

THE TYRANNY OF THE TALE

*We're told that story will set us free. But what if a narrative frame is also
a cage?*

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Scheherazade's legacy—"the magic of storytelling"—has been offered as a means to advance every cause, from community empowerment to brand management. Illustration by Ben Wiseman

After a millennium, she remains the hardest-working woman in literature. It was not enough to be saddled with a husband who had the nasty habit of marrying and murdering a new virgin every day to assure himself of spousal fidelity. Nor was it enough to produce a series of nested stories under such deadlines (truly, I complain too much), stories so prickly and tantalizing that the king postponed her murder every night to wait for the next installment. That's to say nothing of the entirely forgotten three children she bore over those thousand and one nights. Who recalls that there was always a new baby in Scheherazade's arms?

Scheherazade has earned her rest, but she remains booked and busy, obsessively renamed and reclaimed. She is dusted off and wheeled out wherever the “magic of storytelling” is conjured, irresistible to any writer trafficking in “wonder” or “enchantment.” Her ghost floats through the work of Dave Eggers, Colum McCann, and Salman Rushdie in strenuous if harmless homage. But she has also been claimed by new constituencies and put to unsavory new uses. The narrator of “The Arabian Nights” must find herself bewildered at being name-checked in Karl Rove’s “Scheherazade Strategy,” as well as in articles about brand management, serialized content, mastering the attention economy—the unwitting inspiration, and occasional face, of the shifty and shifting tangle of alibis that goes by “storytelling.”

Do we dare define it? “Storytelling”—as presently, promiscuously deployed—comprises fiction (but also nonfiction). It is the realm of playful fantasy (but also the very mortar of identity and community); it traps (and liberates); it defines (and obscures). Perhaps the most reliable marker is that little halo it has taken to holding above its own head, its insistent aura of piety. Storytelling is what will save the kingdom; we are all Scheherazade now. Among the other entities storytelling has recently been touted to save:

wildlife, water, conservatism, your business, our streets, newspapers, medicine, the movies, San Francisco, and meaning itself. Story is our mother tongue, the argument runs. For the sake of comprehension and care, we must be spoken to in story. Story has elbowed out everything else, from the lyric to the logical argument, even the straightforward news dispatch. In 2020, the *Times'* media columnist wrote that the publication was evolving “from the stodgy paper of record into a juicy collection of great narratives.”

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All sorts of studies are fanned out in defense: we are persuaded more by story than by statistics; we recall facts longer if they are embedded in narrative; stories boost production of cortisol (encouraging attentiveness) and oxytocin (encouraging connection). We are pattern-seeking, meaning-making creatures, who project our narrative needs upon the world. “*Homo sapiens* is a storytelling animal that thinks in stories rather than in numbers or graphs, and believes that the universe itself works like a story, replete with heroes and villains, conflicts and resolutions, climaxes and happy endings,” according to Yuval Noah Harari. Story is now so valued that, in many realms, it has become compulsory—consider the recitations required of asylum seekers or rape victims, who are penalized or dismissed if the parameters of their stories do not readily conform to the genre.

And if a story betrays us? The solution, it seems, is to cast about for a better one. The journalist Nesrine Malik makes this case in the 2019 book “We Need New Stories”: “It is pointless to fight fake facts, or true but cynically twisted facts, with other facts. The new stories we need to tell are not just the corrections of old stories, they are visions.” Narrative Initiative, which is

dedicated to “durable social change,” is one of a number of organizations devoted to such strategies; “impactful, enduring social change,” it holds, “moves at the speed of narrative.”

Anyone in my line has every incentive to fall in step, to proclaim the supremacy of narrative, and then, modestly, to propose herself, as one professionally steeped in story, to be of some small use. Blame it on the cortisol, though: there’s no stanching the skepticism. How inconspicuously narrative winds around us, soft as fog; how efficiently it enables us to forget to look up and ask: What is it that story does not allow us to see?

Sometimes, as Wittgenstein suggested, a troublesome word doesn’t need to be retired or humiliated; it just needs to be sent out for cleaning before being returned to circulation. That’s a tricky task when it comes to a word as shop-soiled as “story,” the literary scholar Peter Brooks can attest. Brooks spent most of his career trying to impress upon readers the particular power of narrative, sliding under the chassis of the big novels—“Great Expectations,” “Heart of Darkness”—and taking apart their engines of narrative momentum to reveal how they run and how they carry the reader along with them. In his most recent book, Seduced by Story, he describes the horrifying feeling of having succeeded all too well.

