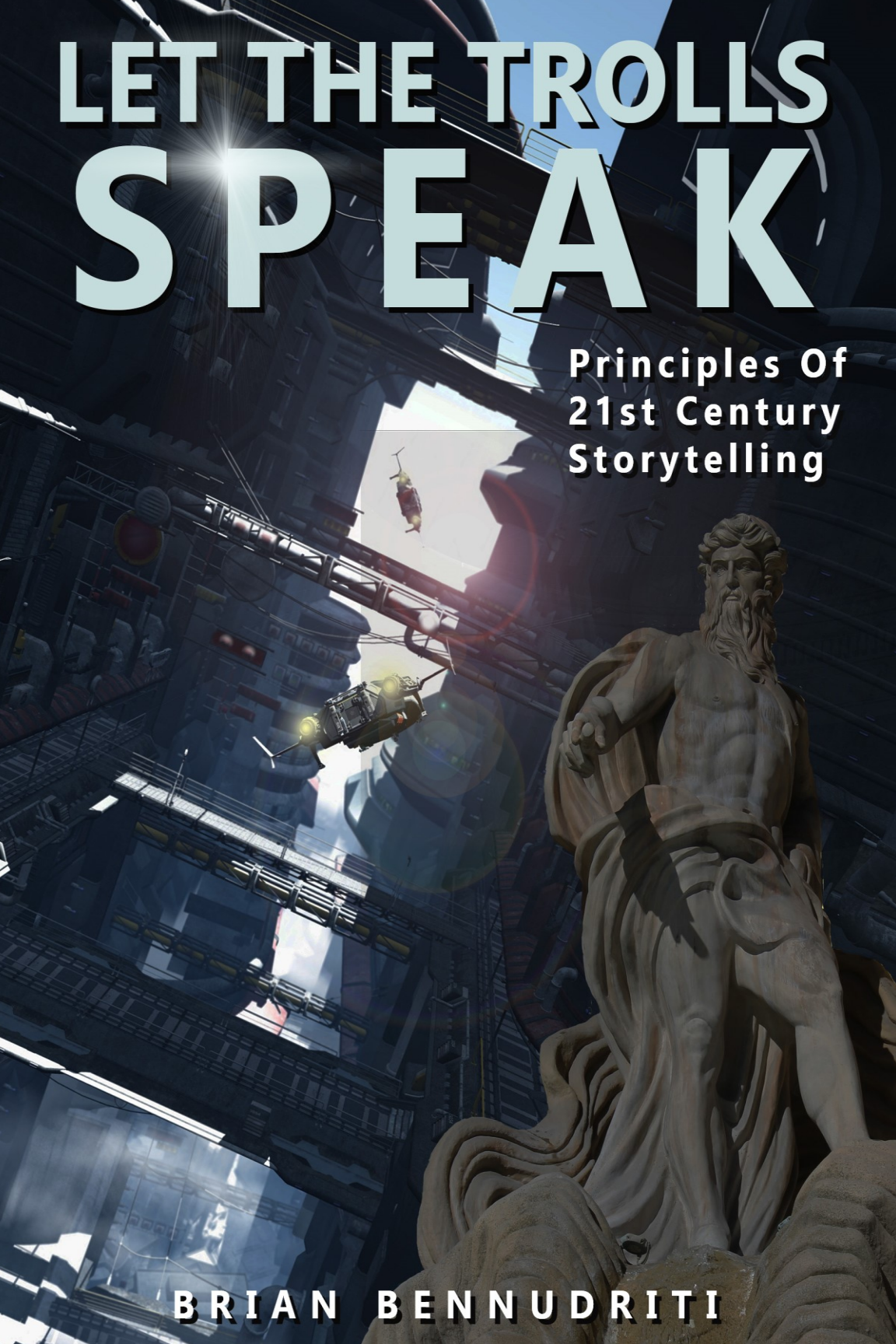
LET THE TROLLS
SPEAK
Principles Of
21st Century
Storytelling
BRIAN BENNUDRITI

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Brian Bennudriti

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INTRODUCTION

I really enjoy reading or listening to an expertly told story. I forget her name; but when I was in school, there was this girl who worked on a project with me and a buddy of mine. The assignment was to present an existing classic story of our choice, then write and present an original sequel to it. We chose Washington Irving's *Legend Of Sleepy Hollow*.

I was the clown, so I wrote and drew this ridiculous, over the top comic strip for the sequel where Ichabod Crane came back with his own pumpkin head riding a mechanical horse made of broomsticks or something. I'm pretty sure Michael Jackson was in it too just because. My buddy was going to work the projector while I read the comic strip. We were clearly going to be the fireworks for the day, the project everybody was going to be talking about. She was just supposed to kick us off by reading the condensed original.

Yet when we dimmed the overhead lights and put a single light on her, with her soft narration and natural storytelling ability, the way she changed her voice to suit the different characters, she stole the show. The class was spellbound. She just knew how to tell a story. It's decades later; and I still remember how great a job she did at that.

There were people like her in Ugarit eight thousand years ago riffing on what would happen if Baal's fiery sister, Anat got mad enough to kill death to get her brother back. It could have been a guy named Vyasa who finalized India's *Mahabharata*, a skull-melting opera house of a story that reads like a science fiction blockbuster only with a god in it. It's convenient to just give credit to a minstrel named Homer for *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, books with such scope and wonder we had to create the word 'epic' for them. Storytellers were around, of course before all that as well – they just couldn't write it all down for us. The old myths of Egypt, Greece, China, the Scandinavians, and the Celts were resonant and fundamental enough to remain with civilization long past the cultures that shaped them. They're still fascinating today. Check Amazon or stroll to the Mythology section in the bookstore – it's a full shelf and it's pages and pages of results.

