COMMUNICATION & SOCIETY

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Communication & Society
ISSN 0214-0039
E ISSN 2386-7876
www.communication-society.com

2024 – Vol. 37(4)
pp. 215-216

How to cite this book review:
Bhattacharya, A. (2024). Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative (Bibliography. Book review). *Communication & Society,* 37(4), 215-216.
https://doi.org/10.15581/003.37.4.215-216

Bibliography. Book review

Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative

Somdev Chatterjee

Published by Notion Press, India, Singapore, Malaysia (2023), 112 pp.

Jack Goody in *The Novel: History, Geography and Culture* states that "[t]he telling of tales is often thought to be characteristic of all human discourse, and it is fashionable to speak of narrative as a universal form of expression, one that is applied both to the life experiences of individuals and to the dramas of social interaction" (p. 3). Somdev Chatterjee's book *Why Stories Work* places this universal urge within the ambit of evolutionary and cognitive psychology. The central premise of the book revolves around the significance of stories in human culture and goes beyond the diegetic-mimetic frameworks that have dominated literary theory and criticism. Chatterjee draws on current and earlier research in evolutionary and cognitive biology and psychology and attempts to place the genealogy of stories within these intersections.

The book is divided into four chapters which deal with a particular aspect of storytelling and its emplacement within evolutionary/cognitive roots. From the beginning, Chatterjee is interested in the relationship between language and cognitive memory. Drawing on an array of studies, Chatterjee argues that storytelling as a techne as well as praxis was inevitably linked to the idea of survival in early humans. He links this to Harare's idea of "intersubjective realities" that is unique to the human species. The very notion that humans could start thinking of a 'future time' or could draw upon temporality as a resource to structure reality (his examples from *Star Wars* are apt here) prompted a certain codification of knowledge that could be transferred and shared. In turn, these codes of transmission also formed group dynamics and the idea of sociality. The ability to subsequently judge these codes for their validity and relevance (Chatterjee invokes the idea of "epistemic vigilance") produces the subversive form of storytelling where the idea of sociality trumps the idea of truth-values.

Storytelling has the innate capability of simulating reality. In a world, where simulacra reign supreme, Chatterjee delves into the evolutionary origins of such simulations in his second chapter. He creates a link between the simulated realities of stories and emotional responses that are intrinsically built in within the human psychological repertoire. These may even encompass negative emotional responses like fear and loathing: "We get a sense of accomplishment when we complete something challenging... This is true even when we know that there is no real danger" (p. 50). Chatterjee argues that the visceral responses that we exhibit while watching simulated realities of stories contain both a psychological as well as a physical dimension. One, as it were, enjoys the unreality of the simulation believing it to be a real phenomenon. One may say that such responses are the bedrock of any social interaction –simulating a make-believe world that helps humans to negotiate the complex terrain of sociality.

The third chapter focuses on the psychological paradigms of storytelling using the twin concepts of 'fitness' and 'affordance,' central for many years to visual cultures and technologies. Both fitness and affordance are key to our negotiation of reality. Chatterjee cites the famous 'invisible gorilla' experiment to indicate that humans often view reality based on

immediate relevance when "we do not see the world as it is, but only those aspects of it that are relevant to whatever goal we are currently pursuing" (p. 56). This strategy to traverse the complexity of reality often follows a pattern, an idea that was formulated by early Russian formalists like Vladimir Propp, where parts of the stories that we encounter, often provide relevant information based on what we perceive as pattern recognition. The ephemerality of the world and its ultimate unknowability (the noumena as opposed to the phenomena, as Kant reminded us) often acts as the driving force for stories.

Chatterjee, in his fourth chapter, engages with the debate between those who consider storytelling as an evolutionary mechanism and those who treat it merely as a byproduct of evolution. Chatterjee here heavily relies on the work of V S Ramachandran, the neuroscientist, especially his speculations on the concept of mirror neurons that seem to provide an empirical basis for imitative human emotions and other forms of behaviour. In a sense, this hypothesis is meant to buttress the idea of human sympathy and empathy that are evoked in the act of storytelling. Chatterjee also reinforces this argument with Tinbergen's study of 'supernormal stimulus' where attraction to a certain exaggerated form evokes even stronger reactions than actual replication of reality. It seems that storytelling taps into these innate instinctual behaviours in the animal kingdom both by being able to excite imitative responses as well as being entertained by the presence of supernormal simulations.

The book is definitively an entertaining read and encapsulates the major developments in evolutionary and cognitive aspects of the act of storytelling. It also emerges from the writer's own practice of pedagogy within an institution which specialises in the visual aspects of storytelling and, by his own admission, often dismisses the power of the narrative. Yet, the book often refuses to acknowledge the vast scholarship in narrative studies that have reached similar conclusions to the ones that the author draws from other disciplines. Recent developments in memory studies or trauma studies often draw heavily from an interdisciplinary repertoire and the book lacks an engagement with such new developments. One might also point out that even in cinema studies there has been a constant engagement with psychology and psychoanalysis since the 1960s and the book would have gained if a comparative perspective were provided.

Why Stories Work, however, is worth a read since most scholars engaged in academic institutions are often restricted to silos of disciplinary boundaries and what the book definitely achieves is an osmotic interpenetration of disciplines. As Margaret Atwood reminds us in *Moral Disorder and Other Stories*: "In the end, we'll all become stories."

References

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