

Praise for Brian McDonald and *Invisible Ink*

“*Invisible Ink* is a powerful tool for anyone who wants to become a better screenwriter.

With elegance and precision, Brian McDonald uses his deep understanding of story and character to pass on essential truths about dramatic writing. Ignore him at your peril.”

—Jim Taylor (Academy Award-nominated screenwriter of *Sideways* and *Election*)

"Brian McDonald's *Invisible Ink* is a wise, fresh, and highly entertaining book on the art of storytelling. I read it hungrily in one sitting, delighted by his careful and illuminating analysis of my favorite films, novels, television shows, and even comics. A multitalented creator, McDonald never errs in his critical judgments or the very practical principles he provides for creating well-made stories. I recommend this fine handbook on craft to any writer, apprentice or professional, working in any genre or form."

—Dr. Charles Johnson (National Book Award-winning author of *Middle Passage*)

"Nobody, in Hollywood or out, understands story better than Brian McDonald. Never give a script to Brian to read casually, because he doesn't know how to do that. He only knows how to make it better—whether you like it or not."

—Mark Handley (Screenwriter of *Nell*)

"If you want to write scripts, listen to Brian. The guy knows what he's talking about. A very well-thought-out, easy-to-follow guide to the thing all we writers love to pretend we

don't slavishly follow—story structure."

—Paul Fieg (Creator of NBC's *Freaks and Geeks*)

"Brian unlocks the secrets to making a great screenplay. I only wish I had read it sooner." —Steve Higgins (Producer, *Saturday Night Live*)

"Hey Brian. after you spoke at ILM's storytelling seminar the response I received from attendees was overwhelming. I really can't forget it. You had them from the start ... your charisma and common sense punctuate the nuts and bolts of story with which you are so familiar and which you share so beautifully with others. thanks a million."

—Kim Bromley (George Lucas's Industrial Light and Magic)

"The nuts-and-bolts of storytelling are laid out with clarity, passion and fun. A lively read, with vivid examples throughout. It's inspiring."

—Paul Chadwick (Creator of the critically acclaimed comic book, *Concrete*)

"Don't tell anyone but the secret to exceptional story crafting is written in *Invisible Ink*. So I advise you read it, memorize it, and then eat the pages one at a time and digest it thoroughly, so that it stays with you. Besides you can't afford for this book to fall into the hands of your competitors. Brian's powerful concept of armature as understructure will change the way you look at movies and writing forever."

—Pat Hazell (Producer / playwright)

"*Invisible Ink* fell into my hands at just the right time—as I was banging my head against the wall trying to structure a screenplay that had too much going on in it. The book's thoughtful exploration of what makes movies work helped me see my core story clearly, and throw away a third of my material—which I now understand will not be missed. I have a stronger, more focused script thanks to a process inspired by this book."

—George Wing (Screenwriter of *50 First Dates*)

INVISIBLE INK

The understructure of story

By

Brian McDonald

2003

For Scott Tolson,

A friend, a brother, a teacher and a storyteller.

This book was written on location at Victrola Coffee, Seattle, WA.

If you put a gun onstage in Act I you must use it by Act III. —Anton Chekhov

If there is something wrong with the third act, it's really in the first act. —Billy Wilder

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Chapter I

WHAT IS INVISIBLE INK?

WHAT IS INVISIBLE INK?

A friend of mine once took an anthropology class in which she heard this story:

An anthropologist was living among tribal people with little to no contact of the modern world. Wanting to share the marvels of technology with these isolated folks, the anthropologist took a photo of the chief and his wives. When the picture was processed and shown to the chief he was unable to recognize the blotches of black, white and gray as an image of himself. He had never learned to translate two-dimensional images into recognizable three-dimensional shapes. That same chief, however, could look at a patch of grass and say what kind of animal had traversed it and how long ago with no more difficulty than you or I would have recognizing in a photographic image.

Story structure works very much this way. It is easy to see if you know what to look for, and invisible to those who don't.

Often when I listen to how people evaluate stories, I hear them talk about dialogue.

When they talk about “the script” for a film they are often talking about the dialogue. Or when they mention how well a book is written, they most often mean they way the words are put together—the beauty of a sentence.

When people speak of Shakespeare's work they almost always talk about the beauty of the language.

These are all forms of "visible ink." This term refers to writing that is readily "seen" by the reader or viewer. They often mistake these words on the page as the only writing that the storyteller is doing.

But how events in a story are ordered is also writing. What events should occur in a story to make the teller's point is also writing. Why a character behaves in a particular way is also writing.

These are all forms of "invisible ink," so called because it is not easily spotted by a reader, viewer, or listener of a story. Invisible ink does, however, have a profound impact on a story. More to the point, they *are* the story itself. Invisible ink is the writing below the surface of the words. Most people will never see, or notice it, but they will feel it. If you learn to use it, your work will feel polished, professional, and it will have a profound impact on your audience.

This book teaches you to see the elements that actually constitute story and how to apply them to your own work. Even stories that you are most familiar with will reveal their inner workings to you in ways you have never seen before.

