society works, turns out to be completely wrong. It has typically been the professors, the university students, the managers, the journalists, and the civil servants who have concocted and disseminated the conspiracies.

Conspiracy theories are not, then, the province of a googly-eyed lunatic fringe. Conspiratorial thinking is not limited to the stupid, the ignorant, or the crazy. It is a reflex of the storytelling mind's compulsive need for meaningful experience. Conspiracy theories offer ultimate answers to a great mystery of the human condition: why are things so bad in the world? They provide nothing less than a solution to the problem of evil. In the imaginative world of the conspiracy theorist, there is no accidental badness. To the conspiratorial mind, shit *never* just happens. History is *not* just one damned thing after another, and only dopes and sheeple believe in coincidences. For this reason, conspiracy theories—no matter how many devils they invoke—are always consoling in their simplicity. Bad things do not happen because of a wildly complex swirl of abstract historical and social variables. They happen because bad men live to stalk our happiness. And you can fight, and possibly even defeat, bad men. *If* you can read the hidden story.

The Storytelling Animal:
How Stories Make Us Human (2012)
Jonathan Gottschall
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

The Moral of the Story

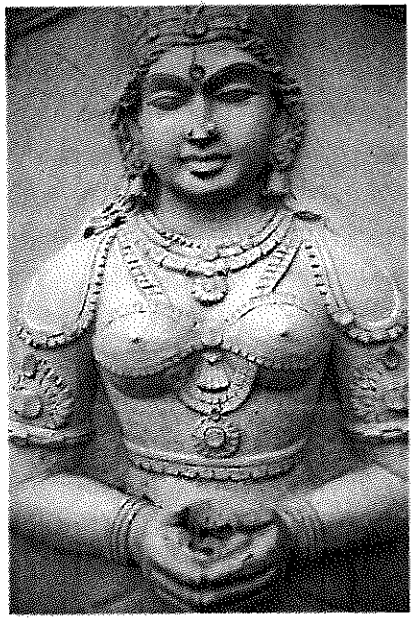
We live or die by the artist's vision, sane or cracked.

—JOHN GARDNER, *On Moral Fiction*

FLIP THROUGH THE holy books of the three great monotheisms—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and you will be flipping through anthologies of stories: the Fall, the Flood, Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham and Isaac, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ, the Archangel Gabriel seizing Muhammad by the throat and revealing that Allah created man from a clot of blood. Take away the lists of begettings, the strings of "thou shalts" and "thou shalt nots" (one writer puts the number of biblical commandments not at ten, but at more like seven hundred), the instructions on how to sacrifice animals and how to build an ark, and you have a collection of intense narratives about the biggest stuff in human life. The Middle Eastern holy books are catalogs of savage violence, of a cruel God wantonly smiting, of a merciful God blessing and forgiving, of people suffering on the

move, of men and women joining in love and doing lots and lots of begetting.

And, of course, it is not just the planet's monotheisms that are built on stories. This seems to be true of all religions, major and minor, throughout world history. Read through the folklore of traditional peoples, and the dominant story type will be myths explaining why things are the way they are. In traditional societies, truths about the spirit world were conveyed not through lists or essays—they were conveyed through story. The world's priests and shamans knew what psychology would later confirm: if you want a message to burrow into a human mind, work it into a story.



Staunch believers in any of the three major monotheisms (Christianity, Islam, and Judaism) may take offense when I refer to their holy scriptures as stories. But many of those same believers would be quick to say that narratives about Zeus or Thor or Shiva—the Hindu god of destruction (pictured here)—are just stories.

Guided by the holy myths, believers must imaginatively construct an alternate reality that stretches from the origins straight through to the end times. Believers must mentally simulate an entire shadow world that teems with evidence of divinity. They must be able to decode the cryptic messages in the stars, the whistle of the wind, the entrails of goats, and the riddles of the prophets.

Throughout the history of our species, sacred fiction has dominated human existence like nothing else. Religion is the ultimate expression of story's dominion over our minds. The heroes of sacred fiction do not respect the barrier between the pretend and the real. They swarm through the real world, exerting massive influence. Based on what the sacred stories say, believers regulate the practices of their lives: how they eat, how they wash, how they dress, when they have sex, when they forgive, and when they wage total war in the name of everything holy.

Why?

Religion is a human universal, present—in one form or another—in all of the societies that anthropologists have visited and archaeologists have dug up. Even now, in this brave age of brain science and genomics, God is not dead, dying, or really even ailing. Nietzsche would be disappointed. Most of the world's people don't look up at the sky and find it—like the poet Hart Crane—"ungoded." The world's big religions are gaining more converts than they are losing. While Europe has become more secular over the past century, most of the rest of the world (including the United States) is getting more religious.

Since it is not plausible that religion just happened to develop independently in many thousands of different cultures, *Homo sapiens* must have already been a spiritual ape when our

ancestors began streaming out of Africa. And since all religions share some of the same basic features—including belief in supernatural beings, belief in a transcendent soul, belief in the efficacy of magic (in the form of rituals and prayer)—the roots of spirituality must be sunk deep in human nature.

But why did we evolve to be religious? How did dogmatic faith in imaginary beings *not* diminish our ability to survive and reproduce? How could the frugal mechanisms of natural selection *not* have worked against religion, given the high price of religious sacrifices, rituals, prohibitions, taboos, and commandments? After all, burning a goat for Zeus meant one less goat for your family. And sawing off a perfectly good piece of your baby son's penis because an ancient story suggests you should is not without risks. (Before the discovery of the germ theory of disease—in the days before antibiotics and surgical steel—circumcision was dangerous, and accidents still do happen.) Also, while it is pretty easy to refrain from violating biblical injunctions against wearing cloth with mixed fibers or boiling a baby goat in the milk of its mother, it's more of a burden to be stoning people all the time: adulterers, magicians, Sabbath breakers, incest enthusiasts, blasphemers, disobedient children, idolaters, wayward oxen.

Religious tendencies are either an evolutionary adaptation, an evolutionary side effect, or some combination of the two. The conventional secular explanation of religion is that humans invent gods to give order and meaning to existence. Humans are born curious, and they must have answers to the big, unanswerable questions: Why am I here? Who made me? Where does the sun go at night? Why does giving birth hurt? What happens to "me" after I die—not my raggedy old carcass, but *me,* that endlessly chattering presence inside my skull?

This is, in essence, a by-product explanation of religion,

and it is the one that most current evolutionary thinkers embrace. We have religion because, by nature, we abhor explanatory vacuums. In sacred fiction, we find the master confabulations of the storytelling mind.

