

Book Notes -- Wired for Story by Lisa Cron

Introduction

Our neural circuitry is designed to crave story.

A powerful story can have a hand in rewiring the reader's brain -- helping instill empathy, for instance.

Subject: An analysis of what we unconsciously respond to when we read a story.

Purpose: To help us write better ones.

1. How to hook the reader

Cognitive secret: We think in story, which allows us to envision the future.

Story secret: From the very first sentence, the reader must want to know what happens next.

We think in story. It's hardwired into our brain. It's how we make strategic sense of the otherwise overwhelming world around us.

2 key cognitive concepts:

1. Stories allow us to simulate intense experiences without actually having to live through them. This was a matter of life and death back in the Stone Age.
2. Not only do we crave story, but we have very specific hardwired expectations for every story we read.

What is a story?

It's how what happens affects someone who is trying to achieve what turns out to be a difficult goal, and how they change as a result.

What happens = the plot

Someone = the protagonist

Goal = Story question

How they change = What the story is actually about.

Question: What does your protagonist have to confront in order to solve the problem you've so cleverly set up for them?

What intoxicates us: The hint that not only is trouble brewing, but it's longstanding and about to reach critical mass. In other words, all is not as it seems.

Three things readers want to know on the first page:

- Whose story is it?
- What's happening here?
- What's at stake?

Everything in a story must have an impact on what a reader is dying to know: Will the protagonist achieve her goal? What will it cost her in the process? How will it change her in the end?

Myth: Beautiful writing trumps all.

Reality: Storytelling trumps beautiful writing every time.

Checklist:

- Do we know whose story it is?
- Is something happening, beginning on the first page?
- Is there conflict?
- Is something at stake?
- Is there a sense that all is not as it seems?
- Can we get a glimpse of the big picture?

Chapter 2: How to Zero In on Your Point

Cognitive secret: When the brain focuses its full attention on something, it filters out all unnecessary information.

Story secret: To hold the brain's attention, everything in a story must be there on a need-to-know basis.

Make sure you can answer the "So what?" question.

3 elements:

Protagonist's issue: The story isn't about whether or not the protagonist achieves their goal per se, but what they have to overcome internally to do it.

Theme: What your story says about human nature.

Plot: Events that relentlessly force the protagonist to deal with their issue as they chase their goal.

Myth: The plot is what the story is about.

Reality: A story is about how the plot affects the protagonist.

Checklist:

- Do you know what the point of your story is? What do you want people to walk away thinking about?
- Do you know what your story says about human nature?
- Do the protagonist's inner issue, the theme, and the plot work together to answer the story question (the external goal)?
- Do the plot and theme stick to the story question?
- Can you sum up what your story is about in a short paragraph?

3. I'll feel what they're feeling

Cognitive secret: Emotion determines the meaning of everything -- if we're not feeling, we're not conscious.

Story secret: All story is emotion-based -- if we're not feeling, we're not reading.

If the reader can't feel what matters and what doesn't, then nothing matters, including finishing the story. The question for writers, then, is where do these feelings come from? The answer's very simple: the protagonist.

The real story is how what happens affects the protagonist, and what they do as a result.

That means that *everything* in a story gets its emotional weight and meaning based on how it affects the protagonist.

Your job is not to judge your characters, no matter how despicable or wonderful they may be. Your job is to lay out what happens, as clearly and dispassionately as possible, show how it affects the protagonist, and then get the hell out of the way.

Myth: Write what you know.

Reality: Write what you know *emotionally*.

Checklist:

- Does your protagonist react to everything that happens and in a way that your reader will instantly understand?
- If you're writing in the first person, is *everything* filtered through the narrator's point of view?
- Have you left editorializing to the op-ed department?
- Do you use body language to tell us things we don't already know? Think of body language as a "tell."

4. What does your protagonist *really* want?

Cognitive secret: Everything we do is goal directed, and our biggest goal is figuring out everyone else's agenda, the better to achieve our own.

Story secret: A protagonist without a clear goal has nothing to figure out and nowhere to go.

When we read a story, we really do slip into the protagonist's skin, feeling what they feel, experiencing what they feel. And what we feel is based on one thing: their goal.

In a story, plot-wise, what all other considerations bend to is the protagonist's external goal. Sounds easy enough, until you add the fact that what her external goal bends to is her internal issue-- the thing she struggles with that keeps her from easily achieving said goal without breaking a sweat.

