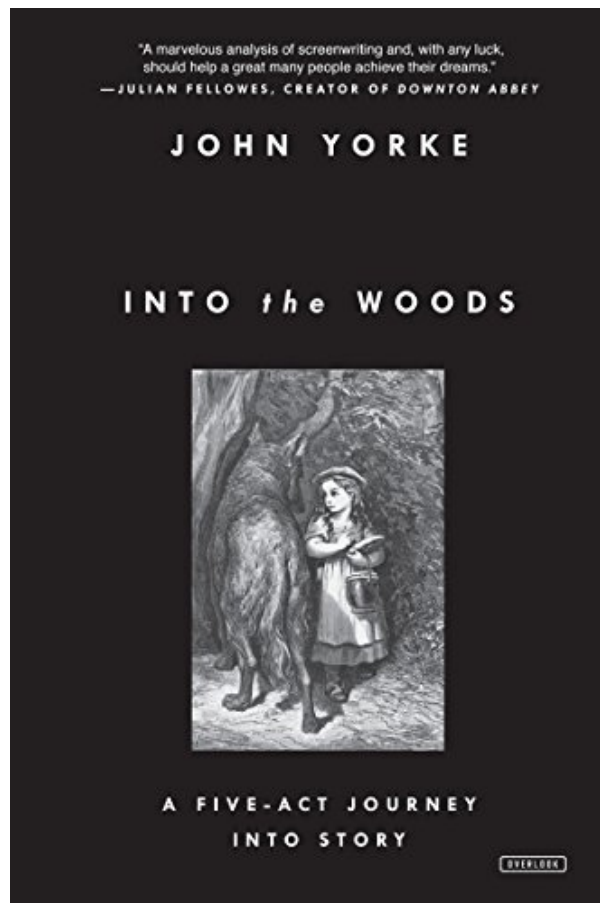


INTO THE WOODS: A FIVE-ACT JOURNEY INTO STORY BY JOHN YORKE



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STORY BY JOHN YORKE PDF



"A marvelous analysis of screenwriting and, with any luck,
should help a great many people achieve their dreams."
—JULIAN FELLOWES, CREATOR OF DOWNTON ABBEY

JOHN YORKE

INTO *the* WOODS



A FIVE-ACT JOURNEY
INTO STORY

OVERLOOK

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Review

“This is a marvelous analysis of screenwriting and, with any luck, should help a great many people achieve their dreams.” (Julian Fellowes, creator/writer, Downton Abbey)

“All script writers will want to read it.” (Caitlin Moran, bestselling author of How to Be a Woman)

“Into the Woods by John Yorke is brilliant on story structure.” (Ken Follett, bestselling author of Pillars of the Earth)

“There is no end of books that instruct us on how to write the perfect screenplay, but few that delve more deeply into the art of storytelling than this erudite volume.” (Financial Times)

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.” (Chris Chibnall, creator/writer, Broadchurch and Gracepoint)

“Outrageously good and by far and away the best book of its kind I've ever read. I recognized so much truth in it. But more than that, I learned a great deal. Time and again, Yorke articulates things I've always felt but have never been able to describe . . . This is a love story to story?erudite, witty and full of practical magic. I struggle to think of the writer who wouldn't benefit from reading it?even if they don't notice because they're too busy enjoying every page.” (Neil Cross, creator/writer, Luther and Crossbones)

“Part ‘how-to’ manual, part ‘why-to’ celebration, Into the Woods is a wide-reaching and infectiously passionate exploration of storytelling in all its guises . . . exciting and thought-provoking.” (Emma Frost, screenwriter, The White Queen and Shameless)

“Brontë aficionados will enjoy the deft interweaving of artifact, biography, and literature, but the greatest pleasure is the expanding chain of associations Lutz creates in each chapter.... The Brontë Cabinet is an engaging read for fans of the Brontë sisters, of course, but also for anyone interested in material culture, the Victorian era, and the history of everyday lives?especially women's lives.” (Susan Hill, author of The

Woman In Black and the Simon Serrailler crime novels)

“Even for a convinced sceptic, John Yorke’s book, with its massive field of reference from Aristotle to Glee, and from Shakespeare to Spooks, is a highly persuasive and highly energetic read.” (Dominic Dromgoole, Artistic Director, the Globe Theatre)

“Of all the books I've read about story construction and the art of fiction, this one is the most comprehensive and concise.” (John Colle, Writer of Master and Commander, Happy Feet, Creation, Walking with Dinosaurs)

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.” (Chris Chibnall, Creator of Broadchurch)

“I absolutely love this book. It's incredible and so well written. I keep trying to find fault but so far no joy – It's so good” (Matt Charman, writer Bridge of Spies; Black Work)

“Excellent” (Peter Straughan, writer of Tinker Tailor Solider Spy, Wolf Hall, Frank)

“Going to read John Yorke's Into The Woods again because it's John Yorke's Into The Woods and that's reason enough ...” (Graham Linehan, writer, Father Ted; The IT Crowd)

“One of my favourite books of last year was John Yorke’s Into The Woods: How Stories Work And Why We Tell Them, a seriously smart distillation of story theory that is as useful to me as a historian as I imagine it is to all the budding screenwriters who have it on their desks” (Dan Jones, author of The Hollow Crown and The Plantagenets)

“Yorke's book, in telling scores of stories in such a fresh, enlightening and accessible manner, is a gripping read from beginning to end.” (Sunday Times)

“Another book on screenwriting! Oh, how I wanted to hate it! I didn't. I loved it. Much of it was fresh to me. And always interesting, always intelligent and, for a writer, always rewarding’ ” (Jimmy McGovern, creator/writer of Cracker; The Street; The Accused)

“In an industry full of so called script gurus and snake oil salesmen, at last there's a book about story that treats writers like grown ups. This isn't about providing us with an ABC of story or telling us how to write a script by numbers. It's an intelligent evaluation into the very nature of storytelling and is the best book on the subject I've read. Quite brilliant” (Tony Jordan, creator/writer of Life on Mars)

“This book is intelligent, well written, incisive and, most of all, exciting. It is the most important book about scriptwriting since William Goldman's Adventures in the Screen Trade” (Peter Bowker, screenwriter Marvellous, Occupation, and Eric & Ernie)

“Into the Woods is brilliant. One of the best books on script writing out there...I loved the book. Inspiring.” (Dominic Mitchell, creator of In the Flesh)

“Terrifyingly Clever... Packed with intelligent argument.” (The Scotsman)

“Its strength is Yorke’s acute perception of the wellsprings of universal narrative structures relevant to all

artistic activities” (The Times (UK))

“A mightily impressive opus, both hugely informative and highly educational. I love the way it’s populated with so many examples - the many combinations of both mass market and the slightly more esoteric giving a something-for-everyone feeling. A brilliant work” (Peter James, author of the Roy Grace series)

“Into The Woods is an amazing achievement. It has a real depth and understanding about story, a fantastically broad frame of reference and it's interesting and absorbing throughout. Full of incredibly useful insights, every TV writer should read the first chapter alone” (Simon Ashdown, former Lead writer and series consultant of Eastenders)

“Books on story structure are ten a penny but Yorke's is the real deal” (Kathryn Flett)

“Terrific...It's a great read, wise and cogent, and a must for all screenwriters” (David Eldrige, writer Festen, In Basildon)

“It's a great read. It makes me smile and say 'Yes!' aloud. Only this and PG Wodehouse do that.” (Lucy Gannon, writer/creator Soldier Soldier, Peak Practice, Frankie, The Best Of Men)

“A mind-blower ... an incredibly dense but very readable tome about the art of storytelling ... Really worth a read” (The Independent)

“Highly recommended reading” (Huffington Post)

“Yorke is aware that the world is not suffering for lack of prescriptive screenwriting manuals. Instead, with Into the Woods, he takes a scalpel to narrative structure – dissecting protagonist, antagonist, inciting incident, crisis and so on – before asking how and why this underlying shape still holds audiences spellbound like a fairytale witch. "A story is like a magnet dragged through randomness," Yorke writes, but while he elegantly untangles the deepest roots of storytelling, he also honours the human need for truth and sense with some more superficial questions: why do series tend to "jump the shark" round about season three, for example, or why is clunky exposition – particularly in medical dramas – so appallingly comical? Sit comfortably, then begin.” (The Guardian)

“This is the ancient template for storytelling, and this, the best book on the subject...Yorke's analysis is superb.” (London Evening Standard)

“I’ve just read a book about professional writing which has genuinely helped me. It’s for those who are serious about avoiding bad ‘How To’ books and want to raise their game, and it’s more intelligent than most of the others. John Yorke’s Into The Woods: How Stories Work And Why We Tell Them is a genuine game-changer and has helped me put past bad habits to rest” (Christopher Fowler)

“One of the most interesting books on screenwriting does not emerge from another Los Angeles screenwriting guru but rather from a London film director, not from another Los Angeles publisher of screenwriting books but a New York publisher called The Overlook Press... Yorke brings forth a tremendous amount of supporting evidence in one of the more erudite books ever written on screenwriting” (Script Magazine)

“A profound and unconventional look at the art of storytelling... Yorke is smart. This isn’t a how-to book... It’s kind of liberating: we can delve into why good stories are so compelling without feeling we need to

suddenly start obeying rules numbered one through ten. Whatever aspect of story he confronts, he does so with humor and flexibility.” (Psychology Today)

“A fine book” (Mark Lawson, The Tablet)

“A comprehensive breakdown of the mysteries and function of drama, and a must-read” (Alec Worley, Author of 2000 AD)

“Probably, in the hackneyed phrase, “the last book on screenwriting you’ll ever need.” He is very good at debunking the claims of some screenwriting gurus, all of whom are busy trying to sell you their own particular brand of snake oil. It’s truly excellent.” (The Daily Telegraph)

About the Author

John Yorke is Managing Director of Angel Station where he works as a drama producer, consultant and lecturer on all forms of storytelling. A former MD of Company Pictures where he Exec Produced Wolf Hall, he’s worked as both Head of Channel Four Drama and Controller of BBC Drama Production. As a commissioning Editor/Executive Producer, he championed Life On Mars, The Street, Shameless and Bodies and in 2005 he created the BBC Writers Academy, a year-long in-depth training scheme which has produced a generation of successful television writers. John is Visiting Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and lives and works in London.

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Praise for Into The Woods:

A Five-Act Journey Into Story

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.”

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and from Shakespeare to Spooks, is a highly persuasive and hugely enjoyable read. It would be hard to beat for information and wisdom about how and why stories are told.”

—Dominic Dromgoole, Artistic Director, the Globe Theatre

Copyright

‘Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.’

G. K. Chesterton

Praise for Into The Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story
Copyright Introduction ACT I HOME 1. What is a Story? 2. Three-Act Structure 3. Five-Act Structure 4. The Importance of Change 5. How We Tell Stories ACT II WOODLAND, DAY 6. Fractals 7. Acts 8. The Inciting Incident 9. Scenes 10. Putting It All Together ACT III THE FOREST 11. Showing and Telling ACT IV THE ROAD BACK, NIGHT 12. Character and Characterization 13. Character and Structural Design 14. Character Individuation 15. Dialogue and Characterization 16. Exposition 17. Subtext ACT V HOME AGAIN, CHANGED 18. Television and the Triumph of Structure 19. Series and Mini-Series Structure 20. Change in Drama Series 21. Home Again 22. Why? APPENDICES I. Act Structure of Raiders of the Lost Ark II. Hamlet – The Structural Form III. Being John Malkovich – The Structural Form IV. My Zinc Bed – The Structural Form V. The Godfather – The Structural Form VI. First and Last Act Parallels: Some Further Examples VII. A Lightning Guide to Screenwriting Gurus Notes Bibliography Acknowledgements Credits Index About the Author About Into the Woods

Introduction

A ship lands on an alien shore and a young man, desperate to prove himself, is tasked with befriending the inhabitants and extracting their secrets. Enchanted by their way of life, he falls in love with a local girl and starts to distrust his masters. Discovering their man has gone native, they in turn resolve to destroy both him and the native population once and for all.

Avatar or Pocahontas? As stories they're almost identical. Some have even accused James Cameron of stealing the Native American myth. 1 But it's both simpler and more complex than that, for the underlying structure is common not only to these two tales, but to all.

Take three different stories:

A dangerous monster threatens a community. One man takes it on himself to kill the beast and restore happiness to the kingdom ...

It's the story of Jaws, released in 1976. But it's also the story of Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem published some time between the eighth and eleventh centuries.

And it's more familiar than that: it's The Thing, it's Jurassic Park, it's Godzilla, it's The Blob – all films with real tangible monsters. If you recast the monsters in human form, it's also every James Bond film, every episode of MI5, House or CSI. You can see the same shape in The Exorcist, The Shining, Fatal Attraction, Scream, Psycho and Saw. The monster may change from a literal one in Nightmare on Elm Street to a

corporation in Erin Brockovich, but the underlying architecture – in which a foe is vanquished and order restored to a community – stays the same. The monster can be fire in *The Towering Inferno*, an upturned boat in *The Poseidon Adventure*, or a boy's mother in *Ordinary People*. Though superficially dissimilar, the skeletons of each are identical.

Our hero stumbles into a brave new world. At first he is transfixed by its splendour and glamour, but slowly things become more sinister ...

It's *Alice in Wonderland*, but it's also *The Wizard of Oz*, *Life on Mars* and *Gulliver's Travels*. And if you replace fantastical worlds with worlds that appear fantastical merely to the protagonists, then quickly you see how *Brideshead Revisited*, *Rebecca*, *The Line of Beauty* and *The Third Man* all fit the pattern too.

When a community finds itself in peril and learns the solution lies in finding and retrieving an elixir far, far away, a member of the tribe takes it on themselves to undergo the perilous journey into the unknown ...

It's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Morte D'Arthur*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down*. And if you transplant it from fantasy into something a little more earthbound, it's *Master and Commander*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Guns of Navarone* and *Apocalypse Now*. If you then change the object of the characters' quest, you find *Rififi*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Easy Rider* and *Thelma & Louise*.

So three different tales turn out to have multiple derivatives. Does that mean that when you boil it down there are only three different types of story? No. *Beowulf*, *Alien* and *Jaws* are 'monster' stories – but they're also about individuals plunged into a new and terrifying world. In classic 'quest' stories like *Apocalypse Now* or *Finding Nemo* the protagonists encounter both monsters and strange new worlds. Even 'Brave New World' stories such as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Witness* and *Legally Blonde* fit all three definitions: the characters all have some kind of quest, and all have their own monsters to vanquish too. Though they are superficially different, they all share the same framework and the same story engine: all plunge their characters into a strange new world; all involve a quest to find a way out of it; and in whatever form they choose to take, in every story 'monsters' are vanquished. All, at some level, too, have as their goal safety, security, completion and the importance of home.

But these tenets don't just appear in films, novels, or indeed TV series like *Homeland* or *The Killing*. A nine-year-old child of my friend decided he wanted to tell a story. He didn't consult anyone about it, he just wrote it down:

A family are looking forward to going on holiday. Mom has to sacrifice the holiday in order to pay the rent. Kids find map buried in garden to treasure hidden in the woods, and decide to go after it. They get in loads of trouble and are chased before they finally find it and go on even better holiday.²

Why would a child unconsciously echo a story form that harks back centuries? Why, when writing so spontaneously, would he display knowledge of story structure that echoes so clearly generations of tales that have gone before? Why do we all continue to draw our stories from the very same well? It could be because each successive generation copies from the last, thus allowing a series of conventions to become established. But while that may help explain the ubiquity of the pattern, its sturdy resistance to iconoclasm and the freshness and joy with which it continues to reinvent itself suggest something else is going on.

Storytelling has a shape. It dominates the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginnings of the recorded word. It's a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it's a shape that may be – though we must be careful – a universal archetype.

'Most writing on art is by people who are not artists: thus all the misconceptions.'

Eugène Delacroix

The quest to detect a universal story structure is not a new one. From the Prague School and the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century, via Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, many have set themselves the task of trying to understand how stories work. In my own field it's a veritable industry – there are hundreds of books about screenwriting (though almost nothing sensible about television). I've read most of them, but the more I read the more two issues nag away:

- Most of them posit completely different systems, all of which claim to be the sole and only way to write stories. How can they all possibly claim to be right?
- None of them asks 'Why?'³

Some of these tomes contain invaluable information; more than a few have worthwhile insights; all of them are keen to tell us how and with great fervour insist that 'there must be an inciting incident on page 12', but none of them explains why this should be. Which, when you think about it, is crazy: if you can't answer 'why', the 'how' is an edifice built on sand. And then, once you attempt to answer it yourself, you start to realize that much of the theory – incisive though some of it is – doesn't quite add up. Did God decree an inciting incident should occur on page 12, or that there were twelve stages to a hero's journey? Of course not: they're constructs. Unless we can find a coherent reason why these shapes exist, then there's little reason to take these people seriously. They're snake-oil salesmen, peddling their wares on the frontier.⁴

I've been telling stories for almost all my adult life, and I've had the extraordinary privilege of working on some of the most popular shows on British television. I've created storylines that have reached over 20 million viewers and I've been intimately involved with programmes that helped redefine the dramatic landscape. I've worked, almost uniquely in the industry, on both art-house and populist mainstream programs, loved both equally, and the more I've told stories, the more I've realized that the underlying pattern of these plots – the ways in which an audience demands certain things – has an extraordinary uniformity.

