Your Storytelling Potential

YOUR STORYTELLING POTENTIAL

The Underground Guide to Finally Writing a Great Screenplay or Novel

MITCHELL GERMAN
WITH RUSSELL PHILLIPS

YOUR STORYTELLING POTENTIAL

The Underground Guide to Finally Writing a Great Screenplay or Novel

Dedicated to the memory of my father Eugene German,
whose generosity simply knew no limits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

October 2021 I began to promote my new course called *Your Storytelling Potential.* It had taken me over a decade to put together and evolve my storytelling ideas that I planned to share during the 10 week online course. Shortly after I began promoting the course, I received an email from an existing student of mine named Russell Phillips. Russell had already taken my original screenwriting course, *The Screenwriting Mega Course,* years earlier. He explained how that original course had changed his entire way of thinking about stories and writing. Having signed up for my new course, Russell offered to help me in any way possible. I suggested he could take the transcripts from the live sessions, clean them up, and add in all the relevant images. He readily accepted that task.

It turns out Russell had a different vision than I did. He didn't just clean up the transcripts, instead he took the material, rewrote it, clarified it, and expanded on it when needed. This book is the result of that simple assignment. Therefore, I'd like to extend a huge thank you to Russell Phillips for helping to make this book a reality.

After Russell completed his initial draft of the book, I reviewed and edited it, and then I excitedly distributed the first draft to my existing students. That same day one of the participants in the course named Laurence Starn reached out to me asking for an unlocked version so he could make some notes and corrections to the text. It turns out, not unlike Russell, Laurence had his own vision for the book, and over the next many months Laurence would spend countless hours reviewing and editing the text and material of the book as it evolved into its final version. Therefore,

I'd like to extend a huge thank you to Laurence Starn for helping to make this book a reality.

And to all my students, clients and customers over the years. I remember when I first started selling my original online course, *The Screenwriting Mega Course,* and then my software, *Plot Control 1.0*, I knew in the beginning the names of every single person who signed up. Before long, that list of names became too long and too many. And that list of names grew and grew, first into the hundreds, then thousands, and then tens of thousands. To each and every one of you, I thank you for your support and small help in making this book a reality.

And to so many others who supported me and my efforts to make my software Plot Control, Chapter Control and Episode Control the most powerful and useful tools for creating stories for movies, novels and TV Shows.

Finally, I'd like to mention some not so unimportant people, namely my wife, children, mom, and extended family who continue to support me and my efforts to share this incredible story information and transform as many writers as possible.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Over the past decade, I've been fortunate to work with so many amazing writers, from household names to first time writers. I'm continually amazed at how few writers truly understand stories, and what makes a story really special.

Unfortunately, not only do most aspiring (and professional) writers not understand what makes for a great story, but they also don't have a process to work through the complex layers and Thematic Connections that are **absolutely required** for any compelling novel or screenplay.

Most writers who come to me have shallow and disconnected story ideas based on the prevailing "single storyline" concept, which inevitably results in stories with no depth, no Thematic Layers, and nothing to carry their stories through a second act to a meaningful **CLIMAX** and **RESOLUTION**.

To make the situation worse, nearly every writer I have worked with has invested enormous amounts of time, energy, and in most cases, money (sometimes A LOT of money) reading books, watching videos, attending seminars, and even working with high-priced consultants who don't know what they're talking about.

I'm excited to bring my knowledge of storytelling to those who want to learn what actually makes certain stories great, and who want to have a step-by-step system they can use to create stories with their **Own Extraordinary Writing Potential**.

Mitchell German
Creator of Your Storytelling Potential

P.S. One important note for the reader: In developing my approach of storytelling, I have developed many terms that are unique to this system. Some of these terms may seem familiar but are in fact used in a nuanced and unique way. To help you with this, we have included a comprehensive glossary of the terms used throughout this book, and any time a glossary term is mentioned for the first t ime i t a ppears i n a ll **C APS & B OLD**, subsequent uses of the term are Capitalized.

P.S.S. Before you get started, I recommend you download the worksheets that go along with this book. You can download your free worksheets here:

(IMPORTANT NOTE: This is a free version of this book. To access the worksheets, please purchase a copy at https://www.yourstorytellingpotential.com)

(These worksheets are fully editable and can be opened in the free Adobe PDF Reader or nearly any web browser, such as Google Chrome or Microsoft Edge. The PDF format allows you to fill out the forms and save your ongoing work.)

CHAPTER 1:

Hidden, Revealed and Unknown

Welcome to *Your Storytelling Potential*. Prepare to enter a new world. With the right mindset, the principles presented here hold the power to become a tremendously transformative catalyst for your personal evolution and adventure as a storyteller.

It may not be evident now, but what you just read in that brief opening paragraph contains the lifeblood essence of many of the core concepts that shape the Your Storytelling Potential Method—the key to this unique system for constructing deeply-layered, three-dimensional stories. And this system applies to the broad spectrum of storytelling applications. Whether it's for the screen, the stage, the campfire, or the page, if you want to tell a story there are some universal truths for telling an effective one.

Here is the first universal storytelling truth: Great stories are *not* random events.

Your Story

Before you decided to dive into the Your Storytelling Potential Method, you had a backstory as a storyteller. Whatever walk of life, since the day you were born, you have been growing through your experiences, your education, your lineage, and your unique personality. There are more influences on the way you think and process your world than we can name. All of that history and your inherent traits shape who you are as a

storyteller. Your story is important to you, and you wish to tell your story in a way that captures and holds the attention of your audience from the very **BEGINNING** and all the way through to the end.

It is very likely if you have aspirations as a professional storyteller—someone who brings your work to the market to find an audience—that you have studied storytelling in some fashion. You have taken courses. You have read countless how-to books. You have participated in workshops. You have joined live or online communities to discuss and learn from peers.

Or maybe not.

Perhaps you are just starting out in your storytelling journey. (Don't worry if you are an absolute beginner! This book will explain clearly everything you need to know.)

The point here is, as with every experience within the bounds of *your life story* and, specifically, your story as a storyteller, the Your Storytelling Potential Method represents an *intersection* between you/your story *and* a potentially **TRANSFORMATIVE EVENT**.

Prior to this, you did not know this information about storytelling told precisely the way it is presented here in this book. *Now* you are beginning to be exposed to the Your Storytelling Potential Method. At some point in the near future, you will have completed this material. And then you will resume your life as a storyteller, hopefully *transformed* by what you have learned.