Some evolutionary thinkers, including leading lights such as Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, focus relentlessly on the black side of religious behavior: the pogroms, the bigotry, the suppression of real thought in favor of dumb faith. They think that religion is the result of a tragic evolutionary glitch. Dawkins and Dennett argue that the mind is vulnerable to religion in the same way that a computer is vulnerable to viruses. Both Dennett and Dawkins view religion as a mental parasite (as Dawkins memorably put it, religion is "a virus of the mind"), and a noxious one at that. For these thinkers, religion is not akin, say, to the friendly parasites that colonize our intestines and help us digest food. Religion is more like the loathsome pinworms that lay itchy eggs around the anus. According to Dawkins and Dennett, human life would be a lot better if the mental parasite of religion could simply be eradicated.

I'm not so sure. I think the by-product explanation of religion captures a major part of the truth: humans conjure gods, spirits, and sprites to fill explanatory voids. (This is not to deny the possibility of gods, spirits, or sprites; it is to deny that one culture's supernatural story can be more valid than another's.) But does this mean that religion is, in evolutionary terms, useless or worse? A growing number of evolutionists think not.

In his trailblazing book *Darwin's Cathedral,* the biologist David Sloan Wilson proposes that religion emerged as a stable part of all human societies for a simple reason: it made them work better. Human groups that happened to possess a

faith instinct so thoroughly dominated nonreligious competitors that religious tendencies became deeply entrenched in our species.

Wilson argues that religion provides multiple benefits to groups. First, it defines a group as a group. As the sociologist Émile Durkheim wrote, "Religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices . . . which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them." Second, religion coordinates behavior within the group, setting up rules and norms, punishments and rewards. Third, religion provides a powerful incentive system that promotes group cooperation and suppresses selfishness. The science writer Nicholas Wade expresses the heart of Wilson's idea succinctly: the evolutionary function of religion "is to bind people together and make them put the group's interests ahead of their own."

Atheists are often dismayed that intelligent believers can entertain patently irrational beliefs. From the atheist's perspective, the earth's faithful are like billions of foolish Don Quixotes jousting with windmills—all because, like Quixote, they can't see that their favorite storybooks are exactly that.

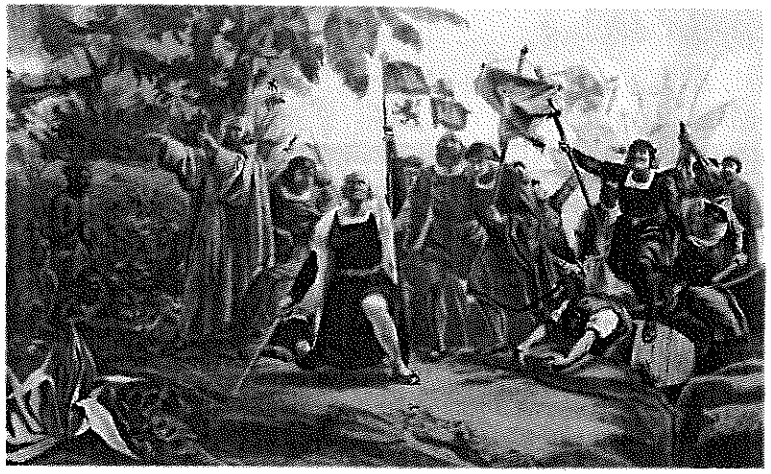
But Wilson points out that "elements of religion that appear irrational and dysfunctional often make perfectly good sense when judged by the only appropriate gold standard as far as evolutionary theory is concerned—*what they cause people to do.*" And what they generally cause people to do is to behave more decently toward members of the group (coreligionists) while vigorously asserting the group's interests against competitors. As the German evolutionist Gustav Jager argued in 1869, religion can be seen as "a weapon in the [Darwinian] struggle for survival."

As Jager's language suggests, none of this should be construed to suggest that religion is—on the whole—a good

thing. There are good things about religion, including the way its ethical teachings bind people into more harmonious collectives. But there is an obvious dark side to religion, too: the way it is so readily weaponized. Religion draws coreligionists together, *and* it drives those of different faiths apart.

SACRED HISTORIES

Supernatural myths aren't the only stories that play a binding role in society. National myths can serve the same function. I recently asked my first-grade daughter, Abigail, to tell me what she learned in school about Christopher Columbus. Abby has an excellent memory, and she recalled a lot: the names of the three ships, the fact that Columbus discovered America by sailing the ocean blue in 1492, and that Columbus proved that the earth was round, not flat. It's the same thing they taught me in elementary school thirty years ago, and what my parents learned before me.



A depiction of Columbus arriving in the New World by Dióscoro Puebla (1831–1901).

But what Abigail was taught is mostly fiction, not history. It is a story that is simply wrong in most details and misleading in the rest. On the small side of things, in 1492 most educated people shared Columbus's confidence that the earth was round. On the large side of things, Abby was not told that Columbus first landed in the West Indies, where he wrote of the Arawak Indians, "They would make fine servants . . . With fifty men we could subjugate them all and make them do whatever we want." Columbus and his followers went on to do just that, killing and enslaving the Arawak with real avidity and sadistic creativity. Within sixty years or so, the Arawak were wiped out. Abby also wasn't told that this was just the first stage of a centuries-long effort to strip the North American continent of Indian life.

Revisionist historians such as Howard Zinn and James Loewen have argued that American history texts have been whitewashed so thoroughly that they don't count as history anymore. They represent determined forgetting—an erasure of what is shameful from our national memory banks so that history can function as a unifying, patriotic myth. Stories about Columbus, Squanto and the first Thanksgiving, George Washington's inability to lie, and so on, serve as national creation myths. The men at the center of these stories are presented not as flesh-and-blood humans with flaws to match their virtues, but as the airbrushed leading men of hero stories. The purpose of these myths is not to provide an objective account of what happened. It is to tell a story that binds a community together—to take *pluribus* and make *unum.*

Many commentators see revisionists like Zinn and Loewen not as myth busters, but as spinners of countermyths, in which Western society is trashed and indigenous societies are absurdly romanticized. They point out that societies

everywhere—including the New World and African societies decimated by Westerners—have long histories of war and conquest. For them, the big difference between the conquering Western powers and their victims was technological. For example, if the rapacious Aztec Empire had developed the means to sail to Europe in order to sack and pillage, they may well have done so. People have been pretty nasty throughout history, and over the past half millennium or so, Westerners have just been better at being nasty than anyone else.

But this more balanced, if bleak, view of human history isn't taught in our schools either. Throughout most of our history, we've taught myths. The myths tell us that not only are we the good guys, but we are the smartest, boldest, best guys that ever were.

IMAGINING THE UNIMAGINABLE

Theirs was a May-December affair. Tom was only twenty-two. He was tall and lean, boyish of face and build. Sarah was buxom and quick to laugh. She looked much younger than her forty-five years. If not for the silver streaks in her dark hair, she might have passed for Tom's sister. When Tom graduated college, Sarah decided to take him to Paris as a reward. "Let me be your sugar momma," she said, laughing.

