

STORY FANATIC

2010

A Journal of Meaningful Story Structure

Jim Hull

Copyright © 2011 by Jim Hull
All rights reserved.

Digital PDF Version

Story Fanatic
Valencia, California
<http://storyfanatic.com>

Table of Contents

Story Essentials

Writing Complete Stories	1
What Character Arc Really Means	9
A Story is an Argument	11

Story Structure

Redefining Protagonist and Main Character	17
Narrative Drive and Weak Protagonists	21
The Main Character's Central Problem	25
The MacGuffin is a Joke	31
The True Definition of a Protagonist	39
Plot Points and the Inciting Incident	47
Four Acts, Not Three	57
The Reason for Acts	65
Accurate Story Structure Ain't Easy	73
The Antagonists of Inception	81
Sophisticated Story Goals	87
Applying Pressure to the Main Character	91
How to Train Your Inciting Incident	95
When Failure Becomes a Good Thing	99
What It Means to Fail	105

Story Theory

Dramatica: Story Theory for the 21st Century	113
Not Everything is a Hero's Journey	119
The Structure of a Short Story	127
What You're Missing By Not Understanding Dramatica	131

Story Analysis

Up In The Air	137
You Don't Know Jack	143
Avatar and Star Wars: Spectacle Over Substance	149
Avatar and the Broken Main Character	157
The Pacific vs. Band of Brothers	163
The Difference Between Neo and Luke Skywalker	169
The Handshake and the Machine	177
Avoiding the False Moment of Character	183
Successful Short Story Adaptations	193
When Film Analysis Goes Bad	203
The Illusion of Change	211
Meaningful Storytelling, an Analysis of Inception	219
The Delectable and Exquisite Themes of Ratatouille	225

Writing

Organizing Your Screenwriting Life with the iPhone and iPad	235
Writing a Screenplay with Dramatica	245

Introduction

Why do some stories work better than others?

This is a question that has long held my interest, eventually providing the motivation to build a website that explored the possible answers deeper and further than they had ever been in the past. Taking into account the centuries upon centuries of the narrative art-form, it seems clear that there is something special about a *great story*. But where to start?

Re-imagined within the context of a book, the following thirty-nine chapters represent the entirety of my research on the subject during the past year. Organized into the four main areas of study -- *Story Structure*, *Story Theory*, *Story Analysis*, and *Writing* -- each article attempts to make the mysterious machinations of great stories easily identifiable. Those articles that delve even further contain an *Advanced Story Theory* section. Using the Dramatica theory of story as a baseline, these sections provide a deeper understanding of story structure. Where possible, additional links have been provided. These links will be updated as needed, ensuring that the references within remain current and accurate.

Meaningful story structure is important. Not because it guarantees a script sale, but rather because we as humans have been built to crave meaning in our lives. Stories provide that better understanding in a way we can never experience on our own.

It is my sincere hope that the writing within this book illuminates some aspect of story you never knew existed, perhaps even helping you to create something truly important and indisputably enduring.

Jim Hull

Part I

Story Essentials

1

Writing Complete Stories

Psst! Hey, buddy....wanna know the secret to Pixar's success?

In their first fifteen years, Pixar Animation Studios has managed to provide the world with ten monumentally successful films. Not only have they easily won their respective box office returns, these films have also won the hearts of audiences both young and old. Everyone loves a Pixar film.

The voice talent is unique and inspired, the character design rocks massive appeal, and the animation fans the flames of magic first ignited within the classic Disney animated films of the mid 20th-century.¹

But there is one ingredient that towers paramount over all of these.

A Matter of Perspective

Most everyone who delves into the complicated world of storytelling eventually comes to the realization that in the end, stories are about solving problems. The concepts of story –character, plot, theme, and so on –were all developed as a means to communicate the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of the approach used in solving those problems. When done properly, an audience is provided with meaning.

