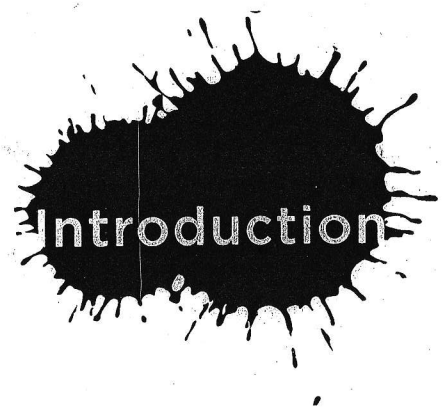

Once upon a time really smart people were completely convinced the world was flat. Then they learned that it wasn't. But they were still pretty sure the sun revolved around the Earth . . . until that theory went bust, too. For an even longer period of time, smart people have believed story is just a form of entertainment. They've thought that beyond the immense pleasure it bestows—the ephemeral joy and deep sense of satisfaction a good story leaves us with—story itself serves no necessary purpose. Sure, our lives from time immemorial would have been far drabber without it, but we'd have survived just fine.

Wrong again.

Story, as it turns out, was crucial to our evolution—more so than opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs let us hang on; story told us what to hang on to. Story is what enabled us to imagine what might happen in the future, and so prepare for it—a feat no other species can lay claim to, opposable thumbs or not.[1] Story is what makes us human, not just metaphorically but literally. Recent breakthroughs in neuroscience reveal that our brain is hardwired to respond to story; the pleasure we derive from a tale well told is nature's way of seducing us into paying attention to it.[2]

In other words, we're wired to turn to story to teach us the way of the world. So if your eyes glazed over back in high school when your history teacher painstakingly recited the entire succession of German monarchs, beginning with Charles the Fat, Son of Louis the German, who ruled from 881 to 887, who could blame you? Turns out you're only, gloriously, human.

Thus it's no surprise that when given a choice, people prefer fiction to nonfiction—they'd rather read a historical novel than a history book, watch a movie than a dry documentary.[3] It's not because we're lazy sots but because our neural circuitry is designed to crave story. The rush of intoxication a good story triggers doesn't make us closet hedonists—it makes us willing pupils, primed to absorb the myriad lessons each story imparts.[4]

This information is a game changer for writers. Research has helped decode the secret blueprint for story that's hardwired in the reader's brain, thereby lifting the veil on what, specifically, the brain is hungry for in every story it encounters. Even more exciting, it turns out that a powerful story can have a hand in rewiring the reader's brain—helping instill empathy, for instance[5]—which is why writers are, and have always been, among the most powerful people in the world.

Writers can change the way people think simply by giving them a glimpse of life through their characters' eyes. They can transport readers to places they've never been, catapult them into situations they've only dreamed of, and reveal subtle universal truths that just might alter their entire perception of reality. In ways large and small, writers help people make it through the night. And that's not too shabby.

But there's a catch. For a story to captivate a reader, it must continually meet his or her hardwired expectations. This is no doubt what prompted Jorge Luis Borges to note, "Art is fire plus algebra."[6] Let me explain.

Fire is absolutely crucial to writing; it's the very first ingredient of every story. Passion is what drives us to write, filling us with the

exhilarating sense that we have something to say, something that will make a difference.

But to write a story capable of instantly engaging readers, passion alone isn't enough. Writers often mistakenly believe that all they need to craft a successful story is the fire—the burning desire, the creative spark, the killer idea that startles you awake in the middle of the night. They dive into their story with gusto, not realizing that every word they write is most likely doomed to failure because they forgot to factor in the second half of the equation: the algebra.

In this, Borges intuitively knew what cognitive psychology and neuroscience has since revealed: there is an implicit framework that must underlie a story in order for that passion, that fire, to ignite the reader's brain. Stories without it go unread; stories with it are capable of knocking the socks off someone who's barefoot.