They spent ten days in the city, gawking at the Eiffel Tower, the wonders of the Louvre, and the massive spectacle of Notre Dame. On their next-to-last night, they ate dinner and drank red wine at an almost absurdly charming bistro in the Latin Quarter. Tom and Sarah noticed the other patrons' stares. People were always staring. As they strolled hand in hand down Parisian boulevards, they felt the strangers' eyes appraising them, judging them, tsk-tsking behind their backs.

They knew what people were thinking: that it was not right, that she was old enough to be his mother.

Maybe the Parisians weren't thinking this at all. Maybe the Parisians were just staring because they were an attractive couple and clearly much in love. Maybe Tom and Sarah were paranoid. But if so, they had reason to be. The lovers had paid dearly for their bliss. After learning of the affair, Sarah's mother had vowed not to speak to her until she got therapy. Sarah's coworkers whispered nastily about her in the office lounge. For his part, Tom had tearful fights with his father over the affair. When he told his fraternity brothers about Sarah, they laughed nervously, thinking it was a bad joke. But when Sarah started spending nights in Tom's room, the brothers held an emergency meeting and tried to expel Tom from the house.

Truth be told, the lovers enjoyed being judged. That was half the fun of it. They liked thinking of themselves as rebels with the courage to live in contempt of convention. They sat in the bistro finishing their wine and asking each other their favorite rhetorical questions: Who were they harming? Why were people so nosy and jealous? Why was their morality so narrow and timid?

They walked back to their hotel along the Seine, drunk on wine and rebellion. Entering their room, Tom hung the NE PAS DÉRANGER sign on the doorknob. Then, bouncing and rolling across the room's surfaces, Tom and Sarah made love with an athletic intensity bordering on violence.

Afterward, Tom collapsed on Sarah. She cuddled his panting head to her breast and stroked his curly hair and murmured sweetly in his ear. When Tom regained his breath, he rolled to his own pillow and said, "So what should we see tomorrow, Mom?"

Sarah lay her head on his shoulder and plucked playfully at the sparse hairs on his chest. Giggling, she tickled him. "Maybe we'll just stay in bed tomorrow!" Tom giggled back at her, saying, *"Mo-om! Sto-op!"*

First, I'm sorry I did that to you—questionable taste, I agree. Second, I have my reasons, which I'll get to now.

If you are like most people, you probably couldn't help imagining this fictional Parisian love affair. If you have visited Paris, images of the famous city invaded your brain. If you have never visited the city, views from movies, paintings, and postcards still crowded into your head, along with generic images of lovers enjoying a meal in a charming restaurant. When the action turned to joyful lovemaking between two attractive people, your interest in the story might have picked up.

You might have imagined what Tom and Sarah looked like unclothed and how they moved together. After all, such moments—or the promise of them—may be *the* main staple not just of romance novels and porn but of all story types.

But what happened when you learned that the lovers were mother and son? Did your mind revolt? Did you find yourself trying to expel the images from your brain, the way a child might spit out a bite of cake that tasted delicious until she learned it was made from hated carrots?

My loathsome little story was inspired by the psychologist Jonathan Haidt, who exposes people to uncomfortable fictional scenarios like this one in order to study moral logic. (In addition to consensual incest, Haidt's uncomfortable scenarios include a man who has victimless sex with dead chickens and a family that devours their beloved dog after he is killed by a car.) If the man and woman in this story were not related, you probably would have enjoyed imagining their lovemaking. But knowing the truth sours the fantasy. Even if the story clearly shows that the two are consenting adults enjoying an emotionally and physically satisfying relationship, most people are unwilling even to imagine that the relationship is morally acceptable.

This is remarkable, because people are willing to imagine almost anything in a story: that wolves can blow down houses; that a man can become a vile cockroach in his sleep (Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis"); that donkeys can fly, speak, and sing R&B songs (*Shrek*); that "a dead-but-living fatherless god-man [Jesus] has the super-powers to grant utopian immortality"; that a white whale might really be evil incarnate; that time travelers can visit the past, kill a butterfly, and lay the future waste (Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Thunder").

I should say that people are willing to imagine *almost* anything. This flexibility does not extend to the moral realm. Shrewd thinkers going back as far as the philosopher David Hume have noted a tendency toward "imaginative resistance": we won't go along if someone tries to tell us that bad is good, and good is bad.

Here's how Dostoyevsky *didn't* write *Crime and Punishment:* Raskolnikov kills the pawnbroker and her sister for kicks; he feels no remorse; he boasts to his family and friends about it, and they all wet themselves laughing; Raskolnikov is a good man; he lives happily ever after.

Or imagine a short story based on Jonathan Swift's satirical essay "A Modest Proposal." Swift suggests that all of the social ills of Ireland can be solved by starting a baby-meat industry. But imagine that the story is not a satire. Imagine a story in which the author fails to signal that it would be wrong for impoverished women to fatten infants at their breasts just so rich men could feast on baby chops and baby ragout.

Or imagine a story based on the Roman emperor Heliogabalus, who is said to have slaughtered slaves on his front lawn—men, women, and children—just because he found the shimmer of blood on grass delightful to gaze upon. The story celebrates Heliogabalus as an artistic pioneer who fearlessly pursued beauty in the face of arbitrary moral codes.

In the same way that we are unwilling to imagine a scenario in which it is okay for a mother and son to be lovers, most of us are unwilling to imagine a universe where the murder of slaves, babies, or pawnbrokers is morally acceptable.

Storytellers know this in their blood. True, they deluge us with breathtaking depravity, lewdness, and cruelty—think *Lolita,* think *A Clockwork Orange,* think *Titus Andronicus* (in this Shakespeare play, "two men kill another man, rape his

bride, cut out her tongue, and amputate her hands; her father kills the rapists, cooks them in a pie, and feeds them to their mother, whom he then kills before killing his own daughter for having gotten raped in the first place; then he is killed, and his killer is killed"). And we love them for it. We are only too happy to leer on as the bad guys of fiction torture, kill, and rape. But storytellers never ask us to approve. Morally repellent acts are a great staple of fiction, but so is the storyteller's condemnation. It was very wrong, Dostoyevsky makes clear, for Raskolnikov to kill those women. It would be very wrong, Swift makes clear, to raise babies like veal, no matter the socioeconomic returns.

VIRTUE REWARDED

The Greek philosopher Plato banished poets and storytellers from his ideal republic for, among other sins, peddling immoral fare. And Plato's was just the first in a long string of panic attacks about the way fiction corrodes morality—how penny dreadfuls, dime novels, comics, moving pictures, television, or video games are corrupting the youth, turning them slothful and aggressive and perverted.

