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**BOOKS OF THE TIMES | 'THE SEVEN BASIC PLOTS'**

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| **THE SEVEN BASIC PLOTS Why We Tell Stories** By Christopher Booker 728 pages. Continuum. $34.95. |

**The Plot Thins, or Are No Stories New?**

**By** [**MICHIKO KAKUTANI**](http://query.nytimes.com/search/query?ppds=bylL&v1=MICHIKO%20KAKUTANI&fdq=19960101&td=sysdate&sort=newest&ac=MICHIKO%20KAKUTANI&inline=nyt-per)

So what does Steven Spielberg's shark-fest "Jaws" have in common with the Old English epic "Beowulf"? And what do those two stories have in common with "High Noon," "The Guns of Navarone" and most any James Bond movie?

What links "David Copperfield," "Jane Eyre" and the legend of King Arthur together with the fairy tale "The Ugly Duckling"?

What story line resurfaces in such disparate works as the Grail quest, "Raiders of the Lost Ark," "The Lord of the Rings" and Richard Adams's bumptious bunny tale "Watership Down"?

What could Peter Rabbit, Scarlett O'Hara and Alice from Wonderland possibly have in common? Or Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Silas Marner and Scrooge?

These aren't trick SAT questions or annoying Trivial Pursuit queries. They are questions that lie at the heart of the thesis that the critic Christopher Booker sets out in his gargantuan, sometimes absorbing and often blockheaded new book.

According to Mr. Booker, there are only seven basic plots in the whole world - plots that are recycled again and again in novels, movies, plays and operas. Those seven plots are: 1. Overcoming the Monster, 2. Rags to Riches, 3. The Quest, 4. Voyage and Return, 5. Rebirth, 6. Comedy and 7. Tragedy.

The Overcoming the Monster plot lies behind horror movies and thrillers like "Jaws," as well as many war stories, Hollywood westerns and science fiction tales. In this genre, a community dwells under the shadow of a monstrous threat; a hero or band of heroes does battle with the beast (be it a giant white shark, an evil gunslinger or a horde of Nazis); initial dreamlike success is followed by nightmarish setbacks; but a final confrontation results in victory for the hero, the vanquishing of the monster and the restoration of order to the realm.

In the Rags to Riches story line traced by works like "Jane Eyre," an immature hero (often an orphan), who is looked down upon by others, has a series of adventures culminating in a terrible crisis, and emerges from those tests a mature person, ready at last to assume his or her place in the world and make a lasting love match.

Hazardous journeys filled with physical perils provide the structure both for Quest tales like "Raiders of the Lost Ark" and "Voyage and Return" and for narratives like "Alice in Wonderland," while inner journeys (from naïveté to wisdom, psychological paralysis to emotional liberation) form the armature of Rebirth tales like "Snow White" and "A Christmas Carol."

In laying out these archetypes, Mr. Booker - a British newspaper columnist and the founding editor of the satirical magazine Private Eye - does a nimble job of collating dozens of stories, using the 34 years he says it took him to write this volume to identify and explicate all sorts of parallels and analogies that might not occur to the casual reader. He shows us how "The Terminator" and its sequel "Judgment Day" adhere to traditional narrative tropes, moving inexorably if violently toward the ideas of rebirth and redemption. And he reminds us how the movie "E.T." embodies classic coming-of-age-story patterns: the boy hero Elliott's encounter with E.T., his alien alter ego, helps him to grow up, forces him to demonstrate leadership, and enables him to bring new harmony to his fragmented family.

Mr. Booker suggests that five of the seven basic plots (Overcoming the Monster, Rags to Riches, the Quest, Voyage and Return, and Rebirth) can really be placed under the larger umbrella of Comedy: in their purest form, all have happy endings, all trace a hero's journey from immaturity to self-realization, and all end with the restoration of order or the promise of renewal.

In a sense, these plots all represent variations on Freud's family romance - the process whereby a young person comes to terms with parental authority, ventures out into the wider world, faces assorted tests and eventually achieves independence. Along the way, confusion (be it a case of mismatched couples or a community in disarray) is dispelled, and alienation gives way to a new sense of wholeness and well-being. This is often symbolized, Mr. Booker argues, by a marriage that represents the coming together of masculine and feminine values and the achievement of balance among the four virtues of "strength, order, feeling and understanding."

Only in the seventh plot type, Tragedy, he observes, is there a deviation from this fundamental pattern. Here, the hero or heroine also goes on a journey, but is "held back by some fatal flaw or weakness from reaching that state of perfect balance," he writes. "They are doomed to fall short of the goal because in some way they are stuck in a state of incompleteness or immaturity." Despair, destruction or death is often the end result.

The problem is that most of Mr. Booker's theories - from his belief that archetypal stories are rooted in the human unconscious to his arguments about Tragedy and Comedy - are highly familiar, lifted in part or whole from a wide spectrum of influential, even canonical works by writers and thinkers as varied as Jung, Freud, Joseph Campbell, Bruno Bettelheim, Sir James George Frazer, the Shakespeare scholar A. C. Bradley and the folklore experts Peter and Iona Opie.

Not only is Mr. Booker a voracious magpie (who does not always acknowledge the sources of his ideas), but he also turns out to be an annoyingly biased and didactic one. As "The Seven Basic Plots" progresses, it grows increasingly tendentious. Mr. Booker evaluates works of art on the basis of how closely they adhere to the archetypes he has so laboriously described; the ones that deviate from those classic patterns are dismissed as flawed or perverse - symptoms of what has gone wrong with modern art and the modern world.

In the past two centuries, Mr. Booker complains, "a fundamental shift has taken place in the psychological 'center of gravity' from which" stories have been told; as a result, "they have become detached from their underlying archetypal purpose." In fact, when it comes to analyzing classic works from the Romantic and Modernist eras, Mr. Booker proves shockingly narrow-minded and obtuse. He complains that in "Le Rouge et le Noir," Stendhal failed to see his hero as a "monster of egotism." He whines that Chekhov's people are never "strong enough to take control of their own lives" and that they exhibit little growth in the course of their stories. "À la Recherche du Temps Perdu" is denounced as "the greatest monument to human egotism in the history of story-telling," and Joyce's account of Bloom's day in "Ulysses" is dismissed as signifying "defeat, failure, lack of purpose, the trivialized world of the rootless ego divorced from love or any sense of meaning."

Such inane readings of modern literature effectively eclipse the more engaging arguments presented in the first portion of Mr. Booker's book. Anyone tackling "The Seven Basic Plots" would be advised to peruse the informative first half and quickly ditch the second half of this 700-plus page tome.