By the end of this book, you will be able to see footprints in the grass.

Chapter II

SEVEN EASY STEPS TO A BETTER STORY

ONCE UPON A TIME ...

UNTIL ONE DAY ...

AND BECAUSE OF THIS ...

AND BECAUSE OF THIS ...

UNTIL FINALLY ...

AND EVER SINCE THAT DAY ...

SEVEN EASY STEPS TO A BETTER STORY

Stories are not complicated. They are, in fact, deceptively simple. But like anything simple, they are difficult to create. I realize that sounds a little like Lewis Carroll, but hear me out.

One of the things that hangs us all up when writing is that we feel we need to make it more complicated. We feel that this will make it better, but it never does. It just makes it muddy.

I often hear people say, “less is more.” But I don’t see it reflected in their work. What follows are seven steps that make up all narratives. I was taught them by an /writer/teacher by the name of Matt Smith. He learned them from a guy named Joe Guppy. And you are learning them from me.

THE STEPS

1.) Once upon a time_____

2.) And every day_____

3.) Until one day_____

4.) And because of this_____

5.) And because of this_____

6.) Until finally_____

7.) And ever since that day_____

These steps are a kind of invisible ink. I'm sure you recognize them. They just make sense, don't they? Why didn't you know them already? You did. You just thought it would be more complicated than that.

ONCE UPON A TIME ...

There are many books you can read that explain three-act structure so I will cover it only briefly here using “The Seven Steps” as a template.

Let’s look at the first two steps: Once upon a time and Everyday. They are your Act One. What is the purpose of act one? It tells the audience everything they need to know to understand the story that is to follow.

Let’s look at what legendary filmmaker Billy Wilder says about the importance of a good first act:

“If there is something wrong with the third act, it’s really in the first act.”

Most of us have no problem understanding the importance of the first act of a joke.

When someone tells a joke poorly it is more likely than not that they have forgotten to convey an important piece of information in the set-up that makes the punchline funny.

So, it seems, the joke is in the set-up and not the punchline.

Just as with a joke, a story’s set-up must tell the audience everything they need to know

to understand the story.

What does an audience need to know? Think of your childhood storybooks:

Once upon a time there were Three Bears who lived together in their own house in the forest. Mama Bear, Papa Bear, and Baby Bear. They had each a bowl for their porridge—a small bowl for Baby Bear, a middle-sized bowl for Mama Bear, and a big bowl for Papa Bear.

There are several things we know just from those few sentences. Yes, we know there are three bears. We know that there are at least three major characters and we know their relationship to one another. But we also know that these bears behave as people. That is important. You could very well have a story where the bears act as animals.

Remember, when you create a story, you must let the audience know the *reality* of your story. It's your world.

“A duck walks into a bar and orders a rum and Coke.” That joke starts by giving you a major character and letting you know the reality.

Notice that when a joke starts with a duck walking into a bar, no one says, “That’s ridiculous!” They accept it because it’s the first thing they are told. Whatever your “talking duck” is, let people know right away.

The opening of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is often talked about because it's exciting. But it is much more than that. With so many fantastical things happening right at the story's opening, the audience knows a few things about its world.

We know that the story's reality is heightened—that it is not to be a story about a soldier coping with his life after Vietnam. It is a fantasy that takes place in the year 1936. We know that in this world, archaeology is much more than just digging for pieces of clay pots. We know, also, that the guy in the fedora is good with a whip and good at his job. He appears to be fearless and smart. Things don't always go as planned for him, and he sometimes survives by the skin of his teeth.

We meet Belloq, Indiana Jones's arch enemy, so we know his is a ruthless business, and men will kill for the valuable artifacts they seek.

We see that Indiana Jones does have his fears: snakes. He's not superhuman.

Which brings up something else. We know some things because they are defined by their absence. We know that Indiana Jones may be skilled, but he does not possess magical powers. In some realities, magic powers are commonplace, but not in this one.

There is another Spielberg film that shows what a disaster it can be to have a poor first act: In the mid-1980s, Steven Spielberg produced a television show called *Amazing*

Stories. A particular episode, “The Mission,” was one Mr. Spielberg also directed.

The story takes place during WWII, aboard a B-17 bomber. B-17s had a crew of ten. One of the crewmen was positioned under the belly of the plane in a Plexiglas bubble so he could fire his machine gun at any threat coming from underneath the plane.

In this story, the “belly-gunner,” as they were called, is a talented and likable guy who draws caricatures of his crewmates, much to their amusement. He wants to work for Walt Disney Studios.

The plane goes on a bombing mission and is badly damaged. When the belly-gunner tries to crawl out of his bubble and into the plane he finds that he is trapped underneath the plane because of the damage.

The crew tries to get him out, but can’t. No problem; they can just get him out when they land. Then someone suggests that they check the landing gear—it doesn’t work.

Without wheels, the plane will have to land on its belly, crushing the helpless gunner to death.

The crew does not want to give up on their buddy and increase the effort to save him. Nothing works.

