

# What is a Story? (Yet Another Example of the Porousness of Borders)

Excerpt from *The Mechanics of Fiction* (Forthcoming)

P.E. Rowe

So you think you want to write fiction? Great. Go for it. No, seriously. I mean it. Go do it. That's usually how a writer starts. They decide they want to write fiction and they start writing. That's how I did it, and probably you too. Stories are deep in the human psyche, and when I say deep, I mean deeper than any of us know. I suspect they go far deeper than many research psychologists even presume—even plausibly preceding language, if you can wrap your head around that.<sup>1</sup> So, it's a pretty natural thing for you to want to generate fictional stories. People have been doing it—universally across all cultures for tens of thousands of years—probably for as long as people have been people.

But you don't want to just tell stories. You want to tell *good* stories. Otherwise, you wouldn't be here reading this. Good on you, as the Aussies would say. Odds are pretty good that you already have some idea of what a story is, and I'll go so far as to say you probably have a decent, if somewhat vague, idea of what a *good* story is too.

I took a class one time with a highly-regarded fiction writer—let's call him Lucas. This was a week-long evening seminar while I was in graduate school. And the thing about graduate school is that it's very similar to holding down two full-time jobs at the same time—an eighty-hour week, between taking classes, teaching classes, and doing the planning and reading for said classes, is very common. Now imagine a crowd of about fifteen

experienced adult fiction writers, overly-caffeinated, on an average of four hours sleep walking into Lucas's seminar at the end of a long day and watching him begin by asking the question: "What is a story?"

Seriously, he asked that question to a room full of exhausted fiction writers as his opener. And he asked it in a way that suggested he didn't know the answer—as a philosophical musing. And nobody said a word. We all just listened to Lucas contemplate how stories were these mysterious things that were so important in our lives, that shaped how we learned and grew, and formed our understanding of the culture we operated in, and entertained us, et cetera, et cetera...And then he started talking about myths and **whoa!** What is a myth?! And what is the difference between a story and a myth? How do we even begin to...

If you made it through my introduction to these lessons, you're probably well aware that while poor Lucas was reflecting on these things seemingly unproductively, old Rowe was sitting there absolutely bored to a state of catatonia. Picture a teenage boy in an accounting class with his neck tilted all the way back staring straight at the ceiling. That's about what I was feeling inside, because if I didn't already have the answers to these seemingly ponderous questions Lucas was looking to blow our minds with (which I did), I also had a smartphone in my pocket offering instantaneous access to the entire body of human knowledge. These aren't deep questions for serious people anymore. Serious people have been studying this stuff for hundreds of years and have left their knowledge behind for us to use. If you find yourself in a class where a professor like Lucas is hoping to expand your mind by trying to impress you with the difficulty of defining the topic, they either didn't have time to think of a better lesson plan, or they're woefully underqualified to be teaching that class. I liked Lucas a lot. He was a really sweet guy with the right idea and the wrong lesson plan.

Here's where Lucas was right: If you're trying to do anything in life, you stand a much better chance of doing that thing if you know *exactly* what you're trying to do. But remember, most writers are intuitive, and a lot of them only sorta know what they're trying to do—probably a lot like you at the start of this lesson.

Today we're going to define a story. And like all definitions, as we'll soon see, defining a story isn't easy (I'll show you why). But our purpose in defining a story is two-fold. The first is to develop a useful tool for your arsenal, an *exact* idea of what it is you're trying to accomplish when you set your fingers on your keyboard. You might do well to think of fiction writing as a game you're trying to learn—a very hard one. It might be as difficult as that blindfolded darts game with the moving dart-board I described in the introduction. But by the end of this lesson, you will know what game you're playing—that you're trying to stick *your* dart into *that* moving board, blindfolded as you are. At least you'll have the objective.

The second reason is that if you ever have a teacher like Lucas, you can pull out your phone and go: "Here. Right here. This is what a story is to fiction writers. Says it right here. It's necessarily not a perfect definition, but it's good enough. Let's move on, please."

And to that end...

I'll start with an online dictionary definition:

**Story (n.): an account of imaginary or real people and events told for entertainment.<sup>ii</sup>**

That's probably about what you were thinking, right? It's not that hard, Rowe. What are you getting at?

