The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories

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This remarkable and monumental book at last provides a comprehensive answer to the age-old riddle of whether there are only a small number of 'basic stories' in the world. Using a wealth of examples, from ancient myths and folk tales via the plays and novels of great literature to the popular movies and TV soap operas of today, it shows that there are seven archetypal themes which recur throughout every kind of storytelling.
But this is only the prelude to an investigation into how and why we are 'programmed' to imagine stories in these ways, and how they relate to the inmost patterns of human psychology. Drawing on a vast array of examples, from Proust to detective stories, from the Marquis de Sade to E.T., Christopher Booker then leads us through the extraordinary changes in the nature of storytelling over the past 200 years, and why so many stories have 'lost the plot' by losing touch with their underlying archetypal purpose.
Booker analyses why evolution has given us the need to tell stories and illustrates how storytelling has provided a uniquely revealing mirror to mankind's psychological development over the past 5000 years.
This seminal book opens up in an entirely new way our understanding of the real purpose storytelling plays in our lives, and will be a talking point for years to come.

The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories Details

Date	:	Published November 11th 2005 by Continuum (first published October 28th 2004)
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From Reader Review The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories for online ebook

Jessica Healy says

So I was uncomfortable, early on, with the extreme heteronormative attitude, and the appropriation of Freudian/Jungian discourse as if these theories are just self evident, but I gave it a bit of leeway, because, if problematic, that kind of analysis is at least widespread... But my discomfort and suspicion grew, and at last, I could read no more. I gave up after he attempted to discuss Frankenstein, by Mary Shelley. Here are the sentences that almost broke my brain:

"The question which then arises is: how did such an extraordinarily dark, inverted story come into the mind of a young girl who had never written anything before in her life? A good deal of the answer, as various commentators have observed, lies in the personality of the man who was by far the most dominating presence in Mary Godwin's life, Shelley himself." (357)

How could a GIRL have written a clever, dark, subversive story? BECAUSE OF HER BOYFRIEND, DUR!

How could a teenage girl, (the offspring of such revolutionaries as WILLIAM GODWIN and MARY FREAKIN WOLLSTONECRAFT, for crying out loud), possibly think of anything for herself until her sexy, smart, super-famous, romantic poet of a hubby came along and thought it for her?

Booker goes on to quote Shelley's reaction to the novel, as if his reaction to the novel somehow, ananchronistically, makes him responsible for its inception? (Also, there's an astoundingly misogynistic comment about Mary's cousin, Clare, "flinging" herself at Byron.)

So... no. I cannot value what this man has to say. I was suspicious of the breathtaking assurance of the subtitle "why we tell stories" (because there's only one, very clearly identifiable, reason, right?) I was unhappy with the language of psychoanalysis, and I considered the fact that he never engaged with any other theorists dubious... But I was intrigued by the premise, by the promise of a well-researched, far-reaching theory of story-telling.

I was wrong. This is nothing but patriarchy, condescension and tunnel vision.

Katie says

700 pages! A great deal of which is repetition of ideas and extensive plot summaries of exemplar stories throughout time, and can be skimmed. The ideas put forth in this book are appealing intuitively if ultimately unfalsifiable, and familiar if you've ever gotten into Jungian psychology or Joseph Campbell. Basically we're talking about archetypes, the psyche, and evolutionary drives; the human desire to "re"connect with "something greater," which might be god or more likely perpetuation of the species. The plots he identifies as the seven basic are (for those curious) overcoming the monster, rags to riches, the quest, voyage and return, comedy (a specific plot, not necessarily humorous), tragedy, and rebirth (and he later adds a few); the universal plot is the struggle of "light" against "dark"; the archetypal family drama is the rise of the son/daughter to inner maturity and sexual union, to become the father/mother him/herself. Whatever is confusing to you from my brief summary just might be cleared up by reading/skimming these 700 pages

yourself:) Overall, I found it stimulating reading and often found myself jotting down abstract notes pertaining to works in progress - if I didn't, as I hoped, find the solution to all my narrative problems, I did find an illuminating new way of framing them.

Carl says

Perhaps you have heard that there are no new stories, there are only the retelling of old stories. Or maybe you have heard it said that there are only a small number of basic stories. Well, Christopher Booker took these statements seriously, and spent a lifetime writing his book about them and published it in 2004. He asserts in the beginning that there are only seven basic plots: Overcoming the Monster as exemplified by Beowulf and Star Wars, Rags to Riches with Joseph in the Bible and David Copperfield being good examples, The Quest typified by The Odyssey and Raiders of the Lost Ark, Voyage and Return with Alice in Wonderland and Robinson Crusoe being good examples, Comedy exemplified by A Midsummer Night's Dream and Crocodile Dundee, Tragedy as illustrated by The Oresteia and Anna Karenina, and Rebirth with Sleeping Beauty and Crime and Punishment as good examples.