But Plato was wrong, and so were his panicked descendants. Fiction is, on the whole, intensely moralistic. Yes, evil occurs, and antiheroes, from Milton's Satan to Tony Soprano, captivate us. But fiction virtually always puts us in a position to judge wrongdoing, and we do so with gusto. Sometimes we find ourselves rooting perversely for dark heroes such as Satan or Soprano, or even the child molester Humbert Humbert in *Lolita,* but we aren't asked to approve of their cruel and selfish behavior, and storytellers almost never allow them to live happily ever after.

Madame Bovary disrobing for her lover, Léon. In 1857, Gustave Flaubert was tried on the charge that *Madame Bovary* was an outrage against morality and religion. Flaubert's lawyer successfully argued that although the novel depicts immoral acts, it is itself moral. Emma Bovary sins, and she suffers for it.

One of the first novels in English was Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740). That subtitle could be tacked onto most stories that humans have dreamed up, from the first folktales to modern soap operas and professional wrestling. Story runs on poetic justice, or at least on our hopes for it. As the literary scholar William Flesch shows in his book *Comeuppance,* much of the emotion generated by a story—the fear, hope, and suspense—reflects our concern over whether the characters, good and bad, will get what they deserve. Mostly they do, but sometimes they don't. And

when they don't, we close our books with a sigh, or trudge away from the theater, knowing that we have just experienced a tragedy.

By the time American children reach adulthood, they will have seen 200,000 violent acts, including 40,000 killings, on television alone—which is to say nothing of film or the countless enemies they have personally slaughtered in video games. Social scientists generally frown at this carnage, arguing that it leads to an increase in real-world aggression. They have a point (which we'll examine more closely in the next chapter). But they also miss one. Fiction almost never gives us morally neutral presentations of violence. When the villain kills, his or her violence is condemned. When the hero kills, he or she does so righteously. Fiction drives home the message that violence is acceptable only under clearly defined circumstances—to protect the good and the weak from the bad and the strong. Yes, some video games, such as Grand Theft Auto, glorify wickedness, but those games are the notorious exceptions that prove the general rule.

The psychologist Jerome Bruner writes that "great fiction is subversive in spirit." I disagree. It's true that writers have frequently, especially over the past century, set out to challenge (or outrage) conventional sensibilities. There is a reason for all those burned and banned books. But most of this fiction is still moral fiction: it puts us in the position of approving of decent, prosocial behavior and disapproving of the greed of antagonists—of characters who are all belly and balls. As novelists such as Leo Tolstoy and John Gardner have argued, fiction is, in its essence, deeply moral. Beneath all of its brilliance, fiction tends to preach, and its sermons are usually fairly conventional.

In Charles Baxter's influential book on the craft of fiction,

An Egyptian woman telling tales from "Arabian Nights." It's worth remembering that until recently, storytellers who attacked group values faced real risks. For tens of thousands of years before the invention of the book, story was an exclusively oral medium. Members of a tribe gathered around a teller and listened. Tribal storytellers who undercut time-honored values—who insulted group norms—faced severe consequences. (Imagine if our Egyptian storyteller decided to spin a yarn about the wine-soaked debauches of the Prophet, Muhammad.) As a result, oral stories generally reflect "a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind."

Burning Down the House, he bemoans the "death of the antagonist—any antagonist" in modern fiction. He's onto something. Over the past hundred years or so, sophisticated fiction has trended toward moral ambiguity. This is strikingly illustrated by the edgy protagonists of recent cable TV dramas such as *The Shield, The Wire, Dexter, Breaking Bad, The Sopranos,* and *Deadwood.* But I'm making a general argument, not an absolute one. I think that rumors of the death of the antagonist have been exaggerated. Take those edgy antiheroes from cable drama. Do they really muddle the ethical patterns I'm describing or—by setting virtue against vice *inside* the soul of Walter White or Tony Soprano—do they just put a fresh twist

on old morality plays? In any case, I agree with the journalist Steven Johnson, who concludes that the most popular story forms—mainstream films, network television, video games, and genre novels—are still structured on poetic justice: "the good guys still win out, and they do it by being honest and playing by the rules."

If there really is a general pattern of conventional moralizing in stories—one that stands out around the world despite some exceptions—where does it come from? William Flesch thinks it reflects a moralistic impulse that is part of human nature. I think he's right. I think it reflects this impulse, but I also think it *reinforces* it. In the same way that problem structure points up a potentially important biological function of story (problem rehearsal), the moralism of fiction may point up another important function.

In a series of papers and a forthcoming book, Joseph Carroll, John Johnson, Dan Kruger, and I propose that stories make societies work better by encouraging us to behave ethically. As with sacred myths, ordinary stories—from TV shows to fairy tales—steep us all in the same powerful norms and values. They relentlessly stigmatize antisocial behavior and just as relentlessly celebrate prosocial behavior. We learn by association that if we are more like protagonists, we will be more apt to reap the typical rewards of protagonists (for instance, love, social advancement, and other happy endings) and less likely to reap the rewards of antagonists (for instance, death and disastrous loss of social standing).

Humans live great chunks of their lives inside fictional stories—in worlds where goodness is generally endorsed and rewarded and badness is condemned and punished. These patterns don't just reflect a moralistic bias in human psychology, they seem to reinforce it. In his book *The Moral Laboratory*,

Evidence that poetic justice is basic to the fiction impulse comes from children's pretend play. According to David Elkind's *The Power of Play*, children's pretend play always has clear "moral overtones—the good guys versus the bad guys." Children's play scenarios are endlessly convulsed by the collision of evil and good, as in this photograph of children playing cops and robbers.

the Dutch scholar Jèmeljan Hakemulder reviewed dozens of scientific studies indicating that fiction has positive effects on readers' moral development and sense of empathy. In other words, when it comes to moral law, Shelley seems to have had it right: "Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

Similar evidence comes from a 2008 study of television viewers by the psychologist Markus Appel. Think about it: for a society to function properly, people have to believe in justice. They have to believe that there are rewards for doing right and punishments for doing wrong. And, indeed, people generally do believe that life punishes the vicious and rewards the virtuous. This is despite the fact that, as Appel puts

it, "this is patently not the case." Bad things happen to good people all the time, and most crimes go unpunished.

In Appel's study, people who mainly watched drama and comedy on TV—as opposed to heavy viewers of news programs and documentaries—had substantially stronger "just-world" beliefs. Appel concludes that fiction, by constantly marinating our brains in the theme of poetic justice, may be partly responsible for the overly optimistic sense that the world is, on the whole, a just place. And yet the fact that we take this lesson to heart may be an important part of what makes human societies work.