The point of this short book isn't to say that anything foundational has changed about what we like in our storytelling. Myths still have power; and we'll poke into why that is so very soon. However, we are saturated like no generation before in all of human history with entertainment, meaning stories. Think about what that means. No person at any time ever has lived in a world so rich and diverse in storytelling. Equally true, no person has ever lived in a time with more understanding of science and technology than you are right now as you read this. Even if you hate science, you still

know more about lightning and eclipses and tsunamis and a wide universe of other things that were blank slates to hundreds of thousands of years of people before you. Wow. Congratulations on that. It changed you, though.

The point, then is that though there are foundational principles that still apply, our aesthetics have changed. We like it told a certain way now. We're a little less patient with ridiculous explanations held to be true. We have examples of exactingly well-crafted characterizations now to compare against. We wade through swamps of information, so if you're telling us a story, we'll use genres and tropes and categories and stereotypes to make sense of it quickly. If we guess where you're going before you get there, we're disappointed. And it's harder to trick us because we've been there, done that. "Crap", says the storyteller. "Now what?"

I'm a fanatic for reviews. Honest reviews, mind you, not the ones paid for by big publishing houses or bought with favors and connections like you see on a lot of bestsellers. I'm talking about when you want to see a movie, you scroll past the gushing praise of the article to what the people said. The masses. Folks like me. What did they think? That's where you can pierce the noise and see what's what. I've read reviews of movies and books and television shows for much of my life – I'm voracious about that; and it's the place where broad trends in this shift in aesthetics I'm talking about can be seen in the wild. The storyteller could learn well what the people want from their characters, their plots, and their dialogue by compressing the extensive information in honest opinion pieces like reviews and distilling out the principles of twenty first century storytelling. If the concept of natural selection holds true in fiction, then our own stories should be getting more powerful, more interesting, more compelling, and more alive or else they should die out from the assaults of market forces. That means it's harder to tell a good tale. More than ever then, it's urgent we listen first to what the old masters did with their myths to give them the kind of life that still breathes so many centuries later. But then we have to listen to the trolls.

I'm being a little harsh with that term – a troll is technically the unemployed guy living in his mom's basement blasting out quasi-anonymous insults online when he disagrees with your opinion. What I'm really saying is there are widely prevalent trends in what honest reviewers like and dislike that are really obvious when you read enough of them and when you go looking.

So why would you listen to me about something like this?

In my day job, one thing I do is examine and optimize how people communicate. Though I might be emphasizing proper hand-downs in a manufacturing plant or how a management team approaches problem

solving, at the core it's people talking to people about a narrative that resonates. We need to move information quickly; and, because it can be worth hundreds of thousands if not millions of dollars, we need it to stick. What the heck's the difference between the people there and the people reading a terrifying horror story that leaves them glancing behind themselves when they hop in a car? Right. Same people. Same mental wiring. Same tools work.

Apart from that, I'm a wordslinger from way back. I wrote my first book by hand in pencil in a set of three spiral-bound notebooks though it was a shameless ripoff of Kevin O'Donnell's *Journeys Of McGill Feighan*. Reagan was president then; and I've been at it ever since, only going public with it in 2015. Unfortunately that means when I read something I enjoy, like M. John Harrison's *Viriconium* or Stephen King's *11/22/63* or Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down*, I'm probably studying why I like it more than just liking it. But whatever. That's just me. I should stress that my world is more in tune with science fiction, fantasy, thrillers, horror, and speculative fiction versus romance or slice-of-life storytelling…in case that throws you.

Let's dig in first, then to what is timeless and why the old myths still have power to fascinate and to move us so long after their cultures moved on.

CHAPTER 1
The old masters

I wouldn't offend you for the world, so if I refer to something that is the backbone of your religion (or mine) as a myth, please understand what I mean by that. I'm just looking at narratives with incredible power and trying to understand why that is. No judgements on their truth or authorship, one way or the other. Neither is it part of my scope to talk about the ritual or cultural aspects of myth, since Joseph Campbell laid all those tracks and doesn't need any help from me. This is strictly a look as a storyteller what is going on with the gears and engines behind the myths to make them last.

Say you're in charge of a child, one that can walk now and tends to run ahead of you. You need to let this little person know not to do that when you come to the crosswalk, that it's dangerous. I'm not talking about the discipline afterwards when they ignore you and do it anyway. I'm asking how you'll first get the point across. You could explain how all those cars are going places quickly, how the people are probably glancing down at their phones anyway, and how there are rules you're supposed to follow indicated by the colored lights. Good luck with that. Alternatively, you could tell a story about a little girl named Lita who used to live in that house over there, who ignored the lights and stepped out into the street. She has to go to a special school now and can't get up from her wheelchair. Her parents are very sad. Yeah, maybe I went over the line there; but you of course get my point that the latter version will seize your little person's attention and possibly scare the heck out of them. No doubt there is an entire class of kids who have to test it out for themselves; but the majority of us will relate to Lita immediately because she's like us and lived in that house we could see. It was close, personal, relatable and immediate. Keep that in mind as we dive into what the old masters have to say about all this.

The Mahab-uh-what?

I mentioned *The Mahabharata* in the introduction. This is the sort of thing that stops India in its tracks when it's dramatized on television. If you've no idea what I'm talking about, you really should find a novelized version and read it. As I said, I will examine this work simply as a narrative and try to peek under its hood to see why it has had such long life, not make any judgements on its truth or spiritual messages.

Like in *The Lord Of The Rings*, the history of man is broken up into eras; and ours, the Kali Yuga, is a mess in the way we treat each other and its

degradation. The point of the work is to explain why that is so. The beating heart of the narrative centers around five very upright and honorable princes and the betrayal and intrigue that happens to them, led by a jealous cousin. The betrayal culminates in a rigged game of dice. Then the princes go into exile, promised that the eldest of them will have his throne when they return. Typical of our age, another betrayal just leads to the largest battle ever fought at a place called Kurukshetra. It's very apocalyptic – the armies are described as two oceans crashing into each other. Even the narrator is chastised by one of the characters, told that he finds too much beauty in men's deaths. Something huge happens though, right before all that blood and crashing and noise.

