

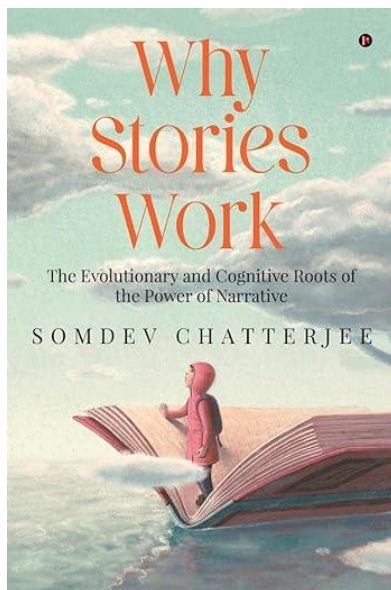


## Book Review

# Somdev Chatterjee's *Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative*. A Review

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Stories are universal and storytelling is essential to the creation of meaning in human life. The story is “central to meaning-making and sense-making” (Peterson, 2). Our minds construct and analyse our truths and beliefs, as well as determine how they relate to other people’s truths and beliefs, through the use of stories. We develop fresh viewpoints and a deeper comprehension of the world by listening to stories. By examining how others perceive the world and how they comprehend it, we are pushed to question and broaden our perspectives. Ken Liu a fantasy

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novelist states that “The planet is at the mercy of our history, our story, our spell.” Furthermore, he adds that “Out of stories, we construct our identity, at the individual as well as the collective level. Our stories tell the world how to be” (Liu,2022). Somdev Chatterjee in his book *Why Stories Work* (2023) claims that the importance of stories is often overlooked and we are losing control of the narratives that shape our lives.

Somdev Chatterjee has made his debut in the field of writing with his book *Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative*. Chatterjee is a writer and filmmaker who teaches at the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute, Kolkata. He is an experienced writer for television and has directed documentaries for international channels. In his debut work, he explores the relationship between stories and other aspects of human experience. According to the author, even today “our lives depend on the stories we tell and we live in” (Chatterjee, 2023, p. 8). Chatterjee reiterates Liu’s argument that “We die for stories, and we live by them.” The former goes one step ahead and states “Stories keep us alive and they can kill us” (p.8).

Chatterjee’s aim in writing the book is to emphasise the significance of stories and story structure and to give a new perspective on the social use of storytelling. The writer analyses the “first principles of story structure and design – to answer questions like what makes a story, why it captures our attention, and how is the experience of consuming a story related to other experiences of life” (p.8). Chatterjee diligently analyses human experiences and emotions to unravel the intricate connection between stories and the essence of being human. In this thought-provoking book, he explores how stories have the power to “shape our lives and make us who we are” (p.9). The book is divided into four chapters that explore the various facets of storytelling from its historical roots to its contemporary relevance.

Chapter 1 titled *Tell It Like Your Life Depends on It* revisits the revolutionary history of humans to find the causes of the origin of storytelling and the survival benefits it confers. The writer’s main argument in this chapter is that stories serve not merely as the vehicles of transmission of knowledge, but they have a greater social use. It is a significant tool to bind groups together and helps to create a common identity. According to the author, universally shared stories “act as a protection from chaos and intra-group conflict” (p.31). Homo Sapiens had to step out of the known protected zone to the unknown territory for survival and to bring back physical or spiritual treasures. In the modern world “physical unknown is replaced by the social and psychological unknown” (p.32). But the pattern and challenges remain the same. The hero goes forth to fight the unknown, untamed, and hostile forces that threaten him or his clan. If he survives, he has a great story to pass on to his people, which might help them in their journey into unknown territory. Chatterjee asserts that “As culture becomes sophisticated, so do their stories” (p.34). He concludes the chapter by elucidating how stories are a powerful medium to influence people’s attitudes toward ideas.

In the second chapter *Learning to Inhabit the Unreal Worlds* the author discusses why “humans inhabit fictional worlds, and respond emotionally to narratives they know to be false” (p.9). He explains how humans are capable of mental simulation. According to Chatterjee, when faced with a difficult situation that can have an uncertain outcome, people simulate various scenarios in their minds, and if one does not have a happy ending, they reject it and start simulating another one. These simulations help us try out different possible future scenarios in relative safety and thus greatly increase our chances of survival. The author asserts that “You die a hundred deaths in your mind to avoid having to die for real” (p.39). These mental simulations often have a narrative form and may be one of the foundations of our ability to mentally inhabit fictional worlds. With time, humans acquired the capacity not only to simulate aspects of the natural world but those of the social world as well. Chatterjee claims that mental simulation of social interaction is a significant factor in our survival and helps us to see the world from another person’s perspective.