Does it make sense so far? It doesn't matter; let's get started…

The First Takeaway

Throughout *Your Storytelling Potential*, we will explain all of the concepts in the system using lots of examples so that everything will be clear.

The first concept is **CONVERGENCE**. Start thinking about stories as the intersection among three major **ELEMENTS**, or *BRANCHES*: a **MAIN CHARACTER**, and *two* major stories (the **A-STORY** and the **B-STORY**). Visually, a complete well-told story looks like this:

Figure 1: A Complete, Well-Told Story

Don't get overwhelmed by this Venn diagram. By the time you complete Your Storytelling Potential, all of this will be explained and demystified.

This is just the first of many images we will be looking at throughout *Your Storytelling Potential* that illustrates the concepts making up this system. Some will be more complex. Some will be very different in design. Some, which we will get to shortly, will be simpler derivations from this starting point that actually deepen your understanding and introduce further concepts you cannot quite see here.

But this initial image offers an essential 30,000-foot view of the Your Storytelling Potential approach. And it highlights the emphasis we are placing on *Convergence*—on thinking about stories as the intersection among these three central Elements. *Every* well-told story can be thought of as the product of the interaction among a Main Character, the A-Story (which is the new **SITUATION** that the Main Character now faces as a result of a **PROBLEM** or **OPPORTUNITY**), and the larger B-Story (which is the Main Character's life experience that provides the forward **MOMENTUM** for the narrative).

There are other components present in the story diagram above. And bear in mind that, by the time we're through, you will see that there are *many* more components to consider. These will be visualized in many ways. We will take each in turn as we build the explanation of this system. For now, just focus on that essential three-element relationship.

The A-Story Element in the Your Storytelling Potential Method

By now you may have caught on that we are using this introduction as a metaphor for introducing the basic concepts of the Your Storytelling Potential Method.

You, naturally, are the *Main Character* of a story about a person who desires to tell stories and seeks out educational tools to improve their skills and abilities.

Your life, specifically your education and experiences that shape the storyteller you are before, during, and after this encounter with Your Storytelling Potential is the B-Story. (Hey, don't get insulted! We haven't discussed B-Stories yet, but you're about to learn that B-Stories are generally *much* more important than A-Stories in the grand scheme.)

This book is the A-Story. It's the potentially Transformative Event that represents an *Opportunity* that has appeared in your present life as a storyteller. And to fully understand this element, you should know a little bit about this A-Story's history.

Much like most of you, we here at *Your Storytelling Potential* have spent many years in formal and self-directed education on storytelling, trying to get that leg up on our writing aspirations. Film school, books, seminars, you name it, we've tried it.

The problem we had, which is likely the same problem you've had and continue to have, in fact, is the same problem most writers have. You've followed all the "rules" and studied all the "experts," yet your screenplays, novels, and stories lack the potency you desire. Something is still missing in your understanding of the way stories operate. Something is still missing in the expression of your Characters and **PLOTS**. Something is still

needed to elevate your stories into the stratosphere so that you can join the ranks of the professional-level elite storytellers.

That's all in the past. You're here now, and everything is about to change. And it all begins from a very unexpected place: The 1997 Jim Carrey movie *Liar Liar*.

This is *not* to say that *Liar Liar* is an extraordinary work of narrative genius. It's an entertaining film. It has been generally well-received by audiences and critics alike. But so far as what it means for *Your Storytelling Potential*, it merely happens to be the movie that unlocked an "a-ha!" moment of epic proportions. Expect to see many of the concepts illustrated with examples from *Liar Liar* as we move forward.

What *Your Storytelling Potential* is NOT (And a bit about what it is…)

Often, introductions for books like this contain a section outlining "Who this book is for?"

Let's be clear: This book is for you.

You picked this book up. Maybe you're taking the Your Storytelling Potential course as well (and we highly recommend you do). That very action says you are someone with an interest in telling stories. As a matter of fact, when you consider how much of the business world is driven by marketing or, deeper still, how much of life is a process of persuasion and negotiation—for which the ability to weave a spellbinding tale is indispensable—our sincere belief is this information can benefit virtually everyone. Definitely everyone seeking a career as a professional storyteller.

So rather than talk about the intended audience for this book, let's focus first on what this book is not about.

The Your Storytelling Potential Method does not teach you how to write. You will not find anything related to grammar and composition.

This is not a book about creative writing. This is not a book about novel-writing. Bear in mind the storytelling principles you will learn apply as much to speakers giving oral presentations as they do to the written word.

This is not a screenwriting book. You will find no information in these pages about formatting screenplays, for example. We do not discuss indus-

try requirements for submissions of manuscripts. We are not concerned with strategies for locating and landing representation.

It is true that *Your Storytelling Potential* has its roots in ideas that were first developed for screenwriters by a script expert. The essential storytelling philosophy we espouse was first presented in the Screenwriting Mega Course and then adapted for the Plot Control software.

You might notice that a lion's share of the examples we draw upon are from major motion pictures. Again, we emphasize this is not a screenwriting-only system. While we strive to present as many relevant examples as possible covering the major forms of storytelling expression, the simple fact is that major motion pictures are the most ubiquitous, and they are quickly and easily digested. They are the most widely known and therefore easiest to relate to. The same reasoning applies to the choices in the book series mentioned throughout. These references reflect the standing of these various properties in the public consciousness. These works have all struck chords with wide audiences, so it makes sense to refer to them for common understanding and relatability.

One further thing this method is not: A step-by-step guide or formula. Many methods of story creation instruction teach a rigid structure born of a formulaic application of preset "beats" and/or a checklist of the necessary **ARCHETYPES** to include. "Place Mentor A into Threshold Crossing B, secure with Plot Turning Points D, G, and H, and you will have a properly structured plot."

Don't get us wrong. This is not challenging the need for solid structure. But we aren't assembling IKEA furniture here. This system is predicated on the idea that all Elements operating within a well-told story—structure included—mesh together organically when the author has a proper understanding of how they interrelate. Formulas don't lend insight to why things happen and what makes every part of the story Relevant.

RELEVANCE is key. This goes back to the first takeaway we discussed: Convergence.

Another way to think of this is chemistry.