A guy named Krishna that's maybe God himself puts a choice before the evil cousin: he could have Krishna's army or he could have Krishna alone by his side. One or the other. Of course, he takes the soldiers. So when Krishna is standing up in the chariot with the eldest prince, he reveals himself as a cosmic being and spells out why the prince should stand strong and fight for what is right. That little bit there is the Bhagavad Gita, by the way, an insertion into the overall work. The point you shouldn't lose in all this is that the prince stands for something fundamental to the people who first internalized this story, and to the people who resonate with it now. He's the good in the world, though he screws up and gets knocked around and even almost chickens out when things hit the fan. He's presented as a person who makes mistakes and gets disheartened when facing challenges he finds distasteful. Though the princes ultimately win the day, our age suffers for it in the echoes and consequences of that, the greatest battle man will ever fight. A heck of a story, really. Boil away the cultural nuances and all the myriad details I skipped; and you'll see things common to other powerful and immortal stories.

I have read everything Ernest Hemingway ever wrote. All of it. I recognize in some of his work, like *A Farewell To Arms* or *A Moveable Feast*, that he pulled off this trick that the princes of *The Mahabharata* were intended to do. He captured the spirit of the era after World War One with his words but made it timeless by embodying it in the haggard soldier character, tired and disillusioned by war. What generation could come up that wouldn't understand that? What he wanted to say is that's what war does to us. You can't explain things, though, you have to show us. So that's how he did it. The princes stand for everyone honest and moral, but who have to face ugliness and hate anyway. You have your obligations in life; and you have to just get on with them no matter who's coming after you. You have a choice though. Myths boil things down to symbols because they know you have to show and not explain. That's why it feels larger than life and ominous when the wicked cousin is offered an army or Krishna alone. That's why the battle at Kurukshetra is described in overblown, bombastic

style like nothing has ever nor will ever be like that battle. It symbolizes all battles. That's how myths work, by boiling important things that are fundamental to all of us into simple pictures we can absorb deeply.

Gilgamesh's Guide To Living Forever

Let's try another one you've possibly come across, though I suspect if you have, it was forced on you with a due date for an essay. Let's talk about Gilgamesh as we have it from the library of King Ashurbanipal and compiled by his exorcist-priest since that's the most complete version. It's from what is now Iraq. You should know however, that this was a character that appeared for almost two thousand years before that all over the ancient near east.

Gilgamesh was the ultimate hunter, warrior and king in a city called Uruk and undefeatable in a fight. It went to his head though; and he was capricious. He bullied the people into rebuilding the city walls, then let them decay. He was a tyrant to them, and even claimed bedroom rights upon every honeymoon. It was bad enough that the people begged the gods to send someone who could humble their king and make things right. So out from the steppe, the gods summoned a wildman of the woods, like an intelligent but naïve sasquatch called Enkidu, who quickly went after Gilgamesh over these indignities. Unfortunately, the clash between the ultimate man of the city and the ultimate man of the wild ended with respect and a deep friendship. That wasn't the plan; but it's what happened, and laid the framework for the substance of this entire narrative. Just like sitcom and morning television show producers will tell you any day of the week, a core dynamic between the key people makes or breaks a show. Here, it's a buddy story; and they truly bonded in a friendship for the ages.

Gilgamesh shared with his new friend that he was concerned he'd be forgotten. Death scared him, and not so much the idea of the dying, but rather that there would come people who wouldn't know who he was. It was awful to him; and he wanted to take Enkidu out to the Cedar Forest and kill a monster-guardian out there that watched over it, to secure their immortality in the stories of man. It would be great.

Ominous nightmares plagued the trip to the forest; and even the guardian they'd come to slay begged them to spare its life. The king himself wavered for a bit on whether they should do this thing since it seemed incredibly wrong. Of course, they killed it anyway; and re-entered the city clutching the guardian's head trying to celebrate what should've been a much happier occasion. This was his way to immortality; but instead, the gods had been offended. There had to be a reckoning for what the two of them had done here, so the gods ultimately decided to kill Enkidu. It was heartbreaking to the helpless king as his friend sickened into a frail, thin,

shivering echo of himself and coughed and died right there in front of the king. It left him cold and more frightened of death than ever. It was close now. He'd had to look in its merciless eyes. Even a powerful king like him just had to watch in the end. So he followed an old story he'd heard about the guy who survived the ancient flood and was immortal. If the king couldn't live forever in history, maybe he could do it by just escaping death entirely. He was almost a broken man by this point, and nothing like the tyrant from earlier. You can feel that if you read the story for yourself. Anyone who's had to watch a loved one shrivel and pass away from cancer will feel along with the king if they're paying attention.

When Gilgamesh eventually found his ancestor who held the secret of true immortality, he failed a test to prove he was worthy of it. Seeing the king's sad desperation, the ancestor gave him a last chance anyway. He described the flower that offered eternal life. In the end, clutching helplessly after the single divine flower, the king watched in horror as a snake gobbled it up and snatched his last path to live forever. He'd have to make his deeds last; and he'd have to be a better king.

Once when I was little, we were visiting an aunt who kept pictures everywhere on the walls of her house. She was the one always dragging out a camera and asking all us boys to stand still, God bless her. Not an easy task when there were seven of us. I remember once asking who this couple was in a framed photo laying around. She explained they had both died in a car accident with no children; and she did something then that has stuck with me now for almost thirty years. She looked me seriously in the eyes and said their names slowly, trying to describe what they were like. She wanted me to remember them. Why would that be important to her?

The myth of Gilgamesh needed a friendship for the point to come across, so it spoke the language of myth and created the ultimate realization of friendship, much like Kurukshetra was the ultimate war. It was every friendship. Breaking it was the only thing that would break the king; and in the end, the story is transmitting down through the ages that death is the great equalizer. We all lose people, even kings. There is no way to leave your mark on the world without it being your deeds.