Eight years ago I started to read everything on storytelling. More importantly I started to interrogate all the writers I'd worked with about how they write. Some embraced the conventions of three-act structure, some refuted it – and some refuted it while not realizing they used it anyway. A few writers swore by four acts, some by five; others claimed that there were no such things as acts at all. Some had conscientiously learned from screenwriting manuals while others decried structural theory as the devil's spawn. But there was one unifying factor in every good script I read, whether authored by brand new talent or multiple award-winners, and that was that they all shared the same underlying structural traits.

By asking two simple questions – what were these traits; and why did they recur – I unlocked a cupboard crammed full of history. I soon discovered that the three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age but an articulation of something much more primal; that modern act structure was a reaction to dwindling audience attention spans and the invention of the curtain. Perhaps more intriguingly, the history of five-act drama took me back to the Romans, via the nineteenth-century French dramatist Eugène Scribe and

German novelist Gustav Freytag to Molière, Shakespeare and Jonson. I began to understand that, if there really was an archetype, it had to apply not just to screenwriting, but to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern or none at all. If storytelling does have a universal shape, this has to be self-evident.

It was an investigation that was to produce a number of interesting offshoots. By concentrating initially on film and television, I was able to:

- explore how story structure works, not just in single-protagonist storytelling but also in multi-protagonist dramas
- explain why protagonists have to be active
- illustrate how – in more detail than ever before – the structural principles work in television
- understand how narration can destroy drama
- expound on why so many characters die in the penultimate stage of any drama
- explain why almost all cops are mavericks
- elucidate why TV drama series all have a limited lifespan, or else become parodies of themselves – normally within three years
- illustrate how characterization is not only born out of dramatic structure but is essential to it.

These were, however, discoveries that started to appear incidental to something more important. What started as a basic exploration of screenwriting morphed slowly into a historical, philosophical, scientific and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling, and – in turn – to the realization that dramatic structure is not a construct, but a product of human psychology, biology and physics.

In *Into the Woods* I attempt to explore and unfold the extraordinary beauty of this structure; to touch on its historical development, and to understand how and why it is manifest in all aspects of fiction, from character to dialogue, but beyond that too. I may use films primarily as a reference because of their familiarity, but the scope of the book stretches beyond cinema, not just to television drama and its relationship to *The Apprentice* and *The X Factor* but further, to touch on how we narrate history, how we interpret art and advertising – even how, in a legal trial, we form our opinions on a subject's innocence or guilt. Why were the Central Park Five originally thought to be guilty and convicted for a crime they didn't commit? It all has to do with story: why did *The Voice* sweep away all before it? How does some modern art exploit its patrons' gullibility? All in the end are products of narrative.

It's been a journey that – finally – let me articulate not only an underlying structure from which these stories are formed but, more importantly, allowed me to explain why that shape exists, and why anyone, without study, can replicate it entirely from within. How can a nine-year-old boy produce a perfect story from nowhere? It's a key question: understand that and you unlock the true shape and purpose of, indeed the true reason for, dramatic structure itself. It's a question, certainly, that no teacher of screenwriting ever appears to ask.

But do you need to know?

You have to liberate people from [film theory], not give them a corset in which they have to fit their story, their life, their emotions, the way they feel about the world. Our curse is that the film industry is 80 per cent run by the half-informed. You have people who have read Joseph Campbell and Robert McKee, and now they're talking to you about the hero's journey, and you want to fucking cut off their dick and stuff it in their mouth.⁵

Guillermo Del Toro echoes the thoughts of many writers and filmmakers; there's an ingrained belief for many that the study of structure is, implicitly, a betrayal of their genius; it's where mediocrities seek a substitute muse.⁶ Such study can only end in one way. David Hare puts it well: 'The audience is bored. It can predict the exhausted UCLA film-school formulae – acts, arcs and personal journeys – from the moment that they start cranking. It's angry and insulted by being offered so much Jung-for-Beginners, courtesy of Joseph Campbell. All great work is now outside genre.'⁷

Charlie Kaufman, who has done more than most in Hollywood to push the boundaries of form, goes further: 'There's this inherent screenplay structure that everyone seems to be stuck on, this three-act thing. It doesn't really interest me. I actually think I'm probably more interested in structure than most people who write screenplays, because I think about it.'⁸ But they protest too much. Hare's study of addiction *My Zinc Bed* and Kaufman's screenplay for *Being John Malkovich* are, as we shall see, perfect examples of classic story form. However much they hate it (and their anger I think betrays them), they can't help but follow a blueprint they profess to detest. Why?

All stories are forged from the same template, writers simply don't have any choice as to the structure they use and, as I hope to show, the laws of physics, of logic and of form dictate they must all follow the very same path. What that template is and why writers follow it; how and why we tell stories is the subject of this book.⁹

Is this therefore the magic key to storytelling? Such hubris requires caution – the compulsion to order, to explain, to catalogue, is also the tendency of the train-spotter. In denying the rich variety and extraordinary multi-faceted nature of narrative, one risks becoming no better than Casaubon, the desiccated husk from *Middlemarch*, who turned his back on life while seeking to explain it. It's all too tempting to reduce wonder to a scientific formula and unweave the rainbow.

But there are rules. As the creator of *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*, Aaron Sorkin, puts it: 'The real rules are the rules of drama, the rules that Aristotle talks about. The fake TV rules are the rules that dumb TV execs will tell you; "You can't do this, you've got to do – You need three of these and five of those." Those things are silly.'¹⁰ Sorkin expresses what all great artists know – that they need to have an understanding of craft. Every form of artistic composition, like any language, has a grammar, and that grammar, that structure, is not just a construct – it's the most beautiful and intricate expression of the workings of the human mind.

It's important to assert that writers don't need to understand structure. Many of the best have an uncanny ability to access story shape unconsciously, for it lies as much within their minds as it does in a nine-year-old's. This isn't a book advocating its conscious use. Its aim is to explore and examine narrative shape, ask how and why it exists, and why a child can write it effortlessly – why they can follow the rules.

There's no doubt that for many those rules help. Friedrich Engels put it pithily: 'Freedom is the recognition of necessity.'¹¹ A piano played without knowledge of time and key soon becomes wearisome to listen to; following the conventions of form didn't inhibit Beethoven, Mozart and Shostakovich. Even if you're going to break rules (and why shouldn't you?) you have to have a solid grounding in them first. The modernist pioneers – Abstract Impressionists, Cubists, Surrealists and Futurists – all were masters of figurative painting before they shattered the form. They had to know their restrictions before they could transcend them. As the art critic Robert Hughes observed:

With scarcely an exception, every significant artist of the last hundred years, from Seurat to Matisse, from Picasso to Mondrian, from Beckmann to de Kooning, was drilled (or drilled himself) in 'academic' drawing – the long tussle with the unforgiving and the real motif which, in the end, proved to be the only basis on which the real formal achievements of modernism could be raised. Only in that way was the right radical

distortion within a continuous tradition earned, and its results raised above the level of improvisory play ... The philosophical beauty of Mondrian's squares and grids begins with the empirical beauty of his apple trees.¹²

Cinema and television contain much great work that isn't structurally orthodox (particularly in Europe), but even then its roots still lie firmly in, and are a reaction to, a universal archetype. As Hughes says, they are a conscious distortion of a continuing tradition. The masters did not abandon the basic tenets of composition; they merely subsumed them into art no longer bound by verisimilitude. All great artists – in music, drama, literature, in art itself – have an understanding of the rules whether that knowledge is conscious or not. 'You need the eye, the hand and the heart,' proclaims the ancient Chinese proverb. 'Two won't do.'

This isn't a 'how to write' book. There are enough gurus already. Ostensibly it's about dramatic structure – about how TV dramas, plays and films work – though journalism, poetry and the novel are all called on at different times to illustrate salient points. If there is a preference for film examples it is simply because they are either well known or easily accessible, but the principles cannot be specific to that medium because they're merely the more recent technological manifestations of a far older process. The beauty of exploring film and television is not just that it lends itself to an easily accessible analysis, but that such analysis acts a bit like a barium meal: used correctly it illuminates not just all story structure, but all narrative – fictional and otherwise; it breaks open and reveals the very way we perceive and render all experience. So the structures of film and television drama are the bedrock of this book, but the implications, and the lessons these mediums reveal to us, are wider.

Storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all – almost – as breathing. From the mythical campfire tale to its explosion in the post-television age, it dominates our lives. It behooves us then to try and understand it. Delacroix countered the fear of knowledge succinctly: 'First learn to be a craftsman; it won't keep you from being a genius.' In stories throughout the ages there is one motif that continually recurs – the journey into the woods to find the dark but life-giving secret within. This book attempts to find what lurks at the heart of the forest. All stories begin here ...

Act I

Home

1

What is a Story?

'Once upon a time ...'

Immediately you read that opening phrase, you know you're going to encounter a setting, and in that place a series of events will occur – almost certainly to an individual. In basic terms that's about it – the very best definition of a story: 'Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened.' There are far more complex explanations of course, most of which we will touch on, but none that is so simple yet all-encompassing.

What an archetypal story does is introduce you to a central character – the protagonist – and invite you to identify with them; effectively they become your avatar in the drama. You live the experience of the story vicariously through them: when they're in jeopardy, you're in jeopardy; when they're ecstatic, you are too. Watch children as they view Transformers or Hannah Montana – it's extraordinary to see the process by which their feelings are sublimated and they become inextricably linked with the fortunes of their fictional

counterparts.

So you have a central character, you empathize with them, and something then happens to them, and that something is the genesis of the story. Jack discovers a beanstalk; Bond learns Blofeld plans to take over the world. The ‘something’ is almost always a problem, sometimes a problem disguised as an opportunity. It’s usually something that throws your protagonist’s world out of kilter – an explosion of sorts in the normal steady pace of their lives: Alice falls down a rabbit hole; Jack Bauer learns of a terrorist plot; Godot doesn’t turn up.

Your character has a problem which they must solve: Alice has to get back to the real world; Jack has 24 hours to find his wife and daughter; Vladimir and Estragon have to wait. The story is the journey they go on to sort out the problem presented. On the way they may learn something new about themselves; they’ll certainly be faced with a series of obstacles they have to overcome; there will likely be a moment near the end where all hope seems lost, and this will almost certainly be followed by a last-minute resurrection of hope, a final battle against the odds, and victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.

You’ll see this shape (or its tragic counterpart) working at some level in every story. It might be big and pronounced as in *Alien* or *Jaws*, it might be subtler as in *Ordinary People*, or it might represent a reaction against it (Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend*) – but it will be there, just as it is in the work of Del Toro, Kaufman and Hare. It reveals itself most clearly in the framework of the classic crime or hospital drama. A murder is committed or someone gets sick; the detective or doctor must find the killer or make their patient well. Such tales are literature’s heroin – storytelling with all impurities removed; a hit of pleasure; minimum effort for maximum reward. That’s why detective fiction is so popular; the unifying factors that appear at some level in all stories are at their most accessible here.

But if the problem and the search for its answer provide the framework for stories, what elements are they actually built from?

The Essential Building Blocks

The protagonist

The protagonist is the person around whom the story revolves. Normally it’s as obvious as that. It’s Batman, it’s James Bond, it’s Indiana Jones. If it’s difficult to identify a protagonist then maybe the story is about more than one person (say *Game of Thrones* or Robert Altman’s *Short Cuts*) but it will always be (at least when it’s working) the person the audience care about most.

But already we encounter difficulties. ‘Care’ is often translated as ‘like’, which is why so many writers are given the note (often by non-writing executives) ‘Can you make them nice?’ Frank Cottrell Boyce, who wrote the script for *Hilary and Jackie* and is one of Britain’s most successful screenwriters, puts it more forcibly than most: ‘Sympathy is like crack cocaine to industry execs. I’ve had at least one wonderful screenplay of mine maimed... Yes, of course the audience has to relate to your characters, but they don’t need to approve of them. If characters are going to do something bad, Hollywood wants you to build in an excuse note.’¹

The question of sympathy has become more complex in recent years. Television, historically, has been the medium of heroes, of “niceness” (*Gunsmoke/The Waltons*) and film the medium of dysfunctional complexity (*Bonnie and Clyde/Five Easy Pieces*). All that started to change after *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, but it was only with the advent of HBO, *Oz*, and then – seismically – *The Sopranos*, that film and television effectively swapped places². Suddenly it seemed, the television world woke up to the idea that you could engage with a character who didn’t love their cat just as the film world seemed to forget it at the same time.

When, five episodes into its first season, Tony Soprano cold bloodedly killed a man while taking his daughter to college³ the world shifted on its axis⁴. The recent revolution in the artistic ambition of television is rooted in understanding that empathy and sympathy are not the same thing. Dark, brooding, borderline psychopaths from *The Shield* to Don Draper have mapped out a new frontier. ⁵

What *The Sopranos'* showrunner David Chase understood instinctively was we don't like Satan in *Paradise Lost* – we love him. And we love him because he's the perfect gleeful embodiment of evil. Niceness tends to kill characters – if there is nothing wrong with them, nothing to offend us, then there's almost certainly nothing to attract our attention either. Much more interesting are the rough edges, the darkness – and we love these things because though we may not consciously want to admit it, they touch something deep inside us. If you play video games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (and millions do), then you occupy literal avatars that do little but kill, maim, destroy, or sleep with the obstacles in your path. We are capable of entering any kind of head. David Edgar justified his play about the Nazi architect Albert Speer by saying: 'The awful truth – and it is awful, in both senses of the word – is that the response most great drama asks of us is neither "yes please" nor "no thanks" but "you too?". Or, in the cold light of dawn, "there but for the grace of God go I".'⁶

The key to empathy, then, does not lie in manners or good behaviour. Nor does it lie, as is often claimed, in the understanding of motive. It's certainly true that if we know why characters do what they do, we will love them more. However, that's a symptom of empathy, not its root cause. It lies in its ability to access and bond with our unconscious.

Why are so many fictional policeman – and, indeed, doctors – mavericks? Laziness on the writer's behalf possibly, but can that really account for the widespread prevalence of one particular character trait? In 2011 Britain seemed to become obsessed with the character of Sarah Lund – the dysfunctional detective at the heart of DR's *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*). Like her pulp-fiction counterparts, she broke the rules, ignored her bosses and went behind their backs; like them she was told by her bosses the Danish equivalent of 'you've got 24 hours or I'm taking you off the case'. Why did she – and why do all mavericks – prove so popular? Largely because that's how many of us feel at times too. Haven't we all at some time felt we're surrounded by idiots, by overly bureaucratic managers who don't understand us, by uncreative colleagues capable of managing only upwards and unable to see the truth in front of their eyes?

If empathy is about entering the mind of a fictional character, then it helps if that mind contains feelings similar to our own. When we watch Sarah Lund rejecting her bosses, we think, 'I wish I could do that'; when we watch Betty Suarez in *Ugly Betty*, we bleed for her clumsiness, recognizing her own inability to fit in within ourselves. There is something immensely attractive in living through a character who does obtain revenge, who is proved to have value or – like the Danish detective – is finally proved right. The attraction of wish-fulfillment, benevolent or masochistic, can't be underestimated – what else can explain the ubiquity of *Cinderella* or the current global dominance of the *Marvel* franchise? Isn't there a Peter Parker in most of us longing to turn into Spider-Man? Our favourite characters are the ones who, at some silent level, embody what we all want for ourselves: the good, the bad and ugly too. We may recoil at the idea of empathizing with Adolf Hitler, but as *Downfall* attests we can and do. A good writer can force us to connect with anyone.⁷

The moment the audience is caught in the conspiracy of story is the most magical in all of drama; you'll know it well from live theatre – it's the point at which the protagonist has burrowed inside and taken over the spectator, the moment the coughing stops. There will be more on empathy later, but for now it's worth noting that we sanction the slaughter in *Modern Warfare* because the character is us, and we are on a mission to save the world.

The mission part is important – you can tell a huge amount about a character from their goals and desires. We will know much of a character if we know they want to save the lost Ark from the Nazis, or are willing to run from the police to Mexico but won't take the easiest route through Texas, the state in which they were raped.

Indeed, all archetypal stories are defined by this one essential tenet: the central character has an active goal. They desire something. If characters don't then it's almost impossible to care for them, and care we must. They are our avatars and thus our entry point: they are the ones we most want to win or to find redemption – or indeed be punished if they've transgressed, for subconsciously we can be deeply masochistic in our desires. Effectively they're us.

The antagonist

So something happens to a central character that throws them off the beaten track and forces them into a world they've never seen. A beanstalk grows, a patient collapses, a murder is committed. All of these actions have consequences, which in turn provoke obstacles that are commonly dubbed forces of antagonism – the sum total of all the obstacles that obstruct a character in the pursuit of their desires. These forces accumulate from this initial moment as we head toward the climax of the story.

In the simple detective story they're catalysed by the murder; in the medical drama the patient. They are the problem or obstacle the protagonist has to overcome. If there's a killer or an evil mastermind bent on planetary domination then they are, obviously, the antagonists; the patient may not behave antagonistically, but they effectively embody the illness that will be the true enemy in the drama. The antagonist is thus the thing or person the protagonist must vanquish to achieve their goal.

The detective and 'monster' templates illustrate this well, but antagonism can manifest itself in many different ways – most interestingly when it lies within the protagonist. Cowardice, drunkenness, lack of self-esteem – all will serve as internal obstacles that prevent a character reaching fulfillment; all, for reasons we will discover, make the person more real. While antagonists can be external (James Bond), internal (The Diving Bell and the Butterfly) or both (Jaws), all have one thing in common which Hitchcock summarized succinctly: 'The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture.'⁹ The best James Bond films are the ones with the best baddies; the more effective the forces of antagonism, the greater the story.

