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THE SCIENCE BEHIND STORIES

OUR WORLD TEEMS WITH TALES. BUT WHY DO WE THINK, TALK AND TAKE SO MUCH DELIGHT IN STORIES? AND HOW DEEP A DELVE MUST WE TAKE INTO OUR CEREBRAL MACHINERY TO FIND THE ANSWERS? PETER MYERS TAKES A JOURNEY UNTIL THE END

Are you seated comfortably? Then I'll begin, with the help of academics and professional tale-spinners, to look for answers. Answers as to why we are so mesmerised by stories — be they fiction, news or simple anecdotes. Why we find ourselves living vicariously through characters within stories, and why they are so unforgettable that our memories, our morals and our shared myths are constructed from them.

But before we start delving, let's draw a line between story and language. Story can best be thought of as a product of the imagination; while language is but one medium for communicating such a thing. For instance, aphasic people, who have suffered brain damage and lost their language abilities, can still tell stories — albeit through other mediums such as dance or visual arts.

As storyteller Vanessa Woolf tells *Discovery Channel Magazine,* "If you showed a person a film of random images then they would devise a story to fit them, without even knowing that they were doing so."

Language to be sure is humanity's particular talent. As widely known psychologist and linguist Dr Stephen Pinker explains in his bestselling books, language is adept at shaping events in the minds of others, with each sentence carrying with it a mini narrative package. Most importantly, language can tell infinite stories — and does so every day. As Pinker writes, "Virtually every sentence that a person utters or understands is a brand-new combination of words, appearing for the first time in the history of the universe."

Language-based stories need not be as complex. Dr Marcel Danesi, professor of semiotics and communication theory at the Department of Anthropology in the University of Toronto, Canada says, "Anything that has a syntax to it seems to be what our brain is predisposed to store and recall." By "syntax," Danesi is not necessarily referring to grammar, but to a rule-governed pattern. In early cultures, he explains, "the poetic form of language, the chant and what we now call music — which we distinguish from language — were not distinguishable."

WIRED FOR STORIES

Depending on where they stand on the nature-nurture divide, theorists believe that we are either somehow innately wired to think in terms of stories, or that the plasticity of our minds is just especially receptive to stories. Because humans have been telling stories to one another for 100,000 years — since at least the time the first *Homo sapiens* inherited the earth from the Neanderthals, and perhaps longer — evolutionary biologists hypothesise that our brains have become "rewired" to embrace story structure.

It is as if, as writer and storyteller Laura Burns suggests, our bodies hold the shared memory of thousands of years of listening to stories. "I believe we are somehow aware of this on a very subliminal level when we listen to stories," says Burns. "And for that reason, we are involved and engaged with storytelling like few other arts."

A narrative-focused mind would lend us an evolutionary advantage, because, in psychologist Dr Alison Gopnik's words, developing story representations from sensory input "lets us predict what the world will be like and so act on