We talked about the dynamics of people there when I mentioned sitcoms and morning television producers. Harlan Ellison said, "The only thing worth writing about is people." The old masters knew that, so they distilled and condensed important things they wanted to say down into people and kept it simple. Those are the principles the old masters are trying to tell us.

1. **Myths are timeless because they show us rather than explain to us; and what they show is timeless.**
2. **The things myths look to transmit are useful and common to us all**
3. **Myths speak simply so we're more likely to get the point.**
4. **Myths talk about people, structuring around chemistry that makes sense to us like family or friends**

Now by pulling out some of these principles of storytelling for the ages we've built at least part of the machine. Let's test that it works.

Just How Wise Was Plato Anyway?

Plato wrote *The Republic* in the fourth century BC and described in its dialogues an ideal city which, if I'm honest, strikes me either as a satire or a *1984*-style nightmare. That's not where I'm going with this, though. He went on for ten books to exhaust the argument that it's better to live a decent, just life than to live for yourself. Then he cut the rudder hard enough to throw you off the boat with an incredibly influential mythic tale about the afterlife that comes literally out of nowhere. It was practically unprecedented in literature, scared the heck out of some, and is probably still echoing in people's heads today though they've no idea of the origins behind the concepts. It's called *The Myth Of Er*.

Er, the son of Armenius from Pamphylia died in a battle. The bodies were left in piles for ten days; but when they came to gather his corpse and take it home for burial, his was strangely not decaying like the others. Two days later, when they cast him onto the funeral pyre, he rolled off, patted himself down, and told the shocked folks watching what happens when you die because he saw it all.

He said when his soul left his body, he found himself with a crowd walking to a mysterious field where he saw two cavernous openings in the ground and two openings in the sky with a set of judges seated in between. The judges sent folks either up into the sky entrance or down into the gaping pit based on how they'd lived their lives. It's explained to him that those folks will spend a thousand years either in bliss as entered through the sky or in torture as entered through the pit. He could see other spirits coming out of the exits from both the sky and from the earth, their terms expired and it being time for their reincarnations. The ones coming from the sky were clean and smiling and described visions of unbelievable beauty; but the ones crawling up from the pit exit told horrible tales of punishment for their choices in life. In fact, for every act that hurt others in life, they

experienced something similar in the pit ten times over. Nice.

Er followed the newly arrived spirits, the ones from either the pit or the sky, to an enormous spindle. Though very familiar to Plato's audience, we probably need a little help to get a picture in our heads. This was the hand-held tool with a hook on top for pulling on a wad of wool you held in your other hand, and a weight on bottom for spinning. It made yarn so you could weave it into clothing or blankets or whatever; but in Er's case and in the cosmic version he saw, it was symbolic of what the Fates were doing with the lives about to be chosen. Everybody got a lottery token to be called up in random order for their choices, no preference given for who they were in life. Laid out on the ground before them were lives from which they could choose: that of animals, tyrannies, lives that would end early or in poverty and exile, those who would be famous or beautiful, and a myriad of other choices. There they were as Er watched them, picking through their choices and awaiting their turns. He noticed people who'd been punished for a thousand years selected as you'd expect and chose better lives, though some chose to become animals since it seemed an easier life. Those who'd been in heaven a thousand years often picked lives that were worse off, maybe seeking balance.

Once each token had been called and each choice made, an assignment of a guardian was made to follow the spirit through its next life entirely and help fulfill the choices made there on that plain. They were made to drink from the Lethe, the river water that caused forgetfulness of all that had gone before, then all fell asleep on the ground. While the people slept, Er watched in wonder as the spirits shot off like flying stars into the sky to begin their next lives and restart the cycle. He couldn't recall his journey back to his own body, but instead only remembered waking up thereafter in the fire of his own funeral.

You may have recognized bits and pieces of things in that narrative which you assumed were probably in the Bible or something if you thought about these things at all. This story has staying power, just maybe not as a whole. How does it fare against the principles we've outlined? Well, Plato would probably have chuckled at us if we could ask what the heck he was thinking mucking up his beautiful and brainy thought experiment with this crazy pipe dream. He'd have said you have to show people, not tell them, if you want it to stick. Did you notice the details he offered, such as the guy's name, his father's name, that he was a soldier, and the city where he'd been born? You have to talk about something that is common to all generations and that matters, like what happens when you die. It has to be useful to them, like instructing people to live decent lives as if there were to be consequences for their decisions beyond what they could see now. The message has to be simple and uncluttered, like a guy waking up from death to tell what he saw. No sub-plots, no intrigue, no noise. We stick with Er

the entire story as our point of view. He's our person, our filter for trying to process the information. And he's a soldier, those who are often typed as people with honor unlikely to lie. All our principles are there and well done by Plato. He knew what he was doing, I suppose.

Meanwhile In Jerusalem…

Let's try this again, only with something close to home for a lot of folks that may read this. Please set aside your prejudices one way or the other and follow the argument. It seems if you mention Jesus Christ at all, people start throwing tomatoes before you've really said anything. Yet the narrative of his story has influenced billions of people and shaped the world we live in like no other narrative. You don't have to believe in its truth as history to admit its power. Let's apply the principles we've outlined and see whether they hold. I'll refer to him as Yeshua because it's probably how he pronounced it anyway, but will in any case hopefully help any reader with prejudice either way distance themselves for a fresher reading.

In an obscure lake region in a backwater part of the mighty Roman Empire, the simple people were buzzing about a wild man by the river who ate locusts and spoke in prophecies and who was saying someone powerful was coming. One day, this wild prophet pointed at a man named Yeshua and said that was the one who'd been promised. The local king ultimately executed the prophet, causing even more people to join the crowds that attached to Yeshua wherever he went. He gathered twelve people to spend time with him and to teach them; but mostly what he said was we should be kind to one another. He could do miraculous things like make people walk or see again, or curing diseases; and he did those things everywhere he went.

