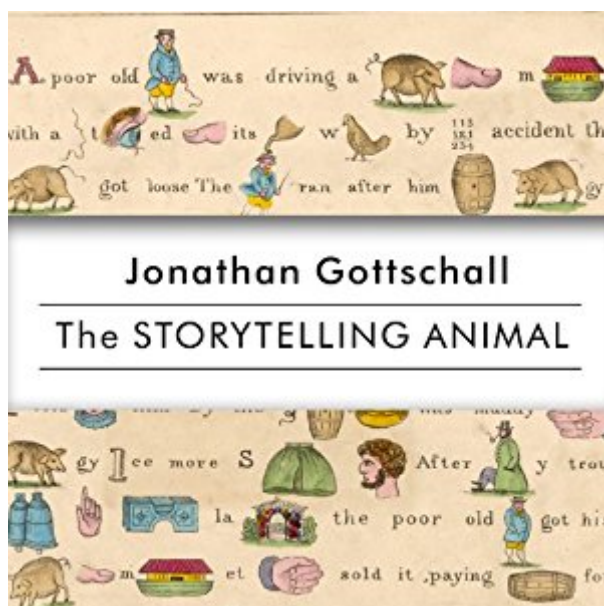


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The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human



Synopsis

Humans live in landscapes of make-believe. We spin fantasies. We devour novels, films, and plays. Even sporting events and criminal trials unfold as narratives. Yet the world of story has long remained an undiscovered and unmapped country. It's easy to say that humans are "wired" for story, but why? In this delightful and original book, Jonathan Gottschall offers the first unified theory of storytelling. He argues that stories help us navigate life's complex social problems - just as flight simulators prepare pilots for difficult situations. Storytelling has evolved, like other behaviors, to ensure our survival. Drawing on the latest research in neuroscience, psychology, and evolutionary biology, Gottschall tells us what it means to be a storytelling animal. Did you know that the more absorbed you are in a story, the more it changes your behavior? That all children act out the same kinds of stories, whether they grow up in a slum or a suburb? That people who read more fiction are more empathetic? Of course, our story instinct has a darker side. It makes us vulnerable to conspiracy theories, advertisements, and narratives about ourselves that are more "truthy" than true. National myths can also be terribly dangerous: Hitler's ambitions were partly fueled by a story. But as Gottschall shows in this remarkable book, stories can also change the world for the better. Most successful stories are moral - they teach us how to live, whether explicitly or implicitly, and bind us together around common values. We know we are master shapers of story. The Storytelling Animal finally reveals how stories shape us.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I must say I'm genuinely confused by folks who gave this book fewer than four stars. Not sure what they were expecting. As a writer, I came away from the read feeling like a "super-hero," as my friend and fellow author M.L. Welker described it. Writing is an extremely isolating experience fraught with self-doubt and discouragement. Gottschall's book is a reminder that what we do is important; this thought, that as writers we have the opportunity to change the world one story at a time, is inspiring and invaluable. Beyond all that heady stuff, Gottschall's work is meticulously researched, yet he delivers it with a breezy, anecdote-riddled style. Love it. GREAT book!

Fantastic read. This book's tone is informal but it's still informative, kind of like one of Brian Green or Steven Pinker's books, but Gotschall moves from topic to topic quickly enough as to keep things from getting stale (which, in my opinion is what makes the aforementioned authors' books hard to get through sometimes). I devoured this book and loved every second of it. Dude's super insightful, well-researched, and appropriately and enjoyably speculative. He's got a great sense of humor and a knack for getting his message across.

This is, essentially, a solid read. It is what one of my editors called "a good book", not a conclusive study, not a magisterial investigation, not an encyclopedic guide. It looks at the importance of storytelling and the ways in which storytelling helps to define humanity itself. This it does quite well. It examines the world of storytelling, the reasons for the violence and conflict therein, the fact that stories may be 'extreme' but still have conventional lessons at their core, and so on. The book looks at the future of storytelling and draws on interesting literary and personal examples. The book is filled with illustrations, many of them quite effective, and it is filled with anecdotes, many of which are engaging and compelling. At first I thought that this would be, first and foremost, a contribution to the literature/evolutionary science literature--the kind of work done by Brian Boyd, Lisa Zunshine, Joseph Carroll, et al. The author does move in that circle, and there are touches of such material here and there, but the overall focus of the book is far broader and the book's tone is very traditional, in the sense of a relaxed voice speaking to general readers. There are endnotes referring to passages in the book, but no footnotes per se. While informed by scholarship, this is not a scholarly book per se. The book makes use of much 'scientific' material, examining, e.g., the many explanations for the existence and nature of dreams. It does not draw conclusions, however, but rather offers the reader a sample of current thought. Modest in its dimensions, I was surprised, e.g., that it did not consider some of the work of cognitive scientists, e.g. Daniel Willingham's discussions of the functions of memory and of the importance of stories for the brain--challenging enough to