Chatterjee tries to explain why fictional worlds evoke real emotions in humans. He recounts the fitness, phylogeny, and ontogeny of the human tendency to create fictional narratives, to pay attention to them, and even to learn from them. He shows how being able to inhabit the fictional world enhances fitness, i.e., increases the chances of survival and reproductive success by enabling us to formulate and remember solutions to the problems in the social world” (pp. 46-47).

The skill of learning solutions to real-world social problems by collectively inhabiting fictional worlds is picked up in early childhood. Engaging in role-playing games is often a child’s first step towards inhabiting a shared fictional world. This helps the child to develop the “appropriate emotional response to a situation” (p.47) in an environment that is relatively safe. When we open a book, enter a movie theatre, or hear someone say “once upon a time ...” the experience is also framed as make-believe and safe. According to Chatterjee storytelling and children’s play have common ingredients like “safety, trust, priming for surprise, and being still caught off guard” (p.49). The children’s play makes them simultaneously experience two contradictory emotions—the ‘pretend’ emotion apt for the fiction being enacted and the ‘real’ pleasure of knowing the fact that they are only playing. Chatterjee argues that the capacity to experience contradictory emotions simultaneously is what gives us the “ability to enjoy stories and we are drawn to the stories that explore danger, taboo or deepest emotional conflicts” (p.48).

The central question discussed in the third chapter titled *Maps of Experienced Reality* is why stories are so powerful and why most of the stories share common traits, such as protagonists who pursue their desires against opposition from others and come into circumstances with uncertain results. Chatterjee also tries to explain why there is often a discrepancy between the protagonist’s expectations of the world and what occurs.

Many narratives begin with the protagonist being confronted by an aspect of reality they had been either oblivious to or purposely avoiding. Chatterjee gives examples like Luke Skywalker whose peace is shattered when his adoptive family is killed by stormtroopers, propelling him into

conflict. Gilgamesh, confronted with the tragic demise of his companion Enkidu due to a curse from the Gods, is compelled to face the inescapable truth of his mortality. Likewise, in most stories, the protagonist is made to confront the impermanence and suffering inherent in life which tests their strength, skills, and ingenuity.

In this chapter, Chatterjee argues that instead of seeing the world as it is, we only focus on its components that are pertinent to the goals we are currently pursuing. This enables us to function with limited cognitive resources. Based on our goals and objectives, we have a partial picture of the world. We notice anomalies that are important to our current pursuit in the world, which is another incomplete model. Therefore, the salience of things and people depend on their relevance to our current goal rather than their inherent importance. Chatterjee takes it one step further and says that “we experience reality within a narrative framework: I am trying to get from my present state to a future (more desirable) state and I see only what is likely to help or hinder my journey” (p.56). He states that the elements of the stories such as – “intention, desire, resistance, and unexpected outcomes may reflect the way in which we experience and make sense of our lives” (p.51). That is why stories have such a magical hold over us. Their structure reflects the fundamental mould in which we experience reality.

The roots of the power of stories go deep and spread wide. In the first three chapters, Chatterjee presents the positive effects of the narrative arts while in the fourth chapter titled *How Stories Work*, he explores how stories often exploit our cognitive biases and weaknesses to evoke powerful psychological and emotional responses. Giving examples from popular stories, Chatterjee explains how some of the most popular storytelling techniques like the use of subtext, melodrama, suspense, and mystery exploit our cognitive biases to hold our attention. By doing so, he aims to provide an answer to the question of why some stories are more likely to succeed than others without having to rely on well-established traditions of literary narrative theory.

According to the author, there are two main schools among those who take a biocultural approach to art. The first group views “art as an adaptation” (p.10) or “adaptive behaviour” (p.79) that humans have picked up via evolution because it helps them survive and procreate. In the first three chapters, Chatterjee argues for viewing storytelling as an adaptation, showing how it serves significant purposes like knowledge transmission, development of the Theory of Mind, simulation of social interaction, promoting social cohesion, and allowing open-ended cognitive play with patterns that are fundamental for our survival. In the fourth chapter, Chatterjee adopts the attitude of the second school which primarily views art as a “byproduct of evolution” (p.10). According to this theory, artists have learned how to exploit the cognitive tendencies and biases acquired via evolution, to produce unearned, ‘useless’ pleasure.

The noted neuroscientist V.S. Ramachandran once described visual art as “lawful distortions from reality to optimally stimulate the pleasure centres of the brain” (qtd 79). According to Chatterjee stories should also be seen in the same light. The adaptation of storytelling offers significant

advantages for our survival; at the same time, stories can also exploit what are essentially flaws and gaps in our psychic nature to exert a kind of control over us that we cannot consciously understand, let alone resist. In this respect, storytelling seems almost like the practice of the dark arts. Chatterjee gives many examples of this, like the use of supernormal stimuli, narrative fallacy, peak shift, and puzzle-like structure in stories. These phenomena help explain the causes of the power of certain storytelling techniques by relating them to the structure of our brains and minds which have developed through the long process of evolution.