In the first third of the book as he identifies each of these plots he describes their structures and variations in some detail. For example, with the Voyage and Return plot, besides it fitting literally what the words say, he identifies three main variants on the theme: there may be a true growth and transformation, such as experienced by Robinson Crusoe, there may be a return but no change at all, usually when a relationship with someone of the opposite sex in that other world has been involved, as characterized by Orpheus, or there may be a totally negative outcome, meaning no return at all, and for this he gives the examples of Kafka's The Trial and Metamorphosis.

What makes his book even more interesting is that he goes on to make two stunning assertions. First he asserts, that these seven basic plots ultimately reduce themselves to one basic story, a universal plot. He links this basic structure to Jung's theory of the archetypes underlying human behavior, and goes on to state that because they are “imprinted unconsciously in our minds, we cannot conceive of stories in any other way.” (p. 216) The evolving structure these universal stories take is:

“(1) This begins with an initial phase when we are shown how the hero or heroine feel in some way constricted. This sets up the tension requiring resolution which leads into the action of the story.
(2) This is followed by a phase of opening out, as the hero or heroine sense that they are on the road to some new state or some far-off point of resolution.
(3) Eventually this leads to a more severe phase of constriction, where the strength of the dark power and the hero or heroine's limitations in face of it both become more obvious.
(4) We then see a phase where, although the dark power is still dominant, the light elements in the story are preparing for the final confrontation. This eventually works up to the nightmare climax, when opposition between light and dark is at its most extreme and the pressure on everyone involved is at its greatest.
(5)This culminates in the moment of reversal and liberation, when the grip of the darkness is finally broken. The story thus ends on the sense of a final opening out into life, with everything at last resolved.”(P. 228)

Having laid out the individual structures of the seven basic plots and the universal structure, he then proceeds in the next third of the book to identify and describe the recurrent but limited set of characters in stories. Specifically, he proceeds through the Jungian cast of characters: the dark figures, the feminine and masculine values, the archetypal family drama, and the light figures as they structure and illuminate the stories. The dark figures are those who oppose the hero and/or heroine in the struggle toward maturity, and may include

any of the following: the dark father, the dark mother, the dark rivals, or the dark other half. The hero, or heroine, must, to achieve his goal, develop and embrace in himself the masculine values of strength and order as well as the feminine values of understanding and feeling. Ultimately for the story to succeed there must be an interplay, repeated again and again in stories, among the father, the mother, the hero, and the heroine. And in most cases the ultimate resolution will require some guidance provided by the light figures, most often a wise old man or Jung's anima.

Booker's second major assertion is that storytelling in the past two centuries, beginning with the onset of the period of Romanticism, has shifted, and some stories have “become detached from their underlying archetypal purpose...
that the central goal of any human life is to achieve the state of perfect balance which we recognize as maturity; and how the central enemy in reaching that goal is our capacity to be held back by the deforming and ultimately self-destructive power of egocentricity." (p. 347-348)
During this time egocentricity was allowed to run rampant while at the same time the imprinted rules of storytelling held the stories true to human nature. He illustrates these points with the stories The Scarlet and The Black by Stendahl and Moby Dick by Melville. In The Scarlet and The Black, Julien Sorel is driven by blind ambition to succeed at all costs in the social world and does so until he is brought down by his own undoing, and the rules of storytelling. Just when he reaches the social pinnacle he desires, his fortunes are threatened by a revealing letter from a former lover. He rushes to his former home, shoots her while she sits in church, is convicted, and executed by the guillotine. In Moby Dick, as we all know, Captain Ahab is obsessed with the hunting down and killing of the white whale, Moby Dick, to satisfy his vengeance against the animal who bit off his leg on a previous expedition. In seeking his revenge he sacrifices not only the lives of his sailors, but, in a victory for the rules of storytelling, his own life too. Booker asserts that the price paid for man's seeming emancipation from what he calls his “natural frame” brought about by Romanticism was a severing not only of his links to the natural world, meaning that world outside himself, but also from his own deeper nature inside. He spends the next section of the book exploring these deviant story patterns, or what he calls “Missing the Mark.”

In a final chapter, Booker makes the assertion, derived from Jung, that all animals have two sets of instincts, a physical set of instincts which tell them what to do about eating, sleeping, and carrying out the functions that keep them individually alive, and an ordering set of instincts which tell them how to behave in groups of their species, to preserve the species. Humans, he asserts, do have intact the first set of instincts, the physical ones, but “the fall” means they have lost the innocence of the second set, and in a sense, are left floundering on their own when it comes to the second set, the ordering ones. What happens, then, is that the selfish ego is disconnected from the restraining influences of the unconscious, and all sorts of mischief happens when the ego runs unfettered; it becomes the monster. Stories in human culture become the device that was evolved to reassert the power of order; stories tell us how to behave in relation to other human beings to keep from destroying the species.

