

An Insight into the Book Titled Why Stories Work

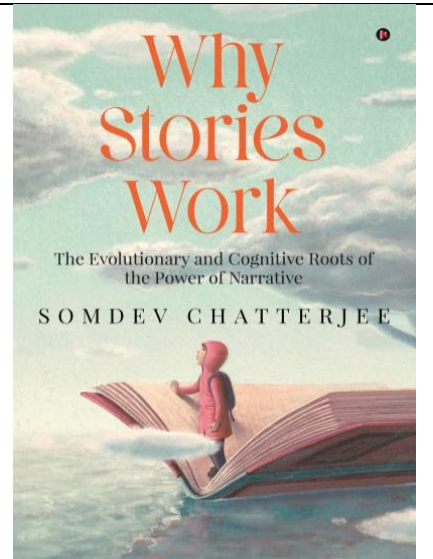
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Brief

Title: Why Stories Work
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Author: Somdev Chatterjee
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Abstract

Somdev Chatterjee's "Why Stories Work" delves into the profound significance of narratives in human evolution and cognition. In this interdisciplinary exploration spanning literary theory, evolutionary science, cognitive psychology, and philosophy, Chatterjee answers fundamental questions about the role of stories in our past, their impact on our minds, and their pervasive influence on our shared reality. The book comprises four chapters, each tackling specific inquiries, such as the evolutionary purpose of storytelling, the development of our capacity to inhabit imaginary worlds, the mapping of experienced reality in stories, and the scientific insights into how stories hack into our brains. Chatterjee contends that stories are not just cultural artifacts but integral tools for survival, shaping our responses to threats and fostering cooperation within groups. He explores the idea that storytelling provides a unique way for humans to articulate and transmit knowledge that is difficult to express explicitly. The author also says that our experience of life itself may have a narrative structure. The book distinguishes itself through its scientific approach to the study of narratives, an interdisciplinary framework drawing from various fields, and its provision of new insights into the nature, structure, and power of stories. Accessible to both lay readers and students, Chatterjee enriches his theoretical discussions with numerous examples from films, novels, and myths. Additionally, the book explores how stories tap into our brains' structure, utilizing mirror neurons, supernormal stimuli, and our inherent pattern-seeking tendencies.

Keywords: Book Reviews, Stories, How Stories Work

Introduction

In "Why Stories Work," author Somdev Chatterjee takes readers on a captivating journey through the evolutionary and cognitive roots of narrative power. A writer, filmmaker, and educator at the Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute in Kolkata, India, Chatterjee draws on his diverse background to unravel the intricate relationship between stories and the human experience. The book, published by Notion Press, explores the profound impact of storytelling on our evolutionary history and cognitive processes. Chatterjee's exploration is grounded in scientific rigor, as he delves into insights from evolutionary sciences, cognitive psychology, and developmental psychology. Through four thematic chapters, he addresses fundamental questions about the role of stories in our past, their relation with our perception of reality, and their ability to tap into the very structure of our minds.

What sets "Why Stories Work" apart is its unique approach to the theory of fiction. Chatterjee emphasizes a scientific perspective, offering an interdisciplinary examination that spans literary theory, evolutionary sciences, cognitive sciences, developmental psychology, and philosophy. The book provides new answers to age-old questions about the nature, structure, and power of stories, all while being easily accessible to both the lay reader and beginning student. Chatterjee's work is enriched by numerous examples from films, novels, and myths, illustrating the concepts discussed throughout the book. As a writer deeply interested in the relationship between stories and various aspects of human experience, Chatterjee brings a nuanced perspective to the study of narratives.

In "Why Stories Work," Somdev Chatterjee invites readers to unlock the secrets behind the magic of storytelling, offering fresh insights into the profound impact narratives have on our minds, our societies, and the very fabric of our shared reality.

The Interdisciplinary Lens:

One of the standout features of "Why Stories Work" is Chatterjee's emphasis on a scientific approach to the study of narratives. The book draws from diverse fields, including evolutionary sciences, cognitive sciences, developmental psychology, and philosophy. This interdisciplinary lens provides a comprehensive view of storytelling, acknowledging its roots in various facets of human cognition and evolution.

Chatterjee's unique background allows him to navigate these different fields with ease, creating an argument that seamlessly weaves together scientific concepts with literary theory. This blend of disciplines enriches the exploration of storytelling, offering readers a holistic understanding of why stories have become an integral part of the human experience.