The internal struggle is what the reader comes for.

By defining your protagonist's internal and external goals, and then pitting them against each other, you can often ignite the kind of external tension and internal conflict capable of driving an entire narrative.

Myth: Adding external problems inherently adds drama to a story.

Reality: Adding external problems adds drama only if they're something the protagonist must confront to overcome their issue.

Checklist:

- Do you know what your protagonist wants?
- Do you know what your protagonist's external goal is?
- Do you know what your protagonist's internal goal is?
- Does your protagonist's goal force them to face a specific long-standing problem or fear?

5. Digging up your protagonist's inner issue

Cognitive secret: We see the world not as it is, but as we believe it to be.

Story secret: You must know precisely when, and why, your protagonist's worldview was knocked out of alignment.

Stories often begin just as one of the protagonist's long-held beliefs is about to be called into question. Sometimes that belief is what stands between her and something she really wants. Sometimes what's keeping her from doing the right thing. Sometimes it's what she has to confront to get out of a bad situation before it's too late. But make no mistake, it's her struggle with this "internal issue" that drives the story forward. *In fact the plot is cleverly constructed to systematically back her into a corner where she has no choice but to face it or fold up her tent and go home.*

Stories are about people dealing with problems they can't avoid.

In your protagonist's bio, the goal is to pinpoint 2 things: the event in their past that knocked their worldview out of alignment, triggering the internal issue that keeps them from achieving their goal; and the inception of the desire for the goal itself.

Checklist:

- Do you know why your story begins when it does?
- Have you uncovered the roots of your protagonist's specific fears and desires?
Do you know what their inner issue is?
- Have you made your characters reveal their deepest, darkest secrets to you?
- Do you know where your story is going?

6. The story is in the specifics

Cognitive secret: We don't think in the abstract; we think in specific images.

Story secret: Anything conceptual, abstract, or general must be made tangible in the protagonist's specific struggle.

The story is in the specifics.

Feel first, think second. That's the magic of story.

Myth: Sensory details bring a story to life.

Reality: Unless they convey necessary information, sensory details clog a story's arteries.

Checklist:

- Have you translated every "generic" into a "specific"?
- Have the specifics gone missing in any of the usual places?
- Can your reader see what, specifically, your metaphors correlate to in the "real world," grasp their meaning, and picture them, when reading at a clip?
- Do all the sensory details have an actual story reason to be there?

7. Courting conflict, the agent of change

Cognitive secret: The brain is wired to stubbornly resist change, even good change.

Story secret: Story is about change, which results only from unavoidable conflict.

Story's job is to tackle exactly how we handle the conflict between safety and risk, which boils down to the battle between fear and desire.

In literature, the goal is to embrace conflict and harness it to suspense.

A story inherently chronicles something that is changing. Usually that something revolves around a problem that protagonist must solve in order to actually get from the shores of before to the banks of after.

Common opposing forces -- which the protagonist is typically caught between:

- What the protagonist believes is true vs. what is actually true.
- What the protagonist wants vs. what the protagonist actually has.
- What the protagonist wants vs. what's expected of them.
- The protagonist vs. themselves.
- The protagonist's inner goal vs. the protagonist's external goal.
- The protagonist's fear vs. the protagonist's goal (external, internal, or both).
- The protagonist vs. the antagonist.
- The antagonist vs. mercy (or its appearance).

The protagonist is only as strong as the antagonist forces them to be.

Myth: Withholding information for the big reveal is what keeps readers hooked.

Reality: Withholding information very often robs the story of what really hooks readers.

Avoid convenience, contrivance, and coincidence.

If we don't know there's intrigue afoot, there's no intrigue afoot.

Checklist:

- Have you made sure that the basis of future conflict is sprouting, beginning on page one?
- Have you established the versus so that the reader is aware of the specific rock and hard place the protagonist is wedged between?
- Does the conflict force the protagonist to take action, whether it's to rationalize it away or actually change?
- Have you made sure that the story gains something by withholding specific facts for a big reveal later?
- Once the reveal is known, will everything that happened up to that point still make sense in light of this new information?

8. Cause and effect

Cognitive secret: From birth, our brain's primary goal is to make causal connections -- if this, then that.

Story secret: A story follows a cause-and-effect trajectory from start to finish.

Myth: Experimental literature can break all the rules of storytelling with impunity -- in fact, it's high art and thus far superior to regular old novels.