Sure that the man will die, the airbase calls a priest to be there when the plane lands.

It becomes painfully clear that the gunner is going to die and there is nothing to be done. Each of the crewmembers puts his hand down the small top opening of the bubble to say his good-byes. They are in tears as they rub the gunner's head or embrace his hand.

Without the belly-gunner's knowledge, the decision has been made to shoot him so that he won't suffer the pain of being crushed.

Slowly, one of the men pulls his pistol and lowers it down to the head of his unsuspecting friend.

The poor gunner is crying and muttering that he can't die because he's going to work for Walt Disney Studios.

The pistol creeps ever closer to his head as he busily sketches a cartoon version of a B-17. He is almost in a trance. He draws big, cartoonish wheels on the bottom of the plane.

As they approach the landing strip, the pilot decides to try one last time to lower the landing gear. His indicators tell him that the wheels have lowered.

From the bottom of the *real* plane, big exaggerated cartoon tires emerge. They make the sound of a squeaky balloon and are complete with a cartoon tire patch.

The plane is able to land on these cartoon tires and the man is saved.

The night this show aired, I had a group of friends over to watch the show. I can tell you that we were riveted to the screen during this show. We kept wondering how the hell they were going to get out of this. The tension and suspense were palpable.

We all reacted with disappointed laughter upon the landing of the plane on cartoon wheels. So, it turns out, did the rest of America.

I can't tell you how disappointed audiences were when this episode aired. I remember how, the next day, people at work talked about how bad it was. They thought the entire episode was awful.

Spielberg had not set up a reality where cartoon tires could save the day. There are realities in which this may be possible: *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, for example.

Spielberg had done such a good job with the first part of the story that we, the audience, believed the situation was dire. We were invested in the story and its world. The cartoon tires were from some other world we knew nothing about.

Just as Billy Wilder said, "If there is something wrong with the third act, it's really in the first act," so your "Once upon a time" is your reality and your major characters.

“And every day ...” just supports what has already been setup. It establishes a pattern. A pattern to be broken by ...

UNTIL ONE DAY ...

an inciting incident occurs. The inciting incident is the true beginning of your story. If your story is about a couple who has an affair, this might be when they meet. Or if they have already met, it is when the affair begins.

Some will tell you that this is where your conflict begins, but not necessarily. Comic-book writer and editor Jim Shooter has observed that the second act can start with conflict or opportunity. For instance, if you've got a story where the first act is about a young woman who is so poor she can't pay her rent then the first act might end when she finds one million dollars.

This step has been called many things: act break, plot point, turning point, and curtain. I prefer curtain. The reason I like the term curtain is because it comes from theater, wherein a curtain is literally dropped between acts. In live theater, they must get the audience back after intermission, so the acts end on the highest point, when the stakes are at their most desperate. For me, imagining that there is a physical curtain helps me to remember to raise the stakes.

In his book, *Comedy Writing Step by Step*, comedy writer Gene Perret calls this the "Uh-oh factor." In a well-constructed sketch, the character and/or situation is established and

then something happens that requires a reaction. He uses an example from the old *Carol Burnett Show* in which Carol plays a woman who has just been released from a hospital psych ward for being addicted to soap operas. She proclaims that she is cured. She says, "I don't care if Bruce marries Wanda or not." Her friend's response is, "Bruce is dead." As Mr. Perret describes it, Carol's eye's widen at this news and the audience thinks "Uh-oh, she's hooked on soaps again."

Drama has this "Uh-oh" moment as well. In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, the king promises his entire fortune to the one of his three daughters who can prove she loves him most. That's an Uh-oh moment if there ever was one.

Few people could stop watching a drama after something like that is introduced.

AND BECAUSE OF THIS ...

This is now your second act. When your first “curtain” goes down, that is the end of your first act. Now it is time to explore what happens as a result of your first act—everything should be cause-and-effect. If your character was diagnosed with inoperable cancer at the end of act one, this is where they deal with it. Do they go into denial? Do they give up, lie down and wait to die? Or are they a fighter? Will they try anything for another few days of life? Do they question how they have lived their life and try to do something worthwhile before they die?

Whatever the character does, it must be in reaction to the incident at the act one curtain.

AND BECAUSE OF THIS ...

Act two is your longest act and makes up the body of your story. This act is usually split in two. I like to call this split the fulcrum. Because act two is so long, it can be difficult to keep an audience engrossed. It helps to cut it in half.

In Billy Wilder's classic noir film, *Double Indemnity*, a woman and her lover decide to kill the woman's husband for the insurance money. In the first half of act two they plan the murder. At the fulcrum, they carry out their plan and the second half of act two the focus becomes: "Will they get away with this crime?"

Back to our character diagnosed with cancer. Let's say that when given the news of his cancer, he gives up on life and begins alienating those who care for him. But at the fulcrum something happens that makes him want to live. Now he will stop at nothing to find a cure.

UNTIL FINALLY ...