In the simple thriller form the antagonist is marked out by their desire to control and dominate the lives of others. They don't follow the moral codes of the community; more often than not they're an embodiment of selfishness. They are also, historically, often marked by physical or mental deformity. Le Chiffre's maladjusted tear duct in the film of Casino Royale is the modern equivalent of Dr No's missing hands or Scaramanga's third nipple in The Man with the Golden Gun. In a more politically correct age, the physical flaw (clearly an outer manifestation of inner damage) has been scaled down to a level society finds acceptable. If the antagonist is internal, the same principles apply: the enemy within works in opposition to the host's better nature – it cripples them. It stands in opposition to everything they might be. It is this that starts to hint at story structure's deeper function.

What do Bond and Blofeld, Sarah and the Terminator, Hank Schrader and Walter White, Rust Cohle and Marty Hart have in common? 'We're not so very different you and I,' says Karla to Smiley in Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy. 'We both spend our lives looking for the weaknesses in one another's systems.'

They're all opposites.

As the Joker, displaying an uncharacteristic grasp of story structure, says to Batman in The Dark Knight,¹⁰ 'You complete me'. We will look at the reason for this later, but for now it's enough to note that all forces of

antagonism embody the qualities missing in their protagonist's lives.

The desire

If a character doesn't want something, they're passive. And if they're passive, they're effectively dead. Without a desire to animate the protagonist, the writer has no hope of bringing the character alive, no hope of telling a story and the work will almost always be boring. Aaron Sorkin put it succinctly, 'Somebody's got to want something, something's got to be standing in their way of getting it. You do that and you'll have a scene.'¹¹

At its most basic, that's all story is. The Russian actor, director and theoretician Constantin Stanislavski first articulated the idea that characters are motivated by desire.¹² As in real life, so in character: we are all motivated by objectives, however small, however inconsequential, for most minutes of every day. If we weren't, we wouldn't get out of bed. The Knights of the Round Table only come alive when they learn of their Grail, and so it is with all characters. To find Nemo, to put out the Towering Inferno, to clear their name, to catch a thief – purpose must be bestowed and actively sought, or a character is dead. 'Tell me what you want,' said Anton Chekhov, 'and I will tell you what manner of man you are.'¹³

Inevitably there are caveats. It's not always enough for a hero to want love or happiness; it's too nebulous, too intangible. The most popular works embody desire in an object. Protagonists want 'Juliet'; they want 'Godot'; they want 'the lost Ark'. In film and television in particular, desires tend to be simple, tangible and easily stated: a trophy, something that can be seen or held. In *Raiders* only the lost Ark will save the world; in *Notting Hill*, love can be found in Anna Scott; *Citizen Kane* is built on a reporter's mission to explain 'Rosebud', *Apocalypse Now* on Captain Willard's desire to kill Colonel Kurtz. In television series the goal will change weekly but it will almost always be a physical embodiment of the protagonists' mission to save, preserve or enhance their world.

Whether simple (kill the shark) or profound (discover the meaning of 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane*), the underlying 'grail quest' structure is clear. Cops want to catch the killer, doctors want to heal their patient; in truth it doesn't actually matter what the object is, its importance is bestowed by those in pursuit. In *North by Northwest*, everyone is simply chasing microfilm of an unspecified variety. Again, Hitchcock says it best: '[We] have a name in the studio, and we call it the "MacGuffin". It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.'¹⁴

So a grail can be any object, but there's another caveat too. Almost all successful plays, films and novels are about primal human desires: success (*Legally Blonde*), revenge (*Falling Down*), love (*Notting Hill*), survival (*Alien*) or the protection of one's family or home (*Straw Dogs*). Why else would we consume a story so ravenously? Love, home, belonging, friendship, survival and self-esteem recur continually because they're the subjects that matter to us most. *The Walking Dead*, in which a small gang of survivors battles a world taken over by Zombies, embodies all these elements very clearly. There's one overriding desire – to survive and prosper – yet each episode contains its own sub-goal – to get off the roof, to get the guns, to find the family or the missing girl. As in all drama, we watch as the characters seek security and vanquish anything that threatens it, just as we'd like to believe we would do ourselves.

When 'something happens' to a hero at the beginning of a drama, that something, at some level, is a disruption to their perceived security. Duly alarmed, they seek to rectify their situation; their 'want' is to find that security once again. They may often, however, choose to find that security in the wrong place. What a character thinks is good for them is often at odds with what actually is. This conflict, as we shall see, appears to be one of the fundamental tenets of structure, because it embodies the battle between external and internal

desire.

External and internal desire

Hollywood blockbusters can be visceral and exciting experiences. Tantalizing in their promise, easy and effortless to digest, they glitter seductively, promising the vicarious pleasures of sex, violence, romance, vengeance, destruction and earned glory. Technically brilliant, occasionally profoundly moving but ... why do they so often feel like an empty experience? Why do so few linger in the mind? Why so often does one leave the movie theatre slightly dejected, uneasy, stuffed with a surfeit of sugar?

The answer appears to lie, like everything else, within structure. Blockbusters are, with one or two exceptions, two-dimensional. It's a world where desire is simple: the hero wants something – to 'kill Bill' or find the secret of the Unicorn. In pursuit of that goal the multiplex hero doesn't change.

The cynic might well say that's because of the demands of the franchise – we want James Bond to be the same in every film. But Bond is a particular kind of character; he is the refined, simplified, hydrogenated bastardization of a deeper archetype.¹⁵ He is white bread: impurities removed, digestion eased; a product of the demand for the thrill of story minus its more troubling and disturbing elements – the offspring of our desire for simplicity and repetition. Bond is two-dimensional because he doesn't change; he has a dimension removed so we may repeatedly enjoy him. Bond just wants; he is an embodiment of pure desire. Three-dimensional characters, however, do change; their purchase is deeper. They have both a want and a need, and they are not necessarily the same thing.

When we first meet Thelma and Louise, they are living in darkness, mortgage-holders on a conservative American society. In *The Lives of Others*, Hauptmann Wiesler is a Stasi agent, the product of a world where empathy doesn't exist. In such terrain he can flourish – his power and steel are terrifying.

Thelma, Louise and Wiesler are all flawed characters, and it is this concept of 'flaw' – or of something lacking – that is absolutely critical in three-dimensional storytelling. Wiesler cannot care; the women are unknowingly repressed. These internalized characteristics are what each character needs to conquer. In order to become fully realized, they need to go on a journey to overcome their weakness, their flaws within.

Flaw or need isn't the same as their want or desire. Wiesler wants to punish the dissident couple he has been sent to spy on; Thelma and Louise want to escape the police and get to Mexico. Both sets of characters go on a journey to recognize that what they want stands in direct opposition to what they need. Going to Mexico or imprisoning dissidents will not make them complete.

The Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp coined the rather beautiful term 'lack' for what a protagonist is missing in the initial stages of any story, and it's this lack that three-dimensional stories exploit. A character seeks what they want and in so doing realizes instead their need. Their lack is lacked no more; they have overcome their flaws and become whole.

While it's possible for characters to get what they want and what they need (certainly that's what happens in *Aliens* or *Star Wars*), the true, more universal and more powerful archetype occurs when the initial, ego-driven goal is abandoned for something more important, more nourishing, more essential. In *Rocky*, *Cars*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Midnight Run* and *Tootsie*, the heroes find a goal they weren't aware they were looking for. Why this shape should be more truthful, we will discuss later, but we shouldn't judge the more simplistic archetype too harshly. Detective or crime fiction – indeed any world where 'the Mountie gets his man' – will always be popular. After all, if the protagonist is us it's comforting to be told by proxy that we're right, that we're surrounded by idiots and that everyone else is wrong. Perhaps, however, we shouldn't be told that too often. Films that work on a three-dimensional level, in which characters don't

get what they initially want, affect us more profoundly and it is this that explains their deeper purchase; they are whole-grain to the two-dimensional, processed white-bread world of the blockbuster. Fun as they are, it's hard to derive much sustenance from repeated viewings of War of the Worlds, Independence Day or The Day After Tomorrow.

Characters then should not always get what they want, but should – if they deserve it – get what they need. That need, or flaw, is almost always present at the beginning of the film. The want, however, cannot become clear until after the inciting incident.

The inciting incident¹⁶

All stories have a premise – ‘What if ...?’

A stuttering monarch takes instruction from a colonial maverick ...

A slum dweller from Mumbai is accused of cheating on Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? ...

A junk-collecting robot is whisked away from his home planet ...

This ‘What if’ is almost always the inciting incident and inciting incidents are always the ‘something’ that happens in every story. Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened ...

Phil Connor is a misanthropic news reporter who would rather stick pins in his eyes than report on Groundhog Day and the ludicrous weather prophesies the locals attribute to their little animal - Punxsatawney Phil. Disparaging everyone and everything in this small Pennsylvania town, he can't wait to get back home to Pittsburgh, but when he's caught in a blizzard he's forced to stay the night in the place he despises. Groundhog Day tells the story of what happens when he wakes the next morning to discover he's reliving the same endless day again – he's caught in a time loop. He's trapped.

Connor's world is literally blown out of shape. That's the inciting incident – or part of it, because what the inciting incident must also do is awaken a desire. We go back to our story shape: a problem occurs; a solution is sought. Connor's solution is to break out of the time loop and get back home any way he can – that's his want, and the ways he chooses to pursue it (from denial through to acceptance via the five stages of grief) – that's the film.

An inciting incident is always the catalyst for the protagonist's desire. In Grey's Anatomy or ER, it will be the patient presenting themselves for treatment. In Luther or C.S.I., it will be the corpse that begs the question ‘Who did this to me?’ Technically, ‘Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened ...’ is a premise, ‘and because of that I'm going to do this ...’ is a story.

We will explore the more detailed structure of inciting incidents later. For now, though, it's perhaps interesting to note that the first attempt to codify them was by A. W. Schlegel in 1808, who called them ‘first determinations’.¹⁷ It might be useful to see them as the subject of a film's trailer: it's the moment the journey begins.

The journey

In Terminator 2, James Cameron's enormously successful and groundbreaking sequel, the writer/director made two significant changes to Schwarzenegger's character. Arnie was turned from villain into hero,

arguably helping position him as a 'family-friendly' star, but the far more significant adjustment was the upgrade the character underwent. The new model Terminator, the T2, unlike his predecessor, was now programmed to learn from his surroundings and experience. Cunningly, his ability to undergo internal change was actually built into the script.

INTO THE WOODS: A FIVE-ACT JOURNEY INTO STORY BY JOHN YORKE PDF

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INTO THE WOODS: A FIVE-ACT JOURNEY INTO STORY BY JOHN YORKE PDF

The Revolutionary guide to dramatic writing, whether you're writing the next Chinatown, Breaking Bad, or Glengarry Glen Ross.

The idea of Into the Woods is not to supplant works by Aristotle, Lajos Egri, Robert McKee, David Mamet, or any other writers of guides for screenwriters and playwrights, but to pick up on their cues and take the reader on a historical, philosophical, scientific, and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling. In this exciting and wholly original book, John Yorke not only shows that there is truly a unifying shape to narrative—one that echoes the great fairytale journey into the woods, and one, like any great art, that comes from deep within—he explains why, too.

With examples ranging from The Godfather to True Detective, Mad Men to Macbeth, and fairy tales to Forbrydelsen (The Killing), Yorke utilizes Shakespearean five-act structure as a key to analyzing all storytelling in all narrative forms, from film and television to theatre and novel-writing—a big step from the usual three-act approach.

Into the Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story is destined to sit alongside David Mamet's Three Uses of the Knife, Robert McKee's Story, Syd Field's Screenplay, and Lajos Egri's The Art of Dramatic Writing as one of the most original, useful, and inspiring books ever on dramatic writing. 20 b&w illustrations

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Review

“This is a marvelous analysis of screenwriting and, with any luck, should help a great many people achieve their dreams.” (Julian Fellowes, creator/writer, Downton Abbey)

“All script writers will want to read it.” (Caitlin Moran, bestselling author of How to Be a Woman)

“Into the Woods by John Yorke is brilliant on story structure.” (Ken Follett, bestselling author of Pillars of the Earth)

“There is no end of books that instruct us on how to write the perfect screenplay, but few that delve more deeply into the art of storytelling than this erudite volume.” (Financial Times)

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.” (Chris Chibnall, creator/writer, Broadchurch and Gracepoint)

“Outrageously good and by far and away the best book of its kind I've ever read. I recognized so much truth in it. But more than that, I learned a great deal. Time and again, Yorke articulates things I've always felt but have never been able to describe . . . This is a love story to story?erudite, witty and full of practical magic. I struggle to think of the writer who wouldn't benefit from reading it?even if they don't notice because they're too busy enjoying every page.” (Neil Cross, creator/writer, Luther and Crossbones)

“Part ‘how-to’ manual, part ‘why-to’ celebration, Into the Woods is a wide-reaching and infectiously passionate exploration of storytelling in all its guises . . . exciting and thought-provoking.” (Emma Frost, screenwriter, The White Queen and Shameless)

“Brontë aficionados will enjoy the deft interweaving of artifact, biography, and literature, but the greatest pleasure is the expanding chain of associations Lutz creates in each chapter.... The Brontë Cabinet is an engaging read for fans of the Brontë sisters, of course, but also for anyone interested in material culture, the Victorian era, and the history of everyday lives?especially women's lives.” (Susan Hill, author of The Woman In Black and the Simon Serrailier crime novels)

“Even for a convinced sceptic, John Yorke's book, with its massive field of reference from Aristotle to Glee, and from Shakespeare to Spooks, is a highly persuasive and highly energetic read.” (Dominic Dromgoole, Artistic Director, the Globe Theatre)

“Of all the books I've read about story construction and the art of fiction, this one is the most comprehensive and concise.” (John Colle, Writer of Master and Commander, Happy Feet, Creation, Walking with Dinosaurs)

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.” (Chris Chibnall, Creator of Broadchurch)

“I absolutely love this book. It's incredible and so well written. I keep trying to find fault but so far no joy – It's so good” (Matt Charman, writer Bridge of Spies; Black Work)

“Excellent” (Peter Straughan, writer of Tinker Tailor Solider Spy, Wolf Hall, Frank)

“Going to read John Yorke's Into The Woods again because it's John Yorke's Into The Woods and that's reason enough ...” (Graham Linehan, writer, Father Ted; The IT Crowd)

“One of my favourite books of last year was John Yorke's Into The Woods: How Stories Work And Why We Tell Them, a seriously smart distillation of story theory that is as useful to me as a historian as I imagine it is to all the budding screenwriters who have it on their desks” (Dan Jones, author of The Hollow Crown and The Plantagenets)

“Yorke's book, in telling scores of stories in such a fresh, enlightening and accessible manner, is a gripping read from beginning to end.” (Sunday Times)

“Another book on screenwriting! Oh, how I wanted to hate it! I didn't. I loved it. Much of it was fresh to me.