It was shortly before George W. Bush’s Inauguration in 2001, and Brooks was watching Bush introduce his Cabinet nominations, delivering accolades with moist emotion: “a great American story”; “I love his story.” The President spoke warmly about the “stories that really explain what America can and should be about.” Brooks writes, “It was as if a fledgling I had nourished had become a predator.” It was a “narrative takeover of reality”—an evocation and understanding of the world which was purely narrative, which could not see that living and telling might be different things.

When did the so-called narrative turn—the doctrine of narrative supremacy—go mainstream? “At a certain point in history, people started

saying, ‘We are born storytellers,’ ” the novelist Amit Chaudhuri said at a 2018 symposium he convened called “Against Storytelling.” This coincided with globalization, he said, and the insistence of the special importance of storytelling to so-called minority communities (the demand that Indian writers, say, should “tell our own stories”) was a contrivance of “literary marketing.” It favored the creation of particular stories—spiced with “local” flavor and ready for export—and punished work that was formally challenging. If communities needed easily parsed stories in order to be heard, we were told, people needed them in order to heal. “My story has value,” the comedian Hannah Gadsby said in their Netflix special “Nanette,” describing their experiences of violence and misogyny. “Stories hold our cure.”

In the past quarter century, the narrative turn has spread to economics, law, and medicine. (Columbia established a Narrative Medicine program in 2001.) Increasingly, narrative has been a business strategy. Today, consultants regularly counsel that a “compelling brand story” is vital to a successful I.P.O. In “Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind” (2017), Christian Salmon traces the way corporations moved aggressively into storytelling, sometimes as a form of damage control. Campaigns against sweatshop labor—and images of Pakistani children hunched over, stitching together Nike soccer balls—incited consumer outrage. Management mavens argued that corporations could no longer produce mere products or brands. There was a feeling that “brands concealed stories,” Salmon writes. “Ugly stories.” In 1998, Nike’s C.E.O., Phil Knight, admitted that the company had become “synonymous with slave wages, forced overtime, and arbitrary abuse.” The brand clearly needed to be associated with something sturdier than a logo or a slogan. Nike recruited a senior staffer at a prominent anti-child-labor program, and a form of organizational storytelling was launched, in which the corporation produced and controlled its own counternarratives.

Meanwhile, the story skeptics trace how we have learned to live—as Jonathan Gottschall writes in “The Story Paradox”—in “unconscious obedience” to the grammar of story. Story lulls. It encourages us to overlook

the fact that it is, first, an act of selection. Details are amplified or muted. Apparent irrelevancies are integrated or pruned. Each decision is an argument, each argument an imposition of meaning, each imposition an exercise of power. When applied to history, it is a process that the late scholar Hayden White termed “emplotment”—in which experience is altered when squeezed into even the most rudimentary beginning-middle-end structure. Memoirists are increasingly conscious of the toll that such arcs exact. The American poet Maggie Smith, in her new book, “You Could Make This Place Beautiful,” notes wryly, “It’s a mistake to think of my life as plot, but isn’t this what I’m tasked with now—making sense of what happened by telling it as a story?” She goes on, “At any given moment, I wonder: *Is this the rising action? Has the climax already happened or are we not even there yet?*”

It’s not just the unruliness of life that is ill-served by story and its coercive resolution. In a withering review of a Brooklyn Museum show on Picasso’s legacy that Hannah Gadsby helped organize, the critic Jason Farago examined the encroachment of storytelling upon art. “‘Nanette’ proposed a therapeutic purpose for culture,” he wrote, and the creed disserved the artists whose works were gathered at the exhibit. “Howardena Pindell, on view here, is much more than a storyteller; Cindy Sherman, on view here, is much more than a storyteller,” he went on. “They are artists who, like Picasso before them, put ideas and images into productive tension, with no reassurance of closure or comfort.”

In truth, suspicion of story is ancient. Plato urged the exile of all storytellers for candying over their ideas with devious manipulations and seductions. (Scheherazade kept the king’s attention not just by using cliffhangers but by scumbling the edges of each story, making it difficult to see where one ended and the next began.) Nor has story been quite as dominant as the story supremacists maintain. Religious texts were delivered as often in riddles as in parables; much of the Quran is non-narrative. Classics of ancient literature do not always evince story in a conventional sense: “Gilgamesh” is woven out

of speeches; “Beowulf” scarcely has a causal plot. For centuries, Scheherazade’s stories, collected as “The Arabian Nights,” were excluded from the canon of Arabic literature precisely because they were stories, classified as *khurafa*—fantasies that were fit only for women and children, that sat in the shadow of poetry, the revered genre of the time.

