



The Ideas Factory:

Thinking Like a Writer

An essay introducing The Ideas Factory by Peter Arnott

Human beings are born storytellers. We do it all the time. We can't help it. Look at these ideas:

A child's bedroom

a pirate ship

a clown

a gunshot...

As soon as we put two ideas together in the same place our minds start trying to make connections between them. Has the child got a toy pirate ship in the bedroom? Are pirates going to kidnap the child? Is the bedroom on the pirate ship? Is there a clown in there with a gun? How did that happen? What's going to happen next?

Everybody is like that. Nonetheless, people ask people who work as writers the following question all the time.

"Where do you get your ideas from?"

At the risk of being rude, it's actually a really strange question. That's because writers can only get their ideas in exactly the same places as everyone else - from their lives, from the world. There isn't a special Ideas Planet writers get to go to, it's what you do with an idea that turns it into a story.

Sometimes I'll sit on a setting or a character or an incident for years before something else comes along that it connects to, which gives an idea the potential to actually become a story. Ideas can come from anywhere and everywhere, but they need to be thought about and then connected and then built into a structure. Their potential for connecting up with other ideas to make a story has to be explored, and only then can all the pieces get put together to make something "whole".

The next question I get asked tends to be "How do you get started?" To which I might reply, really quite crossly now, "Getting started is easy, pal...keeping going is the hard bit."

Maybe it's because I'm not that clever. But I can't write a "whole" story all at once. Like reading a story, writing a story takes time. So while I'm writing a particular incident or location or character (which I need to concentrate on if I'm going to do it well), I need to have some way of knowing that when I've finished what I'm doing now, I'll have something ready to tell me what I'm doing next. That way I'll be able to keep going tomorrow.

"Okay, so how do you keep going then?", is the next question I get asked if they haven't gone away by now.

"Aha," I say a bit smugly, "I need a PLAN."

Stories, like machines or bodies or atoms, are put together from individual elements. A writer needs a way of thinking about these elements, and making each one is as interesting as they know how to make them. Then, when they put the elements back together, the story has to work as a whole thing, whether it is a book or a movie or whatever it is.

Writers and storytellers need, or I need anyway, a method of thinking about the individual elements of a story, and about the whole story at the same time. There may be some writers who can hold that in their heads along with bills and mortgages and getting cross with politicians and banks, but I can't. So I have to write a plan of the story and its elements first before I get to writing the actual words I want somebody else to read. I have to tell the story to myself before I tell it to anybody



The Ideas Factory:

else. I have to test the story, try it out, before I actually get to the fun part.

Once upon a time, journalists were always told that they always had to get “where”, “what” and “who” into their first paragraph, and I use a version of that excellent mantra to set up a way of focussing on one element of story construction at a time. The way I do this isn’t rocket science. But it works for me.

Not every writer works this way, of course, but I think most of us do something like this.

This website is a schematised version of what I do myself, and is based on workshops I’ve done in many contexts, some educational, some community, over the years. My essential equipment for a workshop is usually a flipchart and some coloured pens. The Ideas Factory was made as an experimental project to explore the possibilities of taking what I do with pen and paper and creating an online tool so others can use it to plan stories. The National Library of Scotland learning team have made this possible and are instrumental in this, as is the team of web designers, film-makers and animators they’ve involved in the project.

I think it is a good online version of what works for me as a writer and as a workshop leader, and hope it will be a useful tool for others, whether they use it individually or in groups or classrooms.

As the user goes through each stage, their choices of two WHEREs, five WHATs (in order of events) and of two WHOs will be saved into a plan for them. The over-riding imperative of The Ideas Factory is that you have to establish each of these, in order, before you can go on to the next bit. Hopefully, this makes the structural case for building ideas into stories in slow motion. From this process there emerges an individual story plan, or map, which will support and sustain the process of actually writing.

I’m sometimes asked why I put these categories in that order. So next I’m just going to outline something of the rationale for planning in this way.