Supernormal stimuli, a term coined by ethologist Nikolaas Tinbergen can be defined as a “Stimulus that produces a more vigorous response than the normal stimulus eliciting that particular response” (“Supernormal stimulus,” n.d.). It takes over the natural response tendency and causes humans to respond more energetically, and preferentially, to exaggerated stimuli. Importantly, “it tends to activate some of the same reward systems in the brain that are involved in addiction” (Brooks, 2017). Chatterjee writes that “Supernormal Stimuli abound in all narrative forms” (Chatterjee, 2023, p.85). He affirms that it is not only the characters and individual situations that provide supernormal stimuli through unnatural concentration but the very narrative form does it. In the world of a story, every bit of information coming from any source is relevant to the outcome. This acts as a supernormal stimulus to our information-seeking instincts, and our brain’s neurochemistry keeps us hooked. A masterful storyteller provides the right composition of “new information and surprises to keep the dopamine secreting glands in action” (p.87).

Human instinct is capable of creating a cognitive bias, which is called a “narrative bias or narrative fallacy” (p.87). Once we create a narrative to try to explain a set of events, we tend to interpret new information to fit the narrative and ignore what doesn’t fit in. For example, history is most often presented as a grand narrative leading to a predestined conclusion rather than a chaotic mélange of random events that led to uncertain consequences. According to Chatterjee, this tendency can lead us “horribly astray” (p.88). He says that “narratives are seductive because they create an illusion of understanding of the world” (p.88). Trying to harness the power of storytelling without being aware of its seductively dangerous side can be disastrous. So Chatterjee explains the significant ethical components of any act of storytelling.

In *Why Stories Work* Chatterjee has highlighted some of the significant purposes that stories serve which include, the transmission of explicit and implicit knowledge, the promotion of social cohesiveness, the dissemination and reinforcement of ideologies, the development of the Theory of Mind, the practice of one’s response to potential future threats and opportunities. The biocultural approach offers a framework for investigating the relationship between story design and intended purposes. It highlights the necessity of letting the audience form their judgments as well as the concentration of character and scenario as a technique of conveying implicit knowledge.

The evolutionary approach to storytelling helps to explore the phylogeny of human storytelling, particularly concerning our capacity for mental simulation and social interaction. Chatterjee propounds that it is our ability to mentally simulate future scenarios, especially in social contexts, that has shaped our storytelling capacity. He examines the interconnections between our limited cognitive resources, attention, and the narrative nature of perception. Chatterjee writes that cognitive processes selectively shape our experience of reality. The writer's core argument is that our perception, shaped by the narrative framework, allows us to perceive the deepest layer of reality in a narrative form. He concludes that "The story (and therefore the storyteller) is powerful because it makes sense of our lives" (p.100).

The book reveals the author's love of stories and his profound grasp of their influence on people and cultures. One of the notable features of this book is the eloquent writing style of Chatterjee. The book is full of vivid descriptions of ideas, and logical arguments that are supported by insights from social sciences, psychology, and cognitive sciences. The author has scoured through a large number of books and resources and given examples to support his arguments. He examines storytelling in various contexts from ancient myths to contemporary literature, movies, and even advertising, to showcase how narratives shape our perceptions, beliefs, and behaviour. The chapters are well-organised and aptly titled. The language of the text is uncomplicated and precise. The simple illustrations offer contextual cues and supplement the text. However, there is a minor drawback that at times it becomes overly theoretical and academic, potentially making it a little dry read. Chatterjee could have had a more balanced approach that combines theory with practical examples or anecdotes.

*Why Stories Work* is an intellectually stimulating book that encourages readers to reflect on the significance of narratives in our lives. It serves as a reminder that storytelling is not just an entertaining pastime but an essential part of our human experience and stories possess the power to inspire, challenge, and transform individuals and societies. This book contributes to the study of narratives by fusing literary and film studies with scientific viewpoints. This research expands our knowledge of the universal attraction of storytelling by investigating the connections between the enduring qualities of stories and the patterns in our perception and sense-making processes. It gives storytellers a better understanding of the resources at their disposal, empowering them to create storylines that deeply connect with audiences. In the end, this work catalyses the fusion of science and the study of narratives, promoting a more comprehensive knowledge of human experience. The book is primarily recommended to people who aspire to become storytellers and for academic purposes. However, it is a good read for all those who love stories.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

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