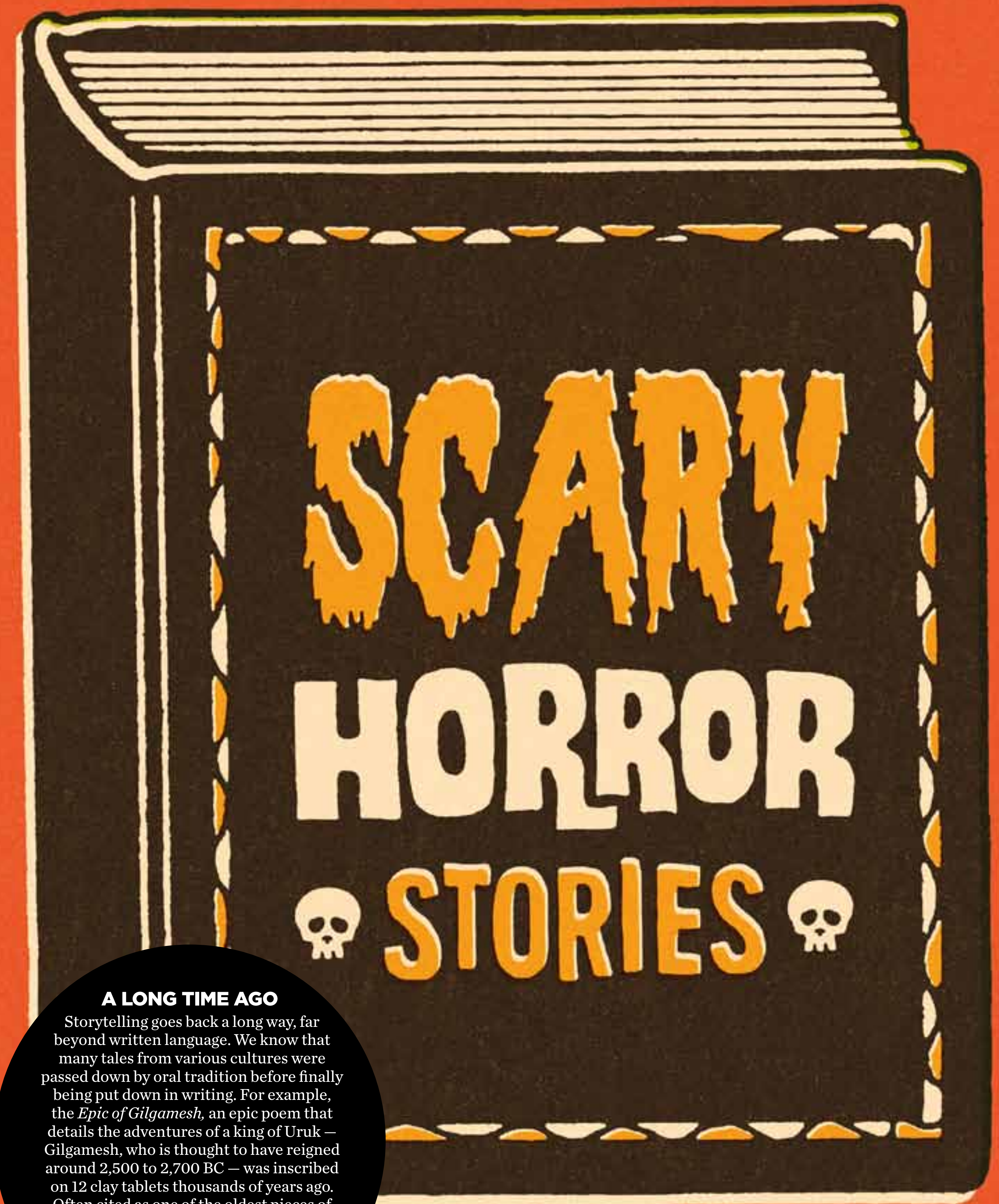


IMAGE: GETTY IMAGES

A LONG TIME AGO

Storytelling goes back a long way, far beyond written language. We know that many tales from various cultures were passed down by oral tradition before finally being put down in writing. For example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh,* an epic poem that details the adventures of a king of Uruk — Gilgamesh, who is thought to have reigned around 2,500 to 2,700 BC — was inscribed on 12 clay tablets thousands of years ago. Often cited as one of the oldest pieces of written literature (if not *the* oldest) in the world, some versions of the tale were believed to have been made for song.

it effectively." She adds, "They are nature's way of solving the problem of knowledge."

A mastery of story would in turn have helped early mankind to mingle and communicate effectively in increasingly complex social worlds. And the better that we were at spinning a yarn, the more keen potential mates might have been on us.

The notion that the relaying of stories is a quintessentially human feat has even provoked artificial intelligence (AI) researchers to try replicating "narrative intelligence" in robots. In a paper on the subject, AI professor Dr Kerstin Dautenhahn writes, "The capacity to communicate in terms of stories is regarded as an efficient means to communicate social matters. And the origin of narratives might therefore have been a crucial milestone in the evolution of primate social intelligence."

On the other hand, the University of Toronto's Danesi argues that the idea that our story abilities are innate or hardwired, with human cultures merely setting the parameters, is misguided. "If for some reason we got rid of all systems, language and symbols completely from our [shared social] memory, in our next generation, that generation would probably go back to its instincts," he contends. "There's nothing in neuroscience that would predict we carry some innate traits of [story]. It wouldn't happen."

Yet every known human culture that has ever existed in history has created stories. And many of these societies, notes Kendall Haven in his book *Story Proof,* have not developed written language, codified laws or exposition.

Academic Dr Jonathan Gottschall sums up the latest research in his recent book, *The Storytelling Animal,* thus: "I don't know for sure whether story is an evolutionary adaptation or a side effect, and neither at this point does anyone else." Gottschall's hunch though, is that although the brain is not designed for narrative, "there are glitches in its design that make it vulnerable to story."

As globetrotting screenwriting instructor Robert McKee put it to *DCM*: "Story fits the human mind." If we were from another planet, he adds, we might have a very different way of looking at and interpreting reality.

TALES FROM THE CRIB

Many developmental psychologists have tried to establish the primacy of story on the human mind, by studying subjects whose minds are so far free of the accumulated mental debris of age.

Dr Jerome Bruner, a much-referenced academic psychologist, talks about infants' "readiness" to construct narrative. He thinks a child's desire to "storify" actually "determines the order of priority in which grammatical forms are mastered". Indeed, he suggests, this happens before the child even learns to talk.

"STORY FITS THE HUMAN MIND. IF WE WERE FROM ANOTHER PLANET, WE MIGHT HAVE A VERY DIFFERENT WAY OF INTERPRETING REALITY"

Ask any parent or teacher, and they will tell you how children's worlds are rocked by stories. "Each day is new and exciting for them," educator and storyteller Amberley Laverick tells *DCM*. "Fairy godmothers and talking teapots could be real." Stories then play a huge part in the way a child interprets life. "The world around them is pieced together by the stories told to them. Each story is an important piece for them in how to understand the world."

While the growing and developing consciousness of children might be consistently nourished by narrative, many neurolinguists believe that a major reason that stories go down so well with the young — and not so young — is that

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES

AN ANTI-STORY NARRATIVE

We are born storytellers, but the magic can soon leave us. London-based teacher and storyteller Amberley Laverick sees it all the time. Children enter school filled with enthusiasm for writing, yet over the years they are reprimanded for their "bad writing," slapdash spelling, punctuation and grammar. So they lose their spark.

"As the years go by, students are told what to write and how to write," mourns Laverick. "The space in their lives to sit and write a story for the sake of writing a story is taken away."

Leaving school, these students get a job and enter a tightly constructed society. And though many of us tell stories of the day's goings-on when we come home, for the most part we lose confidence in our narrative "voice".

Instead we get lost in other people's stories, because these use words we hear every day. But, unlike formal work emails, they are liberatingly free of rules. Just like when we were children.

So how do we regain our own storytelling voice? Writer and storyteller Laura Burns describes how she goes about shaping a tale: "After finding a story that I want to tell, I will start by telling it aloud to myself very quickly and simply. 'This happened, then so-and-so went here and did this.' Sort of constructing the skeleton of events in my head."

She continues, "There are various mapping exercises which I will use to get a feel for the peaks and troughs of the story, and the various places. Often I will sing the story, or tell the whole thing to myself in rhyme and rhythm, to get a feel for the pulse and music of it."

Burns is currently working on finding words from her body — which is easier said than done. "Storytelling requires an embodiment, a bodily connecting to the story. This means I'm spending a lot of time walking around and looking at things, and naming them with as many different names as I can — while keeping to a rhythm."

LIVE ACTION STORIES

What's the difference between live, spoken-word stories and recorded narratives on television or film? As theatregoers well know, there is a certain inherent magic to being in the room as a story unfolds. And this is only magnified when that story is told without a firm script, to a small group of people.

Storyteller Laura Burns points to the "immediate relationship" between the story, the storyteller and the listener. "When this relationship is ignited — which it is the storyteller's responsibility to do — the effect is magnetic, and audiences are involved, in a way they never are watching films."

"If the audience was not there, a told story would have no one to converse with. Whereas a film would play whether people are watching or not," she adds.

Fellow storyteller Amberley Laverick highlights the "raw experience" of the performance, saying, "It is the art of storytelling — stripped back to what all films and TV shows initially begin with. Words."

She explains that when she is storytelling, it is as if time stops. "I feel like a magician when I'm telling a story to a room full of people. And I can see it coming to life for them."