Go into a movie theater. Sit in the front row, but don't watch the movie. Turn around and watch the people. In the flickering light, you will see a swarm of faces—light and dark, male and female, old and young—all staring at the screen. If the movie is good, the people will respond to it like a single organism. They will flinch together, gasp together, roar with laughter together, choke up together. A film takes a motley association of strangers and syncs them up. It choreographs how they feel and what they think, how fast their hearts beat, how hard they breathe, and how much they perspire. A film melds minds. It imposes emotional and psychic unity. Until the lights come up and the credits roll, a film makes people one.

It has always been so. It is easy for us to forget, sitting alone on our couches with our novels and television shows, that until the past few centuries, story was always an intensely communal activity. For tens of thousands of years before the invention of writing, story happened only when a teller came together with listeners. It wasn't until the invention of the printing press that books became cheap enough to reward

mass literacy. For uncounted millennia, story was exclusively oral. A teller or actor attracted an audience, synched them up mentally and emotionally, and exposed them all to the same message.

In recent centuries, technology has changed the communal nature of story, but it has not destroyed it. Nowadays we may imbibe most of our stories alone or with our families and friends, but we are still engaged in a socially regulating activity. I may be by myself watching *Breaking Bad* or *30 Rock,* or reading *The Da Vinci Code* or *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo,* but there are millions of other people sitting on millions of other couches being exposed to exactly the same stories and undergoing exactly the same process of neural, emotional, and physiological attunement. We are still having a communal experience; it's just spread out over space and time.

Story, in other words, continues to fulfill its ancient function of binding society by reinforcing a set of common values and strengthening the ties of common culture. Story en-

culturates the youth. It defines the people. It tells us what is laudable and what is contemptible. It subtly and constantly encourages us to be decent instead of decadent. Story is the grease and glue of society: by encouraging us to behave well, story reduces social friction while uniting people around common values. Story homogenizes us; it makes us one. This is part of what Marshall McLuhan had in mind with his idea of the global village. Technology has saturated widely dispersed people with the same media and made them into citizens of a village that spans the world.

Story—sacred and profane—is perhaps *the* main cohering force in human life. A society is composed of fractious people with different personalities, goals, and agendas. What connects us beyond our kinship ties? Story. As John Gardner puts it, fiction "is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy." Story is the counterforce to social disorder, the tendency of things to fall apart. Story is the center without which the rest cannot hold.

The Storytelling Animal:
How Stories Make Us Human
(2012)
Gottschall, Jonathan
Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Ink People Change the World

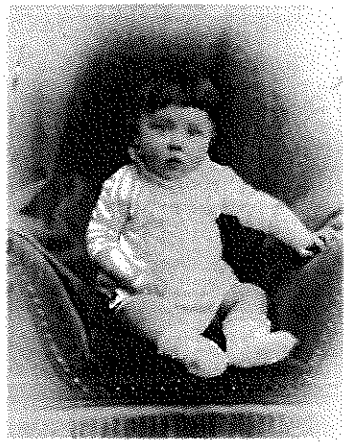
We are absurdly accustomed to the miracle of a few written signs being able to contain immortal imagery, involutions of thought, new worlds with live people, speaking, weeping, laughing.

—VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *Pale Fire*

ALOIS SCHICKLGRUBER WAS BORN in 1837 in the tiny village of Strones, in the hilly region north of Vienna. The Schicklgrubers were peasants, but Alois rose by pluck to a good job in the civil service. Alois raised his family in the town of Linz. He sired nine children in all, including a son named Adolfus, who lived for opera.

Adolfus's boyhood friend August Kubizek relates how, when Adolfus was just sixteen, the two boys attended a performance of Richard Wagner's opera *Rienzi.* For five full hours, the two friends gazed down from the cheap seats as the story of Cola Rienzi, the heroic Roman tribune of the people, unfolded in blasts of song. Afterward, exhausted and emotionally spent, the two friends walked the winding streets of Linz.

The voluble Adolfus was oddly quiet. In silence, he led



Adolfus as a baby.

his friend up the Freinberg, a hill overlooking the Danube. There Adolfus stopped and grasped Kubizek's hands. Trembling with "complete ecstasy and rapture," he said that *Rienzi* had revealed his destiny. "He conjured up in grandiose, inspiring pictures his own future and that of his people . . . He was talking of a mandate which, one day, he would receive from the people, to lead them out of servitude to the heights of freedom." Then Kubizek watched Adolfus walk away into the night.

As a young man, Adolfus dreamed of being a great painter. He dropped out of school at seventeen and moved to Vienna, hoping to attend the Academy of Fine Arts. But while Adolfus could paint landscapes and architectural scenes, he was defeated by the human form, and so he was twice rejected by the academy. Depressed, Adolfus slipped into an aimless, loafing existence. He whipped off paintings of Viennese landmarks and sold them to tourists for the equivalent, in today's money, of ten or fifteen dollars. He flopped for a time with winos and

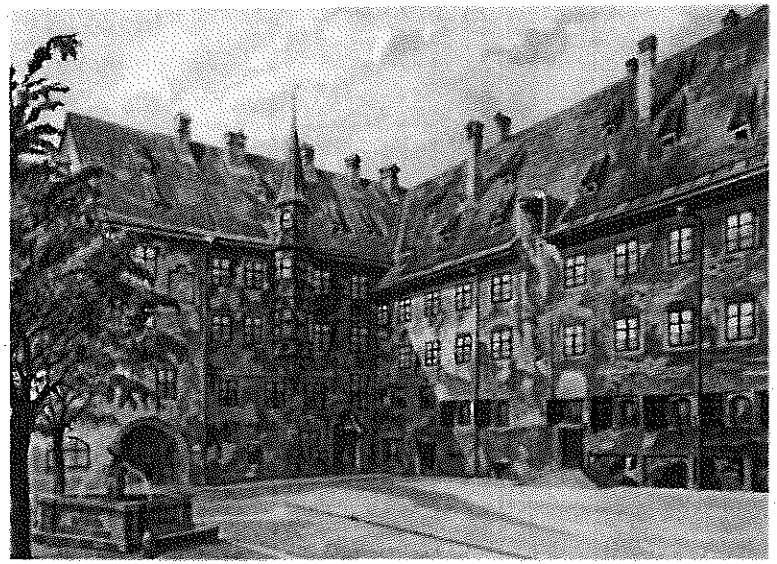
hoboes in a homeless shelter, walking the streets for hours to escape the bugs in his room. He took his meals in soup kitchens. In the winter, he shoveled snow to earn money and spent time in public warming rooms. He sometimes hung around the train station, carrying bags for tips.

Adolfus's relatives tried to get him jobs as a baker's apprentice and a customs officer. He brushed them off. Through all the years of struggle and failure, the confidence he gained from his *Rienzi* epiphany never wavered; he knew he would make his mark.

