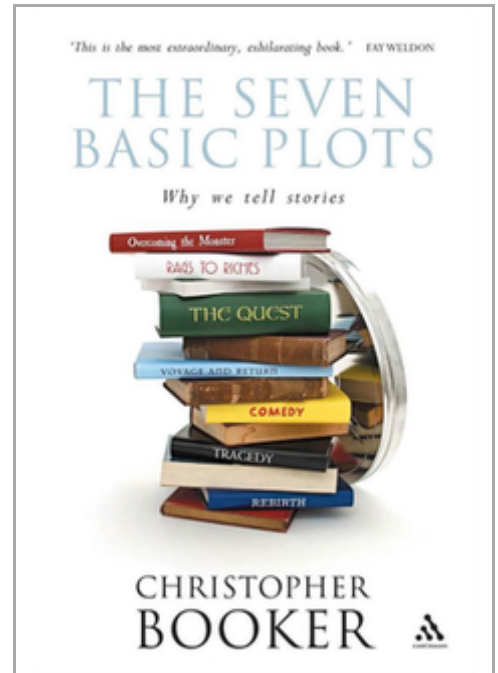


The Seven Basic Plots

The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories is a 2004 book by Christopher Booker containing a Jung-influenced analysis of stories and their psychological meaning. Booker worked on the book for thirty-four years.^[1]

The Seven Basic Plots



Author	Christopher Booker
Language	English
Published	2004
Pages	736
Preceded by	<i>The Great Deception</i>
Followed by	<i>Scared to Death: From BSE to Global Warming</i>

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Summary

The meta-plot

The meta-plot begins with the *anticipation stage*, in which the hero is called to the adventure to come. This is followed by a *dream stage*, in which the adventure begins, the hero has some success, and has an illusion of invincibility. However, this is then followed by a *frustration stage*, in which the hero has his first confrontation with the enemy, and the illusion of invincibility is lost. This worsens in the *nightmare stage*, which is the climax of the plot, where hope is apparently lost. Finally, in the *resolution*, the hero overcomes his burden against the odds.^[2]

The key thesis of the book: "However many characters may appear in a story, its real concern is with just one: its hero. It is the one whose fate we identify with, as we see them gradually developing towards that state of self-realization which marks the end of the story. Ultimately it is in relation to this central figure that all other characters in a story take on their significance. What each of the other characters represents is really only some aspect of the inner state of the hero himself."

The plots

Overcoming the Monster

Definition: The protagonist sets out to defeat an antagonistic force (often evil) which threatens the protagonist and/or protagonist's homeland.

Examples: Perseus, Theseus, Beowulf, Dracula, The War of the Worlds, Nicholas Nickleby, The Guns of Navarone, Seven Samurai (and its Western remake The Magnificent Seven), James Bond, Star Wars.^[2]

Rags to Riches

Definition: The poor protagonist acquires power, wealth, and/or a mate, loses it all and gains it back, growing as a person as a result.

Examples: Cinderella, Aladdin, Jane Eyre, A Little Princess, Great Expectations, David Copperfield, The Prince and the Pauper, Brewster's Millions.^[2]

The Quest

Definition: The protagonist and companions set out to acquire an important object or to get to a location. They face temptations and other obstacles along the way.

Examples: The Odyssey, The Pilgrim's Progress, The Lord Of The Rings, King Solomon's Mines, Six of Crows, Watership Down, Lightning Thief, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

Voyage and Return

Definition: The protagonist goes to a strange land and, after overcoming the threats it poses or learning important lessons unique to that location, they return with experience.

Examples: Ramayana, Alice in Wonderland, Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Orpheus, The Time Machine, Peter Rabbit, The Hobbit, The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie, Brideshead Revisited, The Rime of the Ancient Mariner, Gone with the Wind, The Third Man, The Lion King, Back to the Future.^[2]

Comedy

Definition: Light and humorous character with a happy or cheerful ending; a dramatic work in which the central motif is the triumph over adverse circumstance, resulting in a successful or happy conclusion.^[3] Booker stresses that comedy is more than humor. It refers to a pattern where the conflict becomes more and more confusing, but is at last made plain in a single clarifying event. The majority of romance films fall into this category.

