



# Seven Basic Plots, The : Why we tell stories

Books Reviewed:

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Editor's Choice:

off

Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

Booker has been working since 1969 to produce this enormous book. A short review cannot possibly do it justice. Yet the essentials are easy to summarise. They are crisply announced in the title and subtitle. There are two subjects (effectively two books) here, and the second, an investigation of humanity's need for stories, evolves from the initial enquiry into the basic structures that between them account for most of the stories we know. As Booker sees it, the 'seven basic plots' are 'Overcoming the Monster', 'Rags to Riches', 'The Quest', 'Voyage and Return', 'Comedy', 'Tragedy' and 'Rebirth'. These plots and structures are examined in the first of the book's four parts. The second explores the qualities in hero and heroine necessary to produce the 'great archetypal union' - 'they got married and lived happily ever after' - which marks the perfect resolution of most 'basic' stories. The third section analyses stories that fail to reach this resolution, and the fourth addresses the fundamental relationship between stories and 'real life'. Booker's whole study is rooted in Jungian psychology, and requires our assent to a world-picture in which such terms as 'unconscious', 'self', 'ego', 'anima' and 'archetype' are mandatory. Readers may be uneasy with the psychological determinism that follows from this. Booker tells us that 'stories present to us... a kind of basic ground-map of human nature and behaviour, governed by an absolutely consistent set of rules and values. These values, like the archetypal structures which shape stories, are programmed into our unconscious in a way we cannot modify or control.' For teachers and children's literature specialists, whether paid-up Jungians or not, there is much of interest here to suggest both why young children respond so readily to stories totally unconnected with first-hand experience, and how children's books relate to the whole world of story, in all media. But this ambitious, stimulating book is not only a work of literary criticism or even a literature-based psychological casebook (though it is both). It is also a cultural and finally political critique. To see where Booker is leading his readers, it is wise to begin at the end, and read the last chapter, 'The Age of Loki: The Dismantling of the Self', before anything else. Moreover, it contains his memorable comparison of Bush and Blair to Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

Running Order:

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