

Trust me

I'm telling you stories

There's a website I subscribe to called It's Nice That. It's not just a website, but a group, and they hold events and publish a magazine. It's about art and design and creativity and it mixes analog and digital – it's no surprise I'd like it. One of their regular features is Bookshelf.

They ask someone they find interesting to photograph (at least part of) their book collection, and then pick 5 books to share. Sometimes I find new books this way, but what I'm always interested in is the why: Why are these books important? What do they mean to the people who pick them? Maybe I read too much into the choices, but I think stories are important.

And this is where I got the idea for this talk. I want to share five books. I love them. They are five of my favorite books. They've taught me things about life; I could talk about these books all day, but I'll try and keep my talk confined to the things I think they have to teach us about user experience, because that is the focus for today.

Trust me is a tipoff. When you hear it, you are hearing the acknowledgement of doubt. That someone feels the need to say “trust me” raises suspicion. “Trust me. I'm telling you stories” comes from the first book I want to talk about.



THE VENETIAN BOATMAN'S WEB-FOOTED DAUGHTER

You aren't three whole pages into Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* before you first read, "I'm telling you stories. Trust me." It's a signal from the narrator right away: maybe you need to be careful about what you are hearing.

I didn't read this book at a particularly careful time in my life, which might be one of the reasons I loved it. It's set in Venice – where I still haven't been – but the Venice occupied by Napoleon. The Venice that doesn't work like any other city, with its canals and bridges and boats and mysteries and legends. The Venice where boatmen are rumored to have webbed feet, so they never take off their boots.

Well, there was that one time a boatman – desperate for money and unaware of any potential harm – removed his boots for a bag of gold. They found the rich tourist who offered it to him babbling, alone, in the gondola. The boatman was missing. The boatman was the father of one of the main characters, Villanelle.

Villanelle was, possibly due to an ancient ritual not being following exactly – those pesky exacting ancient rituals – born with webbed feet. Boatmen are supposed to have webbed feet, not their daughters.

You probably shouldn't trust a woman with webbed feet, but you do. You probably also shouldn't trust a poor farm boy who enlists in Napoleon's army only to find himself roasting chicken nearly twenty-four hours a day and waiting on Napoleon personally. It doesn't sound believable, but it is. Trust me.

Winterson employs different devices to build this trust. The writing is confident; her characters make bold and sweeping statements that – while you might not believe them – you know the characters believe them.

She invites outrage: you believe the outrageous.

So when the cross-dressing web-footed daughter takes her shoes off, and later it is said a young man was walking on water as if it was solid, you believe it. When the chicken-roasting soldier helps her recover her missing heart – held in a jar in her lover's room – well, ok.

Trust me.

It shouldn't work, but it does. There's value in knowing what the rules are, and knowing when to break them.



TALKING ANIMALS

My mother gave me the entire set of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, in a nice hardback book club edition. I must have been eight or nine, but don't exactly remember. What I do remember was absolutely, completely losing myself in these books.

We've all heard the phrase "lost in a book": *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* was the first time it happened to me. It was probably a combination of the right time (I could read well enough that the text itself didn't get in the way) and the right story. I so desperately wanted Narnia to be real.

Like a lot of kids who read the book, I never looked at a large piece of furniture or walk in closet the same way again -- I had to feel the back of it, to be sure it was solid. I knew better, but still. The idea of always winter but never Christmas meant things were Scary and Serious. When the Witch tempted Edmund with Turkish delight, I was tempted, even though I had absolutely no idea what Turkish delight was.

I still have the original set of the book club hard covers my mother gave me; I have a beautiful illustrated version as well, but it is an addition to, not a replacement for, the pages that I first got lost in. Engaging experiences have a hold on us, one that can persist over time. More than twenty years after I first read *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, I visited London. I found myself in Fortnum & Mason, the British department store, and on display were boxes of Turkish delight. Immediately the book came rushing back to me. The horrible results of Edmund's giving in to temptation notwithstanding, I bought a box. I still didn't really know what Turkish delight was, and here was my chance to find out.

Engaging experiences don't have to *be* real – in my experience, lions and beavers don't speak English – but they do have to *feel* real. I was so engaged in the Narnia story, I desperately wanted that experience to be possible. And I can't be the only kid who ever wished animals – actual animals or even the stuffed kind – would talk to me. Today, perhaps more kids await their letter to Hogwarts than probe the back of closets, but the impulse is the same. I want to be there. I want it to be real. I want that experience.



JESUITS IN SPACE

Mary Doria Russell's *The Sparrow* is one of the best books I've ever read. It's not just that Russell is able to fully imagine and realize different worlds, it is the way her narrative makes complete sense. She knows when to withhold information and when to reveal it in order to bring the reader in. She explains just enough, and no more. There is nothing arbitrary about her choices. All the puzzle pieces lock together.

