

Book Review

***Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative* by
Somdev Chatterjee, 2023, 111 pp. ISBN 979-8-88935-938-8**

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.The book under review is authored by writer, filmmaker, and teacher, Somdev Chatterjee, who teaches Direction and Producing Electronic Media at Satyajit Ray Film and Television Institute, Kolkata. He has written content for various international television channels for over a decade.

Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative is a captivating book exploring the dynamics, functions, profound significance, and origin of storytelling. Delving into the evolutionary, cognitive, and psychological roots of narrative theory and storytelling, the author presents a compelling case, explaining why stories are an integral part of human survival. The book not only illustrates the intricate relationships between storytelling, human cognition, and the collective unconscious, but also sheds light on its profound impact on human emotional, cultural, and social behaviour.

The study of storytelling as an art has ancient origins, rooted in traditions like Aristotle's *Poetics* in the West and Bharata Muni's *Natya Shastra* in India. Traditionally, critics have used two main approaches to analyze narratives. The first approach classifies stories by genres or predominant emotions, a practice seen in both Aristotle and Bharata Muni's works. This classification can be refined to highlight features specific to a historical period, geographic region, or individual creator.

The second approach examines the interplay between stories and their cultural contexts. This approach looks at how narratives are influenced by and influence issues of power, identity, and marginality.

In contrast to these traditional methods, Chatterjee's book uses a biocultural approach to study narratives. Instead of focusing on cultural aspects, he explores the role of stories in human evolutionary history. Human bodies and brains have been shaped by the need to survive in hostile environments over millions of years, creating specific patterns in our responses. Since stories are part of our environment, our reactions to them are also influenced by our evolutionary past.

Authors like Will Storr, Jonathan Gottschall, and Brian Boyd have pioneered the biocultural approach to narrative studies in the last decade. Chatterjee builds on their work and suggests that the experience of human life itself has a narrative form, shaped by evolution. In the book, he incorporates insights from neuroscience, anthropology, literature, evolutionary sciences, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology to find answers to four sets of questions:

1. What role have stories played in our evolutionary (as opposed to cultural) history, i.e., how have they helped our species survive and become the dominant species of the planet? How has this history shaped our biology, and our response to stories?
2. How did humans develop the capacity to inhabit imaginary worlds?
3. How does storytelling relate to the way we experience life, and does this relation explain why so many stories have a similar structure?
4. How do stories tap into the structure of our brains and minds, the biases that we have inherited through evolution, to wield their magical power over us?

The book comprises four chapters, each addressing one of the aforementioned questions. The author employs an embodied approach to explore cognition and consciousness. He argues that humans' perception of 'reality', just like animals, is shaped by their physical form, survival instincts, and environmental characteristics. Consequently, this perception of 'reality'

influences how humans engage with the fictional realms of stories. Our physiology and evolutionary history determine the magical impact stories have on us.

Chatterjee begins by arguing against the notion that stories are a form of mere entertainment. He claims that stories play a vital role in the survival of humans as a species. He declares that “Stories act as vehicles for the transmission of knowledge, help foster social cohesion, and are powerful tools for influencing people’s attitudes towards ideas” (Chatterjee 09). The author supports his thesis with references to various relevant studies that have been conducted by researchers with various animals as well as humans. For example, Dr. Tetsuro Matsuzawa and colleagues have spent decades researching chimpanzees' cognitive capacities. Their research shows that in some respects chimpanzees have greater cognitive abilities than humans. This, along with their superior physical abilities means that they have far greater chances of survival as individuals in most environments. However, we humans have the ability to cooperate in very large numbers, even outside the confines of our tribe and community. This gives us a crucial edge and is the key to our survival and dominance as a species. The author shows how stories are a big part of how humans developed this ability to cooperate, build trust, and work collectively towards future goals. In short, stories lie at the very foundation of human societies.

Another important benefit of stories that the author highlights is that they can help pass on knowledge, not only in an explicit form but also implicitly, by offering models of how to live in the world. The models that the most successful stories offer usually orient the reader or listener to modes of behaviour that would increase the chances of success of the entire group, rather than the individual alone. This is another way in which stories have contributed to human survival and success.

While discussing the question of how humans developed the capacity to respond emotionally to narratives they know to be false, the author points to two aspects of human behaviour that probably helped to create the cognitive abilities and psychological attitude needed to create and enjoy fictional narratives: mental simulation and pretend-play of children. The author points out that when facing an uncertain future, humans go through multiple simulations in

their imagination, and how “these simulations help us try out different possible future scenarios” (09). These simulations are safer and quicker than actual trial and error and allow us to avoid disastrous mistakes. On the other hand, children engage in pretend play practice and learn psychological responses to various life situations that they may encounter in the future. Our ability to tell stories, our willingness to attend to narratives that we know to be untrue and even to derive pleasure from them may all be linked to our capacity for simulation, and our propensity for play. Chatterjee asserts, “It is undoubtedly true that spending time in virtual worlds helps us succeed in the real one” (42).