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WHERE comes first for two fundamental reasons. Firstly, it’s what comes first when you read or watch the opening moments of a film or a play. The job of an opening sentence or moment is to give you a sense of the territory, of the arena, within which the story will happen. It sets up expectations, rules of what is possible in a place like this. It is the beginning of the contract with the audience or reader. It tells you the kind of thing you’re getting into.

Secondly, for a writer, the location they choose similarly sets off chains of possible events and characters in a very concrete way, and most importantly, it makes you start by thinking consciously about what is possibly the LEAST intrinsically exciting thing (to you) in your story.

On a slightly philosophical level, too, where we place ourselves (or get placed) in the world is the single biggest determinant of what life is going to be like for us. It is that from which everything else follows.

So if, for example, we find ourselves in a garden, then all kinds of expectations present themselves. If we define our garden further, say it’s the formal garden of a big house, those expectations get refined too. If we add in the dimension of time, choosing blithely between the present and 1859, we are further defining sets of possibilities. Then, if we say it’s the garden of Darwin’s house in Kent in the present day, or in 1859 (when his theory of evolution was published), we’re really getting to specifics.



Finally, WHERE comes first, because the writer has to start by choosing a place where they really want to be for as long as it takes to write the story. Just like the reader who picks up a book in the library reads the first couple of sentences and decides if the imaginative world that the book is offering is really the place for them for the next week or so.

I'll finish thinking about WHERE, with an example of a totally irresistible opening sentence that, I think, illustrates this way of thinking.

My very favourite opening sentence of any novel comes from *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. It goes like this:

MANY YEARS LATER

(So there's a long period of time involved here)

AS HE WAS FACING THE FIRING SQUAD

(Okay, a war is one place we're going to go)

COLONEL AURELIANO BUENDIA

(Spanish name...so we're in Spain maybe...or South America. This guy's a soldier, but we don't know anything about him yet)

WAS TO RECALL THAT DISTANT AFTERNOON

(This story includes this man's past, so that's a world too, and it sounds quite nice...unlike that nasty place with a firing squad)

WHEN HIS FATHER

(We're in a family here, so maybe we're dealing with childhood)

TOOK HIM TO DISCOVER ICE.

(What? Pardon? Discover Ice? Now I don't know where I am, but it sounds magical and weird, so I'm going to keep reading.)

In that opening sentence are two worlds, the magical, safe childhood and being in the army facing a firing squad. The story, whatever it is, is going to involve getting from one of those places to the other. And I want to be there.

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WHAT comes next because that's just what happens, psychologically, when you start by thinking about locations. Like the suggestions that are made for me in that first sentence by Marquez, the principle for choosing events for a narrative is the suggestions that each event makes. The WHATs, the suggestions take the form of narrative energy; an event is both a consequence (of prior events) and a cause (of future ones). An event, for a writer, is, then, a fuel source for getting you through a day's work and on to the next day. The energy with which you write translates directly into the energy with which you can be read.

The most interesting game for me at this stage is to experiment with the order of events, not just



The Ideas Factory:

from an impulse to rewrite history, but to see what happens to the energy of each event when you change the order of them.

In workshops I use the example of someone...we don't know who yet...announcing that they're leaving.

"I'm leaving" they say. Now the narrative meaning and consequences of this announcement change utterly depending on where in the chain of events they make this announcement.

Lets say our setting is a family home. Then, "I'm leaving" is going to make a big change in the life of this family

If this announcement happens at the beginning, then everything else that happens is going to be the consequence of that announcement. If the announcement happens at the end, then it itself is the consequence of whatever has happened before. If it happens right in the middle, then our story is going to attempt a holistic view of family breakup, cause and consequence. But if it just happens somewhere between the middle and end, or the beginning and the middle, then it's just one event among many. It ceases to be decisive.

The point is that where an event happens is crucial to what role in the story that event will play.

