Review of 'The Seven Basic Plots' (2004) by Christopher Booker

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Christopher Booker
THE SEVEN BASIC PLOTS: Why we tell stories
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Christopher Booker is a journalist and author. He was the founding editor of *Private Eye*, for whom he still writes – notably as one of the creators of ‘St Albion’s Parish News’ which parodies the Prime Minister and his government as a vicar and his PCC. Booker is a longstanding observer of British culture, reflected in his earlier book *The Neophiliacs*, and critic of the European project regularly discussed in a weekly column for the *Sunday Telegraph* and in his last work *The Great Deception*. However, this most recent volume is undoubtedly his most ambitious work to date as he seeks to explain the nature of storytelling in over 700 pages of closely argued but entertaining prose. His journey begins with the Epic of Gilgamesh and proceeds through the stories of the Bible and Shakespeare, fairytales and films, fables and fantasy, ancient myth and modern fiction to the present day.

The Seven Basic Plots is divided into four sections. Part one entitled ‘The Seven Gateways to the Underworld’ sets out Booker’s basic typology of story consisting of: (i) overcoming the monster; (ii) rags to riches; (iii) the quest; (iv) voyage and return; (v) comedy; (vi) tragedy and (vii) rebirth. As he admits later in the book, these categories are not exhaustive and he identifies at least three other types of story but these are the forms of narrative which Booker sees as foundational to the human condition. Part two begins the process of addressing his subtitle and explaining why humanity has such a ubiquitous need for stories. Under the heading ‘The Complete Happy Ending’ he starts to unpack his Freudian/Jungian thinking on archetypes and their psychological significance. In essence he sees the traditional happy ending, in which a man and woman live happily ever after, as symbolic of integrated personhood where an individual brings together their male and female aspects in maturity and wholeness.

The third part, ‘Missing the Mark’, develops these ideas further by exploring what he believes is the damaging role of the ego in much 19th and 20th century writing. The final part, entitled ‘Why We Tell Stories’, is probably the most stimulating section as Booker applies his ideas to our contemporary situation. For the author, it is the unique power of human ego-consciousness which separates us from each other and nature, and has broken down the natural state of integration between ego and deeper unconsciousness. Thus, stories ‘all originate in a desire to underpin or re-establish that sense of unity which every animal enjoys without thinking’ (p 551).

The penultimate chapter – ‘Of Gods and Men: Reconnection with ‘The One’’ includes Booker’s psychological reading of the Bible, Jesus and Christianity. Using ‘myth’ in the technical sense, he argues that the story of Jesus works within the archetype of tragedy since ‘he acted out the pattern of how all human beings imprisoned in ego-consciousness must die’. However, it also shows how, ‘if only they can make contact with the selfless part of themselves which lies beyond ego-consciousness, that state of ‘sin’ which only came into the world with the ‘Fall’ and mankind’s emergence from unconscious unity with nature, they can be re-united with that state of One-ness which cannot die because it is eternal’ (p 620).
There is no doubt that Booker’s work is sweeping in its scope and impressive in its appreciation of story in all its many manifestations. Perhaps the most surprising omission from his work is any reference to the literary ideas of René Girard. Early on he observes that the ‘love triangle’ is the ‘most incomprehensible form of literature ever devised’ (p 115) and at the conclusion of his reflections on tragedy he notes briefly the importance of the scapegoat (p 191). Given the significance of the tragic archetype in Booker’s understanding Jesus and Christianity, Girard’s approach to mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism would have significantly extended this and other aspects of his analysis. Nevertheless, this is a thought provoking contribution to the role of classical and contemporary story-telling in human culture, which will open up the value of narrative to all who venture between these covers.