And always interesting, always intelligent and, for a writer, always rewarding' ” (Jimmy McGovern, creator/writer of Cracker; The Street; The Accused)

“In an industry full of so called script gurus and snake oil salesmen, at last there's a book about story that treats writers like grown ups. This isn't about providing us with an ABC of story or telling us how to write a script by numbers. It's an intelligent evaluation into the very nature of storytelling and is the best book on the subject I've read. Quite brilliant” (Tony Jordan, creator/writer of Life on Mars)

“This book is intelligent, well written, incisive and, most of all, exciting. It is the most important book about scriptwriting since William Goldman's Adventures in the Screen Trade” (Peter Bowker, screenwriter Marvellous, Occupation, and Eric & Ernie)

“Into the Woods is brilliant. One of the best books on script writing out there...I loved the book. Inspiring.” (Dominic Mitchell, creator of In the Flesh)

“Terrifyingly Clever... Packed with intelligent argument.” (The Scotsman)

“Its strength is Yorke's acute perception of the wellsprings of universal narrative structures relevant to all artistic activities” (The Times (UK))

“A mightily impressive opus, both hugely informative and highly educational. I love the way it's populated with so many examples - the many combinations of both mass market and the slightly more esoteric giving a something-for-everyone feeling. A brilliant work” (Peter James, author of the Roy Grace series)

“Into The Woods is an amazing achievement. It has a real depth and understanding about story, a fantastically broad frame of reference and it's interesting and absorbing throughout. Full of incredibly useful insights, every TV writer should read the first chapter alone” (Simon Ashdown, former Lead writer and series consultant of Eastenders)

“Books on story structure are ten a penny but Yorke's is the real deal” (Kathryn Flett)

“Terrific...It's a great read, wise and cogent, and a must for all screenwriters” (David Eldrige, writer Festen, In Basildon)

“It's a great read. It makes me smile and say 'Yes!' aloud. Only this and PG Wodehouse do that.” (Lucy Gannon, writer/creator Soldier Soldier, Peak Practice, Frankie, The Best Of Men)

“A mind-blower ... an incredibly dense but very readable tome about the art of storytelling ... Really worth a read” (The Independent)

“Highly recommended reading” (Huffington Post)

“Yorke is aware that the world is not suffering for lack of prescriptive screenwriting manuals. Instead, with Into the Woods, he takes a scalpel to narrative structure – dissecting protagonist, antagonist, inciting incident, crisis and so on – before asking how and why this underlying shape still holds audiences spellbound like a fairytale witch. "A story is like a magnet dragged through randomness," Yorke writes, but while he elegantly untangles the deepest roots of storytelling, he also honours the human need for truth and sense with some more superficial questions: why do series tend to "jump the shark" round about season three, for example, or why is clunky exposition – particularly in medical dramas – so appallingly comical? Sit

comfortably, then begin.” (The Guardian)

“This is the ancient template for storytelling, and this, the best book on the subject...Yorke's analysis is superb.” (London Evening Standard)

“I’ve just read a book about professional writing which has genuinely helped me. It’s for those who are serious about avoiding bad ‘How To’ books and want to raise their game, and it’s more intelligent than most of the others. John Yorke’s *Into The Woods: How Stories Work And Why We Tell Them* is a genuine game-changer and has helped me put past bad habits to rest” (Christopher Fowler)

“One of the most interesting books on screenwriting does not emerge from another Los Angeles screenwriting guru but rather from a London film director, not from another Los Angeles publisher of screenwriting books but a New York publisher called The Overlook Press... Yorke brings forth a tremendous amount of supporting evidence in one of the more erudite books ever written on screenwriting” (Script Magazine)

“A profound and unconventional look at the art of storytelling... Yorke is smart. This isn’t a how-to book... It’s kind of liberating: we can delve into why good stories are so compelling without feeling we need to suddenly start obeying rules numbered one through ten. Whatever aspect of story he confronts, he does so with humor and flexibility.” (Psychology Today)

“A fine book” (Mark Lawson, The Tablet)

“A comprehensive breakdown of the mysteries and function of drama, and a must-read” (Alec Worley, Author of *2000 AD*)

“Probably, in the hackneyed phrase, “the last book on screenwriting you’ll ever need.” He is very good at debunking the claims of some screenwriting gurus, all of whom are busy trying to sell you their own particular brand of snake oil. It’s truly excellent.” (The Daily Telegraph)

About the Author

John Yorke is Managing Director of Angel Station where he works as a drama producer, consultant and lecturer on all forms of storytelling. A former MD of Company Pictures where he Exec Produced *Wolf Hall*, he’s worked as both Head of Channel Four Drama and Controller of BBC Drama Production. As a commissioning Editor/Executive Producer, he championed *Life On Mars*, *The Street*, *Shameless* and *Bodies* and in 2005 he created the BBC Writers Academy, a year-long in-depth training scheme which has produced a generation of successful television writers. John is Visiting Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and lives and works in London.

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Praise for *Into The Woods:* *A Five-Act Journey Into Story*

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.”

—Chris Chibnall, creator/writer, *Broadchurch* and *Gracepoint*

“Outrageously good and by far and away the best book of its kind I’ve ever read. I recognized so much truth in it. But more than that, I learned a great deal. Time and again, Yorke articulates things I’ve always felt but have never been able to describe ... This is a love story to story—erudite, witty and full of practical magic. I struggle to think of the writer who wouldn’t benefit from reading it—even if they don’t notice because they’re too busy enjoying every page.”

—Neil Cross, creator/writer, *Luther* and *Crossbones*

“Part ‘how-to’ manual, part ‘why-to’ celebration, *Into The Woods* is a wide-reaching and infectiously passionate exploration of storytelling in all its guises ... exciting and thought-provoking.”

—Emma Frost, screenwriter, *The White Queen* and *Shameless*

“John Yorke’s *Into the Woods* is brilliant. It illuminates and explains.”

—Susan Hill, author of *The Woman In Black* and the Simon Serrailier crime novels

“Even for a convinced sceptic, John Yorke’s book, with its massive field of reference from Aristotle to *Glee*, and from Shakespeare to *Spooks*, is a highly persuasive and hugely enjoyable read. It would be hard to beat for information and wisdom about how and why stories are told.”

—Dominic Dromgoole, Artistic Director, the Globe Theatre

Copyright

‘Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.’

G. K. Chesterton

Praise for *Into The Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story* Copyright Introduction ACT I HOME 1. What is a Story? 2. Three-Act Structure 3. Five-Act Structure 4. The Importance of Change 5. How We Tell Stories ACT II WOODLAND, DAY 6. Fractals 7. Acts 8. The Inciting Incident 9. Scenes 10. Putting It All Together ACT III THE FOREST 11. Showing and Telling ACT IV THE ROAD BACK, NIGHT 12. Character and Characterization 13. Character and Structural Design 14. Character Individuation 15. Dialogue and Characterization 16. Exposition 17. Subtext ACT V HOME AGAIN, CHANGED 18. Television and the Triumph of Structure 19. Series and Mini-Series Structure 20. Change in Drama Series 21. Home Again 22. Why? APPENDICES I. Act Structure of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* II. *Hamlet* – The Structural Form III. *Being John Malkovich* – The Structural Form IV. *My Zinc Bed* – The Structural Form V. *The Godfather* – The Structural Form VI. First and Last Act Parallels: Some Further Examples VII. A Lightning Guide to Screenwriting Gurus Notes Bibliography Acknowledgements Credits Index About the Author About *Into the Woods*

Introduction

A ship lands on an alien shore and a young man, desperate to prove himself, is tasked with befriending the inhabitants and extracting their secrets. Enchanted by their way of life, he falls in love with a local girl and starts to distrust his masters. Discovering their man has gone native, they in turn resolve to destroy both him and the native population once and for all.

Avatar or Pocahontas? As stories they're almost identical. Some have even accused James Cameron of stealing the Native American myth.¹ But it's both simpler and more complex than that, for the underlying structure is common not only to these two tales, but to all.

Take three different stories:

A dangerous monster threatens a community. One man takes it on himself to kill the beast and restore happiness to the kingdom ...

It's the story of *Jaws*, released in 1976. But it's also the story of *Beowulf*, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem published some time between the eighth and eleventh centuries.

And it's more familiar than that: it's *The Thing*, it's *Jurassic Park*, it's *Godzilla*, it's *The Blob* – all films with real tangible monsters. If you recast the monsters in human form, it's also every James Bond film, every episode of *MI5*, *House* or *CSI*. You can see the same shape in *The Exorcist*, *The Shining*, *Fatal Attraction*, *Scream*, *Psycho* and *Saw*. The monster may change from a literal one in *Nightmare on Elm Street* to a corporation in *Erin Brockovich*, but the underlying architecture – in which a foe is vanquished and order restored to a community – stays the same. The monster can be fire in *The Towering Inferno*, an upturned boat in *The Poseidon Adventure*, or a boy's mother in *Ordinary People*. Though superficially dissimilar, the skeletons of each are identical.

Our hero stumbles into a brave new world. At first he is transfixed by its splendour and glamour, but slowly things become more sinister ...

It's *Alice in Wonderland*, but it's also *The Wizard of Oz*, *Life on Mars* and *Gulliver's Travels*. And if you replace fantastical worlds with worlds that appear fantastical merely to the protagonists, then quickly you see how *Brideshead Revisited*, *Rebecca*, *The Line of Beauty* and *The Third Man* all fit the pattern too.

When a community finds itself in peril and learns the solution lies in finding and retrieving an elixir far, far away, a member of the tribe takes it on themselves to undergo the perilous journey into the unknown ...

It's *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Morte D'Arthur*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Watership Down*. And if you transplant it from fantasy into something a little more earthbound, it's *Master and Commander*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Guns of Navarone* and *Apocalypse Now*. If you then change the object of the characters' quest, you find *Rififi*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Ocean's Eleven*, *Easy Rider* and *Thelma & Louise*.

So three different tales turn out to have multiple derivatives. Does that mean that when you boil it down there are only three different types of story? No. *Beowulf*, *Alien* and *Jaws* are 'monster' stories – but they're also about individuals plunged into a new and terrifying world. In classic 'quest' stories like *Apocalypse Now* or *Finding Nemo* the protagonists encounter both monsters and strange new worlds. Even 'Brave New World' stories such as *Gulliver's Travels*, *Witness* and *Legally Blonde* fit all three definitions: the characters all have some kind of quest, and all have their own monsters to vanquish too. Though they are superficially different, they all share the same framework and the same story engine: all plunge their characters into a strange new world; all involve a quest to find a way out of it; and in whatever form they choose to take, in every story 'monsters' are vanquished. All, at some level, too, have as their goal safety, security, completion and the importance of home.

But these tenets don't just appear in films, novels, or indeed TV series like *Homeland* or *The Killing*. A nine-year-old child of my friend decided he wanted to tell a story. He didn't consult anyone about it, he just wrote it down:

A family are looking forward to going on holiday. Mom has to sacrifice the holiday in order to pay the rent. Kids find map buried in garden to treasure hidden in the woods, and decide to go after it. They get in loads of trouble and are chased before they finally find it and go on even better holiday.²

Why would a child unconsciously echo a story form that harks back centuries? Why, when writing so spontaneously, would he display knowledge of story structure that echoes so clearly generations of tales that have gone before? Why do we all continue to draw our stories from the very same well? It could be because each successive generation copies from the last, thus allowing a series of conventions to become established. But while that may help explain the ubiquity of the pattern, its sturdy resistance to iconoclasm and the freshness and joy with which it continues to reinvent itself suggest something else is going on.

Storytelling has a shape. It dominates the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginnings of the recorded word. It's a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it's a shape that may be – though we must be careful – a universal archetype.

'Most writing on art is by people who are not artists: thus all the misconceptions.'

Eugène Delacroix

The quest to detect a universal story structure is not a new one. From the Prague School and the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century, via Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, many have set themselves the task of trying to understand how stories work. In my own field it's a veritable industry – there are hundreds of books about screenwriting (though almost nothing sensible about television). I've read most of them, but the more I read the more two issues nag away:

- Most of them posit completely different systems, all of which claim to be the sole and only way to write stories. How can they all possibly claim to be right?
- None of them asks 'Why?'³

Some of these tomes contain invaluable information; more than a few have worthwhile insights; all of them are keen to tell us how and with great fervour insist that 'there must be an inciting incident on page 12', but none of them explains why this should be. Which, when you think about it, is crazy: if you can't answer 'why', the 'how' is an edifice built on sand. And then, once you attempt to answer it yourself, you start to realize that much of the theory – incisive though some of it is – doesn't quite add up. Did God decree an inciting incident should occur on page 12, or that there were twelve stages to a hero's journey? Of course not: they're constructs. Unless we can find a coherent reason why these shapes exist, then there's little reason to take these people seriously. They're snake-oil salesmen, peddling their wares on the frontier.⁴

I've been telling stories for almost all my adult life, and I've had the extraordinary privilege of working on some of the most popular shows on British television. I've created storylines that have reached over 20 million viewers and I've been intimately involved with programmes that helped redefine the dramatic landscape. I've worked, almost uniquely in the industry, on both art-house and populist mainstream

programs, loved both equally, and the more I've told stories, the more I've realized that the underlying pattern of these plots – the ways in which an audience demands certain things – has an extraordinary uniformity.

Eight years ago I started to read everything on storytelling. More importantly I started to interrogate all the writers I'd worked with about how they write. Some embraced the conventions of three-act structure, some refuted it – and some refuted it while not realizing they used it anyway. A few writers swore by four acts, some by five; others claimed that there were no such things as acts at all. Some had conscientiously learned from screenwriting manuals while others decried structural theory as the devil's spawn. But there was one unifying factor in every good script I read, whether authored by brand new talent or multiple award-winners, and that was that they all shared the same underlying structural traits.

By asking two simple questions – what were these traits; and why did they recur – I unlocked a cupboard crammed full of history. I soon discovered that the three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age but an articulation of something much more primal; that modern act structure was a reaction to dwindling audience attention spans and the invention of the curtain. Perhaps more intriguingly, the history of five-act drama took me back to the Romans, via the nineteenth-century French dramatist Eugène Scribe and German novelist Gustav Freytag to Molière, Shakespeare and Jonson. I began to understand that, if there really was an archetype, it had to apply not just to screenwriting, but to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern or none at all. If storytelling does have a universal shape, this has to be self-evident.

It was an investigation that was to produce a number of interesting offshoots. By concentrating initially on film and television, I was able to:

- explore how story structure works, not just in single-protagonist storytelling but also in multi-protagonist dramas
- explain why protagonists have to be active
- illustrate how – in more detail than ever before – the structural principles work in television
- understand how narration can destroy drama
- expound on why so many characters die in the penultimate stage of any drama
- explain why almost all cops are mavericks
- elucidate why TV drama series all have a limited lifespan, or else become parodies of themselves – normally within three years
- illustrate how characterization is not only born out of dramatic structure but is essential to it.

These were, however, discoveries that started to appear incidental to something more important. What started as a basic exploration of screenwriting morphed slowly into a historical, philosophical, scientific and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling, and – in turn – to the realization that dramatic structure is not a construct, but a product of human psychology, biology and physics.

In *Into the Woods* I attempt to explore and unfold the extraordinary beauty of this structure; to touch on its historical development, and to understand how and why it is manifest in all aspects of fiction, from character to dialogue, but beyond that too. I may use films primarily as a reference because of their familiarity, but the scope of the book stretches beyond cinema, not just to television drama and its relationship to *The Apprentice* and *The X Factor* but further, to touch on how we narrate history, how we interpret art and advertising – even how, in a legal trial, we form our opinions on a subject's innocence or guilt. Why were the Central Park Five originally thought to be guilty and convicted for a crime they didn't commit? It all has to do with story: why did *The Voice* sweep away all before it? How does some modern art exploit its patrons'

gullibility? All in the end are products of narrative.

It's been a journey that – finally – let me articulate not only an underlying structure from which these stories are formed but, more importantly, allowed me to explain why that shape exists, and why anyone, without study, can replicate it entirely from within. How can a nine-year-old boy produce a perfect story from nowhere? It's a key question: understand that and you unlock the true shape and purpose of, indeed the true reason for, dramatic structure itself. It's a question, certainly, that no teacher of screenwriting ever appears to ask.

But do you need to know?

You have to liberate people from [film theory], not give them a corset in which they have to fit their story, their life, their emotions, the way they feel about the world. Our curse is that the film industry is 80 per cent run by the half-informed. You have people who have read Joseph Campbell and Robert McKee, and now they're talking to you about the hero's journey, and you want to fucking cut off their dick and stuff it in their mouth.⁵

Guillermo Del Toro echoes the thoughts of many writers and filmmakers; there's an ingrained belief for many that the study of structure is, implicitly, a betrayal of their genius; it's where mediocrities seek a substitute muse.⁶ Such study can only end in one way. David Hare puts it well: 'The audience is bored. It can predict the exhausted UCLA film-school formulae – acts, arcs and personal journeys – from the moment that they start cranking. It's angry and insulted by being offered so much Jung-for-Beginners, courtesy of Joseph Campbell. All great work is now outside genre.'⁷

Charlie Kaufman, who has done more than most in Hollywood to push the boundaries of form, goes further: 'There's this inherent screenplay structure that everyone seems to be stuck on, this three-act thing. It doesn't really interest me. I actually think I'm probably more interested in structure than most people who write screenplays, because I think about it.'⁸ But they protest too much. Hare's study of addiction *My Zinc Bed* and Kaufman's screenplay for *Being John Malkovich* are, as we shall see, perfect examples of classic story form. However much they hate it (and their anger I think betrays them), they can't help but follow a blueprint they profess to detest. Why?

All stories are forged from the same template, writers simply don't have any choice as to the structure they use and, as I hope to show, the laws of physics, of logic and of form dictate they must all follow the very same path. What that template is and why writers follow it; how and why we tell stories is the subject of this book.⁹

Is this therefore the magic key to storytelling? Such hubris requires caution – the compulsion to order, to explain, to catalogue, is also the tendency of the train-spotter. In denying the rich variety and extraordinary multi-faceted nature of narrative, one risks becoming no better than Casaubon, the desiccated husk from *Middlemarch*, who turned his back on life while seeking to explain it. It's all too tempting to reduce wonder to a scientific formula and unweave the rainbow.

But there are rules. As the creator of *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*, Aaron Sorkin, puts it: 'The real rules are the rules of drama, the rules that Aristotle talks about. The fake TV rules are the rules that dumb TV execs will tell you; "You can't do this, you've got to do – You need three of these and five of those." Those things are silly.'¹⁰ Sorkin expresses what all great artists know – that they need to have an understanding of craft. Every form of artistic composition, like any language, has a grammar, and that grammar, that structure, is not just a construct – it's the most beautiful and intricate expression of the workings of the human mind.

It's important to assert that writers don't need to understand structure. Many of the best have an uncanny ability to access story shape unconsciously, for it lies as much within their minds as it does in a nine-year-old's. This isn't a book advocating its conscious use. Its aim is to explore and examine narrative shape, ask how and why it exists, and why a child can write it effortlessly – why they can follow the rules.

