



IN-DEPTH
STUDY
GUIDE



OVERVIEW OF ROBERT MCKEE'S "STORY"

"Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Screenwriting," originally published in 1997, has become the definitive guidebook for writing for film and TV. Before its publication as a text, "Story" was originally a live seminar Robert McKee held in the 1980s at the University of Southern California. In 1984 he opened up the seminar to the public, and it has been growing ever since. The "Story" seminar has since been expanded to include a genre-specific seminar and a "Storynomics" seminar for writers in business and marketing. "Story" as a written text won the 1999 International Moving Image Book Award and has become required reading at Harvard, Yale, UCLA, USC and Tulane universities. While specifically geared towards students of screenwriting, "Story" has been lauded as an essential guide to the craft for writers of all mediums.

ANALYSIS

Part 1 Analysis

Although the author closes several of his chapters with a "call to action" for the writer, that's really what this section is in its entirety — one big call to action to begin the journey of reading the text and using its teachings to affect a change in the world of film and television. The introduction summarises the larger themes and big picture ideas that will be explored in more depth in the following chapters. Here he uses a clever device in his thematic statements, such as "*Story* is about principles, not rules" (3). By italicising the first word, McKee gives it a dual meaning: the word "story" refers to both the craft form of storytelling, and to the physical text itself. Therefore, each statement applies to both the broader idea and to this specific work. These statements are also effective in that the author doesn't just repeat chapter titles or section headings; he concentrates them into their most basic, foundational ideas.

The introduction also begins laying the groundwork for some of the major themes that echo through this book. McKee explains how story is "about eternal, universal forms, not formulas" (3), and references several seemingly contradictory films that have become commercial successes. He expresses the idea that all of these films work on basic universal story archetypes, an idea that is explored more thoroughly later on.

He also hints at ideas of social responsibility to the audience and to the craft form by avoiding clichéd stereotypes in our writing and by respecting the audience as sacred. Chapter 1, “The Story Problem,” takes the idea further as it explores the nature of “entertainment” and what it is we are really doing when we entertain an audience, how the bulk of contemporary screenwriters are failing that essential symbiotic relationship, and how mastery of the storytelling craft can begin to repair that fissure in the industry.

He goes on to compare story and life, two things that are inextricably intertwined but are not quite the same thing. He says, (in italics, so you know he means business,) “*Story is a metaphor for life*” (25). This idea is referred to over and over again in various sections of the text, illustrating how a story must be even truer than truth itself — that even through the filter of the fantastic an audience will still recognize the deep universal truths within it.

Part 2 Analysis

Part 2 is composed of 5 chapters that all focus on the mechanics of story structure and how it relates to other aspects of storytelling: setting, genre, character, and meaning. To orient the reader, it opens by establishing terminology used in the following chapters. While some of these terms are universal, such as “act,” “scene,” and “sequence,” others are more specific to McKee’s system and usage. “Value,” in particular, is one that is used very frequently in various chapters and to which McKee has ascribed the meaning of “binary qualities of experience that can reverse their charge at any moment” (34). He also establishes his own system of story archetypes within film: the archplot, miniplot, and antiplot. This section is essential in understanding the core points of the rest of the text. Later, the section “The Politics of Story Design” opens the conversation surrounding a storyteller’s responsibility to their art form, a theme which resonates through most of the broader lessons in the text. This chapter explores how that responsibility is precariously balanced with money, mastery of form, and love for the craft.

After the first chapter, Part 2 takes a closer look at how each of these points interacts with the various facets of story construction. The first chapter, focusing on setting, opens with “The War on Cliché.” This is an interesting literary device because clichés are something we usually associate with character and genre, rather than setting. And yet, setting — in its broadest sense — is where these character and genre clichés are born. Leading into this chapter with a seemingly unrelated heading is an effective way of encouraging us to look at what cliché really is. Through setting we also explore “The Principle of Creative Limitation,” which again circles back to avoiding the dreaded clichés in our writing. While creative limitation is explored further in the chapter on genre, here we see how setting informs all of these aspects and encourages us to stretch our limits as writers. When we then revisit “Creative Limitations” in the chapter on structure and genre, we’re able to better understand how setting, character, and genre are all intertwined and pushed to their maximum by using limitation as a creative tool. The chapter on character reinforces these ideas by contrasting “character” with “characterization.” This section looks at the link between story structure and a character’s choices, experiences, and inner being, again allowing us to dive beneath the layer of cliché and into a more deeper truth about human nature — the ultimate goal of the storyteller.

The final chapter in Part 2, “Structure and Meaning,” coalesces these ideas and themes of story as “the creative demonstration of truth” (113). Here we see how by stretching our limits through creative limitation, moving beyond clichés and into the deeper recesses of humanity, we can convey a deep and powerful truth to the audience. Part 2 closes with a reiteration of the artist’s social responsibility to tell the truth through their art and to communicate it to the world.

Continue reading at <https://www.supersummary.com/story/summary/>