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WHO takes part in events is where those events get their meaning. This is understandable almost as soon as you say it (I never said this was rocket science). But the importance of this for a writer is that it matters much less what the events mean to you than it does what those events mean to your characters. It's all very well to describe events with a god-like eye, but inevitably (or at least, this is the way it is for me) your narrator is going to take on a characterisation, and I can't quite convince myself that I'm God.

It's also an extremely useful discipline to experiment with telling the whole story from the point of view of each character. On the one hand, this keeps you alert to what the story might mean to a reader who is close to that character, but can also give you interesting surprises unavailable to a God who already knows everything.

Like a lot of my ideas, this one comes from theatre, and is demonstrated in a story told by William Goldman in his excellent anecdotal guide to screen writing "Adventures in the Screen Trade".

Two actors are in a bar in New York, and as actors do, they ask what each other are doing. And one says he's in a play Off Broadway, and the other asks him what the play is about.

The reply is. "It's about a guy who takes Some Lady to the Booby Hatch." [or asylum]

The play is Tennessee William's *Streetcar Named Desire*, and this actor is playing the part of the hospital attendant who comes on in the last two minutes to take Blanche Dubois to the asylum. To the actor that's who the play is about - not Stanley or Stella or Blanche or Mitch or any of the parts that the famous actors get to play.

This is not just a story about the vanity of actors. It actually contains a profound and useful truth, that to a hospital attendant, the tragic, complex, glorious figure of Blanche Dubois is just "Some Lady".

And it would be entirely possible to write a novel about him. In which Blanche is barely a



The Ideas Factory:

paragraph.

It's worth thinking about minor characters who turn up for a moment in other stories, and what the story might have been like if told from their viewpoint – it can be a great starting point for new stories.

So the choices about WHO is involved in your story, and what it looks like from their point of view are very important. It also emphasises that there is an almost infinite richness of choices available.

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Finally, when a writer or storyteller has sorted out the basic questions, and put together a model of their story structure, they can start to ask themselves the really interesting and difficult question, which is “why”.

Why write this particular story right now, why write at all?

Every story is a version of reality, even when it's a fantasy. The way a story is put together is an argument about the way the world is put together, how it “really” is, and how the world “really” works. Or it is about how it should work, or what makes you angry about it. Does it do that? Is it a convincing version of reality? (Even when it's the reality of the Planet Mars or Roman Britain you're writing about).

One can compare a fictional story to history...is a recent film (I'm writing this in January 2011) like *The King's Speech* for example...an accurate portrayal of historical events? Is Tolstoy's *War and Peace*? Did the Daleks ever really roll over Westminster Bridge?

The answer is clearly “No” in each case. Fictions - the stories we tell ourselves, never CAN be “accurate” in that sense. Storytellers and memory both select events, largely on intuition, on what FEELS right. New information (or prior knowledge) will alter and challenge that feeling. So, almost immediately you recognise that you're asking the wrong question. The truth of a story isn't in its reflection of fact (Historical fact is also a notoriously unreliable category). The “truth” of a narrative, for an audience, is primarily a matter of its internal integrity, of whether it functions coherently as a story. If the internal integrity of a story is consistent, a historical inaccuracy can still distract you from your engagement in a story, but only if you come to the book or the movie with prior knowledge.

Many films, books and so on are criticised for reasons of accuracy, so let's look a bit closer at what is happening here. Of course sometimes narrative can obviously be exploited for pernicious purposes. But in most cases, what has happened is that aesthetic decisions have been taken based on maintaining the internal coherence of the narrative thrust of a story. Filmmakers don't want their audiences over-burdened with the messy contradictions that real life invariably consists of. So they cut out the inconvenient complications that might contradict or complicate the audience's experience, not because they're wicked or lazy or careless but because they make an aesthetic judgement in favour of simplicity.