Give Lucas his due here and think about what that definition tells us, and what we're trying to do—create good stories. See if you can pick at the seams of this definition. I'm sure you can. Where is it weak? You might begin by asking something like,

“Well, what exactly constitutes an event? A poetry reading? Sure. Grass growing? Maybe. And, what constitutes entertainment exactly? That’d be different things for different people, surely. Or the big question for our purposes: Does this help us figure out what we need to do when we’re staring at a blank screen? Marginally at best, I’d say. It doesn’t do a great job of telling us what we should be aiming at. Here’s why (this may seem like a total tangent, btw, but we’re going to keep running into this same problem over and over again):

Suppose I gave you four words that could be grouped into a category, for example, the category “domicile.” Let’s use the words: house, mansion, shack, and castle. Now, you probably have a fairly good idea of the difference between a mansion and a shack, right? Sure. But let’s say I brought you to a street in a very wealthy neighborhood and asked you to tell me which of the dwellings on this street were houses and which ones were mansions? It might not be so simple. And it would get an awful lot harder if I asked you to develop a precise set of parameters that clearly outlined the point at which a shack became a house, a house became a mansion, and a mansion became a castle. Borders, as David Foster Wallace noted, are porous. Thus, if one is so inclined to be annoyingly pedantic, one can pick away at *every* border. It’s not profound.

Now the problem gets doubly sticky once you realize that words are categories. We could play the same game we played with “domicile” with a verb like “run.” It’s why there are synonyms like, trot, gallop, sprint, haul-ass, bound, etc. Or with a noun like seat – well, a chair is a seat, so’s a staircase or a stump, and a big enough rock, etc. The problem here is that words are categories. And categories are fuzzy things.

They’re so fuzzy in fact, that cognitive psychologists have three different working explanations for how we categorize things: we fit like-with-like (all the buildings we think look like houses), we use exemplars (the house that looks most like a

house), and we form theories (the attributes we think qualify something as a house). We don't need to go too deep here; we just need to know that when we're trying to define a story, we're trying to draw borders using all three of those cognitive techniques at once by: 1. Collating a long list of stories we know to be stories, 2. Considering which stories seem most "story-like," and 3. Considering the attributes that make a story a story. It's a hard, fuzzy, moving target. So, Lucas wasn't exactly wrong, after all. It's why he was seemingly so perplexed by a question he should have had technical mastery over.

So what do we do?

First, let's re-consider the Oxford Dictionary definition of the category "story." Who is that definition written for exactly? Who goes to the dictionary to look up a word? Someone, who presumably, doesn't know what the word means, right? That's the type of tool a dictionary is. So, the people drawing the boundaries for the Oxford Dictionary have to consider their audience. It's not novelists. Presumably they know what a story is, right? Right, Lucas? One would hope.

What we need is a better frame. We need to draw our boundaries for the category "story" with *our* goal in mind. We are writers who want to write a good story. What is the target we're aiming at, using all of the best available knowledge, drawn from a diversity of relevant sources, compiled together into a set of attributes that will allow me to understand what I'm doing when I'm sitting at my keyboard pecking away? And here it is:

Written fiction that works is an interest-grabbing set of language-based instructions arranged in an order that cues the reader to simulate an approximate cognitive model of a specific modal universe that changes in such a way across the course of the simulation that it entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition.

Whoa, whoa, whoa, woah! Rowe, what the hell was that? I thought you said this stuff was going to be easy. What are you doing?

Yes, I did. I'm sorry, I did. And it is going to be easy. But if you'll also recall, I also said that I was going to give you the exact definition of a story, and I also said that writing fiction might be the most cognitively complex activity a human can undertake. And...fear not. I also said that what we're looking to accomplish in this lesson is to develop a useful tool to help us understand what a story is and how to write one.

That definition above is what fiction is. That's my technical definition of what a written story is, and I've thought a lot about it. I couldn't subtract a single word from it if we're talking technically about what a story is. But, for our purposes, we're going to shrink that Frankenstein's monster of a definition down to a manageable size that makes for a useful tool. (I will expound upon the above full definition of a story after the lesson for those readers specifically interested – for the rest of you who couldn't care less, read on, please...)