All meaning is derived from context. The idea that “one man’s trash is another man’s treasure” is based on the chasm that exists between two opposing contexts. I may see the world differently than you, but from my perspective I am right. Likewise, from where you stand the way you see the world is correct. Meaning depends on the perspective we take.

¹ In-depth analysis of *Ratatouille* <http://stryfntk.com/book/48>

There are four perspectives from which we can extract some meaning in our lives: I, You, We and They. As we go about our daily lives, we can easily shift perspectives from one context to the next, using whichever one will help us achieve our goals or make us feel better. The only thing we can't do is assume all four perspectives at once.

In our view of ourselves, we can take the I perspective and see what it is like to personally have a problem. We can also see a viewpoint opposite from ours (the You perspective) and have a relationship with others as well (the We perspective). But we cannot step outside and look at ourselves objectively. It's an impossibility.

Conversely when we look at others, we can view them objectively from the They perspective, we can have a relationship with them (the We perspective), and have an opposing view to theirs (the You perspective). But we cannot be them. We cannot simultaneously be both objective and subjective.

Stories can.

If you take the central problem in a story, you can see how that problem would appear different depending on what perspective was taken. The approach one character takes may seem an appropriate way to solve the story's problems while completely inappropriate to another character. It's only once we examine the central problem from all four perspectives that we are finally able to comprehend some truth to the matter and thus arrive at some greater meaning.

This is why stories have such a profound effect on us and why sometimes you can't help but read or watch the same stories over and over again. **Stories offer us something we cannot get in real life**, namely - meaning. When a story covers all four perspectives at once, it effectively has made a complete argument that an audience will be powerless to ignore. They'll have nothing to say because all the bases have been covered.

So how does a story go about exploring these four perspectives?

The Four Throughlines

The four perspectives correspond with the four throughlines found in every successful story. The I perspective matches up nicely with the Personal throughline. From this context an audience member can feel what it is like to personally deal with a problem. The You perspective matches up with the Opposition throughline, as in “You have a different way of seeing the world.” The We perspective corresponds with the Relationship throughline of a story and finally, the They perspective matches up with the Big Picture throughline.

The Big Picture Throughline:This throughline is what most consider the main story, the plot, or if you prefer, the A-story line. A majority of screen-time is spent telling this throughline (at least in American cinema). This is the part of the story you describe when you’re asked, “What was the story about?” From here, the audience gets to see the central problem from a bird’s eye objective view.

The Personal Throughline:This throughline concerns itself with who the story is about. Most story experts agree that a successful story revolves around one central character, most often referred to as the Main Character. This throughline is also sometimes called the B-story line. From here, the audience gets to experience the central problem from a completely subjective personal viewpoint.

The Opposition Throughline:This throughline provides the opposing viewpoint necessary to force the Main Character to deal with their own issues. Most accurately referred to as the Impact Character, this character has also been labeled the personal antagonist. From here, the audience gets to experience a personal viewpoint of the problem that is not their own.

The Relationship Throughline:This throughline is the heart of every story. It concerns itself with the relationship created between the Main and Impact Character and whether or not that relationship is growing or dissolving. From here, the audience can gather some emotional meaning from the problem unavailable in any of the other throughlines.

Incomplete Stories

Incomplete stories exist when one of the throughlines is missing. When the Relationship Throughline is missing, you have a story without heart. In *Monsters vs. Aliens*, the Main Character Susan is left to deal with her personal problems on her own. Because of this, her change at the end seems forced and unbelievable. Main Characters need that Impact Character to help draw them out. Towards the beginning of the film there is a scene with Dr. Cockroach that seems like the beginning of a Relationship Throughline, but it is not followed through with.

This missing throughline is the primary reason for the poor performance of this film overseas. Audiences outside of America love stories with heart. Don't give it to them, and they won't show up.

When the Personal Throughline is missing, you end up with a story that is cold or uninvolving. In *9*, we never learn who "9" is or what emotional baggage he brings to the story. This is why it becomes difficult to become emotionally involved with the film. Storytellers must provide this gateway into a story less they risk an audience checking out.