There's no doubt that for many those rules help. Friedrich Engels put it pithily: 'Freedom is the recognition of necessity.'¹¹ A piano played without knowledge of time and key soon becomes wearisome to listen to; following the conventions of form didn't inhibit Beethoven, Mozart and Shostakovich. Even if you're going to break rules (and why shouldn't you?) you have to have a solid grounding in them first. The modernist pioneers – Abstract Impressionists, Cubists, Surrealists and Futurists – all were masters of figurative painting before they shattered the form. They had to know their restrictions before they could transcend them. As the art critic Robert Hughes observed:

With scarcely an exception, every significant artist of the last hundred years, from Seurat to Matisse, from Picasso to Mondrian, from Beckmann to de Kooning, was drilled (or drilled himself) in 'academic' drawing – the long tussle with the unforbearing and the real motif which, in the end, proved to be the only basis on which the real formal achievements of modernism could be raised. Only in that way was the right radical distortion within a continuous tradition earned, and its results raised above the level of improvisatory play ... The philosophical beauty of Mondrian's squares and grids begins with the empirical beauty of his apple trees.¹²

Cinema and television contain much great work that isn't structurally orthodox (particularly in Europe), but even then its roots still lie firmly in, and are a reaction to, a universal archetype. As Hughes says, they are a conscious distortion of a continuing tradition. The masters did not abandon the basic tenets of composition; they merely subsumed them into art no longer bound by verisimilitude. All great artists – in music, drama, literature, in art itself – have an understanding of the rules whether that knowledge is conscious or not. 'You need the eye, the hand and the heart,' proclaims the ancient Chinese proverb. 'Two won't do.'

This isn't a 'how to write' book. There are enough gurus already. Ostensibly it's about dramatic structure – about how TV dramas, plays and films work – though journalism, poetry and the novel are all called on at different times to illustrate salient points. If there is a preference for film examples it is simply because they are either well known or easily accessible, but the principles cannot be specific to that medium because they're merely the more recent technological manifestations of a far older process. The beauty of exploring film and television is not just that it lends itself to an easily accessible analysis, but that such analysis acts a bit like a barium meal: used correctly it illuminates not just all story structure, but all narrative – fictional and otherwise; it breaks open and reveals the very way we perceive and render all experience. So the structures of film and television drama are the bedrock of this book, but the implications, and the lessons these mediums reveal to us, are wider.

Storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all – almost – as breathing. From the mythical campfire tale to its explosion in the post-television age, it dominates our lives. It behooves us then to try and understand it. Delacroix countered the fear of knowledge succinctly: 'First learn to be a craftsman; it won't keep you from being a genius.' In stories throughout the ages there is one motif that continually recurs – the journey into the woods to find the dark but life-giving secret within. This book attempts to find what lurks at the heart of the forest. All stories begin here ...

Act I

Home

What is a Story?

‘Once upon a time ...’

Immediately you read that opening phrase, you know you’re going to encounter a setting, and in that place a series of events will occur – almost certainly to an individual. In basic terms that’s about it – the very best definition of a story: ‘Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened.’ There are far more complex explanations of course, most of which we will touch on, but none that is so simple yet all-encompassing.

What an archetypal story does is introduce you to a central character – the protagonist – and invite you to identify with them; effectively they become your avatar in the drama. You live the experience of the story vicariously through them: when they’re in jeopardy, you’re in jeopardy; when they’re ecstatic, you are too. Watch children as they view Transformers or Hannah Montana – it’s extraordinary to see the process by which their feelings are sublimated and they become inextricably linked with the fortunes of their fictional counterparts.

So you have a central character, you empathize with them, and something then happens to them, and that something is the genesis of the story. Jack discovers a beanstalk; Bond learns Blofeld plans to take over the world. The ‘something’ is almost always a problem, sometimes a problem disguised as an opportunity. It’s usually something that throws your protagonist’s world out of kilter – an explosion of sorts in the normal steady pace of their lives: Alice falls down a rabbit hole; Jack Bauer learns of a terrorist plot; Godot doesn’t turn up.

Your character has a problem which they must solve: Alice has to get back to the real world; Jack has 24 hours to find his wife and daughter; Vladimir and Estragon have to wait. The story is the journey they go on to sort out the problem presented. On the way they may learn something new about themselves; they’ll certainly be faced with a series of obstacles they have to overcome; there will likely be a moment near the end where all hope seems lost, and this will almost certainly be followed by a last-minute resurrection of hope, a final battle against the odds, and victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.

You’ll see this shape (or its tragic counterpart) working at some level in every story. It might be big and pronounced as in *Alien* or *Jaws*, it might be subtler as in *Ordinary People*, or it might represent a reaction against it (Jean-Luc Godard’s *Weekend*) – but it will be there, just as it is in the work of Del Toro, Kaufman and Hare. It reveals itself most clearly in the framework of the classic crime or hospital drama. A murder is committed or someone gets sick; the detective or doctor must find the killer or make their patient well. Such tales are literature’s heroin – storytelling with all impurities removed; a hit of pleasure; minimum effort for maximum reward. That’s why detective fiction is so popular; the unifying factors that appear at some level in all stories are at their most accessible here.

But if the problem and the search for its answer provide the framework for stories, what elements are they actually built from?

The Essential Building Blocks

The protagonist

The protagonist is the person around whom the story revolves. Normally it’s as obvious as that. It’s Batman, it’s James Bond, it’s Indiana Jones. If it’s difficult to identify a protagonist then maybe the story is about

more than one person (say Game of Thrones or Robert Altman's Short Cuts) but it will always be (at least when it's working) the person the audience care about most.

But already we encounter difficulties. 'Care' is often translated as 'like', which is why so many writers are given the note (often by non-writing executives) 'Can you make them nice?' Frank Cottrell Boyce, who wrote the script for Hilary and Jackie and is one of Britain's most successful screenwriters, puts it more forcibly than most: 'Sympathy is like crack cocaine to industry execs. I've had at least one wonderful screenplay of mine maimed... Yes, of course the audience has to relate to your characters, but they don't need to approve of them. If characters are going to do something bad, Hollywood wants you to build in an excuse note.'¹

The question of sympathy has become more complex in recent years. Television, historically, has been the medium of heroes, of "niceness" (Gunsmoke/The Waltons) and film the medium of dysfunctional complexity (Bonnie and Clyde/Five Easy Pieces). All that started to change after Jaws and Star Wars, but it was only with the advent of HBO, Oz, and then – seismically – The Sopranos, that film and television effectively swapped places². Suddenly it seemed, the television world woke up to the idea that you could engage with a character who didn't love their cat just as the film world seemed to forget it at the same time. When, five episodes into its first season, Tony Soprano cold bloodedly killed a man while taking his daughter to college³ the world shifted on its axis⁴. The recent revolution in the artistic ambition of television is rooted in understanding that empathy and sympathy are not the same thing. Dark, brooding, borderline psychopaths from The Shield to Don Draper have mapped out a new frontier. ⁵

What The Sopranos' showrunner David Chase understood instinctively was we don't like Satan in Paradise Lost – we love him. And we love him because he's the perfect gleeful embodiment of evil. Niceness tends to kill characters – if there is nothing wrong with them, nothing to offend us, then there's almost certainly nothing to attract our attention either. Much more interesting are the rough edges, the darkness – and we love these things because though we may not consciously want to admit it, they touch something deep inside us. If you play video games like Grand Theft Auto or Call of Duty: Modern Warfare (and millions do), then you occupy literal avatars that do little but kill, maim, destroy, or sleep with the obstacles in your path. We are capable of entering any kind of head. David Edgar justified his play about the Nazi architect Albert Speer by saying: 'The awful truth – and it is awful, in both senses of the word – is that the response most great drama asks of us is neither "yes please" nor "no thanks" but "you too?". Or, in the cold light of dawn, "there but for the grace of God go I".'⁶

The key to empathy, then, does not lie in manners or good behaviour. Nor does it lie, as is often claimed, in the understanding of motive. It's certainly true that if we know why characters do what they do, we will love them more. However, that's a symptom of empathy, not its root cause. It lies in its ability to access and bond with our unconscious.

Why are so many fictional policeman – and, indeed, doctors – mavericks? Laziness on the writer's behalf possibly, but can that really account for the widespread prevalence of one particular character trait? In 2011 Britain seemed to become obsessed with the character of Sarah Lund – the dysfunctional detective at the heart of DR's Forbrydelsen (The Killing). Like her pulp-fiction counterparts, she broke the rules, ignored her bosses and went behind their backs; like them she was told by her bosses the Danish equivalent of 'you've got 24 hours or I'm taking you off the case'. Why did she – and why do all mavericks – prove so popular? Largely because that's how many of us feel at times too. Haven't we all at some time felt we're surrounded by idiots, by overly bureaucratic managers who don't understand us, by uncreative colleagues capable of managing only upwards and unable to see the truth in front of their eyes?

If empathy is about entering the mind of a fictional character, then it helps if that mind contains feelings

similar to our own. When we watch Sarah Lund rejecting her bosses, we think, 'I wish I could do that'; when we watch Betty Suarez in *Ugly Betty*, we bleed for her clumsiness, recognizing her own inability to fit in within ourselves. There is something immensely attractive in living through a character who does obtain revenge, who is proved to have value or – like the Danish detective – is finally proved right. The attraction of wish-fulfillment, benevolent or masochistic, can't be underestimated – what else can explain the ubiquity of Cinderella or the current global dominance of the Marvel franchise? Isn't there a Peter Parker in most of us longing to turn into Spider-Man? Our favourite characters are the ones who, at some silent level, embody what we all want for ourselves: the good, the bad and ugly too. We may recoil at the idea of empathizing with Adolf Hitler, but as *Downfall* attests we can and do. A good writer can force us to connect with anyone.⁷

The moment the audience is caught in the conspiracy of story is the most magical in all of drama; you'll know it well from live theatre – it's the point at which the protagonist has burrowed inside and taken over the spectator, the moment the coughing stops. There will be more on empathy later, but for now it's worth noting that we sanction the slaughter in *Modern Warfare* because the character is us, and we are on a mission to save the world.

The mission part is important – you can tell a huge amount about a character from their goals and desires. We will know much of a character if we know they want to save the lost Ark from the Nazis, or are willing to run from the police to Mexico but won't take the easiest route through Texas, the state in which they were raped.

Indeed, all archetypal stories are defined by this one essential tenet: the central character has an active goal. They desire something. If characters don't then it's almost impossible to care for them, and care we must. They are our avatars and thus our entry point: they are the ones we most want to win or to find redemption – or indeed be punished if they've transgressed, for subconsciously we can be deeply masochistic in our desires. Effectively they're us.

The antagonist

So something happens to a central character that throws them off the beaten track and forces them into a world they've never seen. A beanstalk grows, a patient collapses, a murder is committed. All of these actions have consequences, which in turn provoke obstacles that are commonly dubbed⁸ forces of antagonism – the sum total of all the obstacles that obstruct a character in the pursuit of their desires. These forces accumulate from this initial moment as we head toward the climax of the story.

In the simple detective story they're catalysed by the murder; in the medical drama the patient. They are the problem or obstacle the protagonist has to overcome. If there's a killer or an evil mastermind bent on planetary domination then they are, obviously, the antagonists; the patient may not behave antagonistically, but they effectively embody the illness that will be the true enemy in the drama. The antagonist is thus the thing or person the protagonist must vanquish to achieve their goal.

The detective and 'monster' templates illustrate this well, but antagonism can manifest itself in many different ways – most interestingly when it lies within the protagonist. Cowardice, drunkenness, lack of self-esteem – all will serve as internal obstacles that prevent a character reaching fulfillment; all, for reasons we will discover, make the person more real. While antagonists can be external (James Bond), internal (*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*) or both (*Jaws*), all have one thing in common which Hitchcock summarized succinctly: 'The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture.'⁹ The best James Bond films are the ones with the best baddies; the more effective the forces of antagonism, the greater the story.

In the simple thriller form the antagonist is marked out by their desire to control and dominate the lives of

others. They don't follow the moral codes of the community; more often than not they're an embodiment of selfishness. They are also, historically, often marked by physical or mental deformity. Le Chiffre's maladjusted tear duct in the film of *Casino Royale* is the modern equivalent of Dr No's missing hands or Scaramanga's third nipple in *The Man with the Golden Gun*. In a more politically correct age, the physical flaw (clearly an outer manifestation of inner damage) has been scaled down to a level society finds acceptable. If the antagonist is internal, the same principles apply: the enemy within works in opposition to the host's better nature – it cripples them. It stands in opposition to everything they might be. It is this that starts to hint at story structure's deeper function.

What do Bond and Blofeld, Sarah and the Terminator, Hank Schrader and Walter White, Rust Cohle and Marty Hart have in common? 'We're not so very different you and I,' says Karla to Smiley in *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*. 'We both spend our lives looking for the weaknesses in one another's systems.'

They're all opposites.

As the Joker, displaying an uncharacteristic grasp of story structure, says to Batman in *The Dark Knight*,¹⁰ 'You complete me'. We will look at the reason for this later, but for now it's enough to note that all forces of antagonism embody the qualities missing in their protagonist's lives.

The desire

If a character doesn't want something, they're passive. And if they're passive, they're effectively dead. Without a desire to animate the protagonist, the writer has no hope of bringing the character alive, no hope of telling a story and the work will almost always be boring. Aaron Sorkin put it succinctly, 'Somebody's got to want something, something's got to be standing in their way of getting it. You do that and you'll have a scene.'¹¹

At its most basic, that's all story is. The Russian actor, director and theoretician Constantin Stanislavski first articulated the idea that characters are motivated by desire.¹² As in real life, so in character: we are all motivated by objectives, however small, however inconsequential, for most minutes of every day. If we weren't, we wouldn't get out of bed. The Knights of the Round Table only come alive when they learn of their Grail, and so it is with all characters. To find Nemo, to put out the *Towering Inferno*, to clear their name, to catch a thief – purpose must be bestowed and actively sought, or a character is dead. 'Tell me what you want,' said Anton Chekhov, 'and I will tell you what manner of man you are.'¹³

Inevitably there are caveats. It's not always enough for a hero to want love or happiness; it's too nebulous, too intangible. The most popular works embody desire in an object. Protagonists want 'Juliet'; they want 'Godot'; they want 'the lost Ark'. In film and television in particular, desires tend to be simple, tangible and easily stated: a trophy, something that can be seen or held. In *Raiders* only the lost Ark will save the world; in *Notting Hill*, love can be found in Anna Scott; *Citizen Kane* is built on a reporter's mission to explain 'Rosebud', *Apocalypse Now* on Captain Willard's desire to kill Colonel Kurtz. In television series the goal will change weekly but it will almost always be a physical embodiment of the protagonists' mission to save, preserve or enhance their world.

Whether simple (kill the shark) or profound (discover the meaning of 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane*), the underlying 'grail quest' structure is clear. Cops want to catch the killer, doctors want to heal their patient; in truth it doesn't actually matter what the object is, its importance is bestowed by those in pursuit. In *North by Northwest*, everyone is simply chasing microfilm of an unspecified variety. Again, Hitchcock says it best: '[We] have a name in the studio, and we call it the "MacGuffin". It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.'¹⁴

So a goal can be any object, but there's another caveat too. Almost all successful plays, films and novels are about primal human desires: success (*Legally Blonde*), revenge (*Falling Down*), love (*Notting Hill*), survival (*Alien*) or the protection of one's family or home (*Straw Dogs*). Why else would we consume a story so ravenously? Love, home, belonging, friendship, survival and self-esteem recur continually because they're the subjects that matter to us most. *The Walking Dead*, in which a small gang of survivors battles a world taken over by Zombies, embodies all these elements very clearly. There's one overriding desire – to survive and prosper – yet each episode contains its own sub-goal – to get off the roof, to get the guns, to find the family or the missing girl. As in all drama, we watch as the characters seek security and vanquish anything that threatens it, just as we'd like to believe we would do ourselves.

When 'something happens' to a hero at the beginning of a drama, that something, at some level, is a disruption to their perceived security. Duly alarmed, they seek to rectify their situation; their 'want' is to find that security once again. They may often, however, choose to find that security in the wrong place. What a character thinks is good for them is often at odds with what actually is. This conflict, as we shall see, appears to be one of the fundamental tenets of structure, because it embodies the battle between external and internal desire.

External and internal desire

Hollywood blockbusters can be visceral and exciting experiences. Tantalizing in their promise, easy and effortless to digest, they glitter seductively, promising the vicarious pleasures of sex, violence, romance, vengeance, destruction and earned glory. Technically brilliant, occasionally profoundly moving but ... why do they so often feel like an empty experience? Why do so few linger in the mind? Why so often does one leave the movie theatre slightly dejected, uneasy, stuffed with a surfeit of sugar?

The answer appears to lie, like everything else, within structure. Blockbusters are, with one or two exceptions, two-dimensional. It's a world where desire is simple: the hero wants something – to 'kill Bill' or find the secret of the Unicorn. In pursuit of that goal the multiplex hero doesn't change.

The cynic might well say that's because of the demands of the franchise – we want James Bond to be the same in every film. But Bond is a particular kind of character; he is the refined, simplified, hydrogenated bastardization of a deeper archetype.¹⁵ He is white bread: impurities removed, digestion eased; a product of the demand for the thrill of story minus its more troubling and disturbing elements – the offspring of our desire for simplicity and repetition. Bond is two-dimensional because he doesn't change; he has a dimension removed so we may repeatedly enjoy him. Bond just wants; he is an embodiment of pure desire. Three-dimensional characters, however, do change; their purchase is deeper. They have both a want and a need, and they are not necessarily the same thing.

When we first meet Thelma and Louise, they are living in darkness, mortgage-holders on a conservative American society. In *The Lives of Others*, Hauptmann Wiesler is a Stasi agent, the product of a world where empathy doesn't exist. In such terrain he can flourish – his power and steel are terrifying.

Thelma, Louise and Wiesler are all flawed characters, and it is this concept of 'flaw' – or of something lacking – that is absolutely critical in three-dimensional storytelling. Wiesler cannot care; the women are unknowingly repressed. These internalized characteristics are what each character needs to conquer. In order to become fully realized, they need to go on a journey to overcome their weakness, their flaws within.