ward off boredom but not so challenging (like abstraction, e.g.) as to force the brain to labor. Using a measure like Goldilocks', stories are 'just right' for the brain. One of the striking aspects of the book is that it utilizes contemporary materials to essentially confirm the traditional lessons of literary history. Aristotle's model for narrative arcs is shown to be rock-solid, as is Horace's belief that literary art at its best both teaches and pleases. One specific example: the author discusses the manner in which fMRI research demonstrates that readers/listeners/watchers share the emotions of the characters whose stories they are consuming. When the characters undergo certain experiences and emotions, comparable parts of the audience's brains light up. Thus, stories engender empathy, big time. Samuel Johnson, of course, made this point very explicitly, arguing that the novel was a very dangerous form because of the degrees of empathy that it engendered. It could change readers in dramatic ways, for good or ill. Another example: leaning on Pinker and an evolutionary orientation, the author argues that literary materials can equip us for living by building up in our brains a set of experiences/examples that can help us navigate the seas and shoals of real life. Kenneth Burke made that point in a celebrated essay ('Literature as Equipment for Living') in 1938. Bottom line: this is a delightful book that explores the nature and importance of storytelling. It is accessible to general readers and the kind of book that nearly every thoughtful person could enjoy. It does not represent a series of scholarly breakthroughs, though it brings interesting material to bear on old issues (with fairly predictable conclusions). Its secular/skeptical approach to religious stories will be offputting to readers of faith, but that represents a small segment of the book's general argument. It does not make use of upper-paleolithic cave paintings in the way that it might. Since these are the first 'art', art from prehistory, one might ask why its representations of animals are so dazzling, its representations of humans so primitive (when such images exist at all). There is no narrative there, to speak of, but rather rapt attention to the stark beauty of the animal subjects. Why? Does a kind of pure mimesis precede narrative art by thousands of years?

Interesting series of essays on storytelling that range from thoughts on how the brain processes stories to our universal need for stories. Very readable and thought-provoking. I liked it! Kim Burdick Stanton, Delaware

I read this treatise on the power of story from a marketing perspective, but it offers interesting insight into what it means to be human, cognizant, compelling, and compelled. Storytelling is almost a hashtagged buzzword at this point, but it goes a lot deeper than any corporate storytelling tome, into the history and psychology of the art.

Our narrative needs and experience are receiving more and more recognition, from Alisdair MacIntyre, who used, some years before, this book's very same title in a description of our narrative needs and experiences. I believe it was in "After Virtue," but maybe it was another of his. I comment about MacIntyre because it was his emphasis on our needs and experiences as "storytelling animals" that stimulated me to delve further into the subject which I had already become interested in, hearing from one colleague about how more and more professors are encouraging their students to use personal narrative in their writings and dissertations. Another acquaintance, ten years ago, wrote a book (not carried by) focusing on primary education and the benefits of encouraging narrative. Jonathan Gottschall's contribution here is varied and just deep enough to keep the "story" moving along (although there are notes in the back, if you're someone like me who can't resist to "see" exactly what the author is referring to. I don't agree with all of the theories which his arguments are based upon, but I doubt that I'll find a better work in this smaller volume. I still have to read my purchase of Brian Boyd's "On the Origin of Stories." It may have been my purchase of Mara Beller's "Quantum Dialogue: The Making of a Revolution" which prompted my further exploration and purchases on our narrative needs and behaviors. Beller intrigued me (I have not read it yet) with her argument that it was as much the narratives which accompanied the "Copenhagen interpretation" that accounted for its success, in addition to its theoretical content. This "narrative" issue/potential which we apparently immerse ourselves in almost totally and naturally (read Gottschall's arguments) can be both a welcome incentive to explore some particular subject more deeply, as well as a tool of "marketing" and "propaganda." Awareness is "all."

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