Aside from the reservations of philosophers, from Plato to Hannah Arendt, there is also the robust lineage of authors appalled or plain bored by narrative manipulation. E. M. Forster found something unseemly about story, that “lowest and simplest of literary organisms,” a veritable “tape-worm,” with its dankly primordial “and then . . . and then.” We were, he feared, “all like Scheherazade’s husband, in that we want to know what happens next.” For him, there was no avoiding that “naked worm of time.” The writer David Shields, fulminating against the novel form, judged that its mechanisms were “unbelievably predictable, tired, contrived, and essentially purposeless.”

Of course, the most persistent and imaginative rebellions against narrative have been staged by novelists themselves, inexorably drawn to individual acts of sabotage, even after movements like modernism or the *nouveau roman* have hardened into history. Muriel Spark had her heroine in “The Comforters” try to escape from the very tale that gave her existence, skipping appointments that the plot had made for her. Graham Greene’s and Ian McEwan’s characters seem most in their element when wringing their hands about the dangers of fictional form. Rachel Cusk’s cool abstractions draw attention to the cruelty of story; David Markson’s anti-narratives draw attention to its irrelevance. Hernan Diaz’s novel of finance, “Trust,” structured as a set of interlocked tales that sell one another short, is an exercise in narrative mistrust. Resistance to story even crops up from time to time in marketing and design, although less frequently. “Now everybody’s a storyteller,” the Austrian graphic designer Stefan Sagmeister said in a much circulated 2014 speech. In his industry, the term had taken on “the mantle of bullshit.”

This is the red thread I find myself following through literature today—that flash of warning, a sensitivity to story which tips into wariness. Among the skeptics, story’s innocence is never presumed. Story is frisked. Story is marched to the dock. “Every crisis is in part a storytelling crisis,” Rebecca Solnit wrote in the *Guardian* earlier this year. “This is as true of climate chaos as anything else. We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change.” In “How the Word Is Passed,” Clint Smith meets tour guides at historical sites such as Monticello and Louisiana’s Whitney Plantation to survey the narrative choices made by the people who shape and share the story of the past, and what it means to work with the absences and erasures of the archives. In “Ordinary Notes,” Christina Sharpe’s mosaic of fragments mutinies against the progressive arc of narrative. Such scattered dissenters form nothing approaching a movement. But I hear their questions and unease echo and rhyme and join with one another; I hear a chorus.

“I am worried about you,” a biographer friend of mine tells me. “This piece of yours—what is the alternative to story?” Must we throw in with the bloodless quantifiers, wizards of line graphs and charts, replacing plots with scatter plots? Nothing so drastic. There is no jettisoning narrative. But what happens when “story” comes back from the laundry, cleaned and pressed?

Return to storytelling’s primal scene: Scheherazade telling tales in order to live to see another dawn. Before it is anything else, a story is a way we can speak to one another without necessarily being ourselves; that is its risk and relief, its portable privacy. The fact that children ask for stories at night is used to defend the notion of storytelling as natural, deeply human—a defense against the dark. But Margaret Wise Brown, the author of “Goodnight Moon,” was convinced that children didn’t care much about plot; it was their parents who did. When children ask for stories, what they’re asking for is the presence of the adult. One wonders just whom

Scheherazade was regaling in that room. When did her gaze shift from the king to the children, as it must have? What kind of armor did she think she was providing them?

Somehow, here we are, tangled up with mothers once again. (They are, perhaps, story's only rivals when it comes to hosting our outsized expectation and disappointment.) Our era's great case study of narrative hunger is Prince Harry's memoir, "Spare." What Harry grieves is not just the loss of Princess Diana; he grieves the absence of stories about her: "She was mainly just a hole in my heart." It is a terrible emptiness he describes, and his memoir is a chronicle of auditioning other stories that might hold and sustain him—all these metaphors of containment recalling the maternal body. He becomes addicted to the tabloid tales, palace plots, Army jingoism, and fairy tales, until he alights upon his own. "I considered all of the previous challenging walks of my life—the North Pole, the Army exercises, following Mummy's coffin to the grave—and while the memories were painful, they also provided continuity, structure, a kind of narrative spine that I'd never suspected. Life was one long walk. It made sense. It was wonderful." It is also a strange, inadvertent echo of Peter Pan. Peter cannot grow up, he tells Wendy, because he was never told stories: "None of the lost boys know any stories." Without being imparted a sense of narrative, he cannot establish his own.

It's a curious thing: in making the case against story, we rely on—what else?—story. Brooks, for example, describes watching George W. Bush's press conference so vividly; I drag in Peter Pan and my poor biographer friend, who would disapprove of being used so callowly to make a point. Even in contestation, we cannot resist the potency of story: its ingredients of scene, character, *charm*. Instead of trying to resist story, perhaps we should learn to be a better custodian of it. Stories are commonly used to enact a kind of care—to forestall forgetting—but they can impose another kind of forgetting. Robin Wall Kimmerer's best-selling "Braiding Sweetgrass" twines together scientific and Indigenous knowledge of what it means to care for the earth and, in doing so, thinks deeply about what it means to use and pass

on stories, how every story invariably displaces some existing body of knowledge. What forms of attention does story crowd out?