Everyone knows H_2O, the chemical formula for the water molecule. Without going too deep into the science, all you need to understand is that to create a molecule of water, you must have two hydrogen (H) atoms bonded with one oxygen (O) atom.

Stories are much like molecules or any other chemical formula. We could supply you with a particular formula to follow. But does it not make better sense to master the underlying chemistry for yourself? So you understand why elemental atoms bond to one another? And then empower you with the ability to manipulate the atoms to create various stable substances (stories) of your own?

You can be the mad scientist in your story-building lab! Once you have a firm grasp of the chemistry that supports the process, then you can employ your own madness (read: creative instinct) to give your narrative brainchildren life!

That is very much part of our goal: to offer an analysis of the mechanism that makes almost all of the very best stories work. Commit to implementing the concepts shared in this book, and you are going to learn what makes great, engaging stories that connect with your audience and leave them fulfilled by the experience. You will be armed with a process for creating your own well-rounded, rich, thematically relevant, potent stories that accomplish those things.

Once you have a fundamental understanding of great storytelling, then you will have the potential to write great screenplays, novels, and anything else.

So don't think of this as just another how to write a story book. Truly, this is a how to think about crafting a story book.

Three Branches

We just ended the last section stating that our focus is *how to think about* crafting stories. The place to begin with that is reframing how *you* think about stories. With a new frame, we can then work to fill in the complete picture.

Let's take another look at the Venn diagram from the earlier section on Convergence. This one is even a shade simpler. Notice we have removed the arrows leading inward toward the Climax. We will get to that shortly. For now, just take note of the three major Branches and how they relate and overlap.

Figure 2: A Complete Well-Told Story Simplified

As we mentioned earlier, every storyteller should be aware that a well-told story has these three Elements, which we are calling the *Branches*. A Main Character, an A-Story, and a B-Story.

The Main Character is probably self-evident and easy to understand. The *who* the story is about. In a well-told story, the Main Character should be *indispensable.* The story should not be the same if it were to be about anyone else. It has to be *this* specific Main Character, at *this* specific time.

The A-Story is fairly easy to grasp. It's the current *what is happening* in your Main Character's life. It essentially defines where the story *you tell* begins and ends. The A-Story contains a Situation that presents itself as a Problem or an Opportunity. The Resolution of the Problem or Opportu-

nity presented by the A-Story Situation defines the Climax. The A-Story is usually the reason your audience buys the ticket.

Terrorists have seized a building.

The Main Character has just met the person of their dreams.

A regular kid learns he is a wizard and has the Opportunity to go to wizard school.

A nobody farm boy on a desert planet discovers he has special skills and information needed to destroy the powerful weapon devised by an evil galactic empire.

How about the B-Story? This one might be a bit more challenging to comprehend right off the bat.

Here is an important idea to note: The B-Story does *not* mean *subplot*!

The question that might spring to mind is, "Does this mean that *every* story is actually *two* stories?"

Answer: *yes!*

So let's be clear about B-Story versus Subplot(s). There may be many **SUBPLOTS**. There is only ONE B-Story. The B-Story may be revealed by way of the Subplots. Subplots most often serve to express **THEME**, therefore they usually are pulling a sort of double duty. But these two terms are not interchangeable.

So what is the B-Story?

In short, the B-Story is essentially the Main Character's *personal life*. The life they have been living before they encounter the Problem or Opportunity in the A-Story. And the B-Story is that part of your overall story that goes on *after* the Resolution of the A-Story ends.

If the philosopher in you starts to exclaim "How do I distinguish a **CHARACTER** from the life they lead?"—just relax a bit. This isn't a treatise on existentialism. We're speaking on a simple, practical level.

An easy way to draw the distinction is to imagine if we took you, the Main Character of your story, and drop you on a desert island, or send you into witness protection, or ship you to an alien world. The Main Character is the essential person; it's still you. Your inner thoughts, your personality, the choices you make are based on your innate spirit and the

VALUES you adopted throughout your personal history. The B-Story, on the other hand, is the life you have left behind. You can't speak with your friends and family. The concerns you had about your job and paying the rent or mortgage for your housing, etc.—that stuff exists independently from you. And it persists for the most part. It just goes on without you. And as you adapt to your new environment and make new relationships, you are fashioning a new B-Story there.

In a well-told story, the B-Story *also* presents the Main Character with a *Problem or Opportunity*. If your Main Character is a law officer and the A-Story is about the *Opportunity* to advance their career by solving some Big Case, then the crafty storyteller likely gives the officer a *Problem* on the home front, such as a spouse who feels abandoned and threatens to leave if they don't stop working so much. If the A-Story is about a Problem, the B-Story might offer an Opportunity to the Main Character. And vice-versa. Of course, there are always exceptions to any rule, and you can find stories that are Problem-Problem or Opportunity-Opportunity (it may be the dilemma of two conflicting opportunities that *creates* a Problem, for example).

This kind of dynamic, where the A and B Stories push-and-pull on the Main Character, adds a **LAYER** of dimension, creates tension, and makes the story more compelling.

There is *so* much more to say about all of these concepts, which we will discuss later in greater detail. But this use of "B-Story" is unique and fundamental to the Your Storytelling Potential Method, so we want to begin by clarifying the element a bit before we dive into the whole.

Hidden, Revealed and Unknown Outer and Inner Worlds

The next significant thing to note about the Venn diagram we have been looking at is that it represents *more* than the story you tell.

The portion of the story that is *expressed*—written, filmed, told—is the center part of the previous image (see above). The areas where the three Branches overlap form something that looks like the blades of a propeller:

B-Story   **A-Story**

Climax

Theme
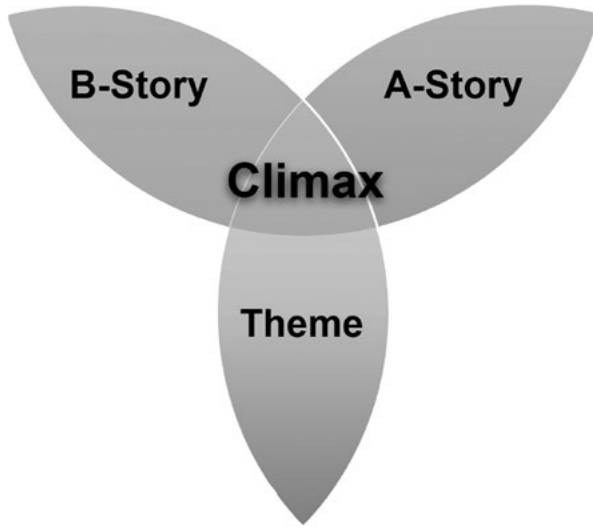
Figure 3: The Revealed Story/Inner World

Notice we refer to the Expressed Story as the **REVEALED STORY** or the **INNER WORLD**. And now it becomes clear that, in the context of that story *you tell*, you must keep in mind these three blades of the "propeller."