Flaw or need isn't the same as their want or desire. Wiesler wants to punish the dissident couple he has been sent to spy on; Thelma and Louise want to escape the police and get to Mexico. Both sets of characters go on a journey to recognize that what they want stands in direct opposition to what they need. Going to Mexico or imprisoning dissidents will not make them complete.

The Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp coined the rather beautiful term 'lack' for what a protagonist is missing in the initial stages of any story, and it's this lack that three-dimensional stories exploit. A character seeks what they want and in so doing realizes instead their need. Their lack is lacked no more; they have overcome their flaws and become whole.

While it's possible for characters to get what they want and what they need (certainly that's what happens in *Aliens* or *Star Wars*), the true, more universal and more powerful archetype occurs when the initial, ego-driven goal is abandoned for something more important, more nourishing, more essential. In *Rocky*, *Cars*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Midnight Run* and *Tootsie*, the heroes find a goal they weren't aware they were looking for. Why this shape should be more truthful, we will discuss later, but we shouldn't judge the more simplistic archetype too harshly. Detective or crime fiction – indeed any world where 'the Mountie gets his man' – will always be popular. After all, if the protagonist is us it's comforting to be told by proxy that we're right, that we're surrounded by idiots and that everyone else is wrong. Perhaps, however, we shouldn't be told that too often. Films that work on a three-dimensional level, in which characters don't get what they initially want, affect us more profoundly and it is this that explains their deeper purchase; they are whole-grain to the two-dimensional, processed white-bread world of the blockbuster. Fun as they are, it's hard to derive much sustenance from repeated viewings of *War of the Worlds*, *Independence Day* or *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Characters then should not always get what they want, but should – if they deserve it – get what they need. That need, or flaw, is almost always present at the beginning of the film. The want, however, cannot become clear until after the inciting incident.

The inciting incident¹⁶

All stories have a premise – 'What if ...?'

A stuttering monarch takes instruction from a colonial maverick ...

A slum dweller from Mumbai is accused of cheating on *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire?* ...

A junk-collecting robot is whisked away from his home planet ...

This 'What if' is almost always the inciting incident and inciting incidents are always the 'something' that happens in every story. Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened ...

Phil Connor is a misanthropic news reporter who would rather stick pins in his eyes than report on *Groundhog Day* and the ludicrous weather prophesies the locals attribute to their little animal - Punxsatawney Phil. Disparaging everyone and everything in this small Pennsylvania town, he can't wait to get back home to Pittsburgh, but when he's caught in a blizzard he's forced to stay the night in the place he despises. *Groundhog Day* tells the story of what happens when he wakes the next morning to discover he's reliving the same endless day again – he's caught in a time loop. He's trapped.

Connor's world is literally blown out of shape. That's the inciting incident – or part of it, because what the inciting incident must also do is awaken a desire. We go back to our story shape: a problem occurs; a solution is sought. Connor's solution is to break out of the time loop and get back home any way he can – that's his want, and the ways he chooses to pursue it (from denial through to acceptance via the five stages of grief) – that's the film.

An inciting incident is always the catalyst for the protagonist's desire. In *Grey's Anatomy* or *ER*, it will be the patient presenting themselves for treatment. In *Luther* or *C.S.I.*, it will be the corpse that begs the question 'Who did this to me?' Technically, 'Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened ...' is a premise, 'and because of that I'm going to do this ...' is a story.

We will explore the more detailed structure of inciting incidents later. For now, though, it's perhaps interesting to note that the first attempt to codify them was by A. W. Schlegel in 1808, who called them 'first determinations'.¹⁷ It might be useful to see them as the subject of a film's trailer: it's the moment the journey begins.

The journey

In *Terminator 2*, James Cameron's enormously successful and groundbreaking sequel, the writer/director made two significant changes to Schwarzenegger's character. Arnie was turned from villain into hero, arguably helping position him as a 'family-friendly' star, but the far more significant adjustment was the upgrade the character underwent. The new model Terminator, the T2, unlike his predecessor, was now programmed to learn from his surroundings and experience. Cunningly, his ability to undergo internal change was actually built into the script.

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6 of 6 people found the following review helpful.

The best of many

By Stephen J. Hullfish

This book was recommended to me by Eddie Hamilton who edited *Kingsman* and the latest *Mission Impossible* movie. There is gold on every page. I have many scriptwriting books and this one is by FAR the best

6 of 7 people found the following review helpful.

Nothing really new, but well done--a good starting point

By Amazon Customer

Story structure books rarely elicit 'meh' reactions--readers either love them as the magic formulas for winning screenplays, or they hate them as hackneyed recipes for mediocrity. This book has generated a fair amount of the latter, particularly with its thesis that all stories are the same.

I write as a member of a team. My writing partner is more creative than I am, and a better writer. I am more analytic, and better at story development. Both sides, the analytic and the creative, are essential for good storytelling, which is why we write pretty well together. With that said, this book is for me more than for my partner.

There is nothing revolutionary in this book--what it says has been said before, in other places. But it lays out its thesis and argument in an engaging and accessible manner. Read this book before reading Robert McKee--what he has to say will make more sense the first time through. Read it before Blake Snyder--you'll better understand his framework and its limitations.

But remember--this is a book of analysis, not creativity. If you belong to the "I just want to tell my story" school of screenwriting, you may view it as a straightjacket on your creativity. If you go down that road, keep in mind that most crappy screenplays are undisciplined attempts by wannabe writers to express some inner vision. Well, that's not what screenplay writing is all about. It's a profession; a highly-disciplined craft

of developing and telling well-structured stories that are calculated to appeal to a wide audience. This book will help you learn to do that.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Helpful and informative book

By Forris B. Day

There are many, many books written about screenwriting. Some are really good and some aren't. There are as many trains of thought about the craft of writing screenplays as there are movies made. What makes John Yorke's book *Into the Woods – A Five-Act Journey Into Story* unique is right there in the title – five acts. He teaches about writing in a five act structure as opposed to the three act structure that most people know and love.

He illustrates how to write this way by using examples. He names his chapters after the 5-acts: Act I - Home, Act II – Woodland, Day, Act III – The Forest, Act IV – The Road Back, Night, and Act V – Home Again, Changed. If you are familiar with writing you can see, just by their names, how these acts describe the journey of any character in a movie or book. There are half a dozen or so simple yet insightful illustrations sprinkled throughout the book to help you visualize the concepts being taught.

In each chapter Yorke discusses, in great detail, elements you must incorporate into your story to create a good screenplay, including topics such as the inciting incident, scenes, character development and creating subtext. He uses popular movies and classical plays to illustrate his points. Yorke definitely is able to articulate what he is teaching in a way that most anyone can understand. The book is designed to teach writers new concepts and ideas and to reinforce old ones, but at the same time, it's just plain fun to read. It's written in a conversational tone and that keeps it interesting.

As I read through the book I had a few “ah-ha” moments where I said “Yes! I get it!” and that's when I realized what a powerful tool this book is for a regular writer such as myself. Anyone who enjoys writing will gain a wealth of information from the pages of this manual. The version I read is paperback so it's easy to carry with you or just keep on the nightstand for quiet reading. His analysis and breakdowns of films such as *E.T*, *Thelma and Louise*, and *Being John Malkovich* and several others is interesting and insightful. You'll re-watch these movies with a keen eye now that you know and understand their story structure.

If you are a writer, movie buff or just someone who is curious about the how and why of storytelling you will be quite happy that you picked up and read *Into the Woods*. I guarantee you that by the time you get to the end of the book you will have gained new knowledge and insight into your own writing. With this new found knowledge your writing can only be better. Get this book and increase your ability to captivate and entertain your own reading audience. I enjoyed reading it and I firmly believe that you will too.

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INTO THE WOODS: A FIVE-ACT JOURNEY INTO STORY BY JOHN YORKE PDF

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Review

“This is a marvelous analysis of screenwriting and, with any luck, should help a great many people achieve their dreams.” (Julian Fellowes, creator/writer, Downton Abbey)

“All script writers will want to read it.” (Caitlin Moran, bestselling author of How to Be a Woman)

“Into the Woods by John Yorke is brilliant on story structure.” (Ken Follett, bestselling author of Pillars of the Earth)

“There is no end of books that instruct us on how to write the perfect screenplay, but few that delve more deeply into the art of storytelling than this erudite volume.” (Financial Times)

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.” (Chris Chibnall, creator/writer, Broadchurch and Gracepoint)

“Outrageously good and by far and away the best book of its kind I've ever read. I recognized so much truth in it. But more than that, I learned a great deal. Time and again, Yorke articulates things I've always felt but have never been able to describe . . . This is a love story to story?erudite, witty and full of practical magic. I struggle to think of the writer who wouldn't benefit from reading it?even if they don't notice because they're too busy enjoying every page.” (Neil Cross, creator/writer, Luther and Crossbones)

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“Brontë aficionados will enjoy the deft interweaving of artifact, biography, and literature, but the greatest pleasure is the expanding chain of associations Lutz creates in each chapter.... The Brontë Cabinet is an engaging read for fans of the Brontë sisters, of course, but also for anyone interested in material culture, the Victorian era, and the history of everyday lives?especially women's lives.” (Susan Hill, author of The Woman In Black and the Simon Serrailler crime novels)

“Even for a convinced sceptic, John Yorke's book, with its massive field of reference from Aristotle to Glee, and from Shakespeare to Spooks, is a highly persuasive and highly energetic read.” (Dominic Dromgoole,

Artistic Director, the Globe Theatre)

“Of all the books I've read about story construction and the art of fiction, this one is the most comprehensive and concise.” (John Colle, Writer of Master and Commander, Happy Feet, Creation, Walking with Dinosaurs)

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.” (Chris Chibnall, Creator of Broadchurch)

“I absolutely love this book. It's incredible and so well written. I keep trying to find fault but so far no joy – It's so good” (Matt Charman, writer Bridge of Spies; Black Work)

“Excellent” (Peter Straughan, writer of Tinker Tailor Solider Spy, Wolf Hall, Frank)

“Going to read John Yorke's Into The Woods again because it's John Yorke's Into The Woods and that's reason enough ...” (Graham Linehan, writer, Father Ted; The IT Crowd)

“One of my favourite books of last year was John Yorke's Into The Woods: How Stories Work And Why We Tell Them, a seriously smart distillation of story theory that is as useful to me as a historian as I imagine it is to all the budding screenwriters who have it on their desks” (Dan Jones, author of The Hollow Crown and The Plantagenets)

“Yorke's book, in telling scores of stories in such a fresh, enlightening and accessible manner, is a gripping read from beginning to end.” (Sunday Times)

“Another book on screenwriting! Oh, how I wanted to hate it! I didn't. I loved it. Much of it was fresh to me. And always interesting, always intelligent and, for a writer, always rewarding’ ” (Jimmy McGovern, creator/writer of Cracker; The Street; The Accused)

“In an industry full of so called script gurus and snake oil salesmen, at last there's a book about story that treats writers like grown ups. This isn't about providing us with an ABC of story or telling us how to write a script by numbers. It's an intelligent evaluation into the very nature of storytelling and is the best book on the subject I've read. Quite brilliant” (Tony Jordan, creator/writer of Life on Mars)

“This book is intelligent, well written, incisive and, most of all, exciting. It is the most important book about scriptwriting since William Goldman's Adventures in the Screen Trade” (Peter Bowker, screenwriter Marvellous, Occupation, and Eric & Ernie)

“Into the Woods is brilliant. One of the best books on script writing out there...I loved the book. Inspiring.” (Dominic Mitchell, creator of In the Flesh)

“Terrifyingly Clever... Packed with intelligent argument.” (The Scotsman)

“Its strength is Yorke's acute perception of the wellsprings of universal narrative structures relevant to all artistic activities” (The Times (UK))

“A mightily impressive opus, both hugely informative and highly educational. I love the way it's populated with so many examples - the many combinations of both mass market and the slightly more esoteric giving a

something-for-everyone feeling. A brilliant work” (Peter James, author of the Roy Grace series)

“Into The Woods is an amazing achievement. It has a real depth and understanding about story, a fantastically broad frame of reference and it's interesting and absorbing throughout. Full of incredibly useful insights, every TV writer should read the first chapter alone” (Simon Ashdown, former Lead writer and series consultant of Eastenders)

“Books on story structure are ten a penny but Yorke's is the real deal” (Kathryn Flett)

“Terrific...It's a great read, wise and cogent, and a must for all screenwriters” (David Eldrige, writer Festen, In Basildon)

“It's a great read. It makes me smile and say 'Yes!' aloud. Only this and PG Wodehouse do that.” (Lucy Gannon, writer/creator Soldier Soldier, Peak Practice, Frankie, The Best Of Men)

“A mind-blower ... an incredibly dense but very readable tome about the art of storytelling ... Really worth a read” (The Independent)

“Highly recommended reading” (Huffington Post)

“Yorke is aware that the world is not suffering for lack of prescriptive screenwriting manuals. Instead, with Into the Woods, he takes a scalpel to narrative structure – dissecting protagonist, antagonist, inciting incident, crisis and so on – before asking how and why this underlying shape still holds audiences spellbound like a fairytale witch. "A story is like a magnet dragged through randomness," Yorke writes, but while he elegantly untangles the deepest roots of storytelling, he also honours the human need for truth and sense with some more superficial questions: why do series tend to "jump the shark" round about season three, for example, or why is clunky exposition – particularly in medical dramas – so appallingly comical? Sit comfortably, then begin.” (The Guardian)

“This is the ancient template for storytelling, and this, the best book on the subject...Yorke's analysis is superb.” (London Evening Standard)

“I've just read a book about professional writing which has genuinely helped me. It's for those who are serious about avoiding bad 'How To' books and want to raise their game, and it's more intelligent than most of the others. John Yorke's Into The Woods: How Stories Work And Why We Tell Them is a genuine game-changer and has helped me put past bad habits to rest” (Christopher Fowler)

“One of the most interesting books on screenwriting does not emerge from another Los Angeles screenwriting guru but rather from a London film director, not from another Los Angeles publisher of screenwriting books but a New York publisher called The Overlook Press... Yorke brings forth a tremendous amount of supporting evidence in one of the more erudite books ever written on screenwriting” (Script Magazine)

“A profound and unconventional look at the art of storytelling... Yorke is smart. This isn't a how-to book... It's kind of liberating: we can delve into why good stories are so compelling without feeling we need to suddenly start obeying rules numbered one through ten. Whatever aspect of story he confronts, he does so with humor and flexibility.” (Psychology Today)

“A fine book” (Mark Lawson, The Tablet)

“A comprehensive breakdown of the mysteries and function of drama, and a must-read” (Alec Worley, Author of 2000 AD)

“Probably, in the hackneyed phrase, “the last book on screenwriting you’ll ever need.” He is very good at debunking the claims of some screenwriting gurus, all of whom are busy trying to sell you their own particular brand of snake oil. It’s truly excellent.” (The Daily Telegraph)

About the Author

John Yorke is Managing Director of Angel Station where he works as a drama producer, consultant and lecturer on all forms of storytelling. A former MD of Company Pictures where he Exec Produced *Wolf Hall*, he’s worked as both Head of Channel Four Drama and Controller of BBC Drama Production. As a commissioning Editor/Executive Producer, he championed *Life On Mars*, *The Street*, *Shameless* and *Bodies* and in 2005 he created the BBC Writers Academy, a year-long in-depth training scheme which has produced a generation of successful television writers. John is Visiting Professor of English Language and Literature at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and lives and works in London.

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Praise for *Into The Woods*:

A Five-Act Journey Into Story

“Love storytelling? You need this inspiring book. John Yorke dissects the structure of stories with a joyous enthusiasm allied to precise, encyclopedic knowledge. Guaranteed to send you back to your writing desk with newfound excitement and drive.”

—Chris Chibnall, creator/writer, *Broadchurch* and *Gracepoint*

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—Susan Hill, author of *The Woman In Black* and the Simon Serrailer crime novels

“Even for a convinced sceptic, John Yorke’s book, with its massive field of reference from Aristotle to *Glee*, and from Shakespeare to *Spooks*, is a highly persuasive and hugely enjoyable read. It would be hard to beat for information and wisdom about how and why stories are told.”

—Dominic Dromgoole, Artistic Director, the Globe Theatre

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‘Art consists of limitation. The most beautiful part of every picture is the frame.’

G. K. Chesterton

Praise for Into The Woods: A Five-Act Journey Into Story Copyright Introduction ACT I HOME 1. What is a Story? 2. Three-Act Structure 3. Five-Act Structure 4. The Importance of Change 5. How We Tell Stories ACT II WOODLAND, DAY 6. Fractals 7. Acts 8. The Inciting Incident 9. Scenes 10. Putting It All Together ACT III THE FOREST 11. Showing and Telling ACT IV THE ROAD BACK, NIGHT 12. Character and Characterization 13. Character and Structural Design 14. Character Individuation 15. Dialogue and Characterization 16. Exposition 17. Subtext ACT V HOME AGAIN, CHANGED 18. Television and the Triumph of Structure 19. Series and Mini-Series Structure 20. Change in Drama Series 21. Home Again 22. Why? APPENDICES I. Act Structure of Raiders of the Lost Ark II. Hamlet – The Structural Form III. Being John Malkovich – The Structural Form IV. My Zinc Bed – The Structural Form V. The Godfather – The Structural Form VI. First and Last Act Parallels: Some Further Examples VII. A Lightning Guide to Screenwriting Gurus Notes Bibliography Acknowledgements Credits Index About the Author About Into the Woods

Introduction

A ship lands on an alien shore and a young man, desperate to prove himself, is tasked with befriending the inhabitants and extracting their secrets. Enchanted by their way of life, he falls in love with a local girl and starts to distrust his masters. Discovering their man has gone native, they in turn resolve to destroy both him and the native population once and for all.

