

*TALKING THE WALK, The Grassroots Language of Feminism*

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Excerpt Part Four, Chapter 19; “The Story of the Story” pp. 234-236

**CHAPTER 19: STORY POWER**

**The Story of the Story**

We live in the story of our lives. Our original minds and formative years are nurtured on the stories of our culture. These are combined with the residue of experience in our memory—an interconnecting fabric of accounts and snippets of the events, processes, thoughts and fictions we have grown up with, deliberately or not. Our bodies give us stories, too. And our emotions offer narratives that our minds could only dream of.

We connect with others and to the external world through stories. We join into the circle of life through culture. Culture can be described as an “environment of narrations that make self-evident sense in explaining human behavior.” From this angle, the process of living ends up as an unending series of stories strung together—or a big anthology, selected over a long period of time—which we, as individuals, must make sense of.

And so we gravitate to story. Tellers of story. Books and news. Gossip. Movies and tv and bullshitters at the bar. The classic, the myth, the well-crafted “piece;” the Bible; titillating trash, theater, the presidential election. Visual arts, songs and music. Our memories, dreams, perceptions and imaginings. We lose ourselves and get embroiled in stories.

Through story, the kaleidoscope of human life is brought to mingle with our hearts and souls. Through it, we find the past and liberate the imagination. Intelligent response unlocks words to reveal the truth about human identity and behavior and the values that have shaped the story.

Story is two-sided: it implies an audience. Reader, onlooker, listener, keeping solidarity with the message; or, because of the teller’s intention or hearer’s aversion, exclusion. We all relate, or not, on a micro or macro level and anywhere in between. Because this is the medium through which we come to know ourselves, we must narrow down this grand narrative and evaluate it in terms of how it correlates with women’s reality and intentions for the future.

Growing up female, we are conditioned to be seduced by story. Classical or trash, we are after that one thing: to be carried away. In the passionate tale, story and reader become reversible, locked together in the allure of patterns and imagery whose

value we not only recognize, but are culturally poised to emulate. We become entrapped in the image of passionate seduction, and are unable to distinguish between the real and the contrived. And it may not end there. Many carry over the model into adult life, renaming it “hope.” We hope that life will turn out like the tales of our cultural directives. We lose ourselves in the story, believing that within the pages, our true selves can be found. Which is a tragedy, because we emerge from this story with romantic notions and frustrated desires, and indisposed to separate the fictions from the real world. The Cinderella story is the classic example. Told that we will be rescued from our limitations by a superior male who will cause us to live happily ever after, we are destroyed when the promise and its trappings fail, often tragically and irreversibly. This is as true today as it always has been. Only the jobs and decor have changed.

“Women are constructed not born,” wrote Simone de Beauvoir, author of *The Second Sex*, meaning we’re playing roles and wearing costumes. Stories lead us out of our essential character, claiming to know us better than we know ourselves. A million discoveries! Telling us what we have longed to find words for. Stories reveal the secrets of our kind—warning us against danger and against our own predations.

In these readings, a sense that the text has appeared to be wholly new, never before seen, is followed, almost immediately, by the sense that it was *always there*, that we the readers, knew it was always there, and have *always known* it was as it was, though we have now for the first time recognised, become fully cognisant of, our knowledge.

A.S. Byatt, *Possession*

Then they betray us, like Prince Charming does. We grow out of these stories. We will no longer be constructed. We have not found the promised man, the great career, the style, clothes, or allure of the drop-dead glamorous. Or maybe we have, but they’ve fled away, because we never learned how to keep them. We fall from the invented ease of the storybook scenario and wake up conscious; ready for the real push toward our individuality.

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There is an omnipresent metaphorical frame through which we learn to know ourselves, the people and the world. This is the male worldview, and its values do not take into account the wisdom and experience of women, except where these serve its purpose. And there is a corresponding willingness in women—masochism even—that sustains and collaborates with this view. When we seek the truth at the essence of the story or image, we do so using judgments fabricated by male values (unless our texts have been vetted by feminist methodology—a rare occasion in the mainstream or at the grassroots level). The error may be inadvertent, but it is reality, all the same.

**End Excerpt *The Story of the Story***