

BOOK REVIEW

Transformative Tales: How Stories Can Change People

Parkinson, R. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2009, 327 pp. Pb £17.99

‘There is one story, and one story only / That will prove worth your telling,’ wrote the poet Robert Graves. He was referring to the idiosyncratic mythology of *The White Goddess*. In this story, crystallised from his fabulous ‘grammar of poetic myth’, Graves avows the eternal feud between the God of the Waxing moon and the God of the Waning mood who compete yearly for the favour of the Goddess. Each successively wins the Goddess only to be eventually betrayed by her and supplanted by the other. Rob Parkinson would not agree with this reductionist notion, nor Jungian archetypes, nor the work of Northrop Fry (1957), nor the current manifestation of this general point of view, popularised by Christopher Bookers (2004). *Seven Basic Plots*, that all the multitudinous stories available world-wide are reducible to a single pattern, or numerous archetypes, or in Brooker’s case, just seven basic plots. He appears to despair of any such Procrustean chopping up of stories to fit with systems or formula.

Transformative Tales, as the subtitle suggests however, does not see stories as mere forms of entertainment that must never be formulised or theorised. The author views stories as invested with therapeutic potential: ‘story metaphors can be used as powerful instruments for inspiring change’ (18), and ‘present an important means of overcoming limitations and developing personal autonomy’ (31). Underlying this view there seems to be a desire to display the author’s rich explorations into the traditions of storytelling. Though he claims to be merely presenting ‘a primer in the language of story’ and not, as it were, the storytellers worldview, ‘the philosophical and mystical traditions that have used stories for centuries’ (20), Parkinson cannot resist dangling these traditions before our jaded Western eyes.

Despite the confusions of intentionality, the author manages to squeeze in an incredible amount of interesting material into the book’s 336 pages. After chapter one’s discussion of the inherent story making tendencies in human nature, the author moves on to a

chapter long-handbook on guided imagery and visualisation and describes its positive effect upon sufferers of post-traumatic stress disorder. Next Parkinson sets out the business of telling stories, defining their distinct, if dubious categories, how they are constructed, and how to harness the psychological dynamics between teller and audience. Chapter four describes the main traditions of storytelling and a little about traditional storytellers, for example, the Irish *seanachie*, the Celtic *filidh*, French minstrels (the *jongleur*, literally juggler), the Moroccan *rawi qissas* and the tribal shaman. The next chapter, ‘Marvellous Miniatures’ explores brief story types and includes maxims, aphorisms, analogies, parables and vignettes. Here Parkinson also includes allegories and satires, a curious choice given the length of the better known such as *Gulliver’s Travels* and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. For the remaining twenty pages of this chapter Parkinson turns rather abruptly to ‘reframing’ stories, stories which can shift the often static frame through which we view our experience, a technique he had first mentioned on page 28! Chapter six returns to theoretical issues as the author illustrates how stories interact, change and develop. But first Parkinson attempts to disentangle stories from Jungian archetypes and Richard Dawkins tedious evolutionary ‘memes’. This section marks a happy moment of acceleration in which the author gives way to the brief ‘flow’ of impassioned thought and feeling about his subject. This leads more logically to a technical section about transposing stories from one situation or culture to another.

The final chapter is symptomatic of the text as a whole. Rather worryingly in a last chapter of a book about stories, it begins with an exploration of symbols and metaphors including a breakdown of five traditional symbols. The material here is fine, but seems redundant by this stage. There is no marked out conclusion to *Transforming Tales* as such, and this chapter ends in a coda using three interwoven stories. But there are what I took to be concluding remarks made on pages 301-2 for the interested reader.

To compare *Transformative Tales* with other work about therapeutic stories, for example the work of Alida Gersie, seems unfair. What Parkinson lacks in formal structure and theoretical strength – qualities clearly found in Gersie’s work – he makes up for through his lively and engaging style. The book does contain moments of depth and brilliance, and the author is incredibly generous with his knowledge of stories and how they work. The reflective reader will learn a good deal about themselves as well as the subject. On the other hand Parkinson’s book is hopelessly muddled. He presents a theoretical case for the potential of stories to effect change in the listener, and he illustrates his points using a dazzling variety of stories from around the world. The argument is dressed in modern clothing, especially utilising the *Human Givens* approach, as well as research on dreaming, trauma and neurology. In regard to the function of dreaming for example, though the author differentiates his approach to that of Freud, it does not seem substantially different to the old notion of wish fulfillment:

...strange stories in dreams can be traced to emotionally arousing introspections occurring specially during the previous day’s experience – arousals that remained essentially unresolved since they didn’t lead to actions. In other words, dreams reflect unfulfilled expectations. (47)

Since he wishes to inhabit the similar ground as psychotherapists, but, of course to inhabit it in a very different way, Parkinson occasionally adopts a critical stance towards the profession. On page 78, he gives an extreme example of psychoanalytic interpretation, where the therapist is quizzing the patient about why she chose a particular seat in the waiting room. Parkinson asserts: ‘This kind of spurious “psychologising” and covert domination is what many people mistrust in the therapy/counselling industry’. He would not then agree with Camille Paglia (1992) who suggested that every thought bears some emotional burden: ‘Had we time or energy to pursue it, each random choice, from the color of a toothbrush to a decision over a menu, could be made to yield its

Correspondence: Chris Nicholson
5 Birch Close, Brightlingsea, Essex,
CO7 0LE, UK
E-Mail: cnich@essex.ac.uk

secret meaning in the inner drama of our lives’ (26). There are more unresolved interactions with psychodynamic approaches. Parkinson hi-lights the link between hypnosis and the trance-state which he believes can be induced by listening to stories. He is not the first writer or storyteller to suggest this, but it is interesting to view his argument in relations to Freud, who is regularly accused of going too far in the art of persuasion. The point is that Freud himself abandoned hypnosis in favour of free association because, while the patient was susceptible to suggestion and open to change in a trance-state, they were not enough in control, the executive self, the ego, was in abeyance and consequently change could not be consciously owned. However, the main difficulty with *Transformative Tales* is that the author has not sufficiently worked out what the book is intending to do. Is it making a case for the centrality and necessity of stories in human life, is it a theoretical argument about how stories work therapeutically upon the individual, is it a manual for would-be story tellers or, finally, is it a collection of tales? As the author puts all of these chicks into the same nest it becomes difficult to deduce the species of the mother. The situation could have been rescued with a little re-structuring. The history and nature of storytelling and the case for its therapeutic potential needed to be drawn properly and cohesively together into sustained argument which might then be lightly peppered with relevant story examples. Unfortunately the author’s overuse of this pepper means we don’t properly taste the food he offers us however good it may be. After a clear section on technique (with relevant examples) if a final section collected the majority of the stories the author introduces then we would have a vastly more memorable account which the student or professional storyteller could easily use. Having said this, I imagine that many professionals will enjoy this book, and if you are happy to just go along with the author, to follow his wayward tale, then his not inconsiderable knowledge of both tales and telling will repay you generously for the ride.

REFERENCES:

1. Paglia, Camille, (1992) *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. London: Penguin Books, p 26
2. O’Prey, Paul, (2001) *Robert Graves: Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Books, p 158

Chris Nicholson