Avatar or Pocahontas? As stories they’re almost identical. Some have even accused James Cameron of stealing the Native American myth. 1 But it’s both simpler and more complex than that, for the underlying structure is common not only to these two tales, but to all.

Take three different stories:

A dangerous monster threatens a community. One man takes it on himself to kill the beast and restore happiness to the kingdom ...

It’s the story of Jaws, released in 1976. But it’s also the story of Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon epic poem published some time between the eighth and eleventh centuries.

And it’s more familiar than that: it’s The Thing, it’s Jurassic Park, it’s Godzilla, it’s The Blob – all films with real tangible monsters. If you recast the monsters in human form, it’s also every James Bond film, every episode of MI5, House or CSI. You can see the same shape in The Exorcist, The Shining, Fatal Attraction, Scream, Psycho and Saw. The monster may change from a literal one in Nightmare on Elm Street to a corporation in Erin Brockovich, but the underlying architecture – in which a foe is vanquished and order restored to a community – stays the same. The monster can be fire in The Towering Inferno, an upturned boat in The Poseidon Adventure, or a boy’s mother in Ordinary People. Though superficially dissimilar, the skeletons of each are identical.

Our hero stumbles into a brave new world. At first he is transfixed by its splendour and glamour, but slowly things become more sinister ...

It's Alice in Wonderland, but it's also The Wizard of Oz, Life on Mars and Gulliver's Travels. And if you replace fantastical worlds with worlds that appear fantastical merely to the protagonists, then quickly you see how Brideshead Revisited, Rebecca, The Line of Beauty and The Third Man all fit the pattern too.

When a community finds itself in peril and learns the solution lies in finding and retrieving an elixir far, far away, a member of the tribe takes it on themselves to undergo the perilous journey into the unknown ...

It's Raiders of the Lost Ark, Morte D'Arthur, Lord of the Rings and Watership Down. And if you transplant it from fantasy into something a little more earthbound, it's Master and Commander, Saving Private Ryan, Guns of Navarone and Apocalypse Now. If you then change the object of the characters' quest, you find Rififi, The Usual Suspects, Ocean's Eleven, Easy Rider and Thelma & Louise.

So three different tales turn out to have multiple derivatives. Does that mean that when you boil it down there are only three different types of story? No. Beowulf, Alien and Jaws are 'monster' stories – but they're also about individuals plunged into a new and terrifying world. In classic 'quest' stories like Apocalypse Now or Finding Nemo the protagonists encounter both monsters and strange new worlds. Even 'Brave New World' stories such as Gulliver's Travels, Witness and Legally Blonde fit all three definitions: the characters all have some kind of quest, and all have their own monsters to vanquish too. Though they are superficially different, they all share the same framework and the same story engine: all plunge their characters into a strange new world; all involve a quest to find a way out of it; and in whatever form they choose to take, in every story 'monsters' are vanquished. All, at some level, too, have as their goal safety, security, completion and the importance of home.

But these tenets don't just appear in films, novels, or indeed TV series like Homeland or The Killing. A nine-year-old child of my friend decided he wanted to tell a story. He didn't consult anyone about it, he just wrote it down:

A family are looking forward to going on holiday. Mom has to sacrifice the holiday in order to pay the rent. Kids find map buried in garden to treasure hidden in the woods, and decide to go after it. They get in loads of trouble and are chased before they finally find it and go on even better holiday.²

Why would a child unconsciously echo a story form that harks back centuries? Why, when writing so spontaneously, would he display knowledge of story structure that echoes so clearly generations of tales that have gone before? Why do we all continue to draw our stories from the very same well? It could be because each successive generation copies from the last, thus allowing a series of conventions to become established. But while that may help explain the ubiquity of the pattern, its sturdy resistance to iconoclasm and the freshness and joy with which it continues to reinvent itself suggest something else is going on.

Storytelling has a shape. It dominates the way all stories are told and can be traced back not just to the Renaissance, but to the very beginnings of the recorded word. It's a structure that we absorb avidly whether in art-house or airport form and it's a shape that may be – though we must be careful – a universal archetype.

'Most writing on art is by people who are not artists: thus all the misconceptions.'

Eugène Delacroix

The quest to detect a universal story structure is not a new one. From the Prague School and the Russian Formalists of the early twentieth century, via Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* to Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots*, many have set themselves the task of trying to understand how stories work. In my own field it's a veritable industry – there are hundreds of books about screenwriting (though almost nothing sensible about television). I've read most of them, but the more I read the more two issues nag away:

- Most of them posit completely different systems, all of which claim to be the sole and only way to write stories. How can they all possibly claim to be right?
- None of them asks 'Why?'³

Some of these tomes contain invaluable information; more than a few have worthwhile insights; all of them are keen to tell us how and with great fervour insist that 'there must be an inciting incident on page 12', but none of them explains why this should be. Which, when you think about it, is crazy: if you can't answer 'why', the 'how' is an edifice built on sand. And then, once you attempt to answer it yourself, you start to realize that much of the theory – incisive though some of it is – doesn't quite add up. Did God decree an inciting incident should occur on page 12, or that there were twelve stages to a hero's journey? Of course not: they're constructs. Unless we can find a coherent reason why these shapes exist, then there's little reason to take these people seriously. They're snake-oil salesmen, peddling their wares on the frontier.⁴

I've been telling stories for almost all my adult life, and I've had the extraordinary privilege of working on some of the most popular shows on British television. I've created storylines that have reached over 20 million viewers and I've been intimately involved with programmes that helped redefine the dramatic landscape. I've worked, almost uniquely in the industry, on both art-house and populist mainstream programs, loved both equally, and the more I've told stories, the more I've realized that the underlying pattern of these plots – the ways in which an audience demands certain things – has an extraordinary uniformity.

Eight years ago I started to read everything on storytelling. More importantly I started to interrogate all the writers I'd worked with about how they write. Some embraced the conventions of three-act structure, some refuted it – and some refuted it while not realizing they used it anyway. A few writers swore by four acts, some by five; others claimed that there were no such things as acts at all. Some had conscientiously learned from screenwriting manuals while others decried structural theory as the devil's spawn. But there was one unifying factor in every good script I read, whether authored by brand new talent or multiple award-winners, and that was that they all shared the same underlying structural traits.

By asking two simple questions – what were these traits; and why did they recur – I unlocked a cupboard crammed full of history. I soon discovered that the three-act paradigm was not an invention of the modern age but an articulation of something much more primal; that modern act structure was a reaction to dwindling audience attention spans and the invention of the curtain. Perhaps more intriguingly, the history of five-act drama took me back to the Romans, via the nineteenth-century French dramatist Eugène Scribe and German novelist Gustav Freytag to Molière, Shakespeare and Jonson. I began to understand that, if there really was an archetype, it had to apply not just to screenwriting, but to all narrative structures. One either tells all stories according to a pattern or none at all. If storytelling does have a universal shape, this has to be self-evident.

It was an investigation that was to produce a number of interesting offshoots. By concentrating initially on film and television, I was able to:

- explore how story structure works, not just in single-protagonist storytelling but also in multi-protagonist dramas
- explain why protagonists have to be active
- illustrate how – in more detail than ever before – the structural principles work in television
- understand how narration can destroy drama
- expound on why so many characters die in the penultimate stage of any drama
- explain why almost all cops are mavericks
- elucidate why TV drama series all have a limited lifespan, or else become parodies of themselves – normally within three years
- illustrate how characterization is not only born out of dramatic structure but is essential to it.

These were, however, discoveries that started to appear incidental to something more important. What started as a basic exploration of screenwriting morphed slowly into a historical, philosophical, scientific and psychological journey to the heart of all storytelling, and – in turn – to the realization that dramatic structure is not a construct, but a product of human psychology, biology and physics.

In *Into the Woods* I attempt to explore and unfold the extraordinary beauty of this structure; to touch on its historical development, and to understand how and why it is manifest in all aspects of fiction, from character to dialogue, but beyond that too. I may use films primarily as a reference because of their familiarity, but the scope of the book stretches beyond cinema, not just to television drama and its relationship to *The Apprentice* and *The X Factor* but further, to touch on how we narrate history, how we interpret art and advertising – even how, in a legal trial, we form our opinions on a subject’s innocence or guilt. Why were the Central Park Five originally thought to be guilty and convicted for a crime they didn’t commit? It all has to do with story: why did *The Voice* sweep away all before it? How does some modern art exploit its patrons’ gullibility? All in the end are products of narrative.

It’s been a journey that – finally – let me articulate not only an underlying structure from which these stories are formed but, more importantly, allowed me to explain why that shape exists, and why anyone, without study, can replicate it entirely from within. How can a nine-year-old boy produce a perfect story from nowhere? It’s a key question: understand that and you unlock the true shape and purpose of, indeed the true reason for, dramatic structure itself. It’s a question, certainly, that no teacher of screenwriting ever appears to ask.

But do you need to know?

You have to liberate people from [film theory], not give them a corset in which they have to fit their story, their life, their emotions, the way they feel about the world. Our curse is that the film industry is 80 per cent run by the half-informed. You have people who have read Joseph Campbell and Robert McKee, and now they’re talking to you about the hero’s journey, and you want to fucking cut off their dick and stuff it in their mouth.⁵

Guillermo Del Toro echoes the thoughts of many writers and filmmakers; there’s an ingrained belief for many that the study of structure is, implicitly, a betrayal of their genius; it’s where mediocrities seek a substitute muse.⁶ Such study can only end in one way. David Hare puts it well: ‘The audience is bored. It can predict the exhausted UCLA film-school formulae – acts, arcs and personal journeys – from the moment that they start cranking. It’s angry and insulted by being offered so much Jung-for-Beginners, courtesy of Joseph Campbell. All great work is now outside genre.’⁷

Charlie Kaufman, who has done more than most in Hollywood to push the boundaries of form, goes further:

‘There’s this inherent screenplay structure that everyone seems to be stuck on, this three-act thing. It doesn’t really interest me. I actually think I’m probably more interested in structure than most people who write screenplays, because I think about it.’⁸ But they protest too much. Hare’s study of addiction *My Zinc Bed* and Kaufman’s screenplay for *Being John Malkovich* are, as we shall see, perfect examples of classic story form. However much they hate it (and their anger I think betrays them), they can’t help but follow a blueprint they profess to detest. Why?

All stories are forged from the same template, writers simply don’t have any choice as to the structure they use and, as I hope to show, the laws of physics, of logic and of form dictate they must all follow the very same path. What that template is and why writers follow it; how and why we tell stories is the subject of this book.⁹

Is this therefore the magic key to storytelling? Such hubris requires caution – the compulsion to order, to explain, to catalogue, is also the tendency of the train-spotter. In denying the rich variety and extraordinary multi-faceted nature of narrative, one risks becoming no better than Casaubon, the desiccated husk from *Middlemarch*, who turned his back on life while seeking to explain it. It’s all too tempting to reduce wonder to a scientific formula and unweave the rainbow.

But there are rules. As the creator of *The West Wing* and *The Newsroom*, Aaron Sorkin, puts it: ‘The real rules are the rules of drama, the rules that Aristotle talks about. The fake TV rules are the rules that dumb TV execs will tell you; “You can’t do this, you’ve got to do – You need three of these and five of those.” Those things are silly.’¹⁰ Sorkin expresses what all great artists know – that they need to have an understanding of craft. Every form of artistic composition, like any language, has a grammar, and that grammar, that structure, is not just a construct – it’s the most beautiful and intricate expression of the workings of the human mind.

It’s important to assert that writers don’t need to understand structure. Many of the best have an uncanny ability to access story shape unconsciously, for it lies as much within their minds as it does in a nine-year-old’s. This isn’t a book advocating its conscious use. Its aim is to explore and examine narrative shape, ask how and why it exists, and why a child can write it effortlessly – why they can follow the rules.

There’s no doubt that for many those rules help. Friedrich Engels put it pithily: ‘Freedom is the recognition of necessity.’¹¹ A piano played without knowledge of time and key soon becomes wearisome to listen to; following the conventions of form didn’t inhibit Beethoven, Mozart and Shostakovich. Even if you’re going to break rules (and why shouldn’t you?) you have to have a solid grounding in them first. The modernist pioneers – Abstract Impressionists, Cubists, Surrealists and Futurists – all were masters of figurative painting before they shattered the form. They had to know their restrictions before they could transcend them. As the art critic Robert Hughes observed:

With scarcely an exception, every significant artist of the last hundred years, from Seurat to Matisse, from Picasso to Mondrian, from Beckmann to de Kooning, was drilled (or drilled himself) in ‘academic’ drawing – the long tussle with the unforgiving and the real motif which, in the end, proved to be the only basis on which the real formal achievements of modernism could be raised. Only in that way was the right radical distortion within a continuous tradition earned, and its results raised above the level of improvisory play ... The philosophical beauty of Mondrian’s squares and grids begins with the empirical beauty of his apple trees.¹²

Cinema and television contain much great work that isn’t structurally orthodox (particularly in Europe), but even then its roots still lie firmly in, and are a reaction to, a universal archetype. As Hughes says, they are a conscious distortion of a continuing tradition. The masters did not abandon the basic tenets of composition;

they merely subsumed them into art no longer bound by verisimilitude. All great artists – in music, drama, literature, in art itself – have an understanding of the rules whether that knowledge is conscious or not. ‘You need the eye, the hand and the heart,’ proclaims the ancient Chinese proverb. ‘Two won’t do.’

This isn’t a ‘how to write’ book. There are enough gurus already. Ostensibly it’s about dramatic structure – about how TV dramas, plays and films work – though journalism, poetry and the novel are all called on at different times to illustrate salient points. If there is a preference for film examples it is simply because they are either well known or easily accessible, but the principles cannot be specific to that medium because they’re merely the more recent technological manifestations of a far older process. The beauty of exploring film and television is not just that it lends itself to an easily accessible analysis, but that such analysis acts a bit like a barium meal: used correctly it illuminates not just all story structure, but all narrative – fictional and otherwise; it breaks open and reveals the very way we perceive and render all experience. So the structures of film and television drama are the bedrock of this book, but the implications, and the lessons these mediums reveal to us, are wider.

Storytelling is an indispensable human preoccupation, as important to us all – almost – as breathing. From the mythical campfire tale to its explosion in the post-television age, it dominates our lives. It behooves us then to try and understand it. Delacroix countered the fear of knowledge succinctly: ‘First learn to be a craftsman; it won’t keep you from being a genius.’ In stories throughout the ages there is one motif that continually recurs – the journey into the woods to find the dark but life-giving secret within. This book attempts to find what lurks at the heart of the forest. All stories begin here ...

Act I

Home

1

What is a Story?

‘Once upon a time ...’

Immediately you read that opening phrase, you know you’re going to encounter a setting, and in that place a series of events will occur – almost certainly to an individual. In basic terms that’s about it – the very best definition of a story: ‘Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened.’ There are far more complex explanations of course, most of which we will touch on, but none that is so simple yet all-encompassing.

What an archetypal story does is introduce you to a central character – the protagonist – and invite you to identify with them; effectively they become your avatar in the drama. You live the experience of the story vicariously through them: when they’re in jeopardy, you’re in jeopardy; when they’re ecstatic, you are too. Watch children as they view Transformers or Hannah Montana – it’s extraordinary to see the process by which their feelings are sublimated and they become inextricably linked with the fortunes of their fictional counterparts.

So you have a central character, you empathize with them, and something then happens to them, and that something is the genesis of the story. Jack discovers a beanstalk; Bond learns Blofeld plans to take over the world. The ‘something’ is almost always a problem, sometimes a problem disguised as an opportunity. It’s usually something that throws your protagonist’s world out of kilter – an explosion of sorts in the normal steady pace of their lives: Alice falls down a rabbit hole; Jack Bauer learns of a terrorist plot; Godot doesn’t turn up.

Your character has a problem which they must solve: Alice has to get back to the real world; Jack has 24 hours to find his wife and daughter; Vladimir and Estragon have to wait. The story is the journey they go on to sort out the problem presented. On the way they may learn something new about themselves; they'll certainly be faced with a series of obstacles they have to overcome; there will likely be a moment near the end where all hope seems lost, and this will almost certainly be followed by a last-minute resurrection of hope, a final battle against the odds, and victory snatched from the jaws of defeat.

You'll see this shape (or its tragic counterpart) working at some level in every story. It might be big and pronounced as in *Alien* or *Jaws*, it might be subtler as in *Ordinary People*, or it might represent a reaction against it (Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend*) – but it will be there, just as it is in the work of Del Toro, Kaufman and Hare. It reveals itself most clearly in the framework of the classic crime or hospital drama. A murder is committed or someone gets sick; the detective or doctor must find the killer or make their patient well. Such tales are literature's heroin – storytelling with all impurities removed; a hit of pleasure; minimum effort for maximum reward. That's why detective fiction is so popular; the unifying factors that appear at some level in all stories are at their most accessible here.

But if the problem and the search for its answer provide the framework for stories, what elements are they actually built from?