Adolfus's last name was not Schicklgruber. His father, Alois, had been born out of wedlock, so Alois was given his mother's last name. But Alois's mother later married Johann Georg Hiedler. When Alois was thirty-nine, he legally took his stepfather's name, which was variously spelled Hiedler, Huetler, or Hitler. The government clerk processing the name change settled on the last spelling, and Alois Schicklgruber became Alois Hitler.

One of Adolf ("Adolfus" is the name on his birth certificate) Hitler's best biographers, Ian Kershaw, writes, "Hitler is one of the few individuals of whom it can be said with absolute certainty: without him, the course of history would have been different." Historians have, therefore, speculated endlessly about whether the twentieth century might have taken a gentler turn if Hitler had been admitted to art school, or if he had not attended *Rienzi* that night in 1906 and gotten drunk on a fantasy of himself as his nation's savior.

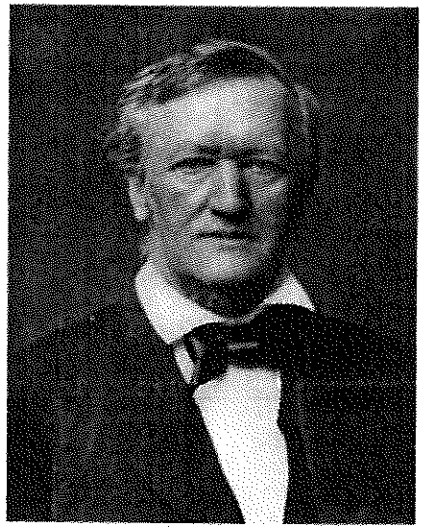
Historians question much in August Kubizek's memoir, *The Young Hitler I Knew,* which began as a work of hero worship commissioned by the Nazi Party but was not finished until after World War II. However, the *Rienzi* episode seems



The Courtyard of the Old Residency in Munich (1914) by Adolf Hitler. A book called *Adolf Hitler as Painter and Draftsman* was published in 1983 in Switzerland. It catalogs some 750 of Hitler's watercolors, oils, and sketches. Offered to several New York publishing houses, it "was rejected on the grounds that it risked making Hitler appear human."

to be authentic. In 1939, Hitler was visiting the family of Siegfried Wagner (the composer's son) at Bayreuth. The children adored him and called him by a special nickname, "Uncle Wolf." Siegfried's wife, Winifred, was a particular friend, and Hitler said to her of his *Rienzi* epiphany, "That was when it all began"—"it" being the process that turned an unpromising boy into the great führer. Hitler also told the *Rienzi* story to members of his inner circle (such as his architect, Albert Speer) and to the generals on his staff.

Of course, this doesn't mean that if young Adolfus had skipped *Rienzi,* the world could have skipped World War II and the Holocaust. But even historians who are skeptical of



Richard Wagner (1813–1883).

the *Rienzi* story do not deny that Wagner's sprawling hero sagas—with their Germanic gods and knights, their Valkyries and giants, their stark portrayals of good and evil—helped shape Hitler's character.

Wagner was not just a brilliant composer. He was also an extreme German nationalist, a prolific writer of inflammatory political tracts, and a virulent anti-Semite who wrote of a "grand solution" to the Jewish menace long before the Nazis put one in place. Hitler worshiped Wagner like a god and called Wagner's music his religion. He attended parts of Wagner's Ring Cycle more than 140 times, and as führer he never traveled anywhere without his Wagner recordings. He considered the composer to be his mentor, his model, his one true ancestor. According to André François-Poncet, the French ambassador to Berlin in the 1930s, Hitler "'lived' Wagner's work, he believed himself to be a Wagnerian hero; he was Lohen-

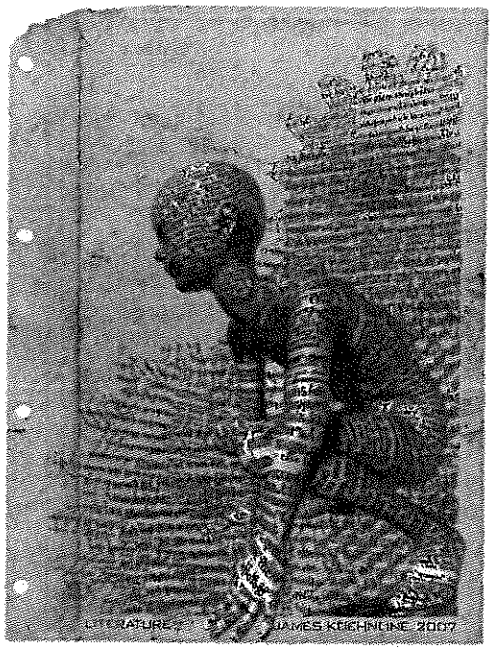
grin, Siegfried, Walther von Stolzing, and especially Parsifal." He saw himself, in other words, as a modern knight locked in a struggle with evil.

The acclaimed Hitler biographer Joachim Fest agrees with François-Poncet: "For the Master of Bayreuth [Wagner] was not only Hitler's great exemplar, he was also the young man's ideological mentor . . . [Wagner's] political writings, together with the operas, form the entire framework for Hitler's ideology . . . Here he found the 'granite foundations' for his view of the world." Hitler himself said that "whoever wants to understand National Socialist Germany must understand the works of Wagner."

INK PEOPLE

The characters in fiction are just wiggles of ink on paper (or chemical stains on celluloid). They are ink people. They live in ink houses inside ink towns. They work at ink jobs. They have inky problems. They sweat ink and cry ink, and when they are cut, they bleed ink. And yet ink people press effortlessly through the porous membrane separating their inky world from ours. They move through our flesh-and-blood world and wield real power in it. As we have seen, this is spectacularly true of sacred fictions. The ink people of scripture have a real, live presence in our world. They shape our behaviors and our customs, and in so doing, they transform societies and histories.

This is also true of ordinary fiction. In 1835, Edward Bulwer-Lytton wrote a novel called *Rienzi.* The young Richard Wagner was inspired by the novel and decided to base an opera on it. Bulwer-Lytton conjured people out of paper and ink. Wagner put those ink people onstage and told their story



James Koehnline's *Literature* (2007).

in song. Those songs changed Adolf Hitler and, through Hitler, the world. Wagner's ink people—Siegfried, Parsifal, Rienzi—may have been significant in the wild mix of factors that brought on the worst war in history, and the worst genocide.

The eleventh edition of *The Encyclopaedia Britannica* claimed vast power for literary art, saying it has had "as much effect upon human destiny" as the taming of fire. But not everyone thinks so. W. H. Auden wrote that "poetry makes nothing happen," and Oscar Wilde wrote that "all art is quite useless." Stories, in this view, are relatively inert in their effects. After all, most people are not stupid. They know the difference between reality and fantasy, and they resist being manipulated.

