**Samira El Ouassil / Friedemann Karig**

**Storymaking Monkeys**

**Myths, Lies, Utopias: How Stories Shape Our Lives**

*Translated by Caroline Waight*

*pp. 80–86*

HOMO NARRANS

It’s time to put down the book and take a brief moment for some honest introspection. Please take a good look – not at yourself as an individual, but yourself as a representative of our species. At your body as a construction of nature, compared to other anatomical blueprints familiar to us: goldfish, giraffes, gorillas. What stands out to you?

Compared to other forms of life on Earth, and especially compared to our closest relatives, apes, we human beings have a few crucial peculiarities: long, muscular legs that can carry us far and fast; flexible, filigree hands capable of performing complex tasks; but above all a relatively large, heavy head with a high-performance brain that works extraordinarily efficiently for its size. The human body at rest devotes roughly a fifth of its energy expenditure to the brain – regardless of whether we’re thinking about something useful, or indeed whether we’re actively thinking at all. The unprecedented enlargement of our brains that took place about 1.8 million years ago came at the cost of additional calories, which had to be either ingested through food or diverted away from other bodily functions. Many anthropologists believe that our brains were only able to develop in this way because at some point we started to consume other living things. But flesh must be hunted and cooked. And both tasks would have been impossible without at least rudimentary stories, narrative guides and recipes shared from person to person.

We are, in other words, a species that began to tell each other stories in order to survive and continue to evolve, and in doing so we massively accelerated that evolution. We are apes who only became humans through storytelling. What term, then, could be more appropriate than *Homo narrans* – narrative man. That’s what American communication theorist Walter Fisher dubbed us, at any rate.[[1]](#footnote-2) Or, to use philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre’s term: storytelling animals. Perhaps we can simply agree on *Pan narrans* – the storytelling ape or storymaking monkey? And since this is the title we’ve chosen for the book, we’d better go back to the beginning. So: when did the first apes start telling stories?

Storytelling is, of course, predicated on our ability to speak. Yet how exactly our language developed is, to put it mildly, controversial. Did we *first* develop opposable thumbs and *then* tell everyone else how useful they were for hunting – or did tales of superior hunters come *first* and we *then* grew bodies to match? Our task in this book is not to try and settle the question by travelling back to the earliest origins of humanity in some sort of time machine cobbled together out of secondary literature and speculation. Human evolution is rarely orderly. It’s likely that these capabilities developed not strictly in sequence but in parallel. One perspective, then, is that the physical and psychological abilities of modern human beings represent the latest in a series of progressive stages of development – an evolutionary success story, in the ‘survival of the fittest’ sense, to use a phrase coined by the British social philosopher Herbert Spencer. It seems feasible that human beings grew more intelligent than other apes because of our brains, and that this intelligence gave rise in turn to the power of speech. Little by little, noises became words, and words eventually became religious myths, military commands and advertising slogans. These developments may have taken place in parallel or may have been mutually interdependent. Regardless, the end result was *Homo narrans*, a creature that differs from all others in that we use our vocal tracts to tell stories. One intriguing question remains, however: when did we start using language to tell stories about things that do not exist? Can we pinpoint when humankind discovered fiction?

First of all, it’s important to note that all human languages contain a specific grammatical feature: they are recursive, meaning it is possible to create sentences that are reflexive, for example through subordinate or nested clauses. The British author Will Storr has described how sentences essentially produce neural movies in the minds of readers, claiming that ‘we experience the stories we read by building hallucinated models of them in our heads.’[[2]](#footnote-3) Grammar, which we learn, helps us to structure the simulated worlds produced in our minds as we read and listen to stories. Storr is drawing here on the work of neuroscientist Benjamin Bergen, who thinks of grammar as a movie director, telling the brain what to model and when. According to Bergen, grammar ‘appears to modulate what part of an evoked simulation someone is invited to focus on, the grain of detail with which the simulation is performed, or what perspective to perform that simulation from.’[[3]](#footnote-4)

Linguist Noam Chomsky’s notion of universal grammar represented a major paradigm in the study of language. In Chomsky’s view, the fact that human beings have the facility to learn languages and that all languages use some form of grammar means that certain sentence structures, including syntactic features such as recursion, are universally innate in our brains. And languages across the world, independently of culture, do in fact share a common fundamental structure. Syntax allows language to express our linear perception of time – our ability to think chronologically and in terms of causal links. Unlike other animals, we can conceive not only of time passing but also of how it hangs together, of the ‘whens’ along the timeline, and we have a sense of before and after. Much of our communication consists of statements about when things have happened or will happen. This enables us to plan and coordinate, to arrange and cooperate – a massive advantage for survival.

