

What do readers like in a story?

I've been thinking about this question, paying attention to what I enjoy reading and also listening to what my readers say about my books. So what *do* readers like about a story and what is missing if it does not resonate with them? Last year I read a fascinating, scientific treatise on this question, by Will Storr, called *The Science of Storytelling*. In it, he argues convincingly that human beings are hard-wired for stories. He states we are ancient storytellers, that story is fundamental to human civilization. Stories he says provide necessary guideposts for living, for teaching us, reassuring us, and connecting us to others. They offer deep satisfaction in seeing justice done, in seeing good triumph over evil, in showing us what we can be. It is through stories that we learn about ourselves and our relations with others. These kinds of stories inspire us. Think of *Don Quixote*.

Stories teach us how to live and show us what is important, and they have been doing so since man began exchanging sentences with his neighbors. Not all stories work this way. Some fail to inspire or catch our interest or imagination. When they fail, I think it is because they lack some of the essential features of a good story. The most moving stories are structured tales. Joseph Campbell describes this beautifully in *The Hero's Journey*, i.e., the mythic oft-repeated format of the hero's quest. The form generally begins with an ordinary man (or woman) called to adventure, usually a noble and difficult one. The future hero is initially reluctant to go but a mentor helps him embark. Along the way, he is tested with setbacks, but eventually he triumphs and reaps his reward. He returns to his ordinary life, but is forever changed. There are more steps, but that is the gist. This heroic tale can operate on many levels, in many realms, all satisfying for a reader.

For example, I just finished reading John Grisham's novel, *The Litigators*. Grisham is a master storyteller. In this particular book, he presents the reader with a pair of bumbling, barely competent "street lawyers," actually, ambulance chasers. These two manage to attract a third partner, a Harvard-educated, high priced associate from a "white-glove firm," who is terribly disillusioned with the billable hours rat race. As a reader, you instinctively pull for this trio. They face impossible odds, nearly give up (as Campbell describes), but they triumph in the end. It's a classic tale.

So, there are story lines and tropes we all resonate with. That doesn't mean one can't write a story that violates these concepts, but it does mean that stories that lack them have difficulty gaining traction with the public. I think some of my work, notably my latest novel, *Empty Luck*, depicts a harsh reality where characters struggle with their challenges and do not triumph. Sure, some do, here and there, but most of my "heroes" are hardly heroic and don't manage to overcome something or someone worthy of the battle. I think my readers deserve a story that has a more satisfying outcome. And this is what is motivating me to write a fourth book in my *Twisted Roads Series*. I want something good to come of Jared, my poor struggling addicted protagonist. So far, he has not been able to rise above his demons, but it is time he does.