Until very recently, this debate was driven largely by anecdote. The most famous by far involves the plight of an ink person named Eliza Harris. Young and beautiful, spirited and good, Eliza was a slave who belonged to Arthur Shelby. Rather than see her small son Harry sold "down the river" to the much rougher plantations of the Deep South, Eliza ran for the North. An account of her flight was serially published beginning in 1851 in the newspaper *National Era.* Readers held their breath as Eliza stood on the south bank of the Ohio River, looking out over the churning expanse of ice floes that separated the slave state of Kentucky from the free state of Ohio. At her back, the slave catchers were already in sight, closing fast. Holding little Harry in her arms, Eliza stepped onto the uncertain ice. Then, leaping and slipping from ice floe to wobbly ice floe, she made it to the other side, and eventually to freedom in Canada.

In 1852, the story of Eliza's terrible struggle, and those of another slave from the Shelby estate, Uncle Tom, was republished in book form. It would become, with the exception of the Bible, the best-selling book of the nineteenth century. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* polarized the American public. By showing the cruelty of slavery, the book roused abolitionist sympathies in the North. And by depicting slavery as a hellish institution ruled over by brutes, the book helped galvanize the South in slavery's defense. The book's representative slave owner, Simon Legree, is a sadistic monster who has a fist like a "blacksmith's hammer." He shakes that hammer in the face of his slaves and says, "This yer fist has got as hard as iron knocking down niggers. I never seen the nigger yet I couldn't bring down with one crack."

When, in the midst of the Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln met Harriet Beecher Stowe, he famously said, "So

Eliza Harris crossing the Ohio River. A promotional poster for an 1881 theatrical adaptation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*

you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war." Lincoln went a little far in his flattery, but historians agree that *Uncle Tom's Cabin* "exerted a momentous impact on American culture (and continues to do so)," inflaming the passions that brought on the most terrible war in American history. Moreover, it affected international opinion in important ways. As the historian Paul Johnson has written, "In Britain, the success of the novel helped to ensure that . . . the British, whose economic interest lay with the South, remained strictly neutral." If the British had jumped into the fight, the outcome may have been different.

People who believe that story systematically shapes individuals and cultures can cite plenty of evidence beyond *Rienzi* and *Uncle Tom's Cabin:* the way D. W. Griffith's 1915 epic film, *The Birth of a Nation,* resurrected the defunct Ku Klux Klan; the way the film *Jaws* (1975) depressed the economies of

coastal holiday towns; the way Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is—in the words of Christopher Hitchens—responsible for much of "the grisly inheritance that is the modern version of Christmas"; the way *The Iliad* gave Alexander the Great a thirst for immortal glory (the eighteenth-century novelist Samuel Richardson asked, "Would Alexander, madman as he was, have been so *much* a madman, had it not been for Homer?"); the way the publication of Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) inspired a spate of copy-cat suicides; the way novels such as *1984* (George Orwell, 1948) and *Darkness at Noon* (Arthur Koestler, 1940) steeled a generation against the nightmare of totalitarianism; the way stories such as *Invisible Man* (Ralph Ellison, 1952), *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee, 1960), and *Roots* (Alex Haley, 1976) changed racial attitudes around the world.

The list could go on and on. But it actually proves very little, because the interesting question isn't whether stories sometimes change people or influence history, but whether those changes are predictable and systematic. A skeptic might yawn at this list and say, "Anecdotes don't make a science."

In recent decades, roughly corresponding with the rise of TV, psychology has begun a serious study of story's effects on the human mind. Research results have been consistent and robust: fiction *does* mold our minds. Story—whether delivered through films, books, or video games—teaches us facts about the world; influences our moral logic; and marks us with fears, hopes, and anxieties that alter our behavior, perhaps even our personalities. Research shows that story is constantly nibbling and kneading us, shaping our minds without our knowledge or consent. The more deeply we are cast under story's spell, the more potent its influence.

Most of us believe that we know how to separate fantasy

and reality—that we keep information gathered from fiction safely quarantined from our stores of general knowledge. But studies show that this is not always the case. In the same mental bin, we mix information gleaned from both fiction and nonfiction. In laboratory settings, fiction can mislead people into believing outlandish things: that brushing their teeth is bad for them, that they can "catch" madness during a visit to a mental asylum, or that penicillin has been a disaster for humankind.

Think about it: fiction has probably taught you as much about the world as anything else. What would you actually know about, say, police work without television shows such as *CSI* or *NYPD Blue*? What would I know about tsarist Russia without Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky? Not much. What would I know about British naval life in the Napoleonic era if not for the habit-forming "Master and Commander" novels of Patrick O'Brian? Even less.

And it is not just static information that is passed along through stories. Tolstoy believed that an artist's job is to "infect" his audience with his own ideas and emotions—"the stronger the infection, the better is the art as art." Tolstoy was right—the emotions and ideas in fiction are highly contagious, and people tend to overestimate their immunity to them.

Take fear. Scary stories leave scars. In a 2009 study, the psychologist Joanne Cantor showed that most of us have been traumatized by scary fiction. Seventy-five percent of her research subjects reported intense anxiety, disruptive thoughts, and sleeplessness after viewing a horror film. For a quarter of her subjects, the lingering effects of the experience persisted for more than six years. But here's what's most interesting about Cantor's study: She didn't set out to study mov-

ies in particular. She set out to study fear reactions across all mass media—television news, magazine articles, political speeches, and so on. Yet for 91 percent of Cantor's subjects, scary films—not real-world nightmares such as 9/11 or the Rwandan genocide by machete—were the source of their most traumatic memories.

The emotions of fiction are highly contagious, and so are the ideas. As the psychologist Raymond Mar writes, "Researchers have repeatedly found that reader attitudes shift to become more congruent with the ideas expressed in a [fiction] narrative." In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than nonfiction, which is *designed* to persuade through argument and evidence. For example, if we watch a TV program showing a sexual encounter gone wrong, our own sexual ethics will change. We will be more critical of premarital sex and more judgmental of other people's sexual choices. If, however, the show portrays a positive sexual encounter, our own sexual attitudes will move toward the permissive end of the spectrum. These effects can be demonstrated after a single viewing of a single episode of a prime-time television drama.

As with sex, so too with violence. The effects of violence in the mass media have been the subject of hundreds of studies over the past forty years. This research is controversial, but it seems to show that consuming a lot of violent fiction has consequences. After watching a violent TV program, adults and children behave more aggressively in lab settings. And long-term studies suggest a relationship between the amount of violent fiction consumed in childhood and a person's actual likelihood of behaving violently in the real world. (The opposite relationship also holds: consuming fiction with prosocial themes makes us more cooperative in lab settings.)

