

Unveiling the Enigma of Narratives: A Review of "Why Stories Work" by Somdev Chatterjee

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Brief

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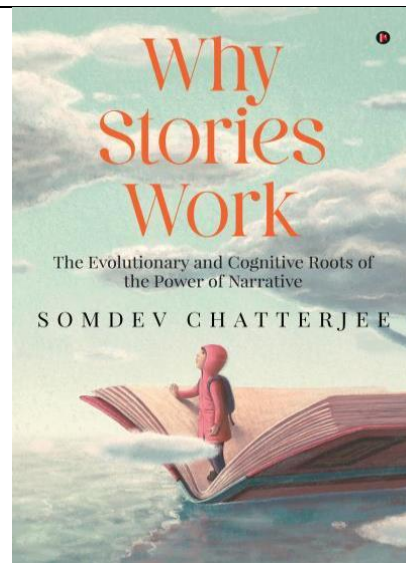
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In "Why Stories Work," Somdev Chatterjee takes a deep dive into the profound mysteries surrounding the allure of narratives, offering readers a captivating exploration of the evolutionary and cognitive roots that underpin the power of storytelling. Published by Notion Press in April 2023, this paperback, with its non-technical language and interdisciplinary approach, provides an accessible journey into the scientific study of fiction, making it a valuable read for both the layman and the budding student of literary and narrative theory.

Evolutionary and Cognitive Inquiry:

Critics and philosophers have studied the structure of stories and speculated on the reasons why art affects us the way it does, at least since the time of Aristotle and Bharat Muni. More recently, in the last two decades, they have begun incorporating insights from the biological sciences to show how features of stories can be explained by the function they have played in our evolutionary past, and how they tap into the structure of our brains and minds.

Chatterjee's book also adopts a bio-cultural approach to the study of narratives, drawing insights from evolutionary sciences, cognitive psychology, developmental psychology, and philosophy. The author embarks on a quest to answer fundamental questions about the role of stories in human evolution, the development of our capacity to inhabit imaginary worlds, the relationship between storytelling and life experience, and how stories tap into the structure of our mindsⁱ.

Four Chapters, Four Questions:

The book is structured around four thought-provoking chapters, each dedicated to addressing a specific question. Chatterjee's embodied approach to cognition and consciousness runs as a common thread, emphasizing the impact of our physiology and evolutionary past on the enchanting realm of storytelling.

Chapter Highlights:

Chapter 1 "Tell it like your life depends on it" explores the evolutionary necessity of storytelling for human survival, showcasing how stories have evolved alongside societies, becoming integral to our environment. Chatterjee provides a wealth of insights from our evolutionary past, unveiling the indispensable role of storytelling in the survival of our species. As the narrative unfolds, readers embark on a journey through time, tracing the origins of storytelling to the very beginnings of our evolutionary history.

Chatterjee argues persuasively that stories were not mere cultural byproducts but survival tools finely honed by early humans. These tales functioned as secret superpowers, enabling our ancestors to share vital knowledge, imagine possible futures, respond collectively to threats, and, ultimately, secure their own survival. From the rudimentary stories that helped primitive societies navigate the challenges of their environments to the intricate narratives that have become as integral as the air we breathe, Chatterjee unveils how stories have not only adapted alongside societies but have also become a pervasive and influential force in our contemporary world.

Later in the chapter Chatterjee introduces the concept of codified and embodied knowledge. Chatterjee contends that, unlike other animals, humans possess the unique ability to observe, abstract, and articulate patterns of behavior through stories. Stories, then, emerge as vessels of knowledge transmission, offering nuanced models of behavior rather than rigid lists of dos and don'ts. This, he suggests, is humanity's best attempt to articulate and publicize the intricate knowledge of navigating the world—a knowledge that science alone cannot fully capture.

Furthermore, the social dimension of storytelling emerges as a powerful force. Chatterjee illuminates how stories function not only as vessels of knowledge but also as architects of group identities, fostering cohesion among individuals through a shared imagined reality. This societal function positions stories as evolutionary assets, with success measured not by their truth but by their utility in shaping behavior, facilitating cooperation, and resolving conflicts within groups.

Chapter 2 "Learning to inhabit unreal worlds" attempts to explain why humans developed the capacity to inhabit the imaginary world of stories, and why we pay attention and have emotional responses to stories that we know are false. This chapter examines the link between pretend play, mental simulations, and the pleasure derived from stories.

In this chapter Chatterjee discusses how mental simulations are crucial for our survival. They help us to rehearse future scenarios and practice our responses in relative safety. These simulations almost always have a narrative form. In human societies, the most challenging simulations that we have to practice are those of social interactions ("If I do X she will respond with Y and then I might be able to convince her to do Z"), and our success in these simulations and subsequent real interactions has a tremendous impact on the chances of our

survival and success. Following Richard Dawkinsⁱⁱ and Nicolas Humphreyⁱⁱⁱ, Chatterjee proposes that the evolutionary pressure to succeed in making these narrative-like mental simulations may be one of the reasons for the growth of consciousness in higher primates.