We love a trickster because they turn the tables on irritating forces against which we often feel powerless. Yeshua in his story faced paradoxical riddles and impossible questions carefully put together to embarrass him or to put him in danger with the spies listening for rebellion. Yet like a trickster, over and again Yeshua was able to give breakthrough answers that twisted what he'd been handed into what he wanted to say anyway. Though he was doing good in the world and helping people, and though he was saying nothing more than to be kind to one another and do what's right, the jealousy and hate built against him. In fact, once he described himself as the son of God, the temple priesthood decided on how they would trap and execute him because that was too much to take. One of the twelve he'd chosen ultimately betrayed him and led his accusers to him in the night. He was brutally tortured and killed in the manner the Romans used for traitors and thieves, leaving the remaining eleven wondering if the whole thing was a lie. Three days later, he resurrected and spoke directly to them face to

face, even showing the wounds. His entire life had been an outreach from a god who could seem distant and difficult to understand, if not entirely absent, and understood the only way to relate was to just incarnate and live as one of us. To communicate.

Applying the principles then, the character of Yeshua is the realization of mercy in a person, telling us to love one another. Like the princes of the Mahabharata, he represents all that is good. The world can be brutal and unfair; but there are rewards and punishments afterwards, much as Plato tried to explain. Consequently, it matters what decisions we make on this. The tale is simply told, following Yeshua through as the key point of view and with a masterful building of suspense as he knowingly approaches his death in the city of Jerusalem. Then finally, the fourth principle is in fact the strategy being employed by Yeshua overall: to leverage a father/son relationship to make sense of a complicated cosmic being probably beyond our understanding anyway. The principles are all there; and the fact that the betrayal and trial come off as so unfair, it lends power to the story through our sympathy for him.

This issue of sympathy lending power is an important concept that makes any timeless or effective story work, so even though it's implied in the principles as we have them outlined, maybe it's worth spending a little time on this as well.

The Power Of Sympathy

Homer's *Odyssey* portrays its lead character, Odysseus as wily and inventive, meaning he's apt to turn the tables on a foe. That makes him a trickster; and as we admitted earlier, tricksters show us it's possible to give a comeuppance to forces that work against us. We like that, so most of us are prone to liking his character already. Something structural and even deeper is happening with the narrative though to gain our sympathy for the events. Here's a noble soldier who fought for his king, long away from his wife and son, just trying to get home. That's superficial and easy though; and any writer worth his words will make choices like that if they want you to care. More to my point is what's happening with his son, Telemachus back home where over a hundred suitors for his mother have been humiliating the both of them. The tension of Telemachus trying to be a man and act as his father would have him, of trying to do with these raiders what the man of the house would do, with him having lost a father for most of his life, drives our engagement with the story probably more than anything Odysseus faces. We love the adventure and to see what he'll come up with next to escape whatever larger than life challenge he faces; but once that dynamic between reluctantly absent father and son at the tip of manhood trying to replace him is set up in our heads, the narrative has legs. You're

going to want to see its resolution because it follows our principles so well.

I truly hope by now if you plan to read or watch anything related to George R. R. Martin's *A Song Of Ice And Fire* you already know the major plot point I'm to mention here. Otherwise you should probably skip this paragraph. I thought of this dynamic of Telemachus in the Odyssey when Ned Stark was beheaded. He was the lead character around which so many other characters revolved, including his large and young family. For much of the remaining books, we're told what happened to his wife and his children, narratives which carry more weight with us because of the sympathy we feel for them as young orphans adrift without a father and ultimately a mother as well. The broken family dynamic lends power to the narrative and engages us.

It is my intention to keep this work very brief, so it's almost time to move on from what the old masters have to say to us. There's one more principle I believe being whispered to us; and nothing spells it out more than the granddaddy of all shape changers: the Holy Grail.

5. **Myths include structures for wish-fulfillment general enough to apply to our most basic and timeless desires**

Grail Quests: It's The Trip, Not The Destination!

If I asked you to describe the Holy Grail, my guess is you'd get smart and say it's a wooden cup because a carpenter couldn't afford a golden goblet. You got that from a movie. Jesus was at someone else's house in that narrative anyway; and would probably have been treated as an honored guest with polished stone; but we'll let that one pass. Maybe it began life in ancient Celtic or Welsh stories as Bran The Blessed's Cauldron Of Life, which was a pot big enough to toss a corpse into so it would spring back to life (though unfortunately be unable to ever speak again). Maybe because of Chretien De Troye or some of the other Normal influenced guys, you see it as a beautiful golden chalice that offered healing and which offered a gorgeous quest for true knights who'd only find it if entirely pure of heart and courageous. If you're exotic in your reading like me, you may even see it as a flat stone that fell from the sky, with mystic writing on the side, kept secret by a maimed king awaiting someone to ask the right question but unfortunately visited by the chosen knight who's been told to keep his mouth shut. That scenario is from Wolfram Von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. There are other versions. How on earth does it keep doing that to every generation, including yours?

We've already seen wish fulfillment with the previous stories, just look at the romps Odysseus went through. This one morphs though. I don't

intend to add dramatically to the libraries already written about the Holy Grail here; but I will offer this thought. If you pay attention to the spam emails you get, the reams of magazines at the grocery line, the flashy ads assailing you on the internet, you'll see the common theme of the search for a better life. Oprah and Doctor Phil have made fortunes on this desire. So have others. Everyone's offering you a way to be better somehow. Go back to the *Mahabharata*, buried in the background of that amazing narrative is the idea of mana: if you devote yourself to the gods and meditate right, you or your weapons charge with mystic energy and make you more powerful. It's fascinating. Gilgamesh sought immortality; and anyone watching cautiously their gray hairs above their ears in the mirror can relate to that. Jesus was offering people a way to rise above slavery, poverty, hatred and oppression when there seemed no other way out, simply by how they lived their lives and what they believed. I view Frank Herbert's *Dune* as one of the best pieces of fiction ever written; and it contemplates a spice called 'melange' in the planet's food and water that uniquely empowers the lead character, Paul Atreides with all sorts of incredible abilities over the course of the story. I feel the same way reading *Dune* as I do the *Mahabharata*…like it's going to really hit the fan when these guys fully charge up. Wish I could do something like that.