It is not only crude attitudes toward sex and violence that

are shaped by fiction. As mentioned in the last chapter, studies have shown that people's deepest moral beliefs and values are modified by the fiction they consume. For example, fictional portrayals of members of different races affect how we view out-groups. After white viewers see a positive portrayal of black family life—say, in *The Cosby Show*—they usually exhibit more positive attitudes toward black people generally. The opposite occurs after white people watch hard-core rap videos.

What is going on here? Why are we putty in a storyteller's hands? One possibility, to borrow the words of Somerset Maugham, is that fiction writers mix the powder (the medicine) of a message with the sugary jam of storytelling. People bolt down the sweet jam of storytelling and don't even notice the undertaste of the powder (whatever message the writer is communicating).

A related explanation comes from the psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock. They argue that entering fictional worlds "radically alters the way information is processed." Green and Brock's research shows that the more absorbed readers are in a story, the more the story changes them. Fiction readers who reported a high level of absorption tended to have their beliefs changed in a more "story-consistent" way than those who were less absorbed. Highly absorbed readers also detected significantly fewer "false notes" in stories—inaccuracies, infelicities—than less transported readers. Importantly, it is not just that highly absorbed readers detected the false notes and didn't care about them (as when we watch a pleasurably idiotic action film); these readers were unable to detect the false notes in the first place.

And in this there is an important lesson about the molding power of story. When we read nonfiction, we read with

Anton Chekhov (1860–1904). Stories change our beliefs and maybe even our personalities. In one study, psychologists gave personality tests to people before and after reading Chekhov's classic short story "The Lady with the Little Dog." In contrast to a control group of nonfiction readers, the fiction readers experienced meaningful changes in their personality profiles directly after reading the story—perhaps because story forces us to enter the minds of characters, softening and confusing our sense of self. The personality changes were "modest" and possibly temporary, but the researchers asked an interesting question: might many little doses of fiction eventually add up to big personality changes?

our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally, and this seems to leave us defenseless.

There is still a lot to be discovered about the extent and magnitude of story's sculpting power. Most current research is based on extremely low doses of story. People can be made to think differently about sex, race, class, gender, violence, ethics, and just about anything else based on a single short story or television episode.

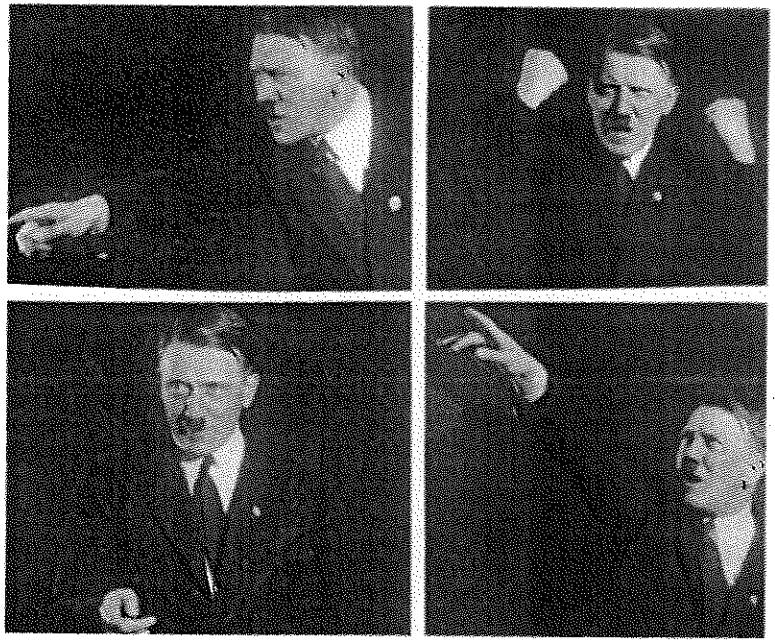
Now extrapolate. We humans are constantly marinating ourselves in fiction, and all the while it is shaping us, changing us. If the research is correct, fiction is one of the primary sculpting forces of individuals and societies. Anecdotes about those rare ink people, such as Rienzi or Uncle Tom, who vault across the fantasy-reality divide to change history are impressive. But what is more impressive, if harder to see, is the way stories are working on us all the time, reshaping us in the way that flowing water gradually reshapes a rock.

HOLOCAUST, 1933

Adolf Hitler is a potent example of the ways that story can shape individuals and histories, sometimes disastrously. The musical stories that Hitler most loved did not make him a better person. They did not humanize him, soften him, or extend his moral sympathies beyond his own in-group. Quite the opposite. Hitler was able to drive the world into a war that cost sixty million lives not in spite of his love of art but at least partly because of it.

Hitler ruled through art, and he ruled *for* art. In his book *Hitler and the Power of Aesthetics,* Frederic Spotts writes that Hitler's ultimate goals were not military and political; they were broadly artistic. In the new Reich, the arts would be supreme. Spotts criticizes historians who treat Hitler's devotion to the arts as insincere, shallow, or strictly propagandistic. For Spotts, "Hitler's interest in the arts was as intense as his racism; to disregard the one is as profound a distortion as to pass over the other."

On the night of May 10, 1933, Nazis across Germany indulged in an ecstasy of book burning. They burned books written by Jews, modernists, socialists, "art-Bolsheviks," and



Adolf Hitler practicing theatrical poses for use in speaking performances. Hitler once called himself "the greatest actor in Europe." Frederic Spotts agrees, arguing that Hitler's mastery of public theater helped him mesmerize and mobilize the German people. After watching the Nazi propaganda film *Triumph of the Will* (1935) fifteen times, the singer David Bowie said, "Hitler was one of the first great rock stars. He was no politician. He was a great media artist. How he worked his audience! He made women all hot and sweaty and guys wished they were the ones who were up there. The world will never see anything like that again. He made an entire country a stage show."

writers deemed "un-German in spirit." They were purifying German letters by fire. In Berlin, tens of thousands gathered in the firelight to hear Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels shout, "No to decadence and moral corruption! . . . Yes to decency and morality in family and state! I consign to the flames the writings of Heinrich Mann, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Gläser, Erich Kästner." And with them went the ink children of Jack

London, Theodore Dreiser, Ernest Hemingway, Thomas Mann, and many others.

The Nazis, deeply inspired by Wagner's musical stories, understood that ink people are among the most powerful and dangerous people in the world. And so they committed a holocaust of undesirable ink people so there would be fewer barriers to a holocaust of real people.

Among the books burned that night in 1933 was the play *Almansor* (1821) by the German Jewish writer Heinrich Heine. The play contains this famous and prophetic line: "Where they burn books, they will also ultimately burn people."