"There is a stillness that you can feel," she enthuses. "When you get it right, there is a calm. Your words soak into the audience, the walls and the roof. People become mesmerised by the words that are painting a picture before them."

And if you do it right? "Stories create imaginary worlds in our minds," Laverick says.

TV'S STORY KINGS

Spoken-word storytellers increasingly have some stiff competition though. Renowned scriptwriting instructor Robert McKee thinks the most exciting storytelling of our time is currently happening in the long-form television series format, written by large teams of scribes.

"It's becoming a magnificent cathedral, a huge spine of action. This is what I think will be the great masterpieces of the 21st century," he says.

With huge casts, the box-set format gives audiences a mass of character development to contend with, while complex plots twist, turn and raise eyebrows, right up until the 99th hour.

everything in the human mind is in fact story-shaped.

Under this theory, every bit of raw data that we have ever taken in has been storified, in order to be understood by our conscious mind. Because of the overwhelming magnitude of stimuli taken in by our senses, 99.999 percent of it — the trivial, day-to-day inputs — simply has to be eliminated, in order to process our important thoughts. Neuroscience researcher Dr Michael S. Gazzaniga, who is also a psychology professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara in the United States, explains the process: "After the brain computes an event [the mind] becomes aware of it. The left hemisphere [then] interprets data the brain has already processed."

UNDER THIS THEORY, EVERY BIT OF RAW DATA THAT WE HAVE EVER TAKEN IN HAS BEEN STORIFIED, **IN ORDER TO BE UNDERSTOOD BY OUR CONSCIOUS MIND. THE TRIVIAL INPUTS ARE ELIMINATED**

This interpreter is in essence our own personal inbuilt storyteller, which each of us relies upon to make sense of our world. And this is why, thinks Bruner, when children begin acquiring language, they are likely to devote their linguistic efforts to what is unusual in their world.

He says that young people not only perk up in the presence of something that is different, but they also gesture towards it — telling "proto-stories" if you will — before vocalising about it, and finally talking about it. And so it is with the stories we love to watch on the silver screen. "When things change, there is a gap between expectations and reality, then the mind pays attention," says scriptwriting guru McKee. Like the stories told in movies, our hard-at-work mind takes reality and sculpts it into a meaningful shape — giving it a temporal order and a tied-up-at-both-ends narrative template. Film-makers do this to grab our attention and entertain us. We do it, because noticing and handling moments of change is an extremely helpful survival technique.

STRANGER THAN FICTION

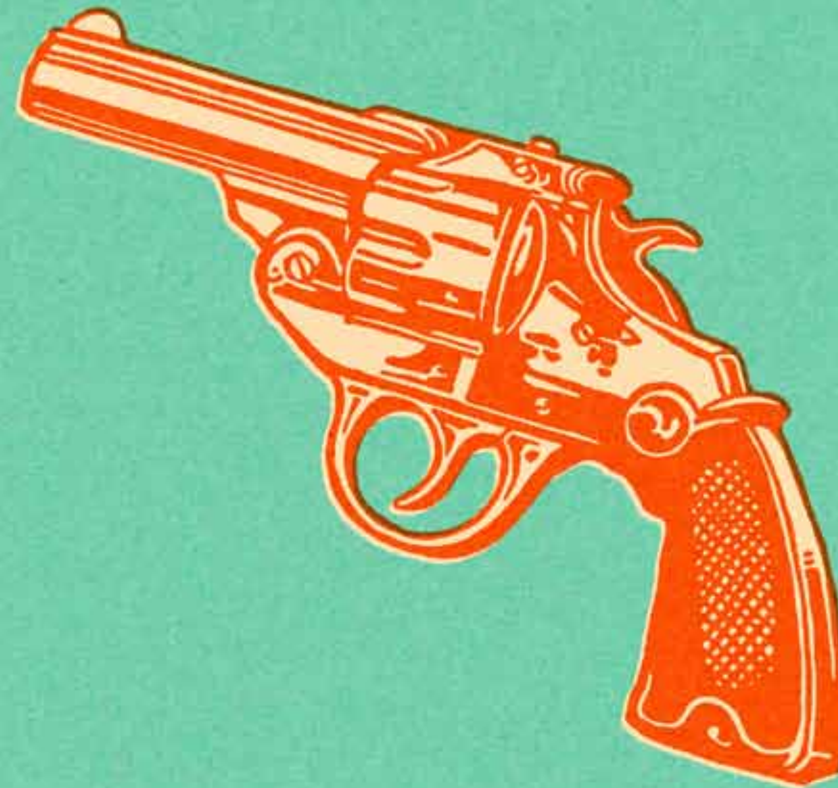
Cue suspenseful music. This storifying of material flooding into our brains has a sinister side effect too. In its never-ending quest for meaning, the mind, thinks Gazzaniga, "reconstructs the brain events — and in doing so makes telling errors of perception, memory and judgement."

Scientists have found that the processing areas of our brain are the same areas that are activated when we create stories. Memory, meanwhile, has been split by researchers into "fact-based" and "story-based" remembering. The mind creates stories from events, writes Haven, "and then remembers the created stories, believing that they are identical with the original event."

The suggestion that the memories in our brain-banks might not be entirely authentic feels somewhat disturbing. It could also lead to serious legal repercussions. As an example, the memories supposedly recovered by therapists often prove to be false — sometimes not before the patient has accused their loved ones of all kinds of salacious falsities.

In the same way that memories can be unconsciously fictionalised, our past failures can far too easily be self-edited, in order to make us feel better about ourselves. After all, it is difficult to live by a story where you, the lead character, are decidedly non-heroic.

As Gottschall writes, "A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skilfully spun meanings."



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DID I TELL YOU?

London-based storyteller Amberley Laverick very quickly dispels the idea that people in her profession have a monopoly on telling stories. "A story is something told to another — or our own self," she says. "It does not have to be written down or labelled a story." So there is nothing stopping you from regaling your friends and families with tales of interesting happenings at work — and yes, those count as stories, too. Just make sure your delivery is coherent though, or your audience might not be amused by your account of "a thing" that happened on the way to the office.