Booker's final assessment is that:
“What stories can tell us, however, much more profoundly than we have realized, is how our human nature works, and why we think and behave in this world as we do.” (p. 698)

My Evaluation --- After all is said and done, over seven hundred pages of it in The Seven Basic Plots, I find I have some ambivalence about this book. I spent most of my adult life looking for a book like this, and one that would confirm the impressions I had developed from my years of reading stories as well as watching them in movies.

And I, like Booker, am a lumper. By that I refer to a comment made by a colleague of mine who once said, “The world is made up of lumpers and splitters.” Clearly, Booker is a lumper, for not only did he reduce all stories to seven basic plots, but he then proceeded to reduce them further to one universal plot. On all of this I find myself in agreement and feeling enlightened by his thorough going analysis, an impression confirmed by repeated reading. What troubles me, and what nagged at me throughout the book, enough so that I abandoned the book for several months, however, was Booker's anchoring of the explanation for what he observed in a Jungian analysis of archetypes, which he talks about as immutable. Throughout the book he makes the point that these archetypes and their relation to storytelling is “imprinted in the unconscious” to the degree that they cannot be escaped, even when the author seems to vary from their scripting. I have trouble with such a deterministic view, although I will confess to lacking any other explanation for the seeming convergence of story plots. Nonetheless, I believe this book to be of greater depth than anything I have read in the last several years. It is in my mind profound and thought provoking.

Richard says

“My notes:
[Sorry, looks like I never got around to constructing an essay]

Recommendation:
• Read all of Section 1, containing descriptions of the seven basic plots in erudite detail.
• Skip to Chapters 21 through 24 of Section 3. These explore the “dark” and “sentimental” variations of the foregoing.
• Skim Chapters 26 and 27, wherein the author is revealed to be a sexist reactionary. Keep in mind that if one can enjoy the music of Frank Sinatra while ignoring the fact that he as a sexist jerk, one can read the balance of Booker's book with the same forbearance.
• Either read or skim Section 2, which explores commonalities of all the plot archetypes, including character archetypes. But it will probably feel pretty redundant.
• Finish with Chapters 28, 29, 25 and 30 in that order. The first two of those introduce and analyze two modern plot types; the third explores Thomas Hardy's psychological novels; the final goes into a fascinating analysis of Oedipus and Hamlet.

p. 382: “[George:] Lucas drew on the knowledge of Joseph Campbell ... in an effort to ensure that his story matched up as faithfully as possible to their archetypal patterns and imagery. [...:] But however carefully Lucas tried to shape his script around these archetypal ground rules ... it had not got the pattern right.”

Section I: the seven basic plots are:
1) Overcoming the Monster (incl. subgenre “The Thrilling Escape From Death”);
2) Rags to Riches;
3) The Quest;
4) Voyage and Return;
5) Comedy (*not* necessarily funny!);
6) Tragedy; and
7) Rebirth.

Section II: what they all have in common: the character archetypes.

Section III: “Missing the Mark” discusses how the plot archetypes go awry.

First examines each of the plots in their “Dark” and “Sentimental” versions. In the “Dark” versions, the protagonist never achieves “enlightenment” in symbolic form due to an egoistic focus. In the “Sentimental” versions, the story and ending appear happy, but without ingredients necessary for archetypal closure. (Chapters 21 to 24).

Then to Thomas Hardy (Ch. 25), documenting how his oeuvre shifted from “light” to “dark” in parallel with his increasingly frustrating and dysfunctional personal life.

Then the worst two chapters (26, 27), reeking of personal biases and opinions regarding nihilism, violence, sex and the changing role of women.

First of three “modern” archetypes (mostly unseen in classic literature): (Ch. 28:) Rebellion against “The One” (except Job); then (Ch. 29:) The Mystery (actually diagnosed as usually a sentimental comedy with a hero unintegrated into the basic story).

Finally, best chapter of the book, on Oedipus and Hamlet.

Section IV: “Why we tell stories”, pretty boring, unless you want an examination of how religious texts can be perceived in archetypal patterns.

Ch. 27: points out many books and films pushed out the boundaries of what was acceptable in terms of sex and violence (e.g., Texas Chainsaw Massacre). But he conflates this with a fundamental shift in the center of gravity of story-telling, ignoring that many of these extreme works have a narrow public appeal and are not considered as having intrinsic lasting importance. Frankly, his reactionary rage (notable in his columns) is barely suppressed.