The Holy Grail is just a conceptual framework – some kind of container, that keeps changing shape to offer this sort of betterment; and it keeps its relevance to each generation because that desire is timeless. The Celts viewed brave warriors undefeatable in battle as their standard. The Grail romance writers viewed chivalrous and brave knights in direct contact with God as theirs. Eschenbach was into bravery as well; but he may have been emphasizing sympathy in his perfect man by forcing Parzival to ask after the maimed king's wounds. We keep writing and making movies about the Grail because it helps us see a way to be better compared to our own standards, whatever those are. A better life. The Grail and many other of our timeless myths give us a playground to ponder how we can pursue rising above our lot.

CHAPTER 2
21st century storytelling

Way back when the TV show *Lost* was in its prime, I was pretty insatiable about reading anything from the showrunners or reviewers to glean more insights into what they were doing. We won't discuss the divisive last season or the finale, which were like the crappy gunk left at the bottom of the bowl when delicious chili is almost gone. But there was a time when that show brought me to a hard stop for an hour a week. I remember reading one reviewer's overblown comment that the show was forging a new way to tell a story in the twenty first century. That comment stuck with me for a long time – obviously it still does since I'm bringing it up now so long afterwards. It made me think about maybe some unwritten rules that apply given our modern aesthetic.

For example, I love watching Alfred Hitchcock movies. I could binge watch all day long, even the really old black and white ones. My dad used to watch John Wayne movies so many times the tapes (tapes?!) would wear out. Yet we both realize those moviemakers could spend way more time on dialogue and romance than most of us have patience for now. Tropes like the 'white savior' motif where a white guy swoops in and does native stuff (or alien stuff) better than the natives (or aliens) are a little annoying now. That makes it much harder for stories like *Tarzan* or *Avatar* (*Dances With Wolves*, same thing) to be told; and is a great case study when compared to the things I covered in the previous chapter when trying to understand what makes a story timeless and what doesn't. A flawless, granite-chinned prettyboy hero who's brave and perfect would probably irritate almost everyone universally these days unless he's a punchline for a wisecracking and flawed guy to demean somehow. My point is that we're not just tired of these themes, we just don't on the whole care for them anymore. Our aesthetic has moved on. Combine these changes with our science savvy, our short attention spans, our heavy exposure to universes of stories, and the overtly visual means of absorbing information we've bathed in since birth – you've got yourself a soup of aesthetic changes. Somebody should wrap all that up into some basic principles to make sense of it. So let's do that!

1. **Character motivations must be reasonable and stable. They can (and should) transform, but should never flip-flop.**

Just an opinion of course, as all of this is; but it's my observation that reviewers – employed ones and guys in basements looking for Twitterwars – are getting much less patient with flat or flip-flopping motivations in

characters. There was a TV show called *Heroes* several years ago that started off fairly interesting; but the ratings dropped like falling Volkswagens in subsequent seasons; and if you try to make sense of why characters are doing the things they're doing, it will just make your head hurt. Seriously, they contradicted themselves in almost every scene. Have you ever watched or read something with characters you feel you know, only to have one of them say or do something that screams to you that it's just not right…that they wouldn't do that? If so, you're helping make my point. Maybe that was always a hangup for people; but bear with me on this - **we know more stories than any other civilization in human history**. That's the kind of information to which we have access. It gets on your nerves more when you're more aware of it. That's where we are with this, I believe. Even the summer blockbuster movies have to show more about why the big baddie wants to blow up the earth or whatever than that he just does or they'll hear about it (and presumably lose sales over it). On the other hand, J.K. Rowling is the queen of solid, consistent and believable motivations in her *Harry Potter* books. Even the bit players in her books are up to something, dreaming about something, or going about a believable and interesting way with themselves. She's that good at this. Similarly, a review I read once about a Grant Morrison X-Men graphic novel described Magneto's character as having 'one of the greatest motivations in all of comics'. The point is that the guy feels oppressed because of how he was born into the world and is fighting back. He's not evil, but rather more of a wildcat backed into a corner and lashing out. That's genius; and it's why that character shows up so often.

2. Points of view and plot should be visceral and easily relatable versus aloof or cerebral

Because there is so incredibly much competition out there to which a reader may turn, it's a deal breaker for anyone involved in modern storytelling to fail to give an anchor point – at least one character that makes sense and with whom we may identify. I know I'm building on my lesson from the old masters here, that we're quick to get lost inside a story and thus heed the message being transmitted when we can relate. Yet things have changed in this regard over the last couple of decades, in my opinion. **Our attention spans are short; and many things are vying for that scarce remaining attention** even when we allot time to read (tweets, posts, vines, stories…). Accordingly, we're less patient with shifts in points of view across multiple characters. We get interrupted too often to keep track of that sort of thing. It's maybe a sobering thought for an aspiring writer that their nerve-wracking efforts at crafting the perfect narrative are being consumed between turns on a Scrabble game or until a random question for Siri comes to mind. We shouldn't take ourselves so seriously to

believe anyone is spellbound for hours. That would be awesome; and it still happens. You probably can't expect it though. God forbid you try and write stories-within-stories works like *The Thousand One Nights* for the modern crowd. Tiny…tiny audience for that now.

Along the same lines, there are increasingly more first person narratives, especially in Young Adult fiction. It's an achievement to read something from even twenty years ago that drones on in an internal monologue about what a character is thinking before just having them do something about it. We're restless! We want action! No long-winded descriptions of what props are in the room or what color somebody's eyes are…just describe the corpse already! Reviews are vicious when lead characters in books or movies waffle and delay, when they're just subject to the flow of a plot and take no decisive action one way or the other…when they are slow to give us something tactile to hold on to. I came across this sharply in reading Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* books.