This is your third act. The third act curtain is the beginning of the end of the story. In a cop drama, for instance, it might be the clue that solves the big mystery and puts the detective on the trail of the killer. This event, whatever it is, starts the chain of events that leads to your climax.

Using our example of the cancer patient, perhaps this is where he makes peace with the inevitable and accepts his impending death. Perhaps he decides to cherish the moments he has left with family and friends and spends his time with them instead of searching for the elusive cure for his disease.

AND EVER SINCE THAT DAY ...

Following your climax is a short scene or two called a denouement. “They lived happily ever after” is the most familiar denouement. You shouldn’t have too much following your climax, just something that lets the audience know what the life of your protagonist is like after it.

In the case of our unfortunate cancer patient, he does not survive; but maybe this is where we see how his courage in the face of death has had a lasting impact on those who survive. Or maybe how he lives on through his art. Or perhaps this death has ended old rivalries and caused others to cherish those around them.

What I would like you to do now is write down each of these steps, followed by a blank space. Then I want you to write a few simple stories using these steps. Make them as simple as possible.

What you will find is that what you have written feels like a story, but seems to lack something. They are shallow for some reason. They are forgettable. It is a small matter to fix; all you need to do is have a point.

Chapter III

THE ARMATURE

JOKE EXERCISE

WHAT MEANS TO DRAMATIZE AN IDEA

THEME BEATS LOGIC

“BUNDLE OF STICKS”

THE USE OF CLONES

THE ARMATURE

A fool speaks because he must say something and a wise man speaks because he has something to say.

– Old Saying

Why do people tell stories? The stories that tend to stick to our bones are those that teach us something. This, I believe, is the primary reason we tell stories: To learn.

Consider this: There is no culture on the globe that does not have stories. We all have music and we all have stories.

People who study human speech believe that humans did not invent language anymore than birds invented flight. It is in our make-up to speak. It is part of being human.

It makes sense to me that stories fall under this category. They are part of us. I've seen memory experts on television who will give volunteers a huge list of objects to memorize. Of course, this is difficult to do. Then they tell the volunteer to string the objects together in an absurd story. When this is done, the list is easily recalled. Our brains seem to retain information this way.

I have read about aboriginal tribes in Australia who use songs and stories in case they get lost. These songs contain information like a map. So if you know the words to a particular song, you can, for instance, find water in an unfamiliar area because you know the song for that area. Besides saving lives, stories can also tell us how we should live.

In Africa, they used to tell the story of a black slave-catcher who helped the English capture his own countrymen and sell them into a life of slavery. One night, after a particularly good catch, the black slave-catcher was celebrating with the English and they all got drunk on rum. The black man passed out, and when he awoke the next day, he found himself in the belly of a slave ship chained to the very people he helped enslave. This is a cautionary tale that teaches its listener that there is a price to be paid for betrayal.

In Bruno Bettelheim's book, *The Uses of Enchantment*, he tells of the traditional Hindi medical practice of giving the patient a story to contemplate. Through this story the patient would learn from the hero's failures and victories how to deal with and resolve his/her own problem.

Take the story of King Midas. This man was so greedy that he wished that all he touched would turn to gold. That is until he touched his beloved daughter and she was changed to gold. We learn that some things are more important than money. Like the aboriginal song, this story is a map, a map for living.

Look at the Bible. It could be just a list of rules, but it's not—it's stories. Stories resonate with people. Lists do not.

If you want people to hold fast to their faith no matter what, you tell them the story of Job. Job would not renounce God no matter what the Devil did to him, and in the end he was rewarded.

If you want people to stand up to power, no matter what the odds, tell them the story of David and Goliath.

If you want to teach people not to get too full of themselves you, tell them the story of King Nimrod, who thought himself so great that he tried to build a tower to God. He was put in his place when God gave all the workers different languages so they could not communicate.

The Greeks and Romans had similar stories. All religions have understood, for a very long time, that stories are powerful tools.

Why is it that some stories stick to our bones, while others are soon forgotten? Do you remember the story I told you about the tribal chief and the anthropologist? Sure you do. Why? It's because I had a point, a reason to tell that story. Having a point gives your stories resonance. Do you recall the saying, "A fool speaks because he must say something and a wise man speaks because he has something to say?" This is true when

one is crafting a story as well.

Because of my work at make-up effects houses, I've known a few sculptors. When they begin sculpting in clay, they first build an armature to act as a skeleton; otherwise, the piece would not hold its shape. It might look good for a while, but would soon collapse.

When an admirer of art looks at a sculpture, she never sees or even thinks about the armature that gives the piece its structural integrity. It is invisible, but as much a part of the sculpture as the outside.

Before you begin writing, you too must build an armature. For us story-crafters, the armature is the idea upon which we hang our story. It is what has been called theme, but I find that the word theme is not descriptive enough and leads to confusion; I have found in teaching that many people bring a lot of baggage to the table when I address theme.