Animals, too, are able to communicate. Prairie dogs, for instance, have different warning noises for airborne or land-based predators, and virtually every animal has some form of verbal or non-verbal exchange. But only human language has been upgraded with syntax. The development of syntactical language enabled us to anticipate, reflect and make verbal reference to experience. It allows us not only to express what *is* but also discuss what *was*, a long time ago – maybe when something bad happened or we made the wrong decision in a particular situation. Thanks to the past tense, we can analyse earlier events, share memories of them, and pass on lessons learned from experience. Similarly, grammar and tenses also allow us to speculate about the future and discuss what *could* be. Our syntax gives imagination free rein and enables the construction of possible or alleged realities. And at some point people started talking about things that didn’t exist at all, or rather: that existed only within themselves.[[4]](#footnote-5) In his essay *The Hero*, American author Lee Child deduces that language was used to describe true events. Initially, he believes, it was used efficiently and purposefully to coordinate survival, organise supplies and plan hunting trips. At first, in order to be effective, the story being told had to be true. In the daily struggle for survival, statements like ‘Watch out! There’s a sabre-toothed tiger out there!’ wouldn’t have been much help if in fact there wasn’t one and all the members of the group were safe in a cave. Fibbing was useless at best, counterproductive at worst – why would you sow fear without good cause? There’s a reason why even today we’re left red-faced if we’re publicly caught in a lie, why it’s often social suicide – it’s a hangover from an age when saying something that wasn’t true could endanger the whole group and was therefore heavily sanctioned. From an evolutionary perspective, in the beginning there was no reason for speakers to get creative when they communicated. Language served purely to convey information.

Yet this was exactly what changed, for reasons that were partly quite pragmatic. Child explains this in terms of a period of extremely harsh cold that claimed the lives of many of our ancestors:

Only the very strongest survived that vicious population bottleneck, and the very best at speculating, strategizing, coordinating, discussing, predicting and developing a plan B ahead of time. Probably a plan C and a plan D too, under the circumstances. Truthful non-fiction carried the day.

But it was increasingly mixed in with something new and strange. At some point [they] started talking about things that hadn’t happened to people who didn’t exist. This was not lying, in a sense that threatened the evolutionary value of language. This was a radical mental jump in a completely different direction, never before attempted. This was imagining a parallel or theoretical universe, where things could happen, based on experience, but not constrained by fact.[[5]](#footnote-6)

Suddenly, ‘saying what is’ became ‘saying what was’, and ‘saying what could be’. And at some point people started telling stories about things that didn’t exist or happen in or immediately outside the cave, but somewhere far away. In fact, they spoke with impunity about sabre-toothed tigers that weren’t even there, presumably to steel themselves before actually bumping into them one day.

Is this the moment fiction began? Were the mammoths in the hunters’ stories suddenly not just big, but the size of mountain? And did people who could tell particularly impressive stories eventually take on an entirely new role in the group?

From a contemporary perspective, it seems plausible that a story in which the mammoth was terrifyingly large was more likely to be passed around than one about an unspectacular rabbit-hunting excursion. As narratives evolved, the more exciting, more memorable stories most likely prevailed, and because they were so dramatic they were easier to pass on and retell than purely factual information. At some point in human history, telling embellished or entirely made-up stories became a factor in survival, leading to an evolutionary advantage. Survival by fiction, so to speak. And before long it had transformed: from a way of warning or comforting one another, and of explaining the world to ourselves, to a way for each individual person to tell a story of his or her own.

1. Walter Fisher: ‘Narration as a human communication paradigm: The case of public moral argument’, in: *Communication Monographs*, 51, 1 (1984), pp. 1–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Will Storr: *The Science of Storytelling: Why Stories Make Us Human, and How to Tell Them Better*. London, William Collins 2019, p.28. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Benjamin K. Bergen: *Louder Than Words: The New Science of How the Mind Makes Meaning*. New York, Basic Books 2012, p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Cf. Daniel Everett’s *How Language Began: The Story of Humanity’s Greatest Invention*. London, Profile 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Lee Child, *The Hero*, London, TLS Books 2019, pp. 32–33. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)