The nature of these decisions is that they are decisions about what we might call the nuts and bolts of a story. The questions that get asked in script meetings for a film are about the functionality of the narrative, not about its truth to life or history. Sometimes this can go too far, and then an audience will be insulted by these decisions, by headlong leaps into cliché and formula, by appeals to myth over our lived experience. Maybe it's just personal, but it feels to me like bad art “lies” and the good stuff tells the truth. That is, the good stuff doesn't insult my own sense of “reality” as being a thing that coheres when I look at it, that works a particular way. The



The Ideas Factory:

really good stuff deepens my understanding of that reality. Nonetheless, artistic judgements, whether as a reader or a writer, are ultimately judgements of aesthetic, rather than 'ultimate' or 'historical' truth.

While a storyteller is putting their story together, though, they are still best advised to think of the structure of a story the way a carpenter thinks about the structure of a chair. If a chair has one leg too short, it doesn't matter how original or beautiful it is, or about the quality of its materials, it does not work. Unless the legs are the right length, nobody will be able to sit on it.

Anyway, for good or ill, questions about the beauty and originality of any work of art are always secondary to questions of functionality. Which is why, on the website, the question I ask is "Does it Work?"

A good thing about having a plan is that it takes much less time to write a plan than to write a whole story, and it's easier to go back and change things if you decide they don't work as well as they should. It should be remembered of course, that if you change one thing, you're probably going to have to change everything else too. The essential elements of a story are all very closely connected to each other. Or they should be, if the story is going to work.

But, as we've seen, "Does it Work?" isn't just a practical question. It's also a question about writing itself. What are you writing this story for? What are you trying to tell your reader or your audience? Why have you made the choices you've made? Do those choices reflect you as an individual? Do they reflect your sense of reality, how the world works?

You'll notice that it's only now I'm asking the other question which people usually ask a writer.

"What is your story about?"

Hopefully, if I've thought carefully about each of the elements of my story, and have thus made lots of small manageable choices, like WHERE the story is set, WHAT happens there and how those events lead to other events and WHO those events are important to, then I've already made individual value judgements, and those decisions already reflect my individuality, what I think about the world and how things happen in it. And I'll find I've already answered that question of what my story is "about" without having thought about it. Whether my choices have been honest and intelligent is something I will have thought about sufficiently myself to prepare them for the judgement of an audience. They will bring their own experiences and versions of reality to bear on it, and hopefully, our exchange of narratives will be enjoyable.

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The story generating and structuring methods I've outlined on this site come from twenty-five years of making stories for theatre out of all different kinds of source material...historical research and adaptations of novels as well as, sometimes, from my own imagination.

It is based on making plays I suppose, because that's what I mainly do, but it's also because a theatre audience tells you very quickly if they're bored or distracted. So you need to take them to, and keep them in, places they want to be, and you need a series of events that keep the energy of the story going in the company of characters who engage them. As a reader of poetry or prose, I don't see why I should be bored or unconvinced, any more than an audience in a theatre or watching TV. In fact I'd go as far as to say that it is problems of structure above all that make a novel unreadable or a TV show unwatchable.

My thinking also draws on what I think we're doing when we're watching or reading a story. We're



The Ideas Factory:

wondering all the time about what's going to happen next. We're deciding whether or not we like a character. We're telling the story to ourselves right along with the writer or the actors. Consequently, I think this is something to be borne in mind when writing a story. The reader and the audience are with you all the time, helping to tell the story. With experience, you learn, I think, that if you keep things simple, you can get them to do a lot of the work. And that they enjoy it when they do.

'Thinking like a Writer' is more like 'Thinking like a Reader' than you might think.

Like I said at the beginning, human beings are all born storytellers. We do it all the time. We can't help it. The story we tell is our version of reality, and the structure of our story is our argument about the way the world seems to work from our point of view. Every story is saying "this is how things happen". Making a plan of that story is a way of telling the story to ourselves before we start writing, of testing it and ensuring we are happy with each part of it...so that hopefully the reader (or audience) will be too.

Last, I just want to say that there's no such thing as a right and a wrong way to tell a story...or even to 'Think Like a Writer'. But all writers owe it to themselves as well as to everybody else to at least be interesting, and to try to tell the truth, and maybe sometimes they can tell us something true in a way that nobody but they could do.

Peter Arnott, January 2011