Much of life is the narrative equivalent of dark matter, and Virginia Woolf had a name for it. “Often when I have been writing one of my so-called novels,” she recounted, “I have been baffled by this same problem”:

That is, how to describe what I call in my private shorthand—“non-being.” Every day includes much more non-being than being. . . . As a child then, my days, just as they do now, contained a large proportion of this cotton wool, this non-being. Week after week passed at St Ives and nothing made any dint upon me. Then, for no reason that I know about, there was a sudden violent shock.

This is what the writer Lorrie Moore refers to as “unsayable life,” when “narrative causality” feels like “a piece of laughable metaphysical colonialism perpetrated upon the wild country of time.” It is what I have experienced from time to time, following the birth of a child, when I feel myself, for months on end, more place than person. That snarl of time, thought, and sensation—uncombed experience—is what theorists call “the unstoried self,” what Annie Ernaux calls “the pure immanence of a moment.”

It is easy to dismiss the cotton wool as inarticulate and unprocessed, instead of acknowledging that it may have an authority of its own. The ethical project of Ernaux’s memoirs forbids the telling to supplant the living. It rejects the old saws about memoir—about its potential for reconciliation or restitution. Her approach is marked by a recoil from narrative; she allows herself nothing “gripping” or “moving.” Excavation, not imposition, is her mode. “Naturally I shall not opt for narrative, which would mean inventing reality instead of searching for it,” she writes. “Neither shall I content myself with merely picking out and transcribing the images I remember; I shall process them like documents, examining them from different angles to give them meaning. In other words, I shall carry out an ethnological study of myself.” Her objective is not to record but to restore the past. “I am not

trying to remember,” she writes. “I am trying to *be inside*. . . . To be *there* at that very instant, without spilling over into the before or after.”

The memoirist’s binocular vision lets the reader experience the story from two points of view: the writer as character in the moment and as narrator after the fact. The narrating self, very often the adult self—who shapes story out of raw hunks of observation and partial understanding—is typically privileged, congratulated for its discernment and given all the good lines. But that unstoried self understands a great deal in its commotion, in its inability to keep anything compartmentalized, and it loses something when experience is squeezed to release trickles of insight. B. B. King, in his memoir, returned in this way to a moment from his childhood in Mississippi. Running an errand for his mother, he saw the dead body of a Black man, hoisted up by a lynch mob gathered around a makeshift gallows. He stayed silent. “Deep inside, I’m hurt, sad, and mad,” he wrote. “My anger is a secret that stays away from the light of day because the square is bright with the smiles of white people passing by as they view the dead man on display. I feel disgust and disgrace and rage and every emotion that makes me cry without tears and scream without sound. I don’t make a sound.” It is a moment that he doesn’t experience as story; it is lightning and grief that he describes, bottled in his body, but protected, too—kept from the bright, white smiles, kept intact, kept *his*. Then he picks up a guitar and finds that notes, not words, can contain these meanings. The notes, and the blues, specifically, did not permit one meaning, one tone to pretend to offer an explanation; they permitted everything, all at once. The poet Yusef Komunyakaa writes of “the days when a man / would hold a swarm of words / inside his belly, nestled / against his spleen, singing.”

Swarm, not story: when a heroine in Elena Ferrante’s work loses the plot or floats free from it, it is that very word she reaches for—“swarm.”

“Frantumaglia”—a jumble of fragments—is what Ferrante titled a collection of her nonfiction writing, deploying an expression that her mother would use to describe being “racked by contradictory sensations that were tearing her

apart.” A swarm possesses its own discipline but moves untethered. Nothing about the notion of a swarm comforts or consoles. It doesn’t contain, like a story. It allows—contradiction, dissonance, doubt, pure immanence, movement, an open destiny, an open road.

Does anyone recall that, in the original version of the tale, it’s unclear whether Scheherazade survives? The Arabic manuscripts offer no resolution; the convention of a happy ending came from the revisions imposed by European translators. What a different ancestor storytelling would have if we knew Scheherazade not as a triumphant, silver-tongued heroine but as a woman controlling her terror as she nurses her smallest baby and minds the other two, telling a story not because she thinks it will save the world, or herself, but because there is nothing else she can do. We can even wonder about what swarm may have nestled against *her* spleen. But that’s another story. ♦