What if you leave out the Big Picture Throughline? In film, it is virtually impossible. Novels, not so much. The book version of *Twilight* suffers from an underdeveloped Big Picture Throughline. We know a lot about Bella, and Edward and their budding romance but we don't know anything about the big bad vampires until 3/4 of the way into the story.

This is why most men will toss the book aside after twenty pages or so. When you leave out the Big Picture Throughline, you end up with stories that don't make sense. This is also why, in the movie version, they sprinkled in bits with those three baddies from the very beginning. You need to have a sense that a story is going to make sense if you want to retain male viewers. Having a Big Picture Throughline goes a long way towards making this happen.

Complete stories are stories in which all four throughlines are present.

The Exceptions

There are occasional exceptions to the failure of incomplete stories. This year we've been treated to three entertaining movies that fell short of supplying us with a convincing argument. *Taken* had neither the Opposition Throughline nor a Relationship Throughline. That's OK, because the purpose of that film was to show Liam Neeson kicking ass throughout Europe, not provide audiences with some deeper meaning.

Likewise, *Inglorious Bastards* from Quentin Tarantino missed the mark in the complete story department. The entertainment value that came from the uniqueness of the subject matter and some captivating performances superseded the audience's need for some greater understanding.

And finally, *Coraline* wasn't trying to be anything more than a beautiful tale.² If you've seen the film you know there's a scene towards the end that seems to come out of nowhere. Coraline's mother, constantly distracted by the pressures of her career, brings home a gift for her daughter. It feels like the right thing for her to do, but at the same time it feels awkward as she never really grew to that point. If they had developed the relationship between Coraline and her mother more (i.e., a Relationship Throughline), the story would have meant something more than simply beautiful character design and technically superior animation.

But they didn't, and the box office languished because of it.

Films suffer when a throughline is missing. Luckily, there is one studio who understands that.

The Pixar Secret

As mentioned above, sure, you can get by with an incomplete story if you have fabulous production design, but you'll always be doing just that: getting by. Audiences crave meaning. It's why they go to movies and

² There is a definite difference between a story and a tale. See "[A Story is an Argument](#)" (Chapter 3)

why they cherish the films they do. And you don't have to look much further than Pixar Animation to find films that people cherish.

Their secret?

They write complete stories.

Of the ten films produced at that studio in the last fifteen years, each and every one has a full and complete story. All four throughlines are present in each film. In fact, the greatest of them all, *Finding Nemo*, actually has two complete stories in it! We have the father/son story that focuses on, well, finding Nemo, and we have the secondary story with Nemo and Gil in the aquarium. The latter is less defined than the former, but it is still treated as a complete story. It's why the film feels so "full."

When reviewing a Pixar film, critics overwhelmingly point out the abundance of heart. This is because every single film has a meaningful relationship at the core. Woody and Buzz, Bob and Helen, Sully and Boo, Wall-E and Eve –these are all classic heart-felt relationships that will be remembered by audiences for years to come.

In addition, every film focuses on one central character from which the audience can experience the story. *Cars* has Lightning McQueen and *Toy Story 2* has Woody. And every film has an opposition character that forces the Main Character to deal with their issues. Lightning has Doc, Woody has Jesse.

The presence of these four throughlines explains why audiences (particularly children) can watch them over and over again. They're getting something out of it that they can't get in real life. They're gaining meaning from solving problems both objectively and subjectively. When life seems pointless or confusing, these films can help supply comfort or greater understanding in the form of meaning.

And that's all there is to it.

Great Expectations

As the world of fiction grows more fragmented and people become more and more distracted by the meaningless, the need for complete stories becomes apparent. If a writer wishes themselves to be heard and to have a profound effect on those who experience their story, they will have to provide them with a complete argument. Anything less, and those long hours at the keyboard will simply become fodder for the refuse pile that is Tweets and YouTube clips.