STORYTELLING A TO Z

C IS FOR CLIFFHANGER
A PLOT DEVICE WHERE A READER OR LISTENER IS LEFT "HANGING" AT THE END, NOT KNOWING WHAT EXACTLY HAPPENED. AN EXCELLENT TOOL FOR **CREATING SUSPENSE**

D IS FOR DREAMTIME
IN THE CULTURE OF **AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES,** THE DREAMTIME IS THE STORY OF HOW THE WORLD WAS CREATED. DREAMTIME LEGENDS FORMED THE BASIS OF THEIR CULTURE AND BELIEFS, AND SOME ESTIMATES SAY THEY GO BACK 65,000 YEARS

F IS FOR FLASH FICTION
VERY SHORT, BITE-SIZED FICTION. RECENTLY EVOLVED INTO **TWITTER FICTION, OR STORIES TOLD IN 140 CHARACTERS OR LESS.** CRIME NOVELIST IAN RANKIN WROTE ONE: "I OPENED THE DOOR TO OUR FLAT AND YOU WERE STANDING THERE, CLEAVER RAISED. SOMEHOW YOU'D FOUND OUT ABOUT THE PHOTOS. MY JAW HIT THE FLOOR"

H IS FOR HOMER
THE **GREEK POET** THOUGHT TO BE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE *ILIAD* AND THE *ODYSSEY,* TWO OF THE MOST FAMOUS STORIES ON EARTH. THEY DEAL WITH THE TROJAN WAR AND A SURVIVING HERO'S RETURN AFTER THE WAR

Perhaps it is no wonder then that autobiographies of the great and good are often derided by critics as being pure fiction. More kindly, maybe they are unconscious wishful thinking on the subject's part. Yet despite its capacity for error, some suggest we need our mind to work in this way, in order to get through the day. McKee notes, "The moment the brain gave birth to the mind and the mind became aware of itself and recognised the enormous chasm between itself and everything else… story rushed in to fill that abyss." Without it, he thinks, we'd go insane.

GOTSCHALL ESTIMATES WE HAVE ABOUT 2,000 DAYDREAMS EACH DAY, AND SPEND AROUND HALF OF OUR WAKING HOURS IMMERSED IN TALES OF OUR OWN DEVISING

Living a life through fiction may also be character building. "The constant firing of our neurons in response to fictional stimuli strengthens and refines the neural pathways that lead to skilful navigation of life's problems," contends Gottschall, citing some initial studies that indicate people who read a great deal of fiction seem to be nicer and more empathetic in their behaviour than those who stick to biographies.

Psychologists Dr Raymond A. Mar, Dr Keith Oatley and their colleagues studied, in a laboratory setting, whether readers of fiction have different characteristics than those who abhor fiction. "Comprehending characters in a narrative fiction appears to parallel the comprehension of peers in the actual world," they observed. Philosopher and researcher Martha Nussbaum puts it more strongly. The novel, she thinks, "actively develops a form of imaginative thinking and feeling about others and their predicaments that is essential for social life."

What if you are not especially bookish? No need to worry. It is highly unlikely that you consume no television or film drama, or do not imbibe other forms of fictional story. And if you don't? Gottschall estimates we have about 2,000 daydreams, each spanning around 14 seconds, each day. Which means we spend approximately half of our waking hours immersed in tales of our own devising — not even including the time we spend entertained by other people's versions of fantasyland.

And afterwards? Stories don't leave us when we sleep, either. Our dreams hold us transfixed by a riotous whirligig of narrative; polyphonic ordeals suffused with violence, fear, desire and buoyant happiness. Even the most mundane of our dreams usually seem interesting at the time — probably because we are the star of our own mind show.

MORALITY TALES

Back to those stories we consume when awake. Even if these are full of blood and guts, war and pillage, they are still likely to be moral and uplifting. All popular stories revolve around the great predicaments of the human condition, and a character's struggle to beat great odds at tremendous risk.

"When the villain kills, his or her violence is condemned," writes Gottschall. "When the hero kills, he or she does so righteously." We don't always notice a story's moral fibre, he says, because its "medicinal message" is mixed with the "heady stew" of storytelling.

This fits with the definition of a story offered to *DCM* by Dr Livia Polanyi, consulting professor in Linguistics at Stanford University: "A specific past time narrative with a moral." Polanyi argues that this "point" or moral is the one thing that people remember about stories, even years after reading or hearing them. As

NANOWRIMO

National November Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, began in the United States in 1999 and quickly went global, thanks to the internet. The challenge is to write a novel, defined as at least 50,000 words, usually from November 1 to 30. While it is meant to be good fun, there are rules: you have to start from scratch — no using previously written material — and you have to be the sole author. According to the website, once you've hit 50,000 and your word count is verified, you will "be added to our hallowed Winner's Page and receive a handsome winner's certificate and web badge."

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN); AGEFOTOSTOCK (JEMAA EL-FNAA)

STORYTELLING A TO Z

J IS FOR JEMAA EL-FNAA
A SQUARE IN MARRAKESH, IN MORROCO, DESIGNATED A **UNESCO MASTERPIECE OF THE ORAL AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF HUMANITY,** FOR ITS STORYTELLERS, AMONG OTHER THINGS

O IS FOR *ONE THOUSAND AND ONE NIGHTS*
A CLASSIC ARABIC **COMPENDIUM OF STORIES** TOLD BY THE NARRATOR, SCHEHERAZADE, WHO MUST ENTERTAIN A KING WITH HER STORIES TO AVOID BEING KILLED

R IS FOR REDDIT
IN 2011, WRITER **JAMES ERWIN** WROTE A STORY THAT **SPRUNG FROM A QUESTION POSTED ON REDDIT.COM:** "COULD I DESTROY THE ENTIRE ROMAN EMPIRE DURING THE REIGN OF AUGUSTUS IF I TRAVELLED BACK IN TIME WITH A MODERN US MARINE INFANTRY BATTALION?" THE POSTS ROCKETED IN FAME AND ARE NOW BEING DEVELOPED INTO A **HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTER**

S IS FOR SERIALISATION
MANY GREAT AUTHORS RELEASED THEIR WORKS IN PORTIONS, BUILDING UP ANTICIPATION. **CHARLES DICKENS** WAS ONE OF THEM. READERS IN THE UNITED STATES WERE SO DESPERATE TO LEARN THE FATE OF LITTLE NELL, THE ANGELIC CHILD IN *THE OLD CURIOSITY SHOP*, THAT THEY REPORTEDLY **STORMED BOATS** DELIVERING THE FIRST COPIES OF THE CLIMAX, IN 1841. "IS LITTLE NELL ALIVE?" THEY SHOUTED TO THE SAILORS

STORIES FOR GOOD

Can narrative be used to make the world a better place? Shauna Monkman knows the power of fairytales and myths when used in non-exploitable ways for good.