Chapter-by-Chapter Exploration:

Chapter 1: Tell it like your life depends on it

The inaugural chapter sets the tone for the book by unveiling the secret superpower of stories. Chatterjee argues that early humans evolved into storytellers as a means of survival. Stories helped them share knowledge, imagine possible futures, respond to threats, and collectively navigate the complexities of their environment. The chapter highlights the transition of stories from survival tools to influential components of our cultural and social landscapes. Chatterjee introduces the concept of codified and embodied knowledge, emphasizing that stories offer a unique way of passing down knowledge that cannot be explicitly stated. This chapter lays the groundwork for understanding the social function of storytelling, illustrating how stories create group identities and foster intra-group cohesion.

Chapter 2: Learning to Inhabit Unreal Worlds

The second chapter delves into the links between narrative, simulation, and the emergence of consciousness. Chatterjee explores the human capacity to mentally simulate the future, with a focus on social interactions. The discussion suggests that the pressure to simulate social scenarios might have played a role in the development of consciousness. The chapter also explores why fictional worlds evoke real emotions. Building on the work of Brian Boydⁱ and others, Chatterjee connects children's natural propensity for pretend play to the development of skills in psychological response and social behavior. This section establishes a link between play, mental simulations, and the pleasurable experience of stories.

Chapter 3: Maps of Experienced Reality

In this chapter, Chatterjee explores the fundamental features of stories, including intentional agents, desire, resistance, and unexpected outcomes. He argues that most stories have these features because they are linked to the way we experience reality. Drawing on psychological experiments, he argues that our tendency to ascribe intention to inanimate objects is a survival skill pushed to an extreme. The discussion on the centrality of desire suggests that our perception of reality is shaped by the journeys we make toward the objects of our desire. Chatterjee introduces the idea that stories serve as maps of experienced reality, reflecting not the objective physical properties of our environment but the psychological reality of a world filled with value-laden objects in the context of goal-directed action. The chapter concludes with an exploration of the war on complexity, emphasizing how stories help us navigate the challenges posed by the inherent complexity of our world.

Chapter 4: How Stories Work

The final chapter unravels the mysteries of how stories exploit our inherited cognitive biases and hack into our brains to captivate us. Chatterjee explores the role of mirror neurons, which enable us to feel empathy and connect with the experiences of others. The discussion on supernormal stimuli sheds light on how stories use exaggerated versions of stimuli to evoke strong responses. Chatterjee also explores our innate tendencies for pattern recognition and puzzle-solving, suggesting that stories tap into these cognitive functions. The concept of peak shift, drawn from Ramachandran'sⁱⁱⁱ laws of aesthetics, explains the popularity of non-realistic

genres like mythological, science fiction, or fantasy. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the importance of story endings, drawing from Daniel Kahnemann's insights on the difference between experiencing events and remembering them.

What Sets the Book Apart:

Scientific Approach: "Why Stories Work" stands out for its commitment to a scientific approach to the study of narratives. Chatterjee leverages insights from evolutionary sciences, cognitive sciences, and psychology to offer a nuanced understanding of storytelling.

Interdisciplinary Exploration: The book's interdisciplinary approach sets it apart from conventional works on fiction theory. By drawing from diverse fields, Chatterjee creates a comprehensive argument that enriches the reader's understanding of the subject.

Accessible Language: Despite the complex subject matter, Chatterjee's writing remains accessible to a wide audience. The book is written in a non-technical language, making it suitable for both the lay reader and those new to the study of narratives.

Fresh Insights: "Why Stories Work" provides new answers to age-old questions about the nature, structure, and power of stories. Chatterjee's exploration goes beyond traditional literary theory, offering insights into the evolutionary and cognitive aspects of storytelling.

Illustrative Examples: The inclusion of examples from films, novels, and myths serves to illustrate the concepts discussed throughout the book. These examples make the theoretical discussions more tangible and relatable to readers.

Embodied Approach to Cognition: Chatterjee's adoption of an embodied approach to cognition adds depth to the exploration of storytelling. By emphasizing the influence of physiology and evolutionary history on our response to stories, the book provides a holistic perspective.

Relevance to Real Life: The book goes beyond the theoretical aspects of storytelling, exploring its practical implications for human life. Chatterjee discusses how stories shape our perception of reality and influence our behavior in the social and cultural.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, Somdev Chatterjee's "Why Stories Work: The Evolutionary and Cognitive Roots of the Power of Narrative" is a compelling exploration of the profound impact of stories on the human experience. It is an important addition to the growing field of the biocultural study of art and storytelling in particular. Chatterjee builds on the work of authors like V.S. Ramachandran, Brian Boyd and Jordan Petersonⁱⁱⁱ to explain the social and physiological basis of the power of stories. He goes a step further than these authors when he suggests that we experience reality itself in a narrative format and that this is what explains their irresistible hold on us. This book should be of interest to anyone who seeks to understand the deepest reasons why stories have the structure they do, and how they can wield their magic.

References

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