What is an armature, then, when talking about story craft? It is what you want to say with your piece. I was once talking to a friend who was complaining about a producer wanting to change a scene in his script. My friend was angry because the change had nothing to do with his "theme." He said, "My theme is competition. And the change has nothing to do with competition!" I didn't say anything at the time, but my friend was confused. There is an old joke about marriage that goes, "Marriage is not a word, it's a sentence." It's the same with theme. My friend had nothing to say about competition. "Competition" is not a theme. A theme (or armature) might be, "Competition is

sometimes a necessary evil.” Or, “Competition leads to self destruction.” Saying that your theme is competition is like saying your theme is “Red.” It really says nothing at all.

Let’s look at the story of King Midas. If you recall, he was a king who loved money above all else, or so he thought. He was granted a wish that all he touched would turn to gold. This was great until he touched his daughter and she was turned to gold. The king learned that some things are more important than money.

One way to look at your armature is what is called, in children’s fables, “the moral.” The armature is your point. Your story is sculpted around this point.

With King Midas, the storyteller wanted to teach people that some things were more important than money. What were his tasks as a writer? First, he had to create a character who was greedy. Then he needed to set up a situation wherein the character gets what he wants. Then he needed to turn this wish into something that would teach the character a lesson. Everything in this story is designed to make the writer’s point. This should be true of your work as well.

Some of you may think this definition of theme too simplistic. It must be harder than this, you think. It isn’t. You are also worried about being perceived as too preachy. Over the years, I have encountered many students concerned with being too preachy or blatant, but never one who was afraid of not being clear enough or that their point would

not be understood.

The first thing you must do to get your point across is to understand what you want to say. I know that sounds simple and obvious, but I almost never meet writers who know what they want to say. Mostly what they want is to say something deep and profound that no one has ever said before, but they don't know what that is. Or they want to say a thousand things in one story, not realizing that to say too much is to say nothing at all.

I was once reading an interview with animation director Chuck Jones in which he talked about animating young animals versus old animals. He had observed that a puppy, for instance, would expend excess energy to perform simple tasks. This results in those floppy movements we associate with young mammals. In contrast, adult animals are more economical. Think of the clumsy hunting style of a kitten versus the precision of an adult cat. I have noticed this same thing with story crafters. Writer with the least experience and skill think that the more complicated something is the better. But like a kitten their work comes off clumsy and unfocused. If you want to come off like a mature writer, be precise.

There is an old piece of advice usually given to someone about to give a speech:

Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them. This is no different for storytellers. In fact, those three bits of advice could represent the three acts. But just how do you put this into practice? How is your armature put together?

First, you must know where you are going or you will never get there. Then you must let the audience know where you are taking them. You show them the armature—the idea you want to build on. One way this is done is to have a character state out loud what you want to say with your story.

In *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial*, when Elliot says something hurtful to his mother, Elliot's older brother gets angry at his insensitivity and yells, "Damn it, when are you going to grow up and learn how other people feel for a change?" What happens next is that Elliot meets E.T. And one of the first things that happens is that when E.T. becomes sleepy, so does Elliot. Then when E.T. is hungry, so is Elliot. When E.T. drinks beer Elliot gets drunk, too.

Later, when Elliot introduces E.T. to his brother, he says, "I'm keeping him." This without any regard for what E.T. wants. But he is beginning to empathize with others as is evidenced in the scene in which Elliot feels for the frogs in his science class, and sets them free before they can be dissected. By the end of the film, Elliot "feels what other people feel," enough to send E.T. home even though he will miss his friend. Everything in the film is built on the armature stated by Elliot's brother at the beginning of the story.

Iron Giant is an amazing animated film directed by Brad Bird. On its surface, this film is like *E.T.* in many ways. It is about a boy who befriends a being from outer space (in this case, a giant robot). And, as in *E.T.*, the government is seeking the alien. So what's different about it, you might ask. It's the armature. As a matter of fact I heard very few

people compare the two films. They each had something different to say, so the similar stuff on the surface didn't matter much.

In the story of *Iron Giant*, the robot is damaged when it gets to earth. Later, after befriending the boy, the kindly robot remembers that it is programmed to be a weapon of mass destruction. In fact, it nearly vaporizes the boy by accident. Now, the robot has an internal conflict. Will it give in to its programming (its nature) or rise above it? From what I understand, when Mr. Bird pitched the story, he said, "What if a gun had a conscience and didn't want to be a gun anymore?" That was his armature. In the film it is stated this way: "You are who you choose to be."

The success of *There's Something About Mary* was a film that sent Hollywood rushing to produce toilet-humor comedies. But the Farelly Brothers had made other "shock-comedies," why did this one become a mega-hit that almost everyone seemed to love? I thought the film was so good I saw it three times in the theater. If you knew me, you'd know that I like few films. And I certainly don't like sophomoric humor. So again, why this film? It had an armature.

I don't believe that audiences care much about the genre of a story; they just want to be moved in some way. And they respond over and over again to stories with an armature. In *Something About Mary*, Ben Stiller's character is dishonest to Mary and to himself. He is a stalker, and until he realizes it, he is not worthy of Mary's love.