Examples: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Music and Lyrics*, *Sliding Doors*, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *The Big Lebowski*.

Tragedy

Definition: The protagonist is a hero with a major character flaw or great mistake which is ultimately their undoing. Their unfortunate end evokes pity at their folly and the fall of a fundamentally good character.

Examples: *Anna Karenina*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Carmen*, *Citizen Kane*, *John Dillinger*, *Jules et Jim*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Madame Bovary*, *Oedipus Rex*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Romeo and Juliet*.

Rebirth

Definition: An event forces the main character to change their ways and often become a better individual.

Examples: *Pride and Prejudice*, *The Frog Prince*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Snow Queen*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Secret Garden*, *Peer Gynt*, *Groundhog Day*.^[2]

The Rule of Three

"Again and again, things appear in threes . . ." There is rising tension and the third event becomes "the final trigger for something important to happen". We are accustomed to this pattern from childhood stories such as *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, *Cinderella*, and *Little Red Riding Hood*. In adult stories, three can convey the gradual working out of a process that leads to transformation. This transformation can be downwards as well as upwards. Booker asserts that the *Rule of Three* is expressed in four ways:

1. The *simple*, or *cumulative* three, for example, Cinderella's three visits to the ball.
2. The *ascending* three, where each event is of more significance than the preceding, for example, the hero must win first bronze, then silver, then gold objects.
3. The *contrasting* three, where only the third has positive value, for example, *The Three Little Pigs*, two of whose houses are blown down by the Big Bad Wolf.
4. The *final* or *dialectical* form of three, where, as with Goldilocks and her bowls of porridge, the first is wrong in one way, the second in an opposite way, and the third is "just right".^[4]

Precursors

- William Foster-Harris' *The Basic Patterns of Plot* sets out a theory of three basic patterns of plot.^[5]
- Ronald B. Tobias set out a twenty-plot theory in his *20 Master Plots*.^[5]
- Georges Polti's *The Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations*.^[5]
- Several of these plots can also be seen as reworkings of Joseph Campbell's work on the quest and return in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

Reception

Scholars and journalists have had mixed responses to *The Seven Basic Plots*. Some have celebrated the book's audacity and breadth. The author and essayist Fay Weldon, for example, wrote the following (which is quoted on the front cover of the book): "This is the most extraordinary, exhilarating book. It always seemed to me that 'the story' was God's way of giving meaning to crude creation. Booker now interprets the mind of God, and analyses not just the novel – which will never to me be quite the same again – but puts the narrative of contemporary human affairs into a new perspective. If it took its author a lifetime to write, one can only feel gratitude that he did it."^[6] Beryl Bainbridge, Richard Adams, Ronald Harwood, and John Bayley also spoke positively of the work, while philosopher Roger Scruton described it as a "brilliant summary of story-telling".^[7]

Others have dismissed the book, criticizing especially Booker's normative conclusions. Novelist and literary critic Adam Mars-Jones, for instance, wrote, "He sets up criteria for art, and ends up condemning *Rigoletto*, *The Cherry Orchard*, Wagner, Proust, Joyce, Kafka and Lawrence—the list goes on—while praising *Crocodile Dundee*, *E.T.* and *Terminator 2*".^[8] Similarly, Michiko Kakutani in *The New York Times* writes, "Mr. Booker evaluates works of art on the basis of how closely they adhere to the archetypes he has so laboriously described; the ones that deviate from those classic patterns are dismissed as flawed or perverse – symptoms of what has gone wrong with modern art and the modern world."^[9]

See also

- Analytical psychology
- Monomyth
- Plot (narrative)

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External links

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