She goes so far as to suggest that when people engage in story and storytelling, they are in fact practicing a form of world-creation.

"At the most basic level, stories prepare us to navigate the unexpected, and to have agency in times of change. Most importantly, because stories trigger empathy, they teach us to live ethically, in harmony with others," she says.

Having worked for several years in publishing and news media, Monkman became disillusioned by the way consumerism fuels the media's storytelling methods. Knowing that a good story can change lives and make the complex more simple, the American wondered how she could best educate people through story, to instead make sustainable decisions.

Currently pursuing a doctorate at Oxford University in the United Kingdom, in the field of environmental anthropology, her research now focuses on narrative and food security (*see page 26*). "People are going to have to change their thinking and their practices around food. Supermarkets and consumers can drive that change — through story," she notes.

Using the oldest tool we've got to make the complex digestible, Monkman explains that food-governance scenarios — collectively crafted stories of the future of food — can and should be shared as part of a company's consumer engagement programme.

Because conservation efforts never really work until empathy is triggered, story for Monkman is the magic vehicle where minds and hearts work together. "Story is the bridge — it's where the emotional and the rational and the subjective and the objective combine," she explains. "So you have this ability to say 'your pain is my pain.'"

"Stories prepare us, let us reformulate our world, and let us create our futures," she says. A forum to facilitate change via citizen media is currently under construction by Monkman and her new social enterprise, South Media. Watch this space.

storyteller Burns sees it, we use stories to describe and affirm our moral universe.

Writers who attempt to tinker with stories, using complex literary devises to obfuscate meaning — famous examples include the modernists, and more recently the late troubled genius David Foster Wallace — might produce admirable works of art, but they can be tough on those who simply crave a good yarn. In a readers' web forum reacting to Wallace's hyper-realistic, posthumously published novel *The Pale King*, an irritated contributor noted, "I'm sorry, but *Hamlet* doesn't seem any less real to me for speaking in iambic pentameter."

In other words, laboriously describing a fictional world in agonising amounts of detail isn't necessary. Story works for us in a different way — it is understood thanks to a weird symbiosis of the writer's storytelling craft, and our own fertile imagination.

NEFARIOUS TELLERS

Because human story needs are simple and predictable, these can also be exploited. Through the subliminal messaging of advertising, the heady stew of narrative can be used to sell us products or ideas that we don't necessarily want or need. As *Reuters* columnist Felix Salmon writes, those with commercially driven ends need to be good storytellers too.

"Talk to any investment banker about selling a bond or a loan, and he'll immediately start talking about the 'story' of the company in question," he writes. "Meanwhile, all investors have to train themselves not to get beguiled by stories, and to look hard for counter-narratives," he notes.

Political speech-writers too are well-trained in the art of the storyteller — from highbrow metaphors that help make an everyday idea more poetic; to everyday stories of ordinary people on the campaign trail, whose personal stories are inserted to play on our sense of empathy. As Haven notes in his book, "No one ever marched on Washington because of the facts in a flowchart."

And what about the great religious texts? Is it any wonder that poetic tomes full of magic, rich allusion, heroic feats, gory battles and apocalyptic events have entranced humankind more than scientific works that chart, using expository text, billions of years of cosmic evolution? Today, even our most lauded contemporary scientists have developed well-honed narrative skills.

The same goes for the world's great myths. Australian Aborigines' Dreaming stories

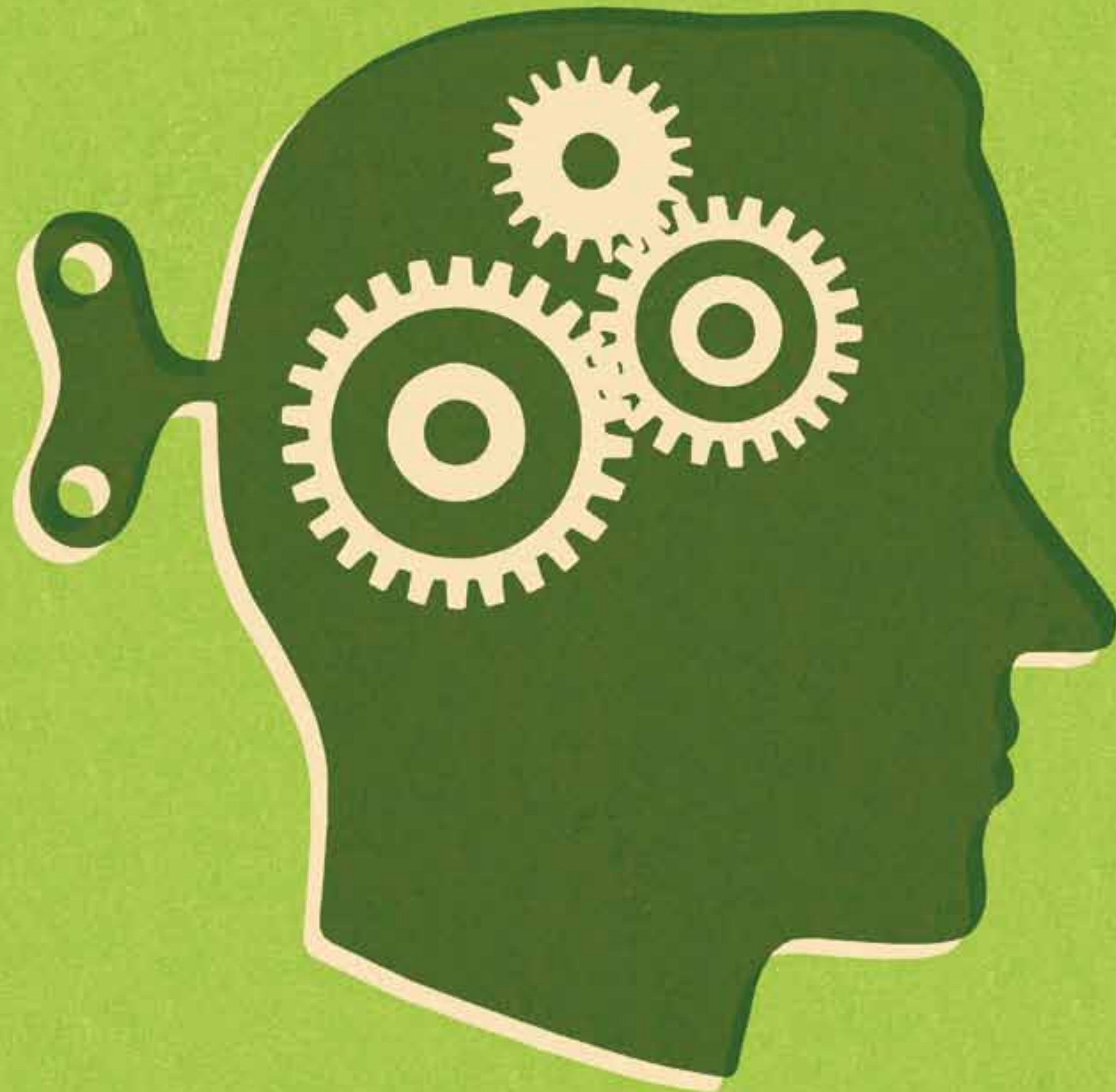
> **STORY IS UNDERSTOOD THANKS TO A SYMBIOSIS OF THE WRITER'S CRAFT, AND OUR OWN FERTILE IMAGINATION**