Ch. 27: Sexism. In discussing the movie Alien, he states “the basic plot is very similar to that of The Texas Chainsaw Massacre” (p. 486). He astonishingly ignores the fundamental distinction between mayhem performed by humans, *acting as monsters*, and that performed by actual monsters. The perverse horror of Chainsaw is in the very disturbing transformation of humans into monsters — even into a family of cooperating monsters. Being killed and consumed by the Alien is basically no worse than an attack by a shark, or a lion.

Also, he seems to be quite sexist here, or at least comes very close to it. “The image of women was becoming de-feminised. No longer were the styles of women's clothing intended to express such traditional feminine attributes as grace, allure, prettiness, elegance: they were designed to be either, in a hard direct way, sexually provocative, or sexlessly businesslike.” [Frankly, I find Trinity in The Matrix (which he doesn't discuss) to be an paragon of grace, allure and elegance as well as sexually provocative.:] Apparently an archetypal hero must be masculine, and thus to portray a woman in heroic terms is a contradiction of the archetype. He sounds outraged: “There was now a premium in showing animus-driven women capable of competing with men and outperforming them in masculine terms. Female characters were expected to be show as just as clever and tough as men, mentally and physically.” His only saving grace is the uncertainty whether he believes (prescriptively) that women should properly behave only in a ladylike way, or whether he believes (descriptively) that the fundamental archetypes in our psyches are limited thus.

But, frankly, his chapters on the modern subversion of the archetypes display more irritation than admiration, and many readers will probably have a sneaking suspicion that the author is a social reactionary, which also

seems to be evident in his columns for the Telegraph.

Consider: the author makes a strong case that these plot archetypes are fundamental and universal (as, I understand, Jung had attempted to establish with personality archetypes?). But does this make them eternal and unchanging? And even if that is given, does it make them good and true? Many inheritances from our evolutionary past are dysfunctional; perhaps it is proper that we should rebel against aspects of these archetypes, especially those that are arbitrarily constraining. Booker doesn't perceive this possibility, implicitly treating any deviation from his perception of these rules as dysfunctional. (Although he isn't consistent: the fact that the heroic Ripley in Alien is a woman he finds distressing; the fact that Oedipus marries and has children with his mother is brilliance.)

Ch. 31 (beginning of Part IV): “[If:] there is one thing we have seen emerging from the past few hundred pages it is the extent to which the stories told by even the greatest of them are not their own.” The stories told by Shakespeare, Dickens, Hugo — not their own? Because they have been influenced by ghostly skeletons of plots and characters in their subconscious? This is incredibly arrogant. Booker has spent so many decades in his labors that he can't see the forest for the trees.

Side note illuminating arrogance: fn. 3, p. 553: “Various attempts have been made in recent years to provide a scientific definition of the difference between human consciousness and that of other animals. A *fundamental flaw* in all of them lies in their failure to take account of the consequences arising from the split between ego and instinct….” Booker — a journalist and author — apparently believes himself competent to evaluate and judge any effort, regardless of the expertise involved.

Q: quote attributed to Churchill belongs to Bernard Shaw? (p. 576)

Santiago Ortiz says

This book is actually many things:

- An introduction to the seven basic plots and their many associated archetypes that work in combination.

- A system. It can be applied to any story you know (and it’s fun to do so).

- A tool. An almost obligatory read for anyone who invents stories. If you don’t tap on this 37 years research you’re simple on disadvantage. It’s not that everyone should follow the author's guidance in order to write stories that fulfill the self and not the ego, on the contrary, a writer might find herself not wanting to do so, but the structure the book provides is a map to decide when and how to move away or within the Self archetypical path.

- A partial and moral history of literature, and an even more partial and equally moral history of Western culture.

- A psychoanalis of our modern western culture, throughout the stories we invent and the ones we tell ourselves. And it's, indeed, a moralistic analysis, something that can pull the nerves of a grownup reader.

- A compendium of great and diverse stories.

- A source of unexpected spoilers (if you read the book be very careful with this, for it reveals the plot of so many stories and books, that chances are it will spoil something you want to read. I had to overlook several paragraphs when reading).

The Odyssey versus Ulysses, E.T. versus Encounters of the Third Type, Terminator versus Frankenstein… in each comparison the author prefers the first and rejects the second option. Interestingly, this framework (or as I called it: system) allows strange and yet consistent and justifiable comparisons, such as Jaws versus Gilgamesh (borrowing a famous gedankenexperiment from Chomsky, if someone told these two stories to a martian, it will think they are just two slightly different versions of the same). It's refreshing to see how the author jumps without loss of continuity from Hollywood B movies to universal classics. And this tool's lack of respect for the boundaries between high and low cultures (the below-the-line and the above-the-line archetype), which is itself a moral construct, compensates, in my opinion, its otherwise unbearable moralism regarding other aspects (ego versus self).

In summary: vaccinate yourself against moralism, enjoy this awesome construction and the many stories it contains, be aware of spoilers, and use what you learned to write great new stories.