Here's the setup: in the near future, less than twenty years from now, the Arecibo Observatory picks up a transmission originating near Alpha Centauri. (The stars you're looking at now.) They think the transmission is maybe some kind of music: it's an obvious sign of intelligent life. Governments debate the right thing to do; the UN takes years to decide if or how to respond. While everyone else bickers, the Jesuits swiftly conclude they must meet God's other children, so they mount a private mission.

Their planning is meticulous: they have the right technology (not entirely proven, but not ridiculously risky), the right people with the right skills (scientists, anthropologists, technologists, language specialists) and the right purpose (meet the aliens). They are thoughtful, sensitive, and pay attention to every detail.

Things still go horribly, tragically wrong.

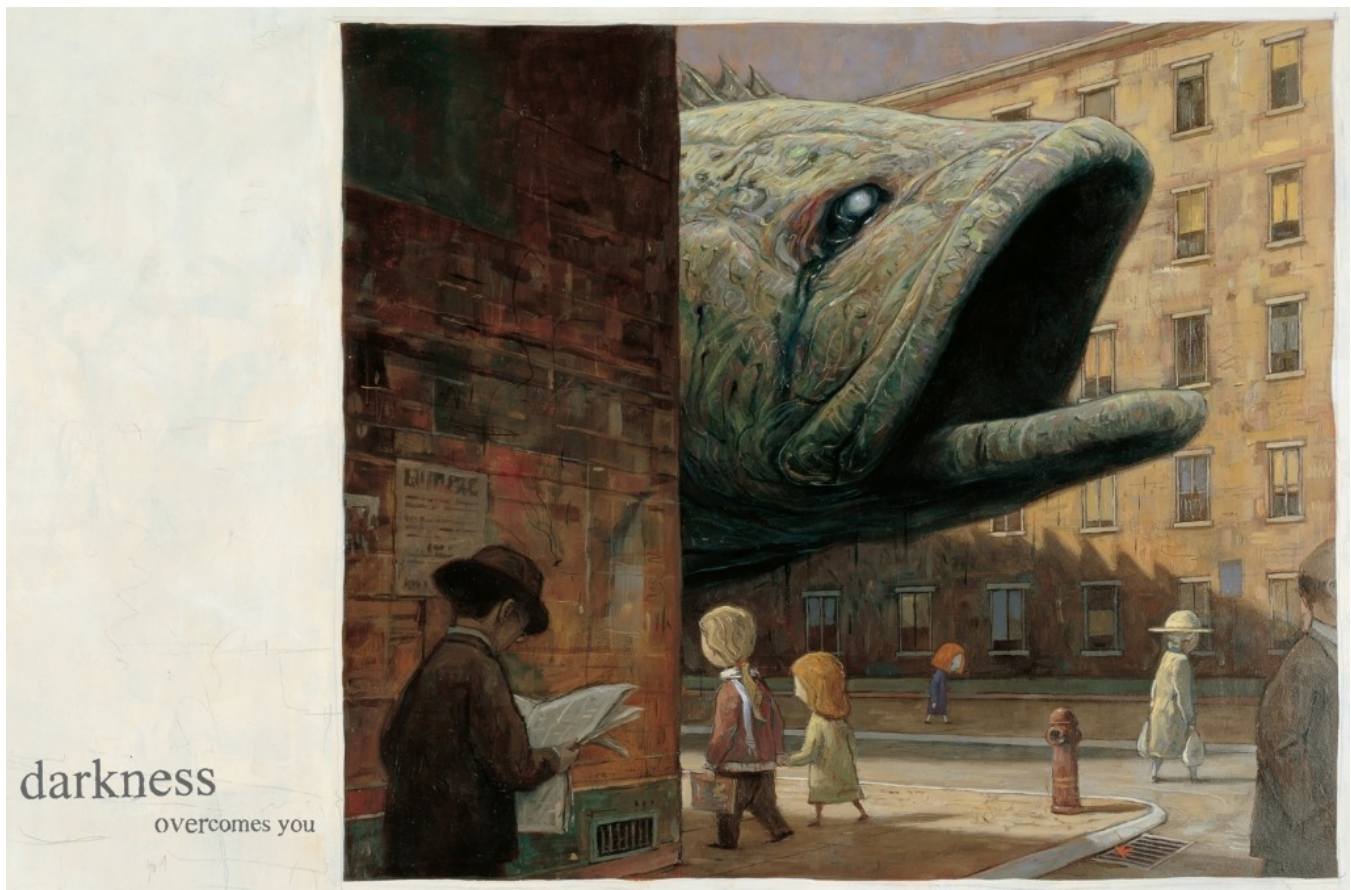
Why?

Well, it wasn't the technology – they seemed to solve all the technical hurdles, they arrive on the planet, and they even meet the aliens.

Things go horribly, tragically wrong because they misunderstand context.

These refined people, with noble intentions, doing excellent work, misunderstand their context. Things don't mean what they think they mean, translation is tricky, and no one in the landing party is able to sufficiently break beyond their own frame of reference to understand the possible consequences of their actions. Most of them die.

In *The Sparrow*, Russell is struggling with the idea that everything happens for a reason. I think everything in her story is there for a reason. It's not a book about easy answers, and that's the point. We never escape the struggle with context.