Chatterjee skillfully navigates the territory of childhood play, emphasizing the natural propensity of children to engage in pretend play. This innate behavior, he argues, serves as a training ground where individuals learn to inhabit shared fictional worlds, experiencing emotions evoked by these worlds without conflating them with reality. This duality, the ability to discern between the real and the imaginary, becomes a cornerstone for the pleasure derived from stories.

The chapter, like the work of a master storyteller, weaves a tale of the interconnectedness of play, narrative, and consciousness, ultimately positioning stories as the harmonious amalgamation of these elements, providing not just entertainment but a profound understanding of the human experience.

Chapter 3 "Maps of experienced reality" elucidates how the features of stories reflect the way we experience life. Chatterjee focuses on four features that are found in almost every story: intentional agents, desire, resistance, and unexpected outcomes. Drawing on a wide range of scientific experiments, the author shows how we are hardwired by evolution to detect and give importance to these features of our surroundings.

The chapter begins with the revelation of our innate tendency to ascribe intention and emotion even to inanimate objects. Chatterjee draws from psychological experiments, demonstrating our relentless inclination to detect intention even in abstract geometric figures. This tendency, he argues, is the lens through which we make sense of the world, projecting intention onto our surroundings and framing our experiences within the context of intentional agents.

Desire emerges as a central motif, shaping our perception of reality. Drawing on the work of psychologists such as Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris^{iv}, Chatterjee elucidates how what we notice in our environment is guided not solely by sensory input but by the narrative context shaped our desires. Our journey through life, he contends, is a continuous narrative of pursuing desires, shaping the reality we experience.

The exploration extends to the concept of affordances, as introduced by J.J. Gibson^v, revealing that our perception is not a passive reception of objective reality but a dynamic process of perceiving opportunities for action. Chatterjee skillfully posits that stories, as maps of experienced reality, guide us not through an objective landscape but through a psychologically significant terrain, allowing us to navigate the complexities of the world with limited cognitive resources.

The war on complexity becomes a focal point of discussion, highlighting humanity's perpetual struggle to simplify the natural and social worlds. The reduction of complexity, achieved through the assignment of social roles, becomes a survival strategy, enabling us to ignore the intricacies of each individual and situation. However, Chatterjee contends that gaps between expectation and reality, moments of heightened complexity, offer both stress and opportunity for learning. Stories give us the opportunity to observe heroes navigate such gaps without having to confront any danger ourselves. They thus offer audiences the vicarious pleasure of discovery and growth.

This chapter contains the heart of the book's argument: We do not experience raw reality, but a highly filtered version of it that can be accessed by our senses and processed by our limited cognitive resources. So we have been wired by evolution to grasp most readily those aspects of our environment that create opportunities or imperatives of action and are important for our survival. The mould in which we experience reality is very similar to the structure of stories – a journey towards objects of desire, navigating a world of friends, enemies, tools, obstacles etc. This is the reason why we respond so powerfully to the same features in stories.

Chapter 4 "How stories work" takes a plunge into recent scientific findings on how stories hack into the structure of our brains and minds, leveraging our innate psychological tendencies and cognitive biases to keep us hooked.

The journey begins with an exploration of mirror neurons, those magical conduits that allow us to experience empathy for others. Chatterjee highlights the neurological mirroring that occurs when we observe someone else performing an action, as if our brain were simulating the very action we witness. This empathetic bridge, he argues, is a crucial requirement for the enjoyment of stories, where readers or viewers emotionally engage with characters and situations.

Supernormal stimuli emerge as potent tools in the storyteller's arsenal, captivating audiences by presenting exaggerated versions of stimuli to which we already have inherent response tendencies. Chatterjee draws parallels between our vulnerability to supernormal stimuli, as evidenced by addictions to junk food and pornography, and the captivating allure of well-crafted stories. The concentration of character and situation, the high relevance of environmental information, and puzzle-like narrative structures are identified as storytelling supernormal stimuli that keep audiences hooked.

Chatterjee goes on to discuss our hardwired inclination to detect patterns in our environment, a crucial survival skill that stories exploit with their multiple layers of patterns—from speech and action to plot and character.

With many such examples, the author shows how storytellers in all ages have intuitively taken advantage of our inherited cognitive biases to capture our attention and keep us hooked. The neuro-chemical effect that these features of stories (puzzles, hooks, patterns, peak-shifts and supernormal stimuli) have on the human brain are similar to that of some narcotics, and can exert a kind of control that the consumer finds almost impossible to resist. This leads the author to describe some aspects of storytelling as being akin to the 'dark arts' and emphasize the moral aspect of the storytellers craft. The storyteller has great, almost magical power, and the correspondingly heavy responsibility that comes with it.

Unique Contributions:

The book distinguishes itself through its interdisciplinary lens, providing fresh answers to age-old questions about the nature and power of stories. Chatterjee skillfully weaves examples from films, novels, and myths into his narrative, making complex ideas easily comprehensible to a wide audience.

Conclusion:

"Why Stories Work" stands as a beacon in the realm of literary and narrative theory, offering a scientifically grounded exploration of the enchanting world of storytelling. Chatterjee's book invites readers on a captivating journey through the evolution of narratives, the structure of conscious experience, and the profound ways in which stories shape our perception of reality. A must-read for anyone intrigued by the magic of storytelling and its profound impact on the human experience.

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