have been described by one cultural theorist as "primordial templates for concepts and hence for thought." In other words, a thing is just a thing until it is storified — transformed into a concept that we can then wax lyrical about.

In his 1949 book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, mythologist Joseph Campbell makes clear that it is through all of the world's mythic traditions, "mankind's one great story", that we not only make sense of our world — but are also each the hero of our own story as we journey through life.

It is virtually impossible to imagine a world without story, a society built entirely on facts, streams of non-interconnected data without emotion, and thus without any deeper meaning. An existence where no morality tales guide our upbringing, and where empathy has not been allowed to blossom.

It is so hard to imagine, because stories are the seam that run through all imagination. As Burns puts it, "Stories tap into fictional truth, truths about the world that cannot be taught as fact or fiction — because they go beyond that." ●



IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN); AFP (XIANGSHENG)

STORYTELLING A TO Z

T IS FOR THREE

THE NUMBER THREE IS HUGE IN STORYTELLING. **THE RULE OF THREE** SUGGESTS THAT **CHARACTERS, EVENTS AND WORDS THAT COME IN THREES ARE MORE EFFECTIVE** THAN OTHER NUMBERS. FOR EXAMPLE, THE THREE STOOGES, THE *MATRIX* TRILOGY, *THREE BLIND MICE* AND THREE-ACT PLAYS

W IS FOR WORLD STORYTELLING DAY

CELEBRATED WITH EVENTS AROUND THE WORLD ON THE DAY OF THE SPRING EQUINOX IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE, THIS YEAR'S THEME IS **"FORTUNE AND FATE"**

X IS FOR XIANGSHENG

***XIANGSHENG*, OR "CROSS-TALK"**, IS A COMEDIC FORM OF CHINESE PERFORMANCE. PERFORMED EITHER AS MONOLOGUES OR DIALOGUES, THEY RELY HEAVILY ON **HOMONYMS AND WORDPLAY.** PERFORMANCES USUALLY BEGIN WITH RAPIDLY EXCHANGED SMALL TALK, WHICH QUICKLY MOVES INTO CHEEKY INSULTS. IT IS WIDELY BELIEVED THAT **THE FORM HAS BEEN AROUND FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS,** SINCE THE MING DYNASTY

ROBERT MCKEE
SCRIPT GURU

Why do you think story is so important? The universe itself has no meaning. This [human] capacity to take reality and turn it into story has meaning only in as much as it allows us to survive. But beyond that it has no meaning. Story then not only organises your experience so that you do not go insane, but to try and answer the question of what is the meaning of all this.

Because even if you go from day to day surviving, thanks to your ability to interpret reality successfully in terms of stories for yourself, it doesn't mean that the biggest question of all — what is the point of survival — will be answered.

Story steps in and provides equipment for living. Stories are stuff and substance that give life its form and meaning. And without story, we would all be utterly uncivilised.

How do you "teach" your scriptwriting students about story? The intelligent, talented people who come to my lectures understand how to tell stories, because they have absorbed an umpteen thousand stories in their life. But they don't know that they know. I don't teach how to do anything, I teach what it is. When this becomes clear, it enables them to move faster.

Apparently after four days of immersion in my lectures, for a lot of people there is an epiphany — now they have names for things and they can understand the relationships between elements; now they can step it and deepen it, turn those characters from types into multidimensional ones.

Nothing that I teach is a secret.

Which screenplays do you most admire? The ability of people today to write minimalism with real beauty and skill — portraiture of a personality without it feeling static — in films like *The Iron Lady*, *J. Edgar*, *Shame*; the use of minimalism as a detailed intensification of the study of psychology, the inner conflicts of a human being, have gotten wonderful. Watch the Norwegian film *Reprise* and you'll see what I mean.

Going in the opposite direction, the long-form television series has been a great form since *I, Claudius* — now it is becoming a magnificent cathedral. They are going beyond soap opera, and creating masterworks. These are what I think will be the great masterpieces of the 21st century.