James says

An absolutely infuriating book. The basic premise, that there are a limited number of basic structures to be found in narrative storytelling, is fair enough but hardly anything new. Booker makes some good connections and some of them are undeniably on-the-money. But the whole book is infected by Booker's right wing, traditionalist ideology that it becomes, as it goes along, a deeply unpleasant, reactionary read. For Booker, the ideal man is a martial warrior & the ideal woman a housewife (same ideals as Hitler, funnily enough). Booker combines all this with a kind of shallow, pop-psychology version of Jungian archetypal theory, blaming all the ills of the world on "human egotism" (to say which is to say absolutely nothing), and what is more condemning any author who dares to not bring their narratives to "a fulfilling, satisfactory conclusion." Booker trashes 200 years of modernist storytelling, thinks gay and women's liberation is a egotism and the shrew that ought to be tamed, seems to admire Thatcher as the Hero of the Falklands and certainly believes that Joe Orton deserved to be killed for daring to write Entertaining Mr. Sloane. The worst thing of all is that Booker misrepresents or just plain gets wrong a large percentage of the books and plays he is discussing, suggesting that he has either not read them or is simply lying about them to advance his ideological argument. Booker, it should be noted, is not the writer of any creative fiction at all, nor is he a proper academic critic (for a work of 700+ pages not to include a single citation or even a bibliography is shocking). This book will be the forgotten as an embarrassment in 20 years time; people would do better to go back to the work of a genuine critic of myths like Northrop Frye.

Erin Lale says

This book helped me do something I find excruciatingly difficult: describe my own novel. I read this book when I was trying to write back cover copy for Punch book 1: The Loribond. It was only in reading The Seven Basic Plots that I realized I had unwittingly written a comedy.

The Seven Basic Plots is a humongous tome. For a book that purports to survey all of human literature to

reveal the basic driving psychology of human storytelling, it's focused on the DWMs a bit too much for me. There were several points at which I found some of the basic premises offensive, such as that the heroine of any story is not a real person, only a projection of the hero's anima. But there were other points at which I was thinking, "So that's why I didn't like that book-- that story violates our sense of how a story is supposed to be shaped."

This book falls into the trap of thinking that ancient literature shows that everyone in Homer's Greece was a person of perfect psychological wholeness, and you can see the decline of Western Man in Chekov and that licentious boy Elvis Presley. Is it not more likely that the ancient literature that has stood the test of time to be passed down to us today is better because it's the best of its time and the bad stuff disappeared, not because everything was better back then?

That said, this book does seem to have reverse-engineered the magic formula behind the success of many classics of Western literature, and I would recommend it to any author.

Rachel says

Finished at last. What an utter waste of time - but in a sick sort of way I just had to keep going, to see just how bad it could get. He started off with a good idea - that a lot of stories have similar basic plot outlines. Unfortunately he then gets a bit carried away, comes up with a formula, then applies it not just to literature, but the whole of human history. Which is all a decline from some prelapsarian state of blessedness. It's like the theory of the four humours in medicine - it seems like it might make sense at first, the trouble is it's all wrong. Ninety-five percent of everything in this book is just wrong. The amount of sexism, homophobia, snobbery and racism was frankly shocking. However I'm sure the author wouldn't give a damn what I think because as a woman I'm obviously only supposed to feel and guess, not think. It's a long time since anything offended me as much as this.

Rita Crayon Huang says

I didn't mean to read this book. I just wanted to know see what the seven basic plots were! But I devoured the first 300+ pages in a way that made me realize I just might read all 700. (It's just so lucid! With all this yummy discussion of well-known stories from throughout the ages, FOR all ages . . .)

The next 150 pages or so have made me increasingly uneasy, as we discuss all the ways in which stories can go "wrong"--AND what this says about their authors. Not to mention us as a society. AND as we also discuss in depth a number of "failed" stories (of the violent and explicit type I normally avoid; so reading recaps of those was upsetting on another level). For one thing, it's just more fun to think about what makes great stories work than to go negative. This author also feels no compunction about reading his thesis right into these other authors' personal lives, issues, failed marriages (or lack of marriages), the way they died. And the big ideas are getting repetitive.

But I'm still on board . . . I inherently believe storytelling should have some moral value, which helps.

Even if I don't find the concluding few hundred pages as illuminating as the first, I'd still recommend this book. Seriously. Other "classic" books on plot and archetypes may have better prepared me for this book, but

this really is the one.

Caveat: I find myself continually distancing myself from some of the blatant, gendered terminology used. I'm familiar with the whole "inner feminine" and "inner masculine" concept from other psyche texts, and the idea that everyone (male or female) needs to balance both in their personalities is great. (I once wrote a 35-page paper using those ideas!) But I'm not sensing this author cares to make any distinctions b/t these terms and his real-world politics. The farther in you read, the clearer it becomes: He's saying exactly what he's saying.