A film like James Cameron's *Terminator* would seem, on its surface, to have a flimsy armature, but it really has something meaningful to say. If you recall, Sarah Connor was an ordinary 20th-century woman with a stressful low-wage job at a burger joint. In the first act of the film, Sarah is having a particularly bad day at work when her coworker says to her, "Look at it this way, in a hundred years, who will care?"

As it turns out, Sarah's life is about to be turned upside down. A robot from the future has been sent back in time to kill her, to prevent her from giving birth to her son, who is a threat to Skynet (the computer that rules the future earth). She is, according to the film, one of the most important people ever born. So, this mundane life that she lives does, indeed, matter. In a hundred years, everyone will care who Sarah Connor was.

This is not unlike *It's a Wonderful Life*, wherein George Bailey thinks it would make little difference to the world if he had never been born. He learns, of course, that his life has had a great impact on those people around him, and even on some he has never met.

These two movies would, on the surface, seem to have nothing in common, but they share a common armature: None of us knows how important our mundane lives may prove to be.

Yes, these are all high-key fantasy films, but armature also applies to straight dramas. They can also state their armature out loud. In *Kramer Versus Kramer*, a story in which Dustin Hoffman's wife, played by Meryl Streep, walks out on him and leaves him with

their child, Dustin is speaking with a neighbor who tells him that what Meryl did took a lot of courage. His response is: “Oh, yeah, how much courage does it take to walk out on your child?” By the end of the film, that question is answered for Dustin and for the audience. Watch it and see.

In the *Wizard of Oz* the armature is stated: “There’s no place like home.” But it might more accurately be said: “You may already have what you are looking for.” How do we know that this is so? Is it because it is said? No, it’s because it is dramatized.

Remember that your armature is the foundation that holds up your story. Everything hangs on top of it. Every decision you make should be based on the idea of dramatizing your armature idea.

JOKE EXERCISE

I like to use jokes as an instructional tool because they are short stories of a type and are great for teaching structure. One can learn much about Invisible Ink from the study of jokes. Just as all elements of a joke support the punchline, so should every element of your story support its armature. Good story structure means that nothing is extraneous, every element leads to an inevitable, yet surprising, conclusion.

Choose the appropriate punchlines for the following jokes.

Joke Number One:

A seaman meets a pirate in a bar. The two men take turns boasting of their adventures on the high seas.

The seaman notes the pirate has a peg-leg, hook, and an eye-patch. He asks, "So, how did you end up with the peg-leg?"

The pirate replies, "We were in a storm at sea, and I was swept overboard into a school of sharks. Just as my men were pulling me out, a shark bit my leg off."

“Wow!” said the seaman. “What about your hook?”

“Well,” replied the pirate, “while my men and I were plundering in the middle east, I was caught stealing from a merchant. I was arrested and my hand was cut off.”

“Incredible!” remarked the seaman. “How did you get the eye-patch?”

“A sea gull dropping fell into my eye,” replied the pirate.

“You lost your eye to a sea gull dropping?” the sailor asked incredulously.

“Well,” said the pirate,

- A.) “In a pig’s eye!”**
- B.) “I’ve seen bigger.”**
- C.) “It was my first day with the hook ...”**
- D.) “I’m thinking, I’m thinking!”**

Joke Number Two:

A guy goes into a bar, orders twelve shots of their finest scotch whisky, and starts drinking them as fast as he can.

The bartender says, "Dang, why are you drinking so fast?"

The guy says, "You would be drinking fast if you had what I had."

The bartender says, "What do you have?"

The guy says:

A.) "75 cents."

B.) "A green tuxedo."

C.) "A trip to the moon."

D.) "I wanted to see time fly."

Joke Number Three:

A ducks walks into a bar and asks, "Got any grapes?"

The bartender, confused, tells the duck that no, his bar doesn't serve grapes. The duck thanks him and leaves.

The next day, the duck returns and says, "Got any grapes?"

Again, the bartender tells him that, no, the bar does not serve grapes, has never served grapes, and, furthermore, will never serve grapes. The duck, a little ruffled, thanks him and leaves.

The next day, the duck returns, but before he can say anything, the bartender begins to yell: "Listen, duck! This is a bar! We do not serve grapes! If you ever ask for grapes again, I will nail your stupid duck beak to the bar!"

The duck is silent for a moment, and then asks, "Got any nails?" Confused, the bartender says no. "Good!" says the duck, then says:

- A.) "That's a funny name for a mouse."**
- B.) "Then whose monkey was it?"**
- C.) "Got any grapes?"**
- D.) "What did you order?"**

Joke Number Four:

As a butcher is shooin a dog from his shop, he sees \$10 and a note in his mouth, which reads: "10 lamb chops, please."

Amazed, he takes the money, puts a bag of chops in the dog's mouth, and quickly closes

the shop. He follows the dog and watches him wait for a green light, look both ways, and trot across the road to a bus stop. The dog checks the timetable and sits on the bench. When a bus arrives, he walks around to the front and looks at the number, then boards the bus. The butcher follows, dumbstruck.