An important question Chatterjee discusses in the book is how common features of stories reflect how we experience life. Based on the work of psychologists Fritz Heider, Marianne Simmel, J.J. Gibson, Daniel Simons, Christopher Chabris, and Donald Hoffman, he builds the argument that evolution has wired humans to see the world not as it is, but in ways that would maximize our chances of survival and reproduction in a hostile environment, while functioning with extremely limited cognitive resources. Chatterjee notes, “...we do not see *what is*, but *what matters* - our perception comes loaded with an inherent value judgment and determined by the imperatives of survival and reproduction and the deepest, most real categories we can perceive are not the categories of being but those related to action.” (60). This leads to the heart of the book’s argument about the origin of the power of stories: “*stories are maps of the deepest layer of reality we can know* - not the scientific reality of value-neutral things, but the psychological reality of a world of value-laden objects in the field of goal-directed action.” Our shared humanity - the shared psychological mould in which we experience life explains why almost all stories have some common features like intentional agents, desire, resistance, and unexpected outcomes.

In the final chapter ‘How Stories Work’ Chatterjee draws on the recent study of human cognitive biases to explain how these affect our responses to stories. Humans, like all other animals, have several instincts and cognitive biases that we have inherited through evolution. These instincts and behavioural biases are usually helpful, which means they statistically increase our chances of survival in the natural environment. However, it is possible to ‘hack’

into these instincts by designing specific stimuli that evoke very strong, involuntary responses. This chapter explores some of the ways in which stories do this by taking advantage of the structure of our brains and minds. He explains how mirror neurons help us empathize with characters we see on screen, how the phenomenon of supernormal stimulus (which is an exaggerated version of a stimulus to which there is an existing response tendency, or any stimulus that elicits a response more strongly than the stimulus for which it evolved) helps to explain the popularity of genres like fantasy, mythology, and melodrama, and how our innate love for pattern detection and puzzle solving is used by storytellers to hook us.

The common theme running through these phenomena is that we can be hooked to stories for reasons that we are not aware of because certain features of stories can directly affect the neurochemistry of our brains, evoking exaggerated cognitive and emotional responses that we have little control over. The author in fact claims that we can be hooked to stories in much the same way we are hooked to cocaine. Whether or not we accept that surprising claim, the fact that the skilled storyteller has the power to exploit our cognitive biases to evoke emotional responses from us that are beyond our conscious understanding or control, inevitably brings out the strong ethical dimension of the act of storytelling that is often overlooked.

In the conclusive chapter, Chatterjee synthesizes the themes, ideas, and concepts explored throughout the book. Not to be ignored, the book has some drawbacks like repetition of several ideas, use of some complex and contradictory thought processes, and a few linguistic complexities. However, through the detailed and comprehensive analysis of his viewpoints with the help of many famous and brilliant literary books, movies, and stories, such as *Pride and Prejudice*, the *Harry Potter* series, *The Bible*, and other mythological books he has justified every significant claim in the book conscientiously.

Chatterjee's heavy reliance on the works of Jordan Peterson, Vilayanur Ramachandran, David Hume, Dan Sperber, and many other such great scholars does not make the book flawed. Rather, while throwing light on the theories and importance of storytelling, the role

of cognitive biases, epistemic vigilance, and other such concepts, the author reinforces and strengthens the book's argument.

The author's detailed analysis of human perception and its effect on storytelling is commendable, though sometimes, it requires additional effort from the average reader to fully comprehend, as the terminology used by the author is quite advanced and derived from psycho-physiology, which could have made it challenging for a common reader to grasp the proposed ideas. However, by explaining every single concept minutely and comprehensively the author has avoided that pitfall as well.

In his conclusion, the author inveighs against those schools of literary or narrative studies that overstress the particular aspects of an era, a community, or an individual creator. It is, however, possible to accuse him of being guilty of the opposite error, that of focusing exclusively on biology to explain the power of narratives. While this does yield many interesting new insights, one wishes that the author had also dwelt on how these various levels of explanation - individual, cultural, and biological - interact with each other to mould the final work, and its influence on us as consumers. Perhaps that would be an avenue of exploration for some future scholars.

To sum up, Chatterjee offers a tour de force analysis of the art and science of storytelling techniques, explaining its profound impact on human cognition, emotion, and culture. Through a comprehensive exploration of key ideas and themes of the book, the author invites readers to delve deep into the heart of storytelling and narrative art, gaining new and keen insights and perspectives along the way. Whether one is a writer who is seeking to hone one's craft or simply a lover of fictional stories, the present book offers a rich tapestry of insights into the power and significance of storytelling in our lives.