Michael Herrman says

This book is 5x thicker than it needed to be. If it didn't make a very few fine observations I would have thrown it against the wall, which would have left a considerable hole.

Repetition aside, its greatest weakness is Booker's inability to disentangle his personal prejudices from what makes a story work in the general sense. For example, according to Booker, if the hero doesn't vanquish the villain and run off with the (victimized) female who, he maintains, is nothing more than a projection of the anima, it's because the culture that spawned the story has run off the rails. He also makes sweeping assertions on the immaturity of a culture by citing various examples of stories that ended in ways that he doesn't personally like. There are numerous counter-examples that don't fit with his theory, of course, but he ignored them.

It's not a worthless read, but don't cling to every word.

Update:

I've upgraded this book by one star. The more I think about his insistence on archetypes and the logical ends to which they should arrive re: the story arc, the more I think he may be right. His arguments on the cult of sensationalism through the lens of the Marquis de Sade's snuff porn (*Justine* in particular) and the lack of closure in such narratives makes sense to me.

Heather says

An exellent book that I highly recommend to any writer, or "wannabe" writer. It helps if you have some concept of Jungian psychology, but the author does a good job of making his discussion of the concept of the "self" and "ego" very approachable. He does synopses of many famous stories, ranging from ancient folk tales to modern Hollywood blockbusters. If you've ever wondered why you found a particular story unappealing, reading this book might help you understand why. I foresee this book being an excellent reference as I pursue my dreams of writing.

Adam Stevenson says

I read the book in one sitting, powered through the sheer weight of verbiage by the force of my hatred for it.

To say there are 7 plots and they represent ways of talking about overcoming the ego is fair enough - but when he can't find a single novel that properly exemplifies these ideas, it may have been time to ditch the theory.

Instead he concludes that all authors since the romantic movement have not been emotionally mature enough to fit his theory, so it must be the author's fault. Not a fault with the theory.

This then goes on to dig its own deep hole, where an author can show their emotional immaturity by having a female hero, or an ugly person or a gay relationship - or pretty much anything really.

I would recommend this book, but only to argue against.

Milena March says

Though I'm a little uncomfortable dismissing a book that has taken someone half a lifetime to write, I can't help but think that when it comes to *The Seven Basic Plots* the author's time could really have been better spent. There were points where this book outright insulted me; as a literature student, as a feminist, as a psychology major, and as a lover of stories in general.

The idea of applying Jungian theory to literature is not new, but reading this book often had me wondering whether such a reductive approach is actually useful. Booker doesn't really offer any compelling information which enhances my experience of literary criticism or of literature in general.

In fact, I had so many problems with this book that I think it's probably best to just list them in no particular order:

1. Booker's prose is at times very poorly crafted. For a writer who has a chapter entitled 'The Rule of Three: (the role played in stories by numbers),' he seems to take a kind of perverse delight in presenting the reader with endless sentences listing countless plot examples without pausing for breath. My advice? Give that poor semicolon a break and focus on putting 'the rule of three' into action.

2. I was about halfway through this book when I realised that just about every story examined in-depth in this book (barring folk and fairy tales) was written by a man. And I'm not the first person to pick up on Booker's gender and cultural bias either.

3. On the above point, the moment when I honestly thought I was going to hurl this book at the wall. Booker's analysis (or, more accurately, his outright dismissal) of two of the best-known female English novelists of all time was absolutely insulting to the intelligence. He begins by adopting the tiresome and oh-so-ignorant line that Jane Austen was desperately in love with her Irish cousin Tom Lefroy, and that the entirety of her writing career was her attempt to compensate for the fact that she would never marry him and have all of his babies. As I've mentioned before, this sentimental (and degrading) little folly is an invention of the Victorians and later of Hollywood, in an attempt to explain just why Austen was so good at writing about love and marriage, given that she apparently had no experience in either field. As just about any serious Austen scholar will tell you, there is absolutely no evidence that Austen was overcome with love for a boy she met only once or twice in her life, and for only a few weeks at a time. What Booker does is latch onto this sweet but irritating little story as a way to explain why a woman would want to be a writer - not just in Austen's day but at any point in history. Austen is 'acceptable' to Booker because she is trying to

compensate for her supposed 'inability' to complete the archetypal journey from childhood to parenthood by re-creating her failed romance in a new setting which she can manipulate toward a new, 'happy' ending. This portrait of one of the most well-respected and loved English novelists of all time - male or female - is degrading. Booker does not given Austen credit for being an extraordinarily intelligent woman, a perceptive social critic, and an accomplished writer in all aspects of technique and style. In the few instances Booker *does* turn his attention to the writing of women throughout history, he constructs them as somehow 'piggybacking' on the fame, intelligence or inspiration of significant men in their lives. He does this with Mary Shelley and *Frankenstein*, and though he doesn't analyse Bronte directly, when he looks at *Jane Eyre* he wilfully misinterprets plots and characters in order to fit it into his overall design.

