

The Role of Story in the Noosphere's Future: Part Two

David Sloan Wilson: Let me wrap up our conversation so far to say that this is a very exciting time scientifically. Of course much is at play, much is at play, much is unsettled. And it's great to have folks like you in the conversation. I think the more literate everyone becomes about these developments, the better, and that includes the storytellers of the world. I'd like to introduce storytelling and fiction in two stages, because I think there's an important distinction between the two. Storytelling can take place even in non-fiction. I mean even when we stick to the facts of the world, there's ways to present it that qualifies as a story and other ways that qualify as not a story.

First, I'd like to ask you the question what's the distinction between storytelling versus non-storytelling in non-fiction, and then bring in fiction. So, what's the difference between storytelling and non-storytelling even when we're sticking to the facts?

PJ Manney: Well, one of the things we have to remember is how our brains work and as social creatures, we have learned to respond to causality. It's partially a survival technique. If I heard a story about how lions can attack and how I could climb a tree and not get eaten, I'm going to remember that story when the lion attacks and I've got to tree to climb. And then I'm going to pass that story on. Our brains look for stories even when there's nothing but random information. There's actually a funny experiment with an AI who was taught to write scripts, and this was early on with the AI was literally just taking script elements and throwing them together almost at random.

There was no causality, but everyone tried to figure out what these scripts were about. They were trying to put a story to these random ideas. If we're looking at storytelling in non-fiction, what we're looking at is the presentation of information in a way that creates a through line, a causality if A and B then C. So, that can happen in any kind of writing. The best scientific writing is certainly that. The best of any kind, journalism, every kind of writing, not just writing, every kind of transmission of information that has an effective sense for the receiver. I think that there's something we forget about story when we're talking about non-fiction, and that is that non-fiction storytelling needs to have many of the same impacts to land on the receiver.

And that includes things like hope and inspiration, and a higher purpose, and a bigger sense of the world, and an understanding we didn't have before, and I'm in the shoes of someone else and I can empathize. So, the best of these nonfiction stories incorporate ironically all the same things that great stories do.

DSW: Imbued by emotions and values, right? So, I'm trying to distinguish this from what would count as not story. A dry scientific account somehow qualifies as some kinds of philosophical discourse count as not story. They're lacking elements of what we would call storytelling. It helps to flesh out what counts as not story and non-fiction in order to appreciate what counts as stories.

PJM: I think not story is a pile of data.

DSW: Not story is a pile of data?

PJM: Yeah. Once you start arranging if A then and B then C, I think you've got a story.

David Brin: Yes, but I think that sometimes, a good novel can be more fair than a non-fiction, so-called non-fiction argument. In that, if you're going to lecture to the readers in a novel, for instance, my novel Earth, that was the one I talk about, that goes to the noosphere and the macro notion of a macro sentient earth planet to a degree of literality that would shock you, incorporating superconducting domains in the earth's mantle. The point is that if you want to have a good drama, you have to have characters that interrogate the lecture you're giving, that interrogate the proponents of your point of

view. And the better the novel, the better the story, the more cogent and on target the interrogators are going to be.

You're going to create characters who give the best arguments you can come up with against your point, and this is not something you see in what might be called tendentious non-fiction. And my most recent non-fiction book—*Vivid Tomorrow*—shows how you have science fiction across the last 50, 60 years has arguably guided our conversations so well that we are alive today, because of science fiction. In my opinion, there's no question that the self-preventing prophecies of *Dr. Strangelove*, *On the Beach*, *Fail-Safe*, *War Games*—prevented nuclear war. *China Syndrome* and *Soylent Green* recruited tens of millions of environmentalists who are now responsible for the possibility that we might make it. PJ.

PJM: I wrote a paper, first it started out as a keynote at UC Santa Cruz, and then I ended up publishing a paper called *Yucky Gets Yummy: How Speculative Fiction Creates Society*. And in it, I trace from the Greeks, from the Bibles, all the way to the present, the notion of how what we saw as characters that represented the yucky, and I used yucky as the 'official yuck factor'—the Arthur Kaplan and Leon Kass argument of the wisdom of repugnance versus not. Characters so yucky because they were created by man, not God. They were monsters, they were aliens, they were *the other*.

And how through the history of literature, *the other* has been turned from the villain to the hero, and why that's happened and how in making *the other* heroic including our monsters, and aliens, and creatures, et cetera, and mutants. And just the entire range of speculative fiction and fantasy and science fiction, we have been able to internalize the lessons that we as human cultures need to understand to move forward. Many of our technologies are integrated in these stories. Suddenly when you have the X-Men as mutants no longer being the villains of a story as in the 18th and 19th century and then becoming the heroes of a story, well now we look at mutants in a different way.

And who do those mutants actually represent? They're also metaphorical. They're both literal and metaphorical.