Audiences want complete stories. It's up to the authors of the 21st century to make it so.

This article was originally published on December 13, 2009 and can be found here: <http://stryfntk.com/book/chapter-1>

2

What Character Arc Really Means

When asked to define character arc, most people think it has something to do with how the Main Character changes within a story. While in some respect this is correct, it is inaccurate to assume that this means every Main Character needs to undergo some major transformation. Understanding the difference between growth and change is essential to the proper implementation of character arc in a story.

Without a doubt, Main Characters need to grow. A story cannot develop organically if the principal characters within it do not grow and adapt to the shifting dramatic tides. When an act progresses from one area of exploration to the next, the Main Character needs to progress as well. That's how stories work. Therefore, it is easy to see how growth, and in particular the Main Character's growth, is inherent in the mechanisms that run story.

But when you talk about change and how the Main Character "has" to change, you're making an assumption about the nature of that growth. Not all growth is transformative. Sometimes a person can grow by maintaining their position, shoring up their resolve against whatever is thrown at them. This is no less meaningful than the kind of growth where someone changes who they are or how they see the world.

A video montage of Main Characters who do NOT fundamentally change can be found on this chapter's corresponding page online.

Video montage: <http://stryfntk.com/book/chapter-2>

When the Main Character reaches the crisis point or climax of a story they are faced with a very important question: are they on the right path or the wrong path?

Some stories are about characters who realize they have been doing things wrong the whole time. These characters **change** and adopt a new way of seeing the world. Other stories are about characters who realize that the way they have been doing things is in fact the right way to approach their problems. These characters **remain steadfast**. In both cases, this realization that they arrive at is an extension of, or better yet, result of their growth.

Now whether or not their decision turns out to be a good thing or a bad thing is a completely different area of discussion. The takeaway here is that in assuming that every Main Character has to change, you are effectively ignoring or discounting fifty percent of the stories out there. And we're not talking about weak stories or stories that have problems. *Amadeus*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Chinatown*, the list goes on and on. These are fantastic stories that are on the top of every Top 100 list. Non-transformative growth can be a powerful means of expressing an author's point-of-view.

Again, understanding the difference between growth and change is the key. Not all growth requires a different mindset. As the video clearly shows, there is great meaning to be found in stories where a character's "arc" requires them to stand their ground.

This article was originally published on September 24, 2009 and can be found here: <http://stryfntk.com/book/chapter-2>

3

A Story is an Argument

There is a significant difference between tales and stories. One can be thrown out and quickly disregarded because it has relatively little to stand on. The other offers meaning and emotional resonance that extends far beyond the initial viewing.

A tale is merely a statement: a linear progression from one event to the next culminating in one singular outcome. In contrast, **a story is an argument**: a course of logical and emotional reasoning aimed at proving that a particular approach is either a good one, or a bad one. Complete stories argue their point in such a way that they leave little for the audience to reject or refute.

A tale, on the other hand, is ultimately forgotten because of the proliferation of exceptions that are inherent to its form. There is no argument being made, no discernible point to it all.

This is why stories are superior. An argument's ultimate goal, after all, is to tell some truth; its purpose is to relay some meaning to an audience. This is where the power of stories lies and is why so many Authors strive to produce them.

Stories as Arguments

The following montage of movie clips seeks to prove that truly wonderful films are the end result of a filmmaker trying to argue a particular meaning. **Spoiler Alerts** abound for the films *Fight Club* and *The Sixth Sense* - if you haven't seen these films and still want to be surprised, don't click play and please stop reading!

The video of “Stories as Arguments” can be found on this chapter’s corresponding page online: <http://stryfntk.com/book/chapter-3>

One cannot possibly come away from *The Shawshank Redemption* without the understanding that no matter the situation, there is always hope. It is what Stephen King and Frank Darabont were trying to communicate through by telling this particular story - there was intention behind their creation.