This isn't at all fair to Peake, who was a genius stolen from us by Parkinson's before he could finish his amazing series the way he intended. My point reflects in the works though. No one coming away from this should feel I have anything but deep respect for what Peake managed to accomplish with these first two books. In *Titus Groan* and *Gormenghast*, Steerpike and other house characters drive the action, while Titus himself is an incidental character. The books are classics and highly praised. If you haven't read them, go do that now. I'll wait for you here. Yet the third book, *Titus Alone* follows Titus out in the city away from the sprawling estate. Things happen to him; and he follows along listlessly the length of the story, entirely passive like a piece of driftwood. I find it unreadable; and many feel the same way. Peake's editor lamented after the author's death that he'd received his suggested edits back from Peake's widow accepted without argument and knew he was buying a diminished work. What it's chiefly missing; and I saw this in countless reviews on the work and agree perfectly, is a backbone for Titus. We want things to happen – to feel them happening – and a brisk pace…less thinking. Get on with it.

3. Hints of your monster outweigh showing it

Of course, this one is best suited for horror, dark fantasy, spooky science fiction or thrillers. I couldn't give advice to someone writing romance or lesbian vampire books, so I doubt those guys would stop to listen to this anyway. My point here piles on to the core of the previous rule about the attention barrier a 21st century writer is dealing with – and it leverages the wisdom of the guy who wrote *Dilbert*. Why would you not listen to the guy who wrote *Dilbert*?

In my career, I've dealt with countless interactions among people seeking decisions from one another, including job interviews and

negotiations and sales meetings. One thing I've learned on my own is people love to listen to themselves. I spent an entire day once on a job interview with a guy who clearly loved himself and actively applied the strategy of allowing awkwardly silent moments. Like almost everybody, he couldn't stand the quiet and filled it up with things he wanted to talk about all day long. Eight hours. He said later the interview was amazing and that I really impressed him. I've tried it on my wife as well – prompting her with some pleasant thought about a beach or some awesome trip we took once to put a pleasurable image in her head, then sat back quietly while she went on about it and dreamed of another. She smiles blissfully, lost in her head. It's like a machine you just have to kick-start. I should stop giving you so many great book recommendations so you'll stick with me here; but if you haven't read *God's Debris* by Scott Adams, please put it on your list. When I first read it and saw these very ideas of allowing someone else to get lost in their heads and thus think you're awesome, I laughed out loud at someone else pointing at this. Because it's so freaking true.

> "No amount of fire or freshness can challenge what a man will store up in his ghostly heart" – F. Scott Fitzgerald

You can use this in 21st century storytelling, then; but not if you're hung up on describing your uber-villain or terribly frightening monster up front and rejoicing as it stomps its way through slaughter like Godzilla. I'm telling you there's a better shot at making this principle work for you if you only hint at the monster, if you have people say cryptic things and drop sharp, pointed little breadcrumbs implying terrible things are coming so the reader imagines far worse than you could describe.

H.P. Lovecraft went a little wordy and had a blast describing his ghoulies. Abraham Merritt was another successful writer from the 30s and 40s, also a guy long on words and splashes of colorful descriptions. I'm sorry, I love them too; but the style is dated now. Try anything from Stephen King. He'll scare the crap out of you with vague, horrifying blasts to your cortex like the cryptic things that clown says in *It* and the hints of what's waiting in *The Mist*. If you'll be honest, you'll agree there's a bit of a letdown when you see the tentacles or the spider or whatever. I read his *Revival* recently; and I thought what was coming at the end was just awful, since he broke my heart in an early chapter with a car accident. I was waiting most of the book with dread at what I just knew he was going to do to me. Then it clunked when he did something different and less cool.

The advice is to spend less time force-feeding the reader, and emphasize priming the pump with sharp, memorable suggestions at the coming terror and set your pacing so you're actually describing some

mundane or unrelated events while the reader's mind is still churning on what scares them the most.

4. Drop hints at an underlying mythology. Leave room for speculation

I can't tell you why Tolkien works so well. The guy made magic when he put together *The Hobbit* and *The Lord Of The Rings* trilogy. Probably a lot of it was timing; but he constructed a world people want to live in even now. Cosplay and conventions have gone a long way towards wiring a generation or two to engage more deeply with their fiction than ever before in the way people engaged with Tolkien from almost the beginning. Dragon Con in Atlanta for example, holds a cosplay parade downtown every year that is mesmerizing. Legions of fans for niche anime shows, book series, movies, cancelled tv shows from fifteen years before…so many they have to be clustered into massive groups. It's beautiful. But it's somewhat new. Even twenty years ago, it was pretty much only Star Trek people doing that; and they were the butts of jokes. Now it's sexy; and a guy will spend $3,000 on Boba Fett armor. What happened? What happened is we have loads of leisure time with jillions of choices for every taste that build on the lessons learned from centuries of storytelling and are at our fingertips. We get fed bad news in divisive twenty four hour news cycles so we highly value escapism with which we can intimately engage. So we want writers to give us toys to play with. Do you see what I mean?

When I was growing up, continuity in television shows was pretty much left to soap operas. When an episode was over, all the pieces were reset so the next week everything could begin from the same point because of the economics and mechanics of getting a show into syndication. To be honest, it gave a plain vanilla feel to most shows when you could see only ten minutes left and knew they were going to wrap everything up neatly before the end. The first time I noticed a story arc on a television show outside of soap operas was *Magnum PI,* which was a detective show set in Hawaii and amazing. What I'm getting at here is the plot had consequences across an entire season. That was new to me. This isn't to say those writers invented continuity, just that they were allowing consequences and arcs at a time when this was becoming more prevalent on TV overall. Shows like *X Files* and *Lost* took continuity to its logical culmination; but they did so with vague hints at the overall mythology they offered. If those writers had just explained outright in a straightforward adventure story the larger picture going on, detailing all the little nits and nats along the way, it would have been far less fascinating because there was so little room to play and engage with the ideas. To explain is to kill it. Tolkien knew this – look what he said (*Letters Of JRR Tolkien* (1981):

'Part of the attraction of *Lord Of The Rings* is, I think, due to the

glimpses of a large history in the background: an attraction like that of viewing far off an unvisited island, or seeing the towers of a distant city gleaming in a sunlit mist. To go there is to destroy the magic, unless new unattainable vistas are again revealed.'