Here's the shortened definition we're going to use, and I think you'll agree it's a more practical tool for our purposes:

Good fiction is an interesting cognitive simulation of a dynamic storyworld that entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition.

Ah! Much better, right? That's more like it. It's shorter, punchy, and much more to the point – or *our point* at least, which is to develop a target to aim at as fiction writers. And this seems like a much easier target to hit. This is a game we can play. Okay, so let's pick at the seams of this one a little and see what we come up with.

If we read that definition closely, there are four main propositions embedded in it. They are:

1. Good fiction is interesting.
2. It is a cognitive simulation.
3. Of a dynamic storyworld.
4. That entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition.

Let's take a look at each of those elements in its own right.

The first proposition is that *good fiction is interesting*. Now, based on our earlier discussion of the porousness of borders and picking at the seams of definitions, your spidey-senses are surely tingling: "What does *good* mean, Rowe? What the hell does *interesting* mean? That could mean anything!" Yes, indeed. Well played. That's a byproduct of the shrunken-head version of the Franken-stein-monster definition I gave above. You need to know only this: by good, I mean functioning, working, the reader is reading; *and* that the story you've written is hitting the marks of the three subsequent categories. It must be generating a cognitive simulation. It must be moving in time and space. And it must be entertaining and/or edifying. By interesting I simply mean it catches and holds interest. And we'll get into what catches everyone's interest when we talk about plot, specifically suspense. But if a book catches no interest, it is not a book: it is a doorstop. Nothing more. Pull back for a minute here, *friendo*. Stop nipping at the threads for the time being and go with it. Good fiction is interesting, right? Good.

The second proposition is that *a story is a cognitive simulation*. Well, hello there, who's this? It's the best selling horror writer in the history of Earth, here to enlighten us on point two! Welcome, Stephen. Thanks for stopping by, that's so very nice of you to join us. Telepathy, you say?

Telepathy, of course. My name is Stephen King. I'm writing the first draft of this part at my desk on a snowy morning in December of 1997...

So let's assume that you're in your favorite receiving place just as I am in the place where I do my best transmitting.

We'll have to perform our mentalist routine not just over distance but over time as well, yet that presents no real problem; if we can still read Dickens, Shakespeare, and Herodotus, I think we can manage the gap between 1997 and [the time you're reading]. And here we go. Actual telepathy in action.

Look—here's a table covered with a red cloth. On it is a cage the size of a small fish aquarium. In it is a rabbit with a pink nose and pink-rimmed eyes. In its front paws is a carrot-stub upon which it is contentedly munching. On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.

Do we see the same thing? We'd have to get together and compare notes to make absolutely sure, but I think we do. There will be necessary variations, of course: some receivers will see a tablecloth which is turkey red, some will see one that's scarlet, while others may see still other shades...

We're having a meeting of the minds.

I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, and the number eight in blue ink. You got them all, especially that blue eight. We've engaged in an act of telepathy.<sup>iii</sup>

We sure have, Stephen, that was very cool. Thanks for that. Has anyone ever told you you're pretty good at telepathy before? It's probably not a mistake that you're one of the world's all-time bestselling authors. It may just have something to do with the fact that you know exactly what you're aiming at, and now the rest of us do too!

Stephen wasn't kidding about writing being telepathic. He's dead serious, and he's not wrong. But don't just take his word for it, or mine for that matter. You can ask Eleanor Maguire. Who's she, and why would anyone ask her, you may ask...

Good question. Eleanor Maguire is a world-renowned neurologist and medical researcher who studies an area of the hippocampus that governs a brain's ability to map space and form mental imagery. And given the little exercise that Stephen was so kind as to take us through, you might be guessing that it's pretty important and has something to do with your brain

processing fiction. And you'd be right! It has *everything* to do with processing fictional narratives. In fact, Eleanor's patients who had severe enough damage to that area of the hippocampus reported that subsequent to their injuries they were no longer able to read novels. They could understand the words on the page and process a sentence's meaning in a literal sense. But her patients lost the ability to simulate the sequence of events portrayed in the story. As a result, the novels became meaningless. Her patients said they really missed reading stories too.<sup>iv</sup> A terrible loss.