Reality: Novels that are hard to read aren't read.

What "show" almost always means is, let's see the event itself unfold.

Every scene must:

- In some way be caused by the decision made in the scene that preceded it.
- Move the story forward via the characters' reaction to what is happening.

- Make the scene that follows it inevitable.
- Provide insight into the characters that enables us to grasp the motive behind their actions.

Checklist:

- Does your story follow a cause-and-effect trajectory beginning on page one, so that each scene is triggered by the one that preceded it?
- Does everything in your story's cause-and-effect trajectory revolve around the protagonist's quest (the story question)?
- Are your story's external events (the plot) spurred by the protagonist's evolving internal cause-and-effect trajectory?
- When your protagonist makes a decision, is it always clear how she arrived at it, especially when she's changing her mind about something?
- Does each scene follow the action, reaction, decision pattern?
- Can you answer the "and so?" to everything in the story?

9. What can go wrong, must go wrong -- and then some

Cognitive secret: The brain uses stories to simulate how we might navigate difficult situations in the future.

Story secret: A story's job is to put the protagonist through tests that even in her wildest dreams, she doesn't think she can pass.

Tips:

1. Don't let your characters admit anything they aren't forced to, even to themselves. Information has to be earned.
2. Do allow your protagonist to have secrets, but not to keep them.
3. Do ensure that everything the protagonist does to remedy the situation only makes it worse.
4. Do make sure that everything that can go wrong does.
5. Do let your characters start out risking a dollar but end up betting the farm.
6. Don't forget that there's no such thing as a free lunch, unless it's poisoned.
7. Do encourage your characters to lie.
8. Do bring in the threat of a clear, present, and escalating danger. Make it concrete! Don't be vague. Have a ticking clock!
9. Do make sure your villain has a good side.
10. Do expose your characters' flaws, demons, and insecurities.
11. Do expose YOUR demons.

Checklist

- Has everything gone wrong that can go wrong?
- Have you expose your protagonist's deepest secrets and most guarded flaws?
- Does your protagonist earn everything she gets, and pay for everything she loses?
- Does everything your protagonist does to make the situation better actually make it worse?
- Is the force of opposition personified, present, and active?

10. The road from setup to payoff

Cognitive secret: Since the brain abhors randomness, it's always converting raw data into meaningful patterns, the better to anticipate what might happen next.

Story secret: Readers are always on the lookout for patterns; to your reader, everything is either a setup, a payoff, or the road in between.

Stories are about the things we need to keep an eye on. They often begin the moment a pattern in the protagonist's life stops working -- which is good, because, as scholars Chip and Dan Heath note, "The most basic way to get someone's attention is this: Break a pattern."

What's a setup? Something that implies future action. "Make fists with your toes."

Checklist:

- Are there any inadvertent setups lurking in your story?
- Is there a clear series of events -- a pattern -- that begins with the setup and culminates in the payoff?
- Do the "dots" build (when you connect them)?
- Is the payoff of each of your setups logistically possible?

11. Meanwhile, back at the ranch

Cognitive secret: The brain summons past memories to evaluate what's happening in the moment in order to make sense of it.

Story secret: Foreshadowing, flashbacks, and subplots must instantly give readers insight into what's happening in the main storyline, even if the meaning shifts as the story unfolds.

Every subplot must in some way affect the story question.

Subplots give stories depth, meaning, and resonance in myriad ways. They can give the protagonist a glimpse of how a particular course of action she's considering might play out; they can complicate the main storyline, they can provide the "why" behind the protagonist's actions.

All subplots must eventually merge into, and affect, the main storyline.

Listen to your characters, who will implore you to give them a believable reason for everything they do, every reaction they have, every word they say, and every memory that suddenly pops into their head and changes how they see everything.

Checklist:

- Do all your subplots affect the protagonist, either externally or internally, as they struggle with the story question?
- When you leap into a subplot or flashback, can the reader sense why it was necessary at that very moment?
- When returning to the main storyline, will your reader see things with new eyes from that moment on?
- When the protagonist does something out of character, has it been foreshadowed?
- Have you given your reader enough information to understand what's happening, so that nothing a character does or says leaves her wondering whether she missed something?

12. The writer's brain on story

Cognitive secret: It takes long-term, conscious effort to hone a skill before the brain assigns it to the cognitive unconscious.

Story secret: There's no writing; there's only rewriting.

Persevere. Just write.