A TINY RED LEAF

This is a page from Shaun Tan's *The Red Tree*. It might not be immediately obvious, so I'll tell you this is a children's book.

I think children's books – particularly illustrated children's books – are one of the most efficient storytelling vehicles in existence. The typical picture book is 32 pages. This is the result of embracing a long-standing physical book publishing constraint.

Yes, the actual pages are bigger with picture books, but so is the text. And most of the story is pictures; you really can't have much text. The best authors and illustrators make every mark and every word matter.

Shaun Tan – who is both author and illustrator – has a particular knack for capturing awkwardness, difficulty, uncertainty, and despair. This picture is awful. Look at that fish: dark, inevitable, oppressive, it doesn't just embody the text, it expands on it: “Darkness overcomes you”.

Look closer: Can you see the tiny red leaf? By the sewer grate?

It's a visual motif carried throughout the book, working to create not just visual continuity, but thematic continuity. The red leaf is hope, it is the possibility that things will get better -- and while it might seem lost, it is always there.

The best picture books are efficient *and* emotional.



A STORYTELLER WITH QUESTIONABLE ETHICS

The last book I want to talk about is Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories*. Unlike the other books, this is nonfiction. Well, it's nonfiction about fiction; his subject is stories, and the ways they shape our understanding of the world. People have been gathering to tell stories since, well, people have gathered. We may spend more times on screens than listening around the campfire these days, but the pull is still there.

King is a writer, college professor, and storyteller. He'd say this makes him a liar, but in acknowledging that he's really saying he's no different from you or me.

He makes many powerful points about how the stories we tell shape our thinking. For example, he compares a Native origin story to the book of Genesis. In terms of stories, they are both creation myths. But how we tell them, how we frame them, sets up expectations about authority and believability and what's true.

The truth about stories, King tells us over and over, is that stories are all we are. The book is mostly a transcription of the talks King gave as the Massey lectures. The Massey lectures are a Canadian cultural institution of sorts, and King was the first Native lecturer. In 2003.

Over and over, King reminds us, stories are all we are, so we need to be careful. Careful about the stories we tell, and careful about the stories we listen to. They are powerful. They can change things. He tells stories about different animals: turtles, and ducks, and coyotes. He tells us stories about the misuse of power, about sexism and racism on personal, institutional, and cultural scales.

There are five sections, five lectures, and at the end of each King admonishes us, "But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now."

It's a powerful trope, and repetition is part of the power. But it can be easy to distance yourself – he's talking about injustice, about history, about too many wrongs and not enough rights – and hey, you tell yourself, he's not talking about me. Not really.

Which is probably why he wrote the afterward. It's a story he won't tell out loud. If you go to the CBC website and search for the audio (which I recommend you do) you won't find the afterward. It's only in the book. The story he tells in it is personal, it is about real people. It's a story about drifting apart from a good friend. An experience many of us can probably identify with.

The particulars of his story are this: Married friends of his have two sons and adopt a daughter. The daughter has fetal alcohol syndrome; this causes significant behavioral issues. Over time, King drifts away from this family. It wasn't a choice, something that he decided and acted on. It probably started with more space between phone calls. At some point he reconnects with the husband, his good friend. King finds out he's no longer a husband, the strain was more than his friend's marriage could bear.

He says he doesn't tell this story out loud because it makes him weep:

"...for the world I've helped to create. A world in which I allow my intelligence and goodwill to be constantly subverted by my pursuit of comfort and pleasure. And because knowing all of this, it is

doubtful that given a second chance to make amends for my despicable behaviour, I would do anything different, for I find it easier to tell myself the story of my failure as a friend, as a human being, than to have to live the story of making the sustained effort to help. "

He ends the afterward the same way he ends each of the lectures -- be reminding us we no longer have the out, we can no longer say we would live differently if we'd heard this story, because we've heard it now.

Every time I read it, it's a punch in the gut. It's a measure of where I am and what I'm doing, and of what I am failing to do.

Stories are how we make sense of our experiences. Stories are how we rationalize; they are also how we change the world.

Stories are how we share what we know. You've heard a lot of stories today, about how techniques work and what results they can achieve. It's a responsibility, and a fantastic opportunity.

Remember, when you leave here, now you can't say you didn't know. You've heard it now.

THE PICTURES

Gondola by dachalan

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/54945394@N00/436291764/>

I found Narnia! by Wyoming_Jackrabbit

http://www.flickr.com/photos/wy_jackrabbit/5337870722/

Centauro by nudomarinero

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/nudomarinero/5501856207/>

Darkness overcomes you, page from *The Red Tree* by Shaun Tan via

<http://www.themillions.com/2011/04/the-millions-interview-shaun-tan.html>

Campfire by eskimoblood

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/eskimoblood/23471417/>

THE BOOKS

The Passion

by Jeanette Winterson

The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe

by C.S. Lewis

The Sparrow

by Maria Doria Russell

The Red Tree

by Shaun Tan

The Truth About Stories

by Thomas King