The Main Character is, of course, involved in both the A-Story and the B-Story, as the Main Character is the one for whom the events of the story are playing out. The Main Character is either reacting to events unfolding or driving things forward through their choices and attempts to resolve the various Opportunities and/or Problems they encounter. (In that way, it *is* appropriate to think of the Main Character as inseparable from the story. Be aware, though, that the Main Character is *revealed* through the story, and not defined by it. This revelation makes your Main Character three-dimensional and whole, not just simply a 2-D cartoon sum of their functional parts within the context of the needs of the story.)

The third "blade" of the Revealed Story propeller is something we have not yet discussed: Theme.

Theme can be a difficult concept to define and master. It's one of those things like irony that seems to elude some people (just ask Alanis Moris-

sette). Even literary scholars don't always seem to operate from the same definition of Theme.

A lot of storytelling instruction mistakes *subject matter* for the Theme. But the Theme of movies about soldiers in battle is *not* "war." Nor is "sports" or "the spirit of competition" the Theme of most any sports story. Same with police procedurals or courtroom dramas and "justice."

Oftentimes people think of Theme as being the *message* of the story. But a story is not a soapbox lecture for the audience. The author/storyteller is not a preacher in a pulpit. This kind of thinking leads to some very on-the-nose interpretations about Theme. The pro-environmentalist writer who is writing a story with an "earth first" Theme makes their Main Character a Greenpeace Hero, overtly battling some demon polluting corporation, a white knight triumphant in winning a big case in court. That is an extreme example, but it makes the point, even if we soften how this version of Theme was executed, it remains off-base to the true concept of Theme.

We are increasingly living in a social responsibility-oriented world, and there may be causes that are near and dear to your heart. But this type of overt message weaving into your stories is not likely to persuade. Subtlety has a proven record of being the more productive path. The best stories may look to contribute to the public conversation by simply casting the spotlight on a topic. A skilled storyteller does well to learn to argue both sides of any issue and find the humanity in all of their characters.

For the Your Storytelling Potential Method, Theme is a *unifying idea*. It is the glue that binds the A and B Stories. Generally speaking, it is *not* a message for the audience but rather an *argument* for the Main Character. We will see that much of what transpires in the A-Story and the B-Story focuses on the Main Character wrestling with the disparity between a Theme *and* its **OPPOSING IDEA**.

The Revealed Story (the expressed story being told) is about the Main Character dealing with the interplay of the A-Story (a new Situation they are working through) and the B-story (the ongoing, larger story of the Main Character's world) on a battlefield of opposing thematic ideas until the Plot events reach a final Climax and Resolution.

And the next thing to know about this conceptual model is that this Revealed Story takes place in the **NOW**.
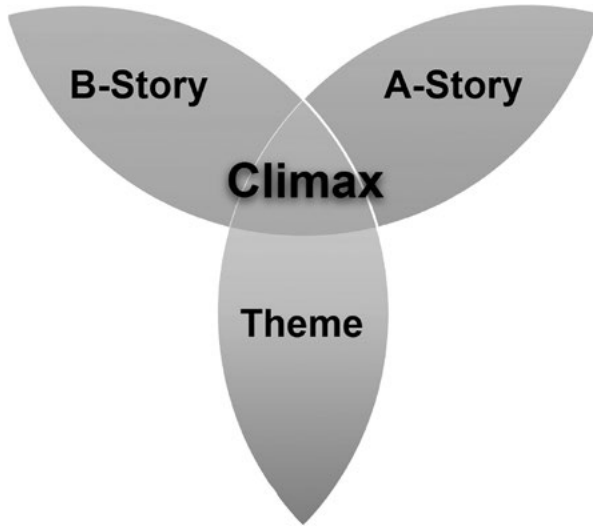
Figure 4: The Revealed Story Takes Place in the Now.

This concept may seem self-evident at first read. On one level, it sounds rather obvious. Trust for the moment that this concept of stories taking place in the Now is a major key. We will explain as we go on why this is a deep concept in this method and a very important consideration for you in the story-building process.

While we are on the topic of *time*, notice the spiraling arrow we've added to the center of the "propeller" in the next diagram. The spiral depicts our story's timeline conceptually. Relative to this propeller image of A-Story, B-Story, and Theme "blades," the spiral illustrates the Main Character's **JOURNEY** moving through each of the Branches repetitively as the Revealed Story progresses, until it all comes together in a Climax. This means the most satisfying, complete Climaxes are those that incorporate all three Branch Elements.

Figure 5: Complete Climaxes Incorporate All Elements

If there is a Revealed Story of the Inner World that takes place in the Now, then logically that implies there must also be a Hidden Story within an **OUTER WORLD** that *does not* take place in the Now. As we return to our Venn diagram and remove the Now of the Revealed Story, we see this idea illustrated:

Figure 6: The Hidden Story of the Outer World

The larger point of this image is that the **AUTHOR-STORYTELLER** must be aware of the untold Hidden Story of the Outer World. Having this consciousness creates the possibility of depth and resonance with the audience. It keeps the storyteller mindful of dimensions that *can be* explored and drawn upon as the story develops. The Outer World is conceptual *potential* for the Inner World of the story expressed in the Now.

Another aspect of Hidden Story to be mindful of deals with time. Your Revealed Story takes place in the Now, but it's just as important to know the **HIDDEN PAST** and the **UNKNOWN FUTURE**. This is particularly relevant for the B-Story, though all Branches have a past and future to be mindful of. The Hidden Past is foundational for the events transpiring in the Now. But it's just as significant to understand where the Main Character's life is headed into the future once the credits roll or the reader reaches "The End." In a small way, your Revealed Story will hint at the future in its final moments; this we call the **REVEALED POTENTIAL**. Most good stories wrap things up either positively (and they lived happily ever after) or else tragically (as in the case of a dark, cautionary tale). We will discuss much more about what transpires in the Now of your Revealed Story, but in the broadest sense, you should recognize that the point of any story is to chronicle a Transformative Event, as the Problem or Opportunity presented by the A-Story intersects with the ongoing life of the Main Character in the B-Story. With that recognition, you can appreciate the Unknown Future as the target.