> **"*Story* urges the creation of works that will excite audiences on the six continents and live in revival for decades. No one needs yet another recipe book on how to reheat Hollywood leftovers. We need a rediscovery of the underlying tenets of our art, the guiding principles that liberate talent. No matter where a film is made — Hollywood, Paris, Hong Kong — if it's of archetypal quality, it triggers a global and perpetual chain reaction of pleasure that carries it from cinema to cinema, generation to generation."** – Robert McKee, *Story*

the 30 HOUR NOVEL

If you've heard of National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, where would-be writers commit to writing 50,000 words in 30 days, British magazine *The Kernel* has one-upped that this year — with The 30-Hour Novel. And *DCM's* **Chris Wright** participated. Here, he chronicles his personal writing ordeal

IMAGES: GETTY IMAGES (MAIN); CORBIS (RIGHT)

PHOTO: CORBIS

SATURDAY, JANUARY 26

7.15 AM

It is still dark and freezing on this January Saturday morning, yet a crowd of us have assembled at an office block in Clerkenwell, London. We are an unlikely gathering. This guy is in food retailing. This woman works for a magazine about British tourism. This man looks haggard: he was performing as a stand-up comedian last night. And her? Well, she's tired because she went dancing. In fact, decked out in thigh-high stockings and a skinny purple mini-dress, I wonder if she's even been home. She must be freezing.

We are bonded, 30 of us here and 300 more on laptops and computers around the world, by a preposterous challenge: write an entire novel, from scratch, in 30 hours. It is an idea of the British magazine *The Kernel,* and is a cruel concentrated revamp of the annual American challenge to write a novel in a month.

The rules are simple. It has to be fiction. Not one word of it can be material you have written before today. You must be the sole author. And you are strongly discouraged from writing the same word 50,000 times, as this is considered unlikely to win.

And the prize? HarperCollins will publish the winner. In the unspeakably difficult world of London publishing, where no major house has accepted an unsolicited manuscript for years and where even most agents won't now contemplate new clients, that is a considerable draw.

We are briefed on a mechanism to weed out the cheats, those errant foes who would cut and paste some previous long-wrought masterpiece and submit it as the work of a weekend. Everyone has to write in a Google Docs document linked to the editors, who will keep an eye on the progress of each, looking for suspicious slabs of entire chapters appearing instantly on the page.

You might protest that this is hardly a bulletproof arrangement. But you have to have some faith in the spirit of the thing.

8AM

We are off. We sit at banks of desks lined up like a schoolroom exam hall.

Most of us have at least thought about what we would write in advance, and in the early hours, we are on fire. Tweets fly around with updates on word counts: 2,000. 3,000. 5,000. Others spend the first hours planning: one produces an ornate family tree but has barely started writing by midday. I suspect she will win.

We shyly talk about our themes and ideas, and they are as diverse as we are: science fiction, murder mystery, stream of consciousness psychedelia, a fictionalised biography of a great-grandmother.

My story, the idea for which came to me two days earlier and around which I have loosely mapped out a structure and key characters, follows the course of a plane crash, and its impact on those who survive it. I am enthused and emboldened, and have hit 4,100 words after three hours.

But we are all too hung up on the count. What will matter in the end is character development, narrative arc, plot, quality of writing. A great big ask in a mere weekend.

11.30AM

A man from HarperCollins arrives. Entire room abandons their masterpieces and swamps him with begging book pitches.

MIDDAY

Clearly, the descent of human behaviour among a group of people trapped in a room for two days trying to confront writer's block, is going to be more interesting than anything any of us actually write. It has crossed my mind to write a novel about people writing a novel.

And maybe it's just me, but by midday the bonhomie seems to be dissipating. One man sniffs relentlessly, amplified by his inability to hear himself through his headphones. Some time later, another man develops the most extraordinary hiccups I have ever heard. They will last for two days.

We drift from amusement to irritation to genuine concern for the man's well-being. Who would have known these perils existed in the world of marathon novel-writing? Hazardous, that's what it is.

4PM
After my initial burst of energy I have hit a wall. One good thing about our compressed collective is that people do share their doubts, and find that everyone has them. Without exception, everyone drifts between creative bursts and crushing inertia. A second wind follows, then a second block. But we'll get there.

9PM
I am having a crisis. I turn to the 140-character clarity of Twitter to convey my state of mind. "Apart from the fact that I hate my characters, doubt my ending, and want to change everything, I think it's going swimmingly." Furthermore, I have eaten so much pepperoni pizza that I think I am going to throw up.

11PM
Salvation arrives in the discovery that the nearby Sainsbury's sells Old Speckled Hen beer. Suitably galvanised, I return to the fray, and head home having written 16,232 words. I'm just not at all sure they are good words, nor necessarily in the right order. We're meant to continue until midnight but my trains don't run that late. So off I go.

12.15AM
Arrive home and wearily crawl into bed. My head is still spinning with a whirl of characters and conjugations.

EXCERPT
***IN FLIGHT* BY CHRIS WRIGHT**
CHAPTER ONE

There may come a time when Barry Hadler is comfortable walking into a bar on his own, but it won't be today, jetlagged and bamboozled in the Mumbai Hilton. This is not how he pictured India. The hotel lobby is streamlined glass and marble, straight-backed sofas, sofas to do business on. The air conditioning keeps the place in a sultry chill. There is an air of things happening, a feeling of money being made and changing hands. He looks at the Indians in clustered informal meetings around the lobby, and is troubled by an odd insecurity. Everyone is smarter than him, sharper than him: a scattering of venture capitalists and hedge fund managers, dealmakers, making things happen. Four hundred million in poverty in this country, yet he feels acutely underdressed.

The hotel bar is Western, really, just a few incongruous Ganesh statues and colourful wall hangings to offer the faintest cultural reminder that it is in India. The staff, in pristine saris, greet him as he enters; extraordinarily, barely an hour after he has checked in, one greets him by name. "Have a good evening, Mr Hadler." This sort of thing doesn't happen back in Sydney. He nods and half smiles but struggles to meet their earnest, confident eye contact.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 27
10.00 AM
After a few hours of sleep and a little time with the children, I return two hours late. Four people have slept here. It now looks like a refugee camp.

11AM
Have lost much of the morning's opportunity to the Murray-Djokovic tennis final coverage in *The Guardian*. Just as well Murray loses in four sets, or the novel would be doomed.

11.10AM
Come on, just get on with it. Write something. Write words!

12.30PM
There is a separate prize in this competition for the best sex scene, and it is having a most curious effect on our gathered throng. One woman shares the awkwardness of writing about her great-grandmother losing her virginity in a lifeboat after a spot of phrenology. I have to look that up. (*Oxforddictionaries.com* defines phrenology as "the detailed study of the shape and size of the cranium.")