The Essential Building Blocks

The protagonist

The protagonist is the person around whom the story revolves. Normally it's as obvious as that. It's Batman, it's James Bond, it's Indiana Jones. If it's difficult to identify a protagonist then maybe the story is about more than one person (say *Game of Thrones* or Robert Altman's *Short Cuts*) but it will always be (at least when it's working) the person the audience care about most.

But already we encounter difficulties. 'Care' is often translated as 'like', which is why so many writers are given the note (often by non-writing executives) 'Can you make them nice?' Frank Cottrell Boyce, who wrote the script for Hilary and Jackie and is one of Britain's most successful screenwriters, puts it more forcibly than most: 'Sympathy is like crack cocaine to industry execs. I've had at least one wonderful screenplay of mine maimed... Yes, of course the audience has to relate to your characters, but they don't need to approve of them. If characters are going to do something bad, Hollywood wants you to build in an excuse note.'¹

The question of sympathy has become more complex in recent years. Television, historically, has been the medium of heroes, of "niceness" (*Gunsmoke*/*The Waltons*) and film the medium of dysfunctional complexity (*Bonnie and Clyde*/*Five Easy Pieces*). All that started to change after *Jaws* and *Star Wars*, but it was only with the advent of HBO, *Oz*, and then – seismically – *The Sopranos*, that film and television effectively swapped places². Suddenly it seemed, the television world woke up to the idea that you could engage with a character who didn't love their cat just as the film world seemed to forget it at the same time. When, five episodes into its first season, Tony Soprano cold bloodedly killed a man while taking his daughter to college³ the world shifted on its axis⁴. The recent revolution in the artistic ambition of television is rooted in understanding that empathy and sympathy are not the same thing. Dark, brooding, borderline psychopaths from *The Shield* to *Don Draper* have mapped out a new frontier. ⁵

What *The Sopranos'* showrunner David Chase understood instinctively was we don't like Satan in *Paradise Lost* – we love him. And we love him because he's the perfect gleeful embodiment of evil. Niceness tends to kill characters – if there is nothing wrong with them, nothing to offend us, then there's almost certainly nothing to attract our attention either. Much more interesting are the rough edges, the darkness – and we love

these things because though we may not consciously want to admit it, they touch something deep inside us. If you play video games like *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* (and millions do), then you occupy literal avatars that do little but kill, maim, destroy, or sleep with the obstacles in your path. We are capable of entering any kind of head. David Edgar justified his play about the Nazi architect Albert Speer by saying: ‘The awful truth – and it is awful, in both senses of the word – is that the response most great drama asks of us is neither “yes please” nor “no thanks” but “you too?”’. Or, in the cold light of dawn, “there but for the grace of God go I”.’⁶

The key to empathy, then, does not lie in manners or good behaviour. Nor does it lie, as is often claimed, in the understanding of motive. It’s certainly true that if we know why characters do what they do, we will love them more. However, that’s a symptom of empathy, not its root cause. It lies in its ability to access and bond with our unconscious.

Why are so many fictional policeman – and, indeed, doctors – mavericks? Laziness on the writer’s behalf possibly, but can that really account for the widespread prevalence of one particular character trait? In 2011 Britain seemed to become obsessed with the character of Sarah Lund – the dysfunctional detective at the heart of DR’s *Forbrydelsen* (*The Killing*). Like her pulp-fiction counterparts, she broke the rules, ignored her bosses and went behind their backs; like them she was told by her bosses the Danish equivalent of ‘you’ve got 24 hours or I’m taking you off the case’. Why did she – and why do all mavericks – prove so popular? Largely because that’s how many of us feel at times too. Haven’t we all at some time felt we’re surrounded by idiots, by overly bureaucratic managers who don’t understand us, by uncreative colleagues capable of managing only upwards and unable to see the truth in front of their eyes?

If empathy is about entering the mind of a fictional character, then it helps if that mind contains feelings similar to our own. When we watch Sarah Lund rejecting her bosses, we think, ‘I wish I could do that’; when we watch Betty Suarez in *Ugly Betty*, we bleed for her clumsiness, recognizing her own inability to fit in within ourselves. There is something immensely attractive in living through a character who does obtain revenge, who is proved to have value or – like the Danish detective – is finally proved right. The attraction of wish-fulfillment, benevolent or masochistic, can’t be underestimated – what else can explain the ubiquity of *Cinderella* or the current global dominance of the *Marvel* franchise? Isn’t there a Peter Parker in most of us longing to turn into *Spider-Man*? Our favourite characters are the ones who, at some silent level, embody what we all want for ourselves: the good, the bad and ugly too. We may recoil at the idea of empathizing with Adolf Hitler, but as *Downfall* attests we can and do. A good writer can force us to connect with anyone.⁷

The moment the audience is caught in the conspiracy of story is the most magical in all of drama; you’ll know it well from live theatre – it’s the point at which the protagonist has burrowed inside and taken over the spectator, the moment the coughing stops. There will be more on empathy later, but for now it’s worth noting that we sanction the slaughter in *Modern Warfare* because the character is us, and we are on a mission to save the world.

The mission part is important – you can tell a huge amount about a character from their goals and desires. We will know much of a character if we know they want to save the lost Ark from the Nazis, or are willing to run from the police to Mexico but won’t take the easiest route through Texas, the state in which they were raped.

Indeed, all archetypal stories are defined by this one essential tenet: the central character has an active goal. They desire something. If characters don’t then it’s almost impossible to care for them, and care we must. They are our avatars and thus our entry point: they are the ones we most want to win or to find redemption – or indeed be punished if they’ve transgressed, for subconsciously we can be deeply masochistic in our

desires. Effectively they're us.

The antagonist

So something happens to a central character that throws them off the beaten track and forces them into a world they've never seen. A beanstalk grows, a patient collapses, a murder is committed. All of these actions have consequences, which in turn provoke obstacles that are commonly dubbed forces of antagonism – the sum total of all the obstacles that obstruct a character in the pursuit of their desires. These forces accumulate from this initial moment as we head toward the climax of the story.

In the simple detective story they're catalysed by the murder; in the medical drama the patient. They are the problem or obstacle the protagonist has to overcome. If there's a killer or an evil mastermind bent on planetary domination then they are, obviously, the antagonists; the patient may not behave antagonistically, but they effectively embody the illness that will be the true enemy in the drama. The antagonist is thus the thing or person the protagonist must vanquish to achieve their goal.

The detective and 'monster' templates illustrate this well, but antagonism can manifest itself in many different ways – most interestingly when it lies within the protagonist. Cowardice, drunkenness, lack of self-esteem – all will serve as internal obstacles that prevent a character reaching fulfillment; all, for reasons we will discover, make the person more real. While antagonists can be external (James Bond), internal (The Diving Bell and the Butterfly) or both (Jaws), all have one thing in common which Hitchcock summarized succinctly: 'The more successful the villain, the more successful the picture.'⁹ The best James Bond films are the ones with the best baddies; the more effective the forces of antagonism, the greater the story.

In the simple thriller form the antagonist is marked out by their desire to control and dominate the lives of others. They don't follow the moral codes of the community; more often than not they're an embodiment of selfishness. They are also, historically, often marked by physical or mental deformity. Le Chiffre's maladjusted tear duct in the film of Casino Royale is the modern equivalent of Dr No's missing hands or Scaramanga's third nipple in The Man with the Golden Gun. In a more politically correct age, the physical flaw (clearly an outer manifestation of inner damage) has been scaled down to a level society finds acceptable. If the antagonist is internal, the same principles apply: the enemy within works in opposition to the host's better nature – it cripples them. It stands in opposition to everything they might be. It is this that starts to hint at story structure's deeper function.

What do Bond and Blofeld, Sarah and the Terminator, Hank Schrader and Walter White, Rust Cohle and Marty Hart have in common? 'We're not so very different you and I,' says Karla to Smiley in Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy. 'We both spend our lives looking for the weaknesses in one another's systems.'

They're all opposites.

As the Joker, displaying an uncharacteristic grasp of story structure, says to Batman in The Dark Knight,¹⁰ 'You complete me'. We will look at the reason for this later, but for now it's enough to note that all forces of antagonism embody the qualities missing in their protagonist's lives.

The desire

If a character doesn't want something, they're passive. And if they're passive, they're effectively dead. Without a desire to animate the protagonist, the writer has no hope of bringing the character alive, no hope of telling a story and the work will almost always be boring. Aaron Sorkin put it succinctly, 'Somebody's got to want something, something's got to be standing in their way of getting it. You do that and you'll have a scene.'¹¹

At its most basic, that's all story is. The Russian actor, director and theoretician Constantin Stanislavski first articulated the idea that characters are motivated by desire.¹² As in real life, so in character: we are all motivated by objectives, however small, however inconsequential, for most minutes of every day. If we weren't, we wouldn't get out of bed. The Knights of the Round Table only come alive when they learn of their Grail, and so it is with all characters. To find Nemo, to put out the Towering Inferno, to clear their name, to catch a thief – purpose must be bestowed and actively sought, or a character is dead. 'Tell me what you want,' said Anton Chekhov, 'and I will tell you what manner of man you are.'¹³

Inevitably there are caveats. It's not always enough for a hero to want love or happiness; it's too nebulous, too intangible. The most popular works embody desire in an object. Protagonists want 'Juliet'; they want 'Godot'; they want 'the lost Ark'. In film and television in particular, desires tend to be simple, tangible and easily stated: a trophy, something that can be seen or held. In *Raiders* only the lost Ark will save the world; in *Notting Hill*, love can be found in Anna Scott; *Citizen Kane* is built on a reporter's mission to explain 'Rosebud', *Apocalypse Now* on Captain Willard's desire to kill Colonel Kurtz. In television series the goal will change weekly but it will almost always be a physical embodiment of the protagonists' mission to save, preserve or enhance their world.

Whether simple (kill the shark) or profound (discover the meaning of 'Rosebud' in *Citizen Kane*), the underlying 'grail quest' structure is clear. Cops want to catch the killer, doctors want to heal their patient; in truth it doesn't actually matter what the object is, its importance is bestowed by those in pursuit. In *North by Northwest*, everyone is simply chasing microfilm of an unspecified variety. Again, Hitchcock says it best: '[We] have a name in the studio, and we call it the "MacGuffin". It is the mechanical element that usually crops up in any story. In crook stories it is almost always the necklace and in spy stories it is most always the papers.'¹⁴

So a grail can be any object, but there's another caveat too. Almost all successful plays, films and novels are about primal human desires: success (*Legally Blonde*), revenge (*Falling Down*), love (*Notting Hill*), survival (*Alien*) or the protection of one's family or home (*Straw Dogs*). Why else would we consume a story so ravenously? Love, home, belonging, friendship, survival and self-esteem recur continually because they're the subjects that matter to us most. *The Walking Dead*, in which a small gang of survivors battles a world taken over by *Zombies*, embodies all these elements very clearly. There's one overriding desire – to survive and prosper – yet each episode contains its own sub-goal – to get off the roof, to get the guns, to find the family or the missing girl. As in all drama, we watch as the characters seek security and vanquish anything that threatens it, just as we'd like to believe we would do ourselves.

When 'something happens' to a hero at the beginning of a drama, that something, at some level, is a disruption to their perceived security. Duly alarmed, they seek to rectify their situation; their 'want' is to find that security once again. They may often, however, choose to find that security in the wrong place. What a character thinks is good for them is often at odds with what actually is. This conflict, as we shall see, appears to be one of the fundamental tenets of structure, because it embodies the battle between external and internal desire.

External and internal desire

Hollywood blockbusters can be visceral and exciting experiences. Tantalizing in their promise, easy and effortless to digest, they glitter seductively, promising the vicarious pleasures of sex, violence, romance, vengeance, destruction and earned glory. Technically brilliant, occasionally profoundly moving but ... why do they so often feel like an empty experience? Why do so few linger in the mind? Why so often does one leave the movie theatre slightly dejected, uneasy, stuffed with a surfeit of sugar?

The answer appears to lie, like everything else, within structure. Blockbusters are, with one or two exceptions, two-dimensional. It's a world where desire is simple: the hero wants something – to 'kill Bill' or find the secret of the Unicorn. In pursuit of that goal the multiplex hero doesn't change.

The cynic might well say that's because of the demands of the franchise – we want James Bond to be the same in every film. But Bond is a particular kind of character; he is the refined, simplified, hydrogenated bastardization of a deeper archetype.¹⁵ He is white bread: impurities removed, digestion eased; a product of the demand for the thrill of story minus its more troubling and disturbing elements – the offspring of our desire for simplicity and repetition. Bond is two-dimensional because he doesn't change; he has a dimension removed so we may repeatedly enjoy him. Bond just wants; he is an embodiment of pure desire. Three-dimensional characters, however, do change; their purchase is deeper. They have both a want and a need, and they are not necessarily the same thing.

When we first meet Thelma and Louise, they are living in darkness, mortgage-holders on a conservative American society. In *The Lives of Others*, Hauptmann Wiesler is a Stasi agent, the product of a world where empathy doesn't exist. In such terrain he can flourish – his power and steel are terrifying.

Thelma, Louise and Wiesler are all flawed characters, and it is this concept of 'flaw' – or of something lacking – that is absolutely critical in three-dimensional storytelling. Wiesler cannot care; the women are unknowingly repressed. These internalized characteristics are what each character needs to conquer. In order to become fully realized, they need to go on a journey to overcome their weakness, their flaws within.

Flaw or need isn't the same as their want or desire. Wiesler wants to punish the dissident couple he has been sent to spy on; Thelma and Louise want to escape the police and get to Mexico. Both sets of characters go on a journey to recognize that what they want stands in direct opposition to what they need. Going to Mexico or imprisoning dissidents will not make them complete.

The Russian Formalist Vladimir Propp coined the rather beautiful term 'lack' for what a protagonist is missing in the initial stages of any story, and it's this lack that three-dimensional stories exploit. A character seeks what they want and in so doing realizes instead their need. Their lack is lacked no more; they have overcome their flaws and become whole.

While it's possible for characters to get what they want and what they need (certainly that's what happens in *Aliens* or *Star Wars*), the true, more universal and more powerful archetype occurs when the initial, ego-driven goal is abandoned for something more important, more nourishing, more essential. In *Rocky*, *Cars*, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Little Miss Sunshine*, *Midnight Run* and *Tootsie*, the heroes find a goal they weren't aware they were looking for. Why this shape should be more truthful, we will discuss later, but we shouldn't judge the more simplistic archetype too harshly. Detective or crime fiction – indeed any world where 'the Mountie gets his man' – will always be popular. After all, if the protagonist is us it's comforting to be told by proxy that we're right, that we're surrounded by idiots and that everyone else is wrong. Perhaps, however, we shouldn't be told that too often. Films that work on a three-dimensional level, in which characters don't get what they initially want, affect us more profoundly and it is this that explains their deeper purchase; they are whole-grain to the two-dimensional, processed white-bread world of the blockbuster. Fun as they are, it's hard to derive much sustenance from repeated viewings of *War of the Worlds*, *Independence Day* or *The Day After Tomorrow*.

Characters then should not always get what they want, but should – if they deserve it – get what they need. That need, or flaw, is almost always present at the beginning of the film. The want, however, cannot become clear until after the inciting incident.

The inciting incident¹⁶

All stories have a premise – ‘What if ...?’

A stuttering monarch takes instruction from a colonial maverick ...

A slum dweller from Mumbai is accused of cheating on Who Wants To Be A Millionaire? ...

A junk-collecting robot is whisked away from his home planet ...

This ‘What if’ is almost always the inciting incident and inciting incidents are always the ‘something’ that happens in every story. Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened ...

Phil Connor is a misanthropic news reporter who would rather stick pins in his eyes than report on Groundhog Day and the ludicrous weather prophesies the locals attribute to their little animal - Punxsatawney Phil. Disparaging everyone and everything in this small Pennsylvania town, he can’t wait to get back home to Pittsburgh, but when he’s caught in a blizzard he’s forced to stay the night in the place he despises. Groundhog Day tells the story of what happens when he wakes the next morning to discover he’s reliving the same endless day again – he’s caught in a time loop. He’s trapped.

Connor’s world is literally blown out of shape. That’s the inciting incident – or part of it, because what the inciting incident must also do is awaken a desire. We go back to our story shape: a problem occurs; a solution is sought. Connor’s solution is to break out of the time loop and get back home any way he can – that’s his want, and the ways he chooses to pursue it (from denial through to acceptance via the five stages of grief) – that’s the film.

An inciting incident is always the catalyst for the protagonist’s desire. In Grey’s Anatomy or ER, it will be the patient presenting themselves for treatment. In Luther or C.S.I., it will be the corpse that begs the question ‘Who did this to me?’ Technically, ‘Once upon a time, in such and such a place, something happened ...’ is a premise, ‘and because of that I’m going to do this ...’ is a story.

We will explore the more detailed structure of inciting incidents later. For now, though, it’s perhaps interesting to note that the first attempt to codify them was by A. W. Schlegel in 1808, who called them ‘first determinations’.¹⁷ It might be useful to see them as the subject of a film’s trailer: it’s the moment the journey begins.

The journey

In Terminator 2, James Cameron’s enormously successful and groundbreaking sequel, the writer/director made two significant changes to Schwarzenegger’s character. Arnie was turned from villain into hero, arguably helping position him as a ‘family-friendly’ star, but the far more significant adjustment was the upgrade the character underwent. The new model Terminator, the T2, unlike his predecessor, was now programmed to learn from his surroundings and experience. Cunningly, his ability to undergo internal change was actually built into the script.

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