Ultimately, of course, the Outer World is only conceptual. The storyteller won't have (nor need) all the details about the Hidden Story/Outer World as they will about the Revealed Story. But that is to say, those details of the story you end up telling emerged from the fertile ground of the Outer World, which you explored until the Revealed Story was finalized. It's about selecting and incorporating appropriate details from the Outer World to make your Revealed Story vibrant and convincing.

Another way to think about this is to see your Revealed Story as the first of a potential franchise, even if you have no such designs.

Unless you just arrived on this planet last week, you know that George Lucas created *Star Wars*, the epitome of movie franchises. The first movie was released in 1977, with sequels that completed a trilogy by 1983. Of course in the decades since, the *Star Wars* universe has grown to include two more sets of trilogies, countless novels, comics, video games, and an ever-expanding roster of TV show spin-offs.

Interestingly, those first three movies were subtitled Episodes IV, V, and VI. Clearly from its inception, *Star Wars* was intended to become a sprawling saga. The first film tells a complete story about a young farm boy who accidentally receives crucial data loaded into a pair of robotic droids, becomes involved with the spiritual warrior-master the message was intended for, and embarks on an adventure to rescue the princess leading a rebellion against the evil space empire that has built a devastating weapon, before using that data to destroy the empire's weapon. Lucas had built that entire expanded world—that B-Story for his hero, Luke Skywalker—and had a tremendous sense of the Hidden Outer World of his story. Both the rich Hidden Past history and the potential of the Unknown Future.

Three Branches, Part II: Introduction to the CORE ELEMENTS

Students of the Screenwriting Mega Course and users of Plot Control software are familiar with this method's Core Elements. As we detail this method, it should become increasingly clear that stories have an *internal logical* **STRUCTURE** of conceptual Elements in balance with one another. This Structure is every bit as important, really more so, than the commonly described Structure of three (or more) *acts* and the *beats* within them plotted on a linear (and usually peaked or arched) timeline. This balanced internal logical Structure of concepts relies on *Relevance*, as we have already discussed.

B-Story	Character	A-Story
Ordinary World	Characterization	Setting
Underlying Cause	Logical Solution	Primary Situation
Resolution Goal	Discovery	Primary Obstacle
Opposing Idea	Personal Goal	Theme

Subplots
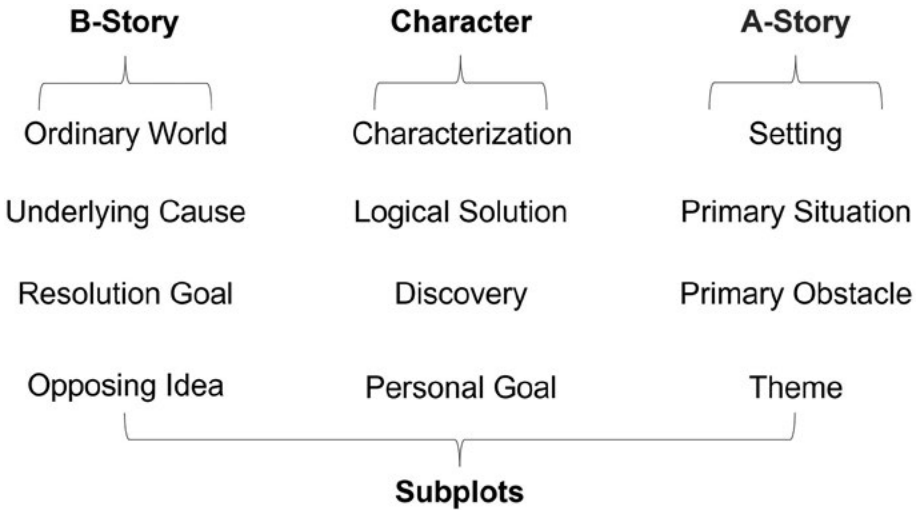
Figure 7: The Twelve Core Elements

A full discussion of the Core Elements is coming in future chapters. Each of the Elements is vital and requires a thorough discussion. There are Twelve Core Elements in the Your Storytelling Potential Method. We will say more about why there are twelve and how they work to achieve that Relevance and internal Structure when understood and applied. But it is appropriate to discuss three of them in this introduction because, as you might guess, they are directly related to our Three Branches.

Figure 8: The Entire Story Expressed

Notice there are some important added descriptors associated with the three Branches: **PERSONAL GOAL**, **PRIMARY SITUATION**, and **UNDERLYING CAUSE**. These are three of the Core Elements of any complete story.

Let's first focus on the Personal Goal.

When we think about the internal landscape of your Main Character that is reflected in their words and actions, this is a crucial element that drives the story forward. Something ethereal in your Main Character's Mind and soul, something intrinsic to their make-up and the way they process their world gives rise to a Goal. This is something they **DESIRE**. The goal may be tangible. It may not be. The goal is often something conceptual, reflective of their Desire to see a deeply held Value manifest in their world in some way. But whatever that is, the Personal Goal continually informs how your Main Character interacts with the Problems or Opportunities in the story. It affects the Main Character's choices in dealing with the Problems or Opportunities they encounter, the words they choose, and how they relate to all of the other Characters.

The A-Story has a Momentum created by the main Problem or Opportunity, often (not always) fueled by the direct actions of an **ANTAGONIST** and their agents (more on this later). The B-Story, as we have discussed, is generally the larger story of the Main Character's life, and gains its Momentum from various Subplots where there is an attempt to aid the Main Character or present a **COMPLICATION** for the Main Character as they deal with the A-Story Situation. And now we understand that the Main Character Branch also exerts a Momentum force acting on the story's flow that stems from the Main Character's Personal Goal, like an X-Factor.

Also, note how the Personal Goal impacts the Theme blade of the Revealed Story propeller. This placement will become critical in understanding and applying the Your Storytelling Potential Method because the Personal Goal functions as the deepest expression of the Main Character, the deepest expression of the rich Thematic Ideas at play in a story, and most importantly, the *link* between the A and B Stories.