Why do writers often have trouble embracing the notion that there is more to creating a story than having a good idea and a way with words? Because the ease with which we surrender to the stories we *read* tends to cloud our understanding of stories we *write*. We have an innate belief that we know what makes a good story—after all, we can quickly recognize a bad one. When we do, we scoff and slip the book back onto the shelf. We roll our eyes and walk out of the movie theater. We take a deep breath and pray for Uncle Albert to stop nattering on about his Civil War reenactment. We won't put up with a bad story for three seconds.

We recognize a good story just as quickly. It's something we've been able to do since we were about three, and we've been addicted to stories in one form or another ever since. So if we're hardwired to spot a good story from the very first sentence, how is it possible that we don't know how to *write* one?

Once again, evolutionary history provides the answer. Story originated as a method of bringing us together to share specific information that might be lifesaving. *Hey bud, don't eat those shiny red berries*

unless you wanna croak like the Neanderthal next door; here's what happened.... Stories were simple, relevant, and not so different from a little thing we like to call gossip. When written language evolved eons later, story was free to expand beyond the local news and immediate concerns of the community. That meant readers—with hardwired expectations in place—had to be drawn to the story on its own merits. While no doubt there were always masterful storytellers, there's a huge difference between sharing a juicy bit of gossip about crazy Cousin Rachel and pounding out the Great American Novel.

Fair enough, but since most aspiring writers love to read, wouldn't all those fabulous books they wolf down give them a first-class lesson in what hooks a reader?

Nope.

Evolution dictates that the first job of any good story is to completely anesthetize the part of our brain that questions how it is creating such a compelling illusion of reality. After all, a good story doesn't *feel* like an illusion. What it feels like is life. Literally. A recent brain-imaging study reported in *Psychological Science* reveals that the regions of the brain that process the sights, sounds, tastes, and movement of real life are activated when we're engrossed in a compelling narrative.[7] That's what accounts for the vivid mental images and the visceral reactions we feel when we can't stop reading, even though it's past midnight and we have to be up at dawn. When a story enthralls us, we are inside of it, feeling what the protagonist feels, experiencing it as if it were indeed happening to us, and the last thing we're focusing on is the mechanics of the thing.

So it's no surprise that we tend to be utterly oblivious to the fact that beneath every captivating story, there is an intricate mesh of interconnected elements holding it together, allowing it to build with seemingly effortless precision. This often fools us into thinking we know exactly what has us hooked—things like beautiful metaphors, authentic-sounding dialogue, an interesting character—when, in fact, despite how engaging those things appear to be in and of themselves, it turns out

they're secondary. What has us hooked is something else altogether, something that underlies them, secretly bringing them to life: *story*, as our brain understands it.

It's only by stopping to analyze what we're unconsciously responding to when we read a story—what has *actually* snagged our brain's attention—that we can then write a story that will grab the reader's brain. This is true whether you're writing a literary novel, hard-boiled mystery, or supernatural teen romance. Although readers have their own personal taste when it comes to the type of novel they're drawn to, unless that story meets their hardwired expectations, it stays on the shelf.

To make sure that doesn't happen to your story, this book is organized into twelve chapters, each zeroing in on an aspect of how the brain works, its corresponding revelation about story, and the nuts and bolts of how to actualize it in your work. Each chapter ends with a checklist you can apply to your work at any stage: before you begin writing, at the end of every writing day, at the end of a scene or a chapter, or at 2:00 a.m. when you wake up in a cold sweat, convinced that your story may be the worst thing anyone has written, ever. (It's not; trust me.) Do this, and I guarantee your work will stay on track and have an excellent chance of making people who aren't even related to you want to read it.

The only caveat is that you have to be as honest about your story as you would be about a novel you pick up in a bookstore, or a movie you begin watching with one finger still poised on the remote. The idea is to pinpoint where each trouble spot lies and then remedy it before it spreads like a weed, undermining your entire narrative. It's a lot more fun than it sounds, because there's nothing more exhilarating than watching your work improve until your readers are so engrossed in it that they forget that it's a story at all.