DSW: So much to say here, I wanted to bring in some of the scientific developments here, especially dual inheritance theory—the idea that basically in our species, there's a cultural stream of inheritance in addition to a genetic stream of inheritance, which enables us to think of our symbolic systems, represented largely as stories, as very much like our genes, very much like our genes. So, every person is a collection of genes. We call it their genotype, which influence just about everything that can be measured about them. We call that their phenotype. And every person because they're human beings is a collection of interrelated symbols, let's call that your symbotype, which also influence just about anything that could be measured—that very same phenotype. That's dual inheritance theory.

And what it means is, is that our symbolic systems represented very largely through stories truly determine who we are. It really blends, it just blends fact and fiction, the distinction between them. So much of our existence in inner and outer, mental and physical is socially constructed. Then the idea that we tell stories which are not yet reality, and then we step into those stories, so that they become the reality, makes perfect sense.

PJM: Makes sense neurologically too. We're looking at story as empathy creation. Stories are empathy engines. And normally, we're used to empathizing with just our tribe or our family, but now we have to empathize with people who could not be less like us in theory. We discover in fact our common values and our common humanity through story.

DB: I think it ties a lot of it together to realize that most of the world knows for sure that Americans are crazy. But as John Travolta said in a movie, ain't it cool? But the pejorative aspect of that has been undermined by generation after generation of Hollywood propaganda, that if you watch most of the Hollywood films, especially the science fiction films, preach suspicion of authority. Some authority must be combated. Tolerance, diversity, and eccentricity, individual eccentricity. The audience bonds with the

character at the beginning of the film, in part because that character exhibits some eccentric trait. And it does not have to be the same eccentric trait as the viewer.

The fact that it is an individualistic eccentric trait is the thing that enables the viewer to bond with the character, and the authority figure doesn't have to be invading aliens. It can be a nosy mother-in-law. The point is that these four things lessons have been so pervasive that I think it's one of the reasons why worldwide mafia oligarchy of almost all oligarch types has united, despite their differences. Some are ex-commissars, some are current commissars, some are casino moguls, mafiosi, drug lords. If you trace it, they're all united because they know that this propaganda system cannot be allowed to invent for one more generation. It's already extremely dangerous to the entire pyramidal zeitgeist, and that is about storytelling.

That is where a lot of the mythological battle has been taking place. I think it's very unfortunate that so many of the mythological champions in science fiction today don't give credit to past science fiction for having been the most liberal genre. I just watched *This Island Earth* last night with my wife, 1955, utterly cringe-worthy female lead who screams at many points, but she's one of the leading scientists in the world and she does brave things. Show me that in another movie from 1955. So, in the context of each era, science fiction was I think at the forefront of this expansion of inclusion project. And I'm all in favor of what the dominant science fiction community is doing now in making that project a centerpiece.

PJM: I agree with David and that's one of the things where speculative fiction has the ability...all fiction has the ability to progress the social conversation. One of the most important books of the 19th century was *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. You had countless stories like this. Dickens brought about the reform laws. You can point directly to pieces of literature...Dostoyevsky change the conversation in Russia. You can look at specific authors and pieces of fiction and actually mark their effects on entire social structures. However, we are far more siloed in our information and our reading. Everyone read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in the United States. It was read as much as the bible in the US.

You can't say that about any single piece of fiction anymore. We're lucky if 1% of the population actually reads something specific. But having said that, there are waves of similar stories. Should I discuss the *New Mythos* specifically because... Okay, let me just back up because I think this will help.

So, this all started because in 2018, I was at *Norwescon* sitting with Gordon van Gelder, Nisi Shawl, and Elsa Sjunneson. And I had an actual epiphany like out of body experience, you know, crazy. We were on a panel discussing science fiction in the age of President Trump, and all these little bits of things that I've been taking in for the last several years all hit me like a tidal wave.

And it was that we were great at dystopic fiction, but we weren't telling the readers, who were now willing to fight, what to fight for. They had finished the battle, but now what? We were focusing on the chosen one stories, but the problem with the chosen one is everybody is responsible for changing society. Not a single person we can all point to and say, "Well, that's the one, I'm voting for and they're responsible. And if they don't do what I want, they're bad." We had all of these failures of storytelling. I mean superheroes for me are an enormous failure in the present day, because they're all about restoring the status quo. Something invades Gotham or Metropolis—a big bad. And the entire goal is to bring society back to its set point.

That's not how society works, that's not how history works. Nothing works that way. If we think every single battle is about restoring the status quo, there's a problem with that kind of storytelling if we're trying...