Yes, the Main Character supplies the Personal Goal as something intrinsic to their makeup, but the way the Personal Goal is *expressed* in the Revealed Story is through Theme. That interplay between a unifying idea and its opposite. Theme comes out in this overlap where the A and B Stories overlap. (We know this may sound overwhelming right now, don't worry, we're going to provide concrete examples of all of this in the coming chapters.)

The other two Core Elements we need to look at here—the Primary Situation and the Underlying Cause—are to be understood as synonyms for the A and B Stories. These Elements get to the heart of the function of these storylines.

The Problem or Opportunity arising in the Now of the Main Character's life presented by the A-Story is the Primary Situation.

The Primary Situation is a NEW Problem or Opportunity that arises in the course of the Revealed Story. This new Situation in the Main Character's life becomes the focus of their attention in the Now and drags them

out of their **ORDINARY WORLD** of the B-Story, and into the world of the A-Story.

It's important to understand that the A-Story doesn't exist in a vacuum, it has its own Hidden Past. The Situation that's about to hit the Main Character is like a tsunami racing towards the shore. That tsunami has its own starting point, its own cause, which took place prior to its intersection with the Main Character. And there is always one major relevant Character associated with that cause.

We call these the **PROXIMATE CAUSE** and the **PROXIMATE CAUSE CHARACTER**. These are essential Elements that we will explore in-depth in later chapters. Suffice for now, there is always one significant Character, apart from the Main Character, who has a major vested interest in the outcome of the A-Story. Oftentimes this is an Antagonist, but *not* always (more on this later).

All of these Elements are related to and seen from the perspective of your Main Character. Although all **3 BRANCHES** have a Hidden Past, the B-Story is the B-Story *because* it is your Main Character's personal life and history. So, yes, while the A-Story has a Hidden Past of its own, it is only relevant to the Revealed Story and is thought of as the Situation your Main Character *now* faces because it has *emerged in* or *converged with* your Main Character's world and life.

As it stands, the Author-Storyteller chooses the perspective of the story. Most often we tell stories about Main Characters we identify with or want to root for. Most often those Main Characters tend to be essentially moral (however we define it), though flawed.

So the point here is the Primary Situation often has the appearance of being an Opportunity or Problem that suddenly came out of nowhere to confront your Main Character. And from your Main Character's *perspective,* it may seem that way. But if your Main Character is a world-class superspy and the Primary Situation is a terrorist organization that has stolen nuclear weapons and is blackmailing the world for a big payday, those criminal masterminds have been plotting that for some time. Or if your story is about astronauts having to plant bombs on a runaway aster-

oid before it destroys Earth, that asteroid has been hurtling through the universe for eons.

Primary Situations have an emergent quality *relative to* your Main Character and the B-Story. But they have a full "life of their own," so to speak, their own Hidden Past.

The last of the three Core Elements related to our three main Branches and another way to think about the B-Story is the Underlying Cause.

Hopefully, by now, the notion of B-Story is growing clearer. As we move forward, we will dig even deeper into just what makes it so important to be able to identify and differentiate the A-Story/Primary Situation Branch from the B-Story/Underlying Cause Branch, because traditionally storytelling has not been taught with this approach. We usually hear about a **PLOTLINE** that concerns itself with moving a main story (in our lingo, the A-Story) forward, and the Author-Storyteller has the job of filling in a Main Character's backstory and developing several Subplots to enrich that single storyline.

Meanwhile, we are emphasizing that a *well-told story* is truly developed through the interplay between two equally important but not intrinsically related main stories *linked by* the involvement of the Main Character.

Underlying here does *not* imply *subordinate*. It is much more meaningful to call it *foundational*. The A-Story/Primary Situation *plays out in the context of* that larger B-Story/Underlying Cause from the perspective of the Main Character.

And as we have already outlined, the Main Character is heavily invested in the Underlying Cause (after all, it's essentially their personal life—at least as it is *relevant* to your Revealed Story). There is a recognition that resolving the Primary Situation Problem or Opportunity has ramifications for the Main Character's B-Story world. And, reciprocally, what is happening in their Underlying B-Story should affect (likely complicate, sometimes aid or attempt to aid) the Main Character's ability to deal with the Primary Situation.

Recall that the best stories also have an Opportunity or Problem coming from the Underlying Cause. Most of the time, the broadest challenge

the Main Character faces is this very two-front *war* of dealing with the Problem or Opportunity stemming from the Primary Situation *and* the Opportunity/Problem of the Underlying Cause *at the same time*.

The Your Storytelling Potential Story Model Illustrated
Case Study: *Liar Liar*

[SPOILER ALERT**!** Be forewarned that exploring these ideas with case study examples from movies and books in the public eye means we will be discussing these stories thoroughly. We urge you to get familiar with the examples used, although it is not necessary. If you are not, however, you will learn key Plot details.]

Assuming you are familiar with the movie *Liar Liar*, if someone were to ask you what is the Primary Situation (namely the A-Story) of the film, how would you answer? We do not assume everyone reading this book has studied storytelling in depth. But it remains very likely that the majority of you have a long-term interest in becoming better story builders, and this is not your first exposure. With that in mind, forgive us if part of the effort involves working to unteach some ideas people have likely learned, counterprogramming to popularly held concepts.

When people think about the core of a story, the tendency is to deliver what is commonly called a *logline*. If you don't know what a "logline" is, it's a short, one or two sentence summary of a story—generally 25 to 50 words—that authors use to market or "pitch" their work to potentially interested industry professionals. Think about the short summaries of movies offered on a streaming service page or in a program guide.

Here is a logline for *Liar Liar*: "A compulsively lying lawyer gets the biggest case of his career, but when his son's birthday wish comes true, preventing him from lying, it puts the case in jeopardy."

Another possible response might actually say less, and simply offer the movie's *high concept.* A high concept is a summary that immediately conveys a story (with a great deal of conflict) in fewer words than it takes to write a logline. In the case of *Liar Liar*, that high concept would be "a lawyer who can't tell a lie."

But when we ask about the Primary Situation (remember: the A-story), if your response includes anything about magical wishes or not being able to tell lies, would you be surprised if we told you it's incorrect? It is difficult to imagine talking about this movie without discussing the Main Character's inability to lie (after all, *Liar* is

right in the title. *Twice!*) But the truth is, the A-Story's Primary Situation has nothing *directly* to do with the magical wish coming true.