Eleanor's discovery is evidence that novels must be cognitively simulated for them to be understood. Don't ever make the mistake of forgetting that a cognitive simulation in our reader's brain is the target we're aiming at as writers—just like the cognitive simulation Stephen so skillfully generated in our brains. That's what we're aiming at, or at least in *part*. We can't forget about the third proposition.

Stephen's simulation was missing something. It's not really a story is it? It's just a rabbit sitting in a cage. Remember the third proposition: the cognitive simulation is *of a dynamic storyworld*. In order for a story to be a story, something has to happen, right? That requires two things: some form of movement, and a space for that movement to take place in. *Dynamic* simply means that something is moving—actions are happening. If no actions are happening, no matter how beautiful and interesting the language, it's still not really a story (hello poetry!). We'll get into this in greater detail in the next lesson, but for now it's sufficient to think "dynamic = movement, and a story must move." And a storyworld? You may not have seen that word very often, but it means exactly what it seems like it means. It's the fictional universe where the story takes place. That galaxy far far away...? That's the *Star Wars* storyworld. Ahab's whaling ship and the world around it? The *Moby Dick* storyworld. You get the idea. Good thing, too. We're going to use that word a lot.

So to the final proposition: *that entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition*. This gets to the purpose of fiction—*why* we read. And if we're seam pulling, this part of the target is admittedly a little more abstract. You might have seen it written somewhere before that a story's purpose is to *entertain* and *instruct*. It's far too old a proposition for it to be my idea. It goes all the way back to the earliest writing we have about writing—from a tunic-wearing dude you might have heard of by the name Aristotle.

Aristotle came from a culture where stories were not just very important but incredibly refined for their time. The plays Aristotle attended and wrote about were a product of hundreds of years of dramatic competitions at religious festivals. And those competitions drove developments in storytelling techniques, innovations in presentation and acting, theater technology and casting, and a host of other meaningful concepts that advanced the process of story-telling in Western culture. We could take "*entertain*" and "*instruct*" at face value and probably call those a decent rough estimate of why people consume fiction. And they probably fit well enough with the "*good*" in our first proposition. Remember, we're trying to develop a useful tool now, not tear fruitlessly at the seams.

One place where we could go *deep* down a rabbit hole is with the word "*instruct*." I'm sure more than a handful of PhD dissertations on the ways fiction can be instructive have been written. Hell, you could write one for an English degree and turn around and write another in Psychology and still another in Philosophy. And I've probably gone on far too long already to try your patience with too much more on this front. But my interpretation of what Aristotle and the ancient storytellers understood about fiction being instructive is that it should be edifying. If it entertains, that's awesome and good enough to be "*good*" for the purposes of hitting *our* target. The way I interpret "*instruct*" here is that some "*good*" stories offer us something

beyond a few laughs and a short break from our real-world troubles. They offer us something deep and human. One might even say they “*explore the nature of the human condition.*” If you’re looking for “instruction” on how to get ahead, find true love, or find the job of your dreams, that’s over in the Self-Help section beside the books on Religion and DIY Carpentry. You don’t want to take life advice from a writer anyway. Look up any writer in the Biography section between History and Tragic-Comedy. There’s probably a liquor store in between.

And here, I’m tempted to stop, because the more I try to draw boundaries and elucidate *precisely* what I mean, the more things seem to get fuzzy and slip away, like an Escher print, infinitely winding its way around a staircase. Remember the porousness of borders and that words are necessarily categories, and precise definitions are tough. Let’s call it good enough for our purposes here – that’s what our brain does anyway! Here is your target; fire away:

Good fiction is an interesting cognitive simulation of a dynamic storyworld that entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition.

That’s one useful tool for your toolbox – a fuzzy idea of what the hell we’re doing. And if your eyes haven’t totally glazed over yet, I’m going to include my best attempt at a *brief* explication on the Frankenstein-monster story definition for anyone whose eyes haven’t already turned to stone. Feel free to skip ahead if you’ve had enough. I promise I won’t judge.