DSW: Can I break in here because I want to make a point that because every culture relies on stories as part of their DNA, their cultural DNA, then there will be stories for every variety of culture, including the cultures that we deem bad, plus the ones that we want to be the cultures of the future. So stories where there's a disruption and then a return—a disruption of the social fabric and then a restoration of the

social fabric, of course those stories are going to abound in cultures around the world and it's the stories of those cultures. It's the way those cultures preserve themselves.

We might want to have different stories because we want the culture to change, but we should acknowledge that every culture, no matter whether we approve of that culture or not, that's what a conspiracy theory is. It's a story, for a certain kind of group in a certain ecological situation. I think we have to appreciate the diversity of stories is no less than the diversity of all cultures, whether those cultures are benign or pathological. Whether we want them to change or we don't want them to change, that's how diverse stories are. Would you agree with that?

PJM: I agree with that to a certain extent, in that specifically for instance in Asian storytelling structures, there is an absolute need for a return to the traditional sense of purpose. I don't think though that if you're doing science fiction or fantasy, that is a necessary aspect to the genre. In fact, I think it's a false aspect of the genre.

DB: Except that most of those superhero stories, while they nullify a large disturbance in the form of something evil, generally there are finger wags and lessons to be learned. And certainly in the ongoing xenification of the image of the hero, I'm referring not to the actual root of *zeno* as in the alien, but xenification in the sense of more and more like Xena warrior princess. The xenification of the image of the hero is certainly something that is having an effect. You can no longer say little girls have nobody to point to who kicks butt .

PJM: Having worked on Xena, in fact that's actually how I became friends with David 10 years ago when I gave the very first version of this New Mythos idea of speculative fiction creating society. He was in the audience and he said, "Anyone who worked on Xena is a friend of mine."

DB: I did not know that, except possibly through the noosphere. I had an idea that you would smile if I coined that word.

PJM: My point is more this, that there are many other ways to tell a story than the ones that are at the forefront right now in our genre, and you don't have to have a single chosen one hero. You can have a community. You don't have to have a classic heroes journey, where the hero might be changed, but the society is brought back to the status quo. You don't need to do that. There are many changes...you don't have to have a three-act structure. I mean there are so many ways we can look at how to tell a story and in fact, looking towards other cultures, not just western culture. Western culture of course has been steeped in the three-act structure since the Greeks. So, I am open to other kinds of storytelling.

I'm saying that we should all be exploring other kinds of storytelling to see what kinds of stories fit best that might guide our future activities toward something like a positive future. When we end the story, when we have the smallest denouement, we got the bad guy and then the story ends, boom, out. The problem with that is then what? It helps you learn to fight whatever you think the bad guy is, but it doesn't tell you then what you do with it. I try to explore that in (C)onscience with well, what are the options? Once you get rid of the big bad, then what? And I think that there's a tendency to think that the audience is less able to take complex stories or ideas than they are.

DB: Well, PJ I have to say that your customers and mine are perfectly comfortable being uncomfortable. Now, you're right that there is a great deal out there that is troglodytic, and one of the problems we face is that this great worldwide oligarchic push is taking advantage of a minority of Americans, but a large minority of Americans that recurringly is capable of deep anomie toward the future and towards smartypants nerds, which is the principal propaganda on their media. I do have to take issue with one thing you said, and that is our storytelling being rooted in the Greek. Well, the Greek mythos, the plays and all of that were much more Asian as you say. A notion that the lovers cannot ever actually kiss.

It must be tragic separation. There must be tragedy. The mother genre is fantasy, and the mother genre fantasy, you can have fantastic elements as in science fiction, but there are certain tropes, and that is that things get back to where they were. The social order doesn't change. Science fiction is a bastard offspring of fantasy, in that it's all about change, starting with Mary Shelley. And even though she pushed things back where they were and said don't do this, it was nevertheless a dystopic science fiction experiment. And a lot of science fiction, I talk about this in Vivid Tomorrows. A lot of science fiction expresses the criticisms that you just expressed that we need to get away from chosen ones.

And I do this in some of my Star Wars versus Star Trek rants, where the Star Wars is essentially fantasy. It is absolutely devoted to the mother genre that it's all about demigods, and the Republic not only doesn't do anything right. It doesn't do anything, and this is exemplified by the ship in Star Wars which is a single seat fighter with a squire or drone or droid or Sancho Panza. But the Republic can't fit on a little fighter. The thing about Star Trek is it's a naval vessel, and that means that the captain is only way, way above average. And she must call upon way, way above average people to help every time, and half of the episodes are about the Federation.

It does stuff, it's about stuff. It's a topic of conversation, it's a topic of criticism, and often a topic of hope, how we could be different than we are. We may not be worthy to make the Federation, but maybe we can make ourselves worthy to make the makers of the makers of the makers of the Star Trek Federation. So, I agree with everything you said. I just wanted to point out that there are a lot of stories like yours and mine that point out that large numbers of way, way, way above average people can change things.