5. Don't abuse the suspension of disbelief: avoid gaping and obvious plot holes

The unfortunate consequence of our being at the same time intimately engaged with our fiction and incredibly sophisticated at recognizing and appreciating their familiar elements is we're more attuned to gaffes. When I say that you probably know more and definitely know more diverse stories than the majority of human-kind over its entire existence, that has implications, right? If there's an obvious plot hole, like Gandalf not just calling those eagles for the fellowship of the Ring to take them to Mordor rather than make them journey there…that kind of thing drives us nuts when it's pointed out, whereas audiences from centuries ago would have been more forgiving or maybe even less likely to recognize them. Maybe you didn't even notice when watching the *Star Wars* prequels that Obi Wan intended to hide Luke Skywalker from Darth Vader on Tatooine but did so by leaving his name unchanged and put him with family on the same planet – out of the entire galaxy – on the same planet where Darth Vader as Anakin grew up. Yet when someone points that out to you, it is maddening. Read through the venomous reviews of any and all of those prequels to see the heaps of irritation at one gaffe like this after the other. The conversation from Episode IV between Luke and Obi Wan when we first see the lightsaber is practically unwatchable now that we have the prequels that make nonsense of everything Obi Wan said. Don't start with me on the backpedaling and whitewashing the keepers of their continuity have done in books and comics to shore those things up…just admit they pooched up and somebody else had to come along and sort it out later. In fact, my opinion is that was the single biggest mistake the *Star Wars* prequels made that ultimately doomed their mainstream reputations: they didn't make sense given what had gone before.

Anybody that's watched *Doctor Who* or who's into time travel stories knows well the painful contortions writers will go through to generate drama when anyone can just go back and fix whatever is causing the drama in the first place. Comics have this kind of problem given how readily they resurrect characters after they die. The one-time Editor-In-Chief, Joe Quesada, was instrumental in the turnaround at Marvel even prior to Disney's acquiring them by instituting a 'dead is dead' rule, which greatly rewarded the company in readership and popularity following the bombastic nonsense and huge guns / huge boobs fireworks of the nineties.

The showrunners at *Game Of Thrones* have discussed the importance of such a rule and how sparingly they'll have to break it given the show's reputation so greatly relying on meaningful character deaths and their consequences.

However, I could rattle off a list of movies, shows or books I feel have minimal plot holes and are tightly written like *The Ring*, *Babadook*, *It Follows*, *Rendezvous With Rama*, *Dune*, *The Stand*, *Foundation*, *The Magicians*, *Stranger Things*, anything by Nick Hornby or Hemingway or Neil Gaiman and so on; and somebody out there can dig deep enough to find something. Of course. That's not my point here at all. I've got them too, no doubt. My point is just that there's a sharp audience out there with a universe of alternatives from which to choose, with a deep intuition of story structure and plot, jaded and saturated with every type of story you might want to tell. This audience is uniquely sensitive to areas where a hapless writer struggling to shore up what seemed in the beginning like such a waterproof premise but now, in the details, winds up doing unexpected patchwork. If you're building off huge name recognition or continuing from a legacy, then maybe you don't have to worry about something like that. If your audience is incredibly forgiving and only looking for escapism then again, maybe you don't have to worry about that. Hollywood blockbusters in summertime certainly don't, when they can jack up the explosions and over-the-top stuntwork to give the people their bread and circuses. Not to be too cerebral here; but I'm offering you that anyone looking to push any boundaries and create something new…the reason so many of us got into this shindig to begin with…we're going to have to pay special attention to avoiding these obvious goofs and just create our world, our rules, and to just stick with them. That shouldn't be too hard to ask, right?

SUMMARY

THE OLD MASTERS

1. **Myths are timeless because they show us rather than explain to us; and what they show is timeless.**
2. **The things myths look to transmit are useful and common to us all**
3. **Myths speak simply so we're more likely to get the point.**
4. **Myths talk about people, structuring around chemistry that makes sense to us like family or friends**
5. **Myths include structures for wish-fulfillment general enough to apply to our most basic and timeless desires**

TWENTY FIRST CENTURY STORYTELLING

1. **Character motivations must be reasonable and stable. They can (and should) transform, but should never flip-flop.**
2. **Points of view and plot should be visceral and easily relatable versus aloof or cerebral**
3. **Hints of your monster outweigh showing it**
4. **Drop hints at an underlying mythology. Leave room for speculation**
5. **Don't abuse the suspension of disbelief: avoid gaping and obvious plot holes**

Just because of the deep wells and tremendous talents from which I've distilled these principles, both from myth-makers of old and the movers and shakers of today's entertainment and media conglomerates, I know there is power here. If we really want to write…I mean, if we really want to craft something for the ages, or something people can engage with in a meaningful and impactful way, doesn't it make sense to wire some of this into the machinery?

Then again, I never said any of this was easy.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Bennudriti is a futurist, artist, writer and consultant. He's taken a nuclear reactor critical, piloted a destroyer, slept in the Omani desert, negotiated multi-million dollar acquisitions, run two companies, provided strategic and management consulting across the United States, and traveled around the world in every hemisphere. He's a plankowner on the aircraft carrier, USS Harry S Truman and has made a lifetime study of religious beliefs and mythology. Brian's groundbreaking science fiction debut novel, TEARING DOWN THE STATUES, was published in 2015, followed up by designing, writing, and illustrating a related tabletop wargame, SALT MYSTIC. His short story collection, THE STORYBOOK PUZZLE BOX was published in 2020.