For the smarty-pants brigade, here’s that definition again. We’re going to look at it piece by piece:

Written fiction that works is an interest-grabbing set of language-based directions arranged in an order that cues the reader to simulate an approximate cognitive model of a specific modal universe that changes in such a way across

the course of the simulation that it entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition.

This probably makes quite a bit more sense after reading the rest of the lesson, but there are still a few things worth being specific about here.

**Written fiction that works** – By “works” I mean functions in the ways we talked about in the chapter. It grabs the reader’s interest, simulates a cognitive model of a storyworld that moves and entertains, instructs, etc.

**Interest-grabbing** – This will be covered more when we talk about literary suspense. For now, just know that some events grab a reader’s interest, like a fire in an apartment building or an earthquake, and some don’t, like a bake sale or an afternoon pulling weeds in the community garden – I’ll teach you a sure-fire way to tell the difference shortly. Remember, if it doesn’t grab interest, the book becomes a doorstop, and that’s not working in the way we care about.

**Language-based** = written system of language, from Chinese characters to Arabic – hell, who knows, maybe even hieroglyphics. It is important to remember that writers are in the business of symbolic signals.

**Directions arranged in an order that cues the reader** – This gets to the writer’s art, arranging the words to direct the cognitive model in one way instead of another. Your words are your primary tools because they are the specific cues your reader receives. Remember that blue eight on the rabbit? You wouldn’t have the image in your head if Stephen hadn’t presented the precise cues: “On its back, clearly marked in blue ink, is the numeral 8.” One of the reasons Stephen’s a successful writer is the order in which he arranged these cues. We’ll get into this more when we talk about storyworld building, but for now, you might think about why Stephen chose to cue you to think about the rabbit’s back *before* the numeral 8.

**To simulate an approximate cognitive model of a specific modal universe**—This gets to the whole telepathy thing again. The words, acting as cues, are the stimuli for a reader’s mental model of the storyworld. By “modal,” I mean hypothetical or imagined. It’s a term borrowed from linguistics that forms the subjunctive in languages that have a subjunctive mood for describing hypothetical actions, events, thoughts, etc. In English, we use words like “should” or “might” to indicate thoughts or actions that haven’t actually occurred (at least yet). As in, “Rowe *should* move on now or I *might* stop reading.”

The *approximate* cognitive model was demonstrated quite nicely by Stephen in the way he talked about the difference in the shades of red in the tablecloth beneath the rabbit’s cage. A writer can never be anything more than *somewhat* precise with respect to the cognitive model her reader will generate. Telepathy is necessarily a cooperative act. The writer provides the cue “red cloth,” and the reader provides their cognitive interpretation of what their brain thinks a red cloth looks like (using their hippocampus! say all the members of the smarty-pants group who stuck around). And as a bonus for sticking around, you’ll get this little nugget early: there’s a word for this in cognitive psychology called “schema.” You could think of schema as your brain’s warehouse of representations of generic objects in the world—the picture of a train you see in your mind’s eye when you read the word “train,” for example. And your schematic train is going to be slightly different from everyone else’s schematic train based on your unique experience of learning what a train is.

**...that changes in such a way across the course of the simulation that it entertains, instructs, or explores the nature of the human condition**—And here you can probably guess that by *changes across the course of the simulation*, we’re talking about movement in the storyworld. Things are dynamic, and dynamic in a way that’s either entertaining, meaningful or both.

There. That wasn't so bad, was it? And now we've got a pretty good idea of exactly what we need to do. That doesn't mean it's going to be easy. But we sure stand a hell of a better chance of getting it right, now that we know what we're trying to do here.

So with all that settled, in the words of that infamous psychopathic clown, "And. Here. We. Go!!!"

---

<sup>i</sup> Abbott, H. Porter. "The Evolutionary Origins of the Storied Mind." *Narrative*. p. 251, October, 2000.

<sup>ii</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed online Jan, 2019:  
<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/story>

<sup>iii</sup> King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. Scribner, pp. 103-106, 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> Maguire, Eleanor. "The Neuroscience of Memory." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Royal Institution, 13 March 2014, 50:20,  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gdzmNwTLag>.