I've been following her @emma_storms tweets while she's been wrestling with this: "Up against the anchor? Bums squashed up against port holes?" "I'm too English for this. I fear it's going to be a bad bodice ripper with heaving bosoms and thinking of England." "'Irma giggled at Frank's dingle-dangle.' It's got to that."

A woman in her 60s asks whether it would be good to have her heroine say that she has an app that can accurately measure the size of a man's genitalia. Meanwhile, a man across the room moves his hands seductively in the air. He is, he will explain, trying to convey accurately the mechanics of the front-loading bra clasp. This is all degenerating rather swiftly.

For me, being British, I decide to anchor my own novel's sex scene in comedic botched disaster — and make sure that I don't refer to anyone as "I".

2PM
I have not been a regular smoker since 1998. Now the nicotine cravings are killing me. What is this process doing to us?

3PM
Now Liverpool is playing Oldham. How am I supposed to concentrate?

3.30PM
The real world will keep intruding on our odd cocoon. My daughter phones to complain she can't get the DVD player to work. My wife phones too: flat tyre. Don't they understand I'm creating art?

4PM
At 24,000 words I do believe I have a first draft. Now I have seven hours left to edit it, and to develop a sense of enormous doubt about the whole thing. I am not the first to do so. One guy had 12,000 words last night. Nine hours on, he has 8,000.

5.30PM
The reality of potential publication is starting to alarm me. All the submitted novels will be put online for the public to vote on. My friends will read this. My family. At some stage, potentially my children. I heavily revise the sex scene.

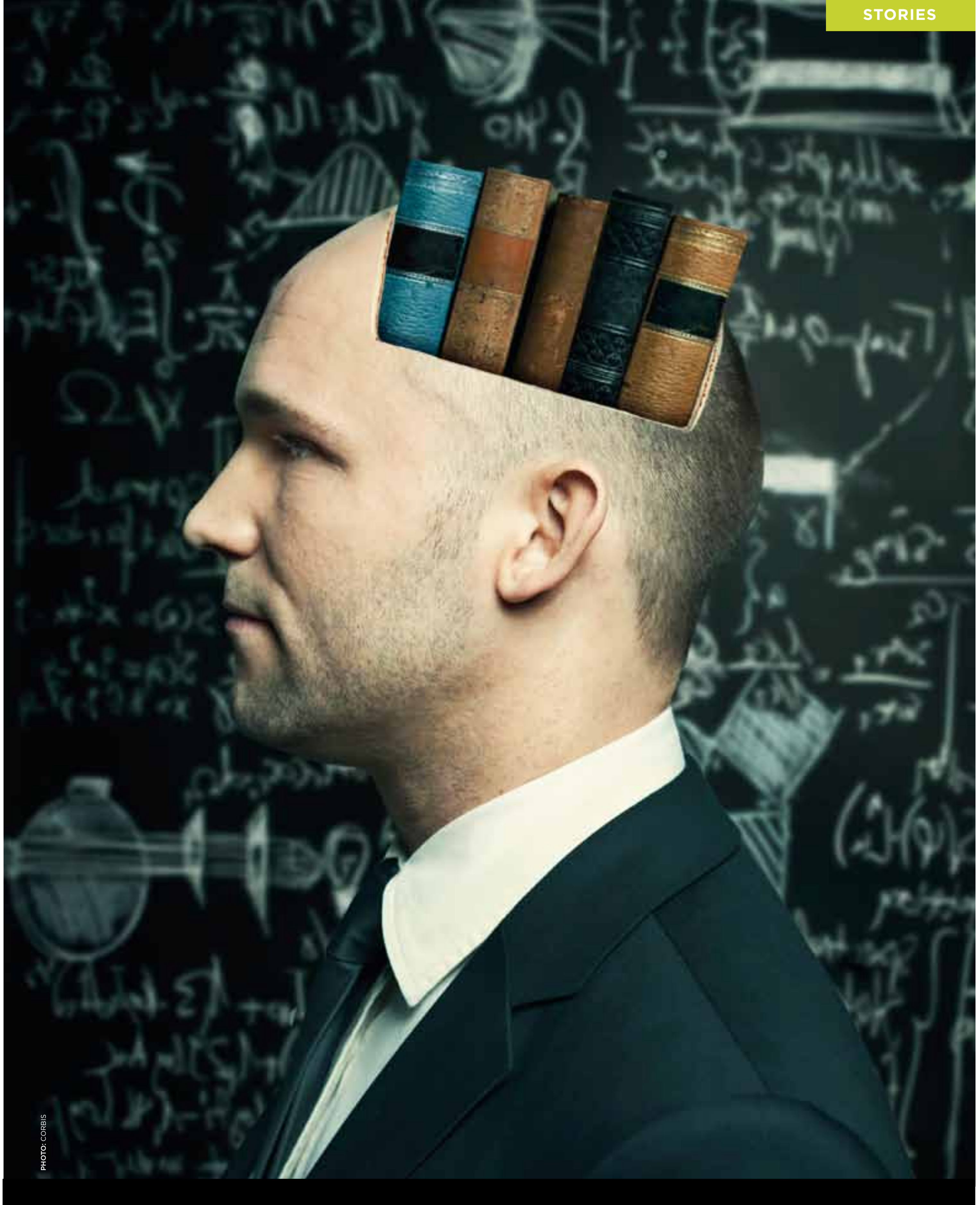
7PM
Pizza. Dear God I've had a lot of pizza.

9PM
There are four of us left in the room. Some people have left to finish the job at home. Several have decided that they are not going to have anything fit to submit. But they are pleased to have participated because they something to build on, in a more sensible time frame. Some seem to have lapsed into a coma.

9.15PM
I have been reading and rereading for five hours, tweaking and fiddling, but it is now time — to press send. "I fear it is rubbish," I tweet while on the train home. "But it has been an experience."

The next day, *The Kernel* sends out an email saying that 122 of the 376 people who registered for the challenge submitted novels. Next, it will go to a public vote. There is much muttering about this, that it will be an exercise in manipulating social media rather than the quality of the work. But then again, that's the reality of modern publishing: if you can't get noticed and market your own work, you'll never be published anyway.

What did I learn from this gruelling weekend? That writing long-form fiction is hard work. That you can surprise yourself under absurd deadline pressure. And that I'm never going to write another sex scene. ●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