The logline above does a great job of touching on all three Branches of the story. The movie's high concept mentions *nothing* about the Opportunity or Problem that stems from the A-Story.

In the case of *Liar Liar*, the hook—the sizzle that sells the steak and captures imaginations—comes from the B-Story. It's in the Underlying Cause. As we have been talking about, the Underlying Cause/B-Story is the Main Character's ongoing personal life. It's the aspect of the story that was going on *before* the Now of the Revealed Story the audience experiences and goes on *after* the Transformative Event(s) have concluded.

The current Problem or Opportunity that the Main Character, Fletcher (played by Jim Carrey), *now* faces is an Opportunity to advance his career and make partner if he wins a big-money law case for his firm. That's it. The *law case* is the thing happening Now, and there is nothing inherent in the law case that forbids him from telling lies.

For example, if the story were about an up-and-coming lawyer who wins his cases because he is unethical and tells lies, and the Opportunity was he has to win a case being argued in front of a judge who has special lie-detecting powers, *then* we could say the Problem or Opportunity in the A-Story has something to do with magical forces preventing him from telling lies to win a case. In that story, the special-powers judge would **not** be part of the Main Character's ongoing life, his B-Story Underlying Cause. (And maybe it would be a far less engaging story.)

Instead, the magical force in *Liar Liar* that removes Fletcher's ability to lie comes from a simple wish made by his son. Quite coincidentally and totally separate from Fletcher's job or the courts or any aspect of the case itself. His son has been disappointed by his father's deceptions. Fletcher misses his son's birthday party, because of the court case, and cooks up an excuse for doing so, so his son makes the wish. That Problem becomes Fletcher's major obstacle.

Now we have identified the A-Story, or Primary Situation, and the B-Story, or Underlying Cause, of *Liar Liar*:
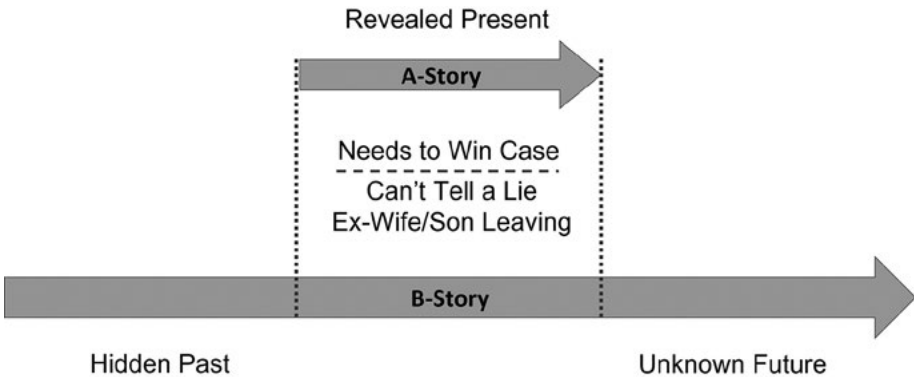
Figure 9: The Primary Situation & Underlying Cause of Liar Liar

The Theme Branch of the movie, ironically, is easier to identify. In our deeper discussions on Theme to come, we will see that for the vast majority of stories, Theme can be fairly complex and not at all what we expect. Themes aren't always incredibly deep ideas, though they can be. Often, though, Theme is expressed as a conflict between an idea (such as honesty) and its opposite (dishonesty) which are at war for the Main Character's soul. With *Liar Liar*, its Theme is expressed in the title: honesty.

In Jim Carrey's Fletcher, we meet a man whose core central trait, being a pathological liar, makes him exceptionally successful in his vocation as a lawyer but terrible in his relationships as husband and father. Deeper expressions of the central Theme in the story might show *justifications for telling lies* or *ends justifying deceptive means*. In his heart of hearts, Fletcher ultimately wants to better himself. We see that he's a pretty good Dad *when he's present* for his son. We get the sense that there is a lot his now ex-wife still loves about him. But in his mind, getting to the top of his profession makes him a better man and puts him in a better position to fulfill his role within the family. Clearly, he's lost sight of his priorities.

Liar Liar, like any compelling, well-told story, centers on a *specific* Character in these *specific* circumstances. Notice the principle of *Convergence* in this story. Fletcher's important court case is being heard *on a specific day* (Primary Situation), which coincides with his son's making a wish that his father cannot tell a lie for just one day *on that very same day* (Underlying Cause). There's not much of a story if Fletcher doesn't rely on telling lies to be successful in his job, and must be dishonest to win the specific case in question. There are many pathological liars employed in every field

under the sun. It also wouldn't be a compelling story if the day on which his son makes his wish, Fletcher was merely preparing for a court case for the next week, or spending his day drafting motions he intends to file the next day. Or if the wish time period fell over the weekend. Similarly, the Revealed Story is just as dependent on the Complication that comes from the Underlying Cause. If there's no wish at all, it's an unfunny short story about an easy day winning a trial in court for Fletcher. Otherwise, maybe the Author-Storyteller finds a different Problem or Opportunity arising from the Underlying Cause, such as his son burning Fletcher's case files instead of making the wish. Finally, Fletcher must have the *Values* he does, which drives his Personal Goal. None of this makes much of a difference if Fletcher doesn't *really care* about making partner in his firm or being involved with his family. In any case, without the two main stories unfolding the way they do, for this specific Main Character, we don't have *this* story.

Embrace the Method!

You now have a pretty complete, high-level picture of the model for how stories work in the Your Storytelling Potential Method.

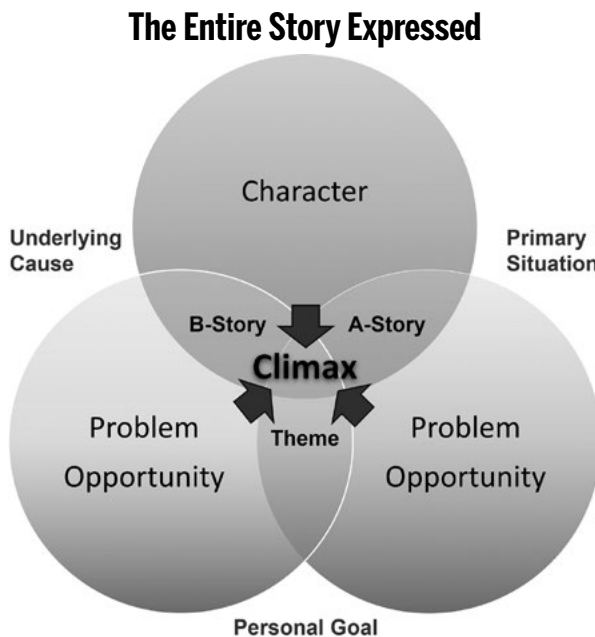## The Entire Story Expressed

Figure 10: The Entire Story Expressed

Admittedly, what we have shared in this first chapter, in both concepts and diagrams to illustrate them, is not entirely *actionable* without showing how these concepts work on a practical level. This is just the first chapter. Obviously, there is a *lot* more to come!