As the bus travels out into the suburbs, the dog takes in the scenery. After awhile he stands on his back paws to push the “stop” button, then the butcher follows him off.

The dog runs up to a house and drops his bag on the stoop. He goes back down the path, takes a big run, and throws himself -Whap!- against the door. He does this again and again. No answer. So he jumps on a wall, walks around the garden, beats his head against a window, jumps off, and waits at the front door. A big guy opens it and starts cursing and pummeling the dog.

The butcher runs up screams at the guy: “What the hell are you doing? This dog’s a genius!”

The owner responds:

- A.) “Yesterday we were campaigning.”**
- B.) “Are you gonna eat that?”**
- C.) “It’s supposed to do that?”**
- D.) “Genius, my eye. It’s the second time this week he’s forgotten his key!”**

When listening to a joke, we all know there will be some unexpected twist and that everything preceding the punchline is a necessary part of the joke. We understand that the punchline can only use elements previously introduced. More accurately, the punchline must use elements previously introduced—otherwise, why introduce them? Long-form stories are no different from jokes in that they should be this precise.

WHAT IT MEANS TO DRAMATIZE AN IDEA

I have often had conversations with people who will like a film or story because it deals with a certain subject, such as sexism or racism. Then, later, when I see the film, I will see that the subject has not been dealt with at all, only spoken about.

Look at this scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, where Dorothy meets The Scarecrow:

THE WIZARD OF OZ

by

Noel Langley

Florence Ryerson

and Edgar Allen Woolf

1939

DOROTHY

... you did say something, didn't you?

The Scarecrow shakes his head, then nods –

Dorothy looks at the Scarecrow as he nods his
head – she speaks to him –

DOROTHY

Are you doing that on purpose, or can't you make
up your mind?

The Scarecrow explains – shows his straw head –

SCARECROW

That's the trouble. I can't make up my mind. I
haven't got a brain – only straw.

DOROTHY

How can you talk if you haven't got a brain?

SCARECROW

I don't know. But some people without brains do
an awful lot of talking, don't they?

DOROTHY

Yes, I guess you're right.

Dorothy steps over the fence and into the
cornfield.

DOROTHY

Well, we haven't really met properly, have we?

SCARECROW

Why, no.

Dorothy curtsies.

DOROTHY

How do you do?

SCARECROW

How do you do?

DOROTHY

Very well, thank you.

SCARECROW

Oh, I'm not feeling at all well. You see, it's
very tedious being stuck up here all day long
with a pole up your back.

DOROTHY

Oh, dear – that must be terribly uncomfortable.
Can't you get down?

Dorothy moves around to the back of the pole –

SCARECROW

Down? No, you see, I'm – Well, – I'm –

DOROTHY

Oh, well, here – let me help you.

SCARECROW

Oh, that's very kind of you – very kind.

Dorothy examines the back of the Scarecrow as
she tries to unfasten him –

DOROTHY

Well, oh, dear – I don't quite see how I can –

SCARECROW

Of course, I'm not bright about doing things,

but if you'll just. ...

Dorothy follows the Scarecrow's directions -

SCARECROW

...bend the nail down in the back, maybe I'll
slip off and...

DOROTHY

Oh. ...

Dorothy turns the nail and the Scarecrow falls
to the ground.

Here, the Scarecrow is introduced, and one of the first things he says is that he doesn't have a brain. But it is he who knows how best to get him off his pole, not Dorothy.

Here's another scene:

Dorothy and Scarecrow come forward along Yellow
Brick Road. Dorothy reacts as she sees an apple
orchard. She goes up to one of the trees.

DOROTHY

Oh - apples - Oh, look! Oh. Oh -

Dorothy picks an apple off - reacts as the tree
takes the apple back and slaps Dorothy's hand -

DOROTHY

Ouch!

First Tree opens its "mouth" and speaks to
Dorothy.

TREE

What do you think you're doing?

DOROTHY

We've been walking a long ways and I was hungry
and - Did you say. ...

The First Tree gestures as it speaks -

FIRST TREE

She was hungry! Well, how would you like to
have someone come along and pick something off
of you?

DOROTHY

Oh, dear - I keep forgetting I'm not in Kansas.

SCARECROW

Come along, Dorothy - you don't want any of
those apples. Hmm!

FIRST TREE

What do you mean - she doesn't want any of those
apples? Are you hinting my apples aren't what
they ought to be?

SCARECROW

Oh, no! It's just that she doesn't like
little green. ...

The Tree reacts, makes a grab for the two -

SCARECROW (o.s.)

...worms!

TREE

Oh ...

The First Tree grabs for the two - the Scarecrow
fights him off as Dorothy runs off, the
Scarecrow follows her.

TREE

... you ...

SCARECROW

Go - Go!

TREE

... Oh - Help - let me out. I'll give you
little green worms.

SCARECROW

I'll show you how to get apples.

TREE (o.s.)

You can't ...

The First tree winds up, throws apples.