4. Which brings me to another point. There is a lot of subtle twisting of plots in order to make them fit into Booker's overall plan. If a situation, ending, scene, or character doesn't fit in with his scheme, then it is conveniently ignored. A quick Google search using only the book's title as a keyword threw up an article which points out that Booker ignores the final chapter of *Middlemarch* and the character of Stephen Dedalus in Joyce's *Ulysses*. So it's not just me that has this problem. Of course, all literary analysis does this to some extent, but Booker so wilfully ignores it that reading *The Seven Basic Plots* you begin to wonder if you read the same version of these books as he did.

5. Why on earth does Booker feel he has to retell the entire plot of popular fairy tales in excruciating detail? Who doesn't know the plot of *Cinderella*?!

6. The book also promises to explain 'why we tell stories'. The answer to this question, according to Booker, is quite infuriatingly simple (we are trying to re-create the generational transition of child becoming parent, growing into their 'place' in the world) but takes so long to actually answer that the point (however unexciting it may be) is lost.

7. At the risk of sounding like a literary snob, it is vital that anyone who reads this book takes note; Booker is NOT a literary critic. Neither is he a psychologist. This is important to remember because what becomes apparent very quickly is how little citation there is in this book. It's a reflection of the assumption that to become a literary theorist or critic one simply has to read a lot of books. As someone working towards a degree in literature, I can honestly state that most of literary criticism involves reading *around* the text. Citing the Introductory Notes to *The Thousand and One Nights* just isn't going to cut it. The few references which do crop up are so ridiculously out of date that it makes the reader feel like Booker is too cheap to buy new books and too lazy to visit the library; instead his references seem to be solely those he can download free off Project Gutenberg or books he bought when he was an undergrad at university and never got round to throwing out.

8. The thing which bothered me the most: the fact that Booker dismisses any story which doesn't follow the archetypal pattern as 'wrong' or 'bad' fiction, that it is somehow a failure. I just... I can't even begin to talk about this one.

9. Where is postmodernism to fit in all this? Reading this book one would assume that the last sixty years of literary development never happened. Either Booker is too traditionalist to even crack open the cover of a postmodern novel or else he wilfully ignores them because he knows they refute his argument. Is everything that literature has become in the past few decades also 'wrong', because it doesn't fit neatly into Booker's personal preferences for literature?

There are a few interesting points in this book, but ultimately, I don't think it contributes meaningfully to our understanding of storytelling. It is an out-of-date book full of unenlightened ideas and little to really

challenge the reader. Read it if you must, but be warned; finishing this book may bear a startling resemblance to the outline of Booker's 'Overcoming the Monster' plot.

Mark says

The Seven Basic Plots
Author: Christopher Booker
Publisher: Continuum International Publishing Group
Published In: New York City, NY / London, UK
Date: 2004
Pgs: 728

REVIEW MAY CONTAIN SPOILERS

Summary:
A small number of basic stories permeate the world. They are hardwired into the human psyche. These plots exist in ancient myths, folk tales, play, novels, campfire tales, James Bond, Harry Potter, and Star Wars. These plots go to the way that we imagine stories and human psychology. Stories that lose touch with their archetypal underpinning.

Genre:
Literature & Fiction
History & Criticism
Politics & Social Sciences
Folklore & Mythology
Criticism & Theory

Why this book:
Writing and writers and the stories that they tell and we read.

The concept of The Seven Basic Plots is awesome in scope once you consider it.

The Feel:
It is interesting that the mores shattered as they did in the 1950s, when with Lady Chatterley's Lover seeing full publication in all of its details for the first time in history along with other novels and specifically Lolita which predated the unexpurgated Lady. Was it the shift of a flush society free from heavier wants causing this? A freedom from the power of the church in everyday life? Taken in context with Hitchcock's Psycho and its focusing on Norman’s murders and voyeurism, and other less artistic movie and page moments that rounded out the later half of the 21st century, we see how these treatments of those topics and the way that they are explained and touched upon fits in with the seven basic plots. And while all of that is fascinating as a study of the shift in morality, it’s not like it’s the first morality shift ever. It’s just the most televised and widespread visually and aurally. Despite this fascinating sidelight, this really doesn’t get the premise of the book. This book is about half again as long as it could have been.

Favorite Scene / Quote:
Relating the epic of Gilgamesh and James Bond's Dr No adventure is sheer genius. Puts the concept of this book in perspective immediately.

Totally agree on the great majority of World War 2 fiction being Overcoming the Monster.

Plot Holes/Out of Character:
Androcles and the Lion doesn't really fit with the Overcoming the Monster paradigm.