What we wish to emphasize, especially for those with a history of storytelling methodology study under their belts, is you are going to get the most out of the Your Storytelling Potential Method if you *set other systems aside*. Just for now.

Understand that the Your Storytelling Potential Method employs its own vocabulary. Terms used by other systems very likely *do not mean precisely the same thing* in this system. For example, many systems talk about an *Ordinary World* of the **PROTAGONIST**. In those models, the *Ordinary World* is a place and/or set of circumstances that the Protagonist *leaves* to enter some "new world" of the story. At the conclusion, the Protagonist then leaves that "new world" and *returns to* the Ordinary World, *bringing back* some lesson or conceptual *elixir* gained over the course of the story. You will find that *Ordinary World* in this method is not used in the same way. Most of the terminology in the following pages will be unique to this method.

We do not think the Your Storytelling Potential Method is the *only* way to tell a story.

In its simplest form, any series of events that involve a Character or are related in a sequence somehow can be considered a "story." And there is no denying that there are great pearls of wisdom to be had by learning from the recognized masters who have discussed the subject throughout history. At the same time, we assert that there are many popular instruction systems on storytelling that just get it wrong. Some explanations are murky and impenetrable. Others regurgitate concepts that have come to be accepted as authoritative but, in our view, don't stand up to scrutiny.

Finally, always does not always mean *always*. Like any philosophy based on observation and analysis, the concepts presented should be understood to be *statistically true*. True most of the time. There are always exceptions to every "rule."

When we look at the complete published and produced creative works of mankind, there will be many examples of stories that do not behave as we describe. Oftentimes, this is because works are bought and distributed by people following their understanding of popular appeal, chasing a buck by producing subpar work with some kind of gimmick—a bankable star, a sequel to something big, or work based on a true story but executed poorly. Just because things make it to market does not make them examples of great storytelling. But other such cases are certainly the products of unique genius, and usually, they do things *so* uniquely that they are impractical or impossible to replicate. *Lightning in a bottle*, as they say.

Our focus here is not merely to teach a blueprint for constructing any story. But on sharing how *well-told* stories operate. We want to open your mind to "a-ha!" moments to unlock *your* storytelling potential.

In the next chapter, we will continue to demonstrate that these concepts are the driving force behind virtually all engaging stories by exploring numerous examples of classic IPs.

Some of you just read that and are now asking, "What's an IP?"

In case you don't know, **IP** stands for **INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY**. It refers to the extended world of any story, across all formats in which that world is presented. *Star Wars* is a fantastic example of an IP. It began life as a single movie. Now it exists as a series of movies, television shows, animated cartoons, comic books, novels, video games, assorted merchandise, and amusement park theme rides. Additionally, there is an inspired, devout fanbase of creators supplementing the reach of George Lucas's seminal IP with fan fiction productions of all varieties. The extent of it is immeasurable.

J.K. Rowling has built a similar conceptual empire with the wizarding world of Harry Potter.

This is the strength of the B-Story and the recognition of building a robust Outer World. We enthusiastically invite you to think of your story ideas as the seeds for *your* IPs!

CHAPTER 2:

The Beginning Is Not the Beginning

I n the first chapter, we laid out the foundational concepts for how stories operate within the Your Storytelling Potential Method. That introduction to this system presented several variations of a basic Venn diagram image to demonstrate a central principle of Convergence. As we have stated from the beginning, well-told stories are *not* a series of random events. Nor are they a series of conceptually unrelated events. We lean heavily on the idea that every strand and element of a story should work in a harmony born of Relevance. Relevance is the result of conscious choices made by the Author-Storyteller to link each part through *thematic ideas*. The result is an illusion of naturally unfolding life events that take on significance for an audience as they sense the complexity and depth in a Well-Layered, three-dimensional tale.

In this chapter, we continue the exploration of fundamental concepts. But we are going to begin the process of delving deeper towards a practical level.

With that end goal in mind, here is the second universal storytelling truth: Great stories don't start at the Beginning.

Time Traveling Transition

Just as we began our discussion about the underlying ideas in Chapter One with a foundational image, let's take a look at the first master diagram for the way we will approach the concepts in this chapter:
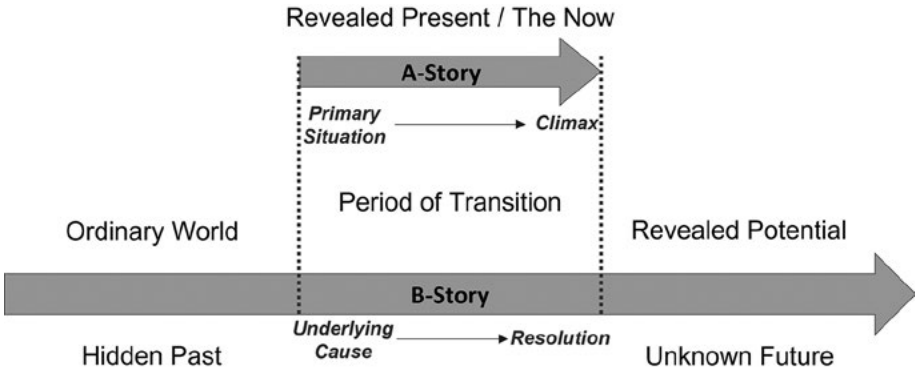

Figure 11: The Entire Story Revealed in Time

THANK YOU FOR YOUR INTEREST IN *YOUR STORYTELLING POTENTIAL: THE UNDERGROUND GUIDE TO FINALLY WRITING A GREAT SCREENPLAY OR NOVEL*

To continue reading, please purchase the book at:

https://www.YourStorytellingPotential.com