TREE

... do that to me! I'll ...

Scarecrow and Dorothy react as the apples begin
to hit them the Scarecrow falls back to the road

—

TREE

... show you!

The Trees throw apples at Scarecrow and Dorothy
and Toto in the b.g. — The Scarecrow rises,
dodges about —

TREES

You can't do that! You can't do that! Hey!

First Tree laughs as it throws apples.

SCARECROW

Hooray!

Scarecrow picks up the apples.

SCARECROW

Hooray! I guess that did it! Help
yourself.

There it is again. It is Scarecrow who has the plan to get the apples, not Dorothy. Some of you may be thinking that this type of writing might be too obvious. But how many times have you seen *The Wizard of Oz* and never noticed that the scarecrow comes up with all of the plans? It was invisible to you—invisible ink.

Here is a great little scene for the Lion, the Tin Man, and Scarecrow. Remember, the Tin Man thinks he has no heart, and the Lion believes himself a coward.

Tin Man, Lion and Scarecrow peer over the rocks.

SCARECROW

That's the castle of the Wicked Witch! Dorothy's
in that awful place!

TIN MAN

Oh, I hate to think of her in there. We've got
to get her out.

(cries)

SCARECROW

Don't cry now. We haven't got the oil-can with
us and you've been squeaking enough as it is.

LION

Who's them? Who's them?

The Witch's Winkies marching about in the Castle
Courtyard

The Lion tries to turn back, but others grab
him, push him forward -

SCARECROW

I've got a plan how to get in there.

LION

Fine. He's got a plan

SCARECROW

And you're going to lead us.

LION

Yeah. Me?

SCARECROW

Yes, you.

LION

I - I - I - I - gotta get her outta there?

SCARECROW

That's right.

LION

All right, I'll go in there for Dorothy - Wicked
Witch or no Wicked Witch - guards or no guards -

I'll tear 'em apart.

(growls)

I may not come out alive, but I'm going in
there. There's only one thing I want you
fellows to do.

SCARECROW AND TIN MAN

What's that?

LION

Talk me out of it.

Again, we see that the Scarecrow has a plan, but we also see that the Tin Man has a heart because he tears up. And the Lion gets a chance to show his courage in the face of fear.

By the time we get to the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, we know (at least, subconsciously) that the foursome of the Lion, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow and Dorothy already have what they've been seeking. We, as an audience, were able to figure it out, and with that comes satisfaction. This almost happens on a subconscious level.

This is what is meant by dramatization. It is showing rather than telling. We know that those things to which we have an emotional connection stick with us better than those for which we have none. Dramatization is a way to get your intellectual ideas across to your audience emotionally.

Do you think anyone watching *Terminator* for the first time thought to themselves: *The theme of this film is that none of us knows how important our lives might be?* Of course they didn't. What they thought was: *RUN! Get the hell away from that thing!* But believe me they got the message of the film, whether they can articulate it or not. Don't be afraid to entertain—a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down.

Jaws is another example of a film that dramatizes, in a very entertaining way, its theme. The character of Chief Brody is terrified of the water. It is something we learn about him early on. At the end of the film, after he has killed the shark, his last line is: "You know, I used to hate the water." He learned that to face his fear was to conquer his fear. The shark was an external representation of Brody's internal fear. If you think that this is something I'm reading into the film, look at the evidence and ask yourself, *Why would killing a shark rid Brody of his fear of water?* It doesn't make any logical sense, but it makes all the sense in the world, thematically.

The following is a story by Aesop.

“BUNDLE OF STICKS”

Once there was a farmer with many sons whose sons were always bickering and fighting with each other. One day the farmer called his sons together. He had with him a bundle of sticks tied together.

He commanded each son to take the bundle and break it in half. In turn they tried and failed. The farmer then untied the bundle, handed each son a single stick and told them to break them now. Which they did so with ease.

“You see, my sons,” said the farmer, “if you are of one mind, and unite to assist each other, you will be unaffected by all the attacks of your enemies; but if you are divided among yourselves, you will be broken as easily as these sticks.”

Armature (Moral): In unity there is strength.

Aesop lived nearly 3,000 years ago and his stories are still told. Not only are they told they thrive. They are part of our everyday lives. Everyone knows what we mean when we say someone is a wolf in sheep’s clothing. Or if we say someone has sour grapes. Or

if we say of someone that he/she is crying wolf. All of these sayings are from Aesop's stories.

Why have stories told so long ago stuck around? It is because they had something to say about living as a human being in society, and people haven't changed much since 600 BC. And believe me, as long as there are people, we will have the same problems we have always had.

Aesop's armatures are often called morals, but whatever you call them, it all boils down to the fact that he had a point. Not only that, but he dramatized his point. The farmer in the "Bundle of Sticks" story demonstrates his point to his sons rather than just telling them. This also demonstrates Aesop's point to the reader.

Just as with a joke, these short-form stories have no excess elements. Remember that this is true of any well-crafted story, regardless of length.

I included this story to *dramatize* the ideas of dramatization and armature.