I do think that the monster is sometimes wholly human.

Is Mystery an 8th basic plot or is Mystery the plots dressed in different circumstances with a macguffin thrown in and a sense of suspense?

Hmm Moments:
Loved Jaws, hated Beowulf, never really considered that, at base, they were the same story.

Amazing on how many Overcoming the Monsters stories there are out there throughout history.

Feel that the stereotypes of Monster as Predator, Holdfast, or Avenger fits either for protagonist or antagonist roles.

I begin to wonder at where Frankenstein would fit. OtM may only work if Victor is indeed the monster.

Appreciate Ian Fleming's Bond pattern being given a few pages. Despite the repeating pattern, I did enjoy those books. It just wasn't the same when Gardner took over and, then, onward to the plethora of authors who became associated with fictional Bond-age. The pattern which holds true for the majority of the Fleming Bonds: the call-anticipation, initial success-dream, confrontation-frustration, final ordeal-nightmare, miraculous escape-death of the monster. This Bondian pattern appears throughout literature. The Thirty Nine Steps used the same format.

The Lord of the Rings is called a Quest. And while it is a Quest, it is also an OtM in that Sauron and, by extension, the Ring, itself, are the monster.

WTF Moments:
The dismissal of The Lord of the Rings as a "not a fully integrated, grown up story" plays as elitist drivel when taken in context with the author's own assertion that LOTR exhibits all 7 basic plot elements. I believe that LOTR may be one of the best fully realized stories and worlds ever presented in literature, pulp, classical, neo-classical, modern, post-modern, whatever.

Meh / PFFT Moments:
Lists The Magnificent Seven as an OtM, I see The Magnificent Seven more as a The Quest or a Rags to Riches, with the riches being redemption as these bad men find their place in the sun. By the same token, the Sevens, both Magnificent and Samurai, could be seen as Rebirth stories.

I'm not in general a big fan of the Rags to Riches story type. I, also, disagree with the idea that Jack and the Beanstalk is a Rags to Riches instead of an Overcoming the Monster. I guess that some of these fit more than one category.

Disagree with the idea that Lolita is a veiled Raging Temptress. I see it more the in vein of a weak protagonist who fails to Overcome the Monster, with himself as the Monster.

Wisdom:
Talks of Dracula and how Jonathan Harker unexplainedly escaped the castle at the end of Part One of Dracula. Always felt that Dracula let him go as both preamble and herald of Dracula's coming to England to bring his scourge and reign onto England's nighttime scene.

This has shown me that perspective shows us that many of the stories that we think of as examples of this type can, in many cases, be categorized in many different ways. What I'm gathering from this book, despite Booker's protestations in classifying classical and neo-classical stories into the seven basic plots, is that many crossover and merge many elements from across the basics. Maybe part of what makes a truly great story is when it's a little bit Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, The Quest, Voyage and Return, Comedy, Tragedy, and Rebirth.

Missed Opportunity:
The failure to focus more sharply on the seven basic plots, 8 if we go with the mystery idea.

Last Page Sound:
I'm disappointed, that's not really fair. I'm unhappy that the reason I read this book, the reason brought up in the title isn't given full service in the book, which that isn't really fair either. The ideas and the frameworks of the seven basic plots is here. The problem is that it is covered over in a cat box full of othter ideas. It's like the author wanted to get into the ideas of the self and ego more than the seven basic plots. I would argue that there are at least two or three tangentially related books hidden inside these 700 some odd pages.

Author Assessment:
I don't know, would depend on subject matter, length, and whether I felt the focus was tight enough.

Editorial Assessment:
Failure to drive focus to a laser point….or a dull scooping spoon. There were three good books about writing here, but they weren't' scooped into their own piles.

Knee Jerk Reaction:
not as good as I was lead to believe

Disposition of Book:
Irving Public Library
South Campus
Irving, TX

Dewey Decimal System:
809.924
B724s

Would recommend to:
no one

Jessica says

A fascinating but infuriating book which requires one to accept the premise that Jungian archetypes form the only satisfying basis for a narrative. This premise is explored through the means of numerous if partial examples from both literary and popular culture. The author's bias and erudition make this an enjoyable read and it is worth persevering to the end, however there are several annoying factual errors in the plot summaries. And Booker's despair with regard to novels and other works from the 18th century onwards, with a few exceptions (Crocodile Dundee is a bizarre and much-quoted example) leave one feeling frustrated.

A note of caution: Booker seems to believe that the only possible fulfilling relationship is that between a man and a woman, and that other permutations must by their nature lack validity. Which is a bit normative, if you ask me. But it remains a work that anyone who loves writing or reading should take a look at, if only because it provides a guide to many different types of plot and the archetypes that *may* underlie them.

This is one for fans of narrative closure! ;-)