Likewise, one can’t watch *Fight Club* and not believe that sometimes anarchy and self-destruction is an effective solution to one’s problems. David Fincher certainly has a point of view about the hopeless reality of life and more often than not executes it brilliantly. At the other end of the spectrum, Walt Disney’s *Pinocchio* argues that one should simply do the right thing. While handled in a more obvious way than *Fight Club*, *Pinocchio* is no less effective; both films are about something.

But it is in the climactic clip from *The Sixth Sense* that one can clearly see how meaningful stories work on all levels.

The Connection Between the Personal and the External

Malcom Crowe (Bruce Willis) had been fooling himself (as many Main Characters do) into believing that what he saw and what he perceived as being reality was in fact, real. It was only by working his way through the story and allowing the influence of Cole into his life that he finally understood what was really going on.

The truly great thing about this story was that this understanding was reflected not only in Malcom’s personal throughline but also in the larger story about a disturbed boy and his even more disturbing visions.

Many of the characters in the film (Malcom included) perceive Cole’s outlandish actions as symptomatic of a heavily disturbed mental psychosis. They believe that Cole must be a victim of some sort of child abuse or that he is acting out because his father is gone. He couldn’t possibly be seeing real ghosts.

As it turns out, they were dead wrong.

The Real Reason Stories Exist

Their error of perception, the same that Malcom experiences personally, is shown to be deception, deliberate or otherwise. Overcoming this problem is the focus of the story, and the ultimate meaning of the film.

When people talk about the importance of story, of creating a narrative that matters, what they are really looking for is some way of bringing meaning into the piece. **Structure exists to create this meaning.** This message, or purpose, has to be in there from the beginning of development. It can't be tacked on towards the end of the writing process and the specifics of it can't be tied to a myopic story paradigm.³

The Shawshank Redemption, Fight Club, Pinnocchio –all these films were carefully designed with an overall purpose in mind. Whether it was the benefits of hope when there is no hope or the healing power of anarchy, each film was trying to say something the Authors felt was very important. Tales are usually the unfortunate result of an Author unsure of what they want to say, or confused as to how proper story structure can aid in their writing process.

In regards to this last point, the argument made in *The Sixth Sense* can be applied to writing as much as it can towards deceased ghosts who don't know they're really dead. People should look beyond what they see, what they perceive to be the truth about storytelling, and really dig down deep to the reality that exists.

Story structure communicates the Author's argument.

Advanced Story Theory for this Article

The concept of the difference between a story and a tale is something that sits at the heart of the Dramatica theory of story. The first chapter of the theory book states in no uncertain terms that Dramatica is concerned with stories that seek to

³ See "[Not Everything is a Hero's Journey](#)" (Chapter 20)

be meaningful by arguing a particular point-of-view.⁴ Tales can attempt to be meaningful, but this meaning will always be left to interpretation by audiences; the meaning will warp and bend because of each individual audience member's subjective experience.

Complete stories, what Dramatica refers to as Grand Argument Stories, are designed to communicate a specific perspective *regardless* of who receives the message.⁵ If the givens in the story are accepted, audience members will find it close to impossible to argue a counterpoint. This is because a complete story covers all the bases.

The message is not left open to interpretation.

Summary

- A tale is a statement: This happened, then this happened, and then it was over. A series of events with little to no emotional resonance.
- A story, a complete story, is an argument wherein the Author tries to argue a certain point-of-view.
- One isn't inherently better than the other, though if an Author wants to have lasting emotional impact, they would best be served by the latter.

This article was originally published on September 25, 2008 and can be found here: <http://stryfntk.com/book/chapter-3>

⁴ Chapter One of the Dramatica Theory Book: <http://stryfntk.com/book/49>

⁵ Dramatica's definition of a Grand Argument Story: <http://stryfntk.com/book/50>

Like what you've read?

To read the remaining 250+ pages, including even more on story structure, analysis and theory please visit:

<http://storyfanatic.com/store>