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Stories and Literature — A General Reader

How stories work, and why every educated person reads them

Nji Griphan

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IMPRINT

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A note on this book

The Library of this school is a full library, not a shelf of one man's field alone. This general reader introduces literature — stories, poems, plays and the novel — how they are built, how to read them well, and why they belong in the education of scientists and farmers as much as of scholars. All examples are discussed in general terms any

reader can verify in the works themselves.

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Chapter 1

Why Stories Matter

Before writing, there were stories; before schools, stories were the school. This chapter considers what stories do — carry memory, rehearse life, and bind communities — and why a university library keeps them at its centre.

Stories as memory

Communities store their past in stories: origins, heroes, warnings, jokes at the expense of the powerful. The folktale a grandmother tells is an archive with a voice. When a people's stories are lost, its memory develops holes that no document fully repairs.

Stories as rehearsal

In a story we practise life safely: we face the trickster, the journey, the betrayal and the return, and learn their shapes before life presents them in earnest. This is why children beg for the same tale again — rehearsal, like all practice, improves with repetition.

Stories as knowledge of others

A story is the only technology that lets us live, briefly, inside another person's skin — another village, century or station in life. Educated judgement depends on this exercise of imagination; without it, knowledge stays narrow however wide it grows.

Key points

- Stories are archives, rehearsals and exercises in imagination.
- Every culture keeps its memory in narrative.
- Reading widely widens judgement.

Exercises

1. Retell a folktale you know in one page, exactly as it was told to you.

2. Name a story that taught you something before life did.

3. Explain, in a paragraph, what is lost when a community's stories die.

Chapter 2

The Parts of a Story

Stories differ in a thousand ways and agree in their anatomy. This chapter names the parts — character, setting, plot, conflict, theme — so that you can discuss any story, from a fireside tale to a long novel, with precision.

Character and setting

Character is who acts; setting is where and when they act, and it is never mere scenery: a drought-year farm and a palace make different people of the same soul. Watch how good storytellers let setting press on character until character reveals itself.

Plot and conflict

Plot is events arranged by cause, not merely by sequence: the king died, then the queen died is a list; the king died, then the queen died of grief is a plot. At plot's heart sits conflict — person against person, against nature, against society, or against themselves.

Theme — what the story is about underneath

Theme is the question the story keeps asking: what does greed cost? can love survive pride? Themes are not morals pasted on; they grow from what happens to whom. Two readers may name a story's theme differently and both be right, if both can point to the tale.

Key points

- Plot is causality, not just sequence.

- Conflict is the engine; theme is the question underneath.
- Support every reading with evidence from the story.

Exercises

1. Analyse a tale you know: character, setting, conflict, theme.

2. Turn a list of events into a plot by adding causes.

3. State one story's theme two different defensible ways.

Chapter 3

Poetry — Language at Its Densest

Poetry is language compressed until it glows: rhythm, image and sound carrying more meaning per line than prose attempts. This chapter teaches the beginner's toolkit — image, metaphor, rhythm and form — with which any poem can be opened.

Image and metaphor

A poem thinks in images: it shows the thing through a comparison. A metaphor declares one thing to be another ('the night is a cloth'), borrowing the second thing's qualities for the first. Ask of every metaphor: what exactly is being carried across?

Rhythm and sound

Verse moves in patterned time — the drumbeat under the words. Even poems without strict metre manage their pace, speeding and slowing the reader's breath. Reading a poem aloud is not decoration; it is switching the poem on.

Forms — sonnet to free verse

Forms are the games poets agree to play: the sonnet's fourteen lines, the ballad's story-song, the praise poem's cascading names, free verse's self-made music. Form is not the enemy of feeling; it is feeling's trellis.

Key points

- Poetry compresses: image, metaphor, rhythm.
- Read poems aloud; sound is half the sense.

- Form is a trellis, not a cage.

Exercises

1. Write two metaphors for rain, one joyful, one fearful.

2. Read a poem aloud twice and note what the second reading revealed.

3. Describe the form of a praise poem or hymn you know.

Chapter 4

Drama — Stories Acted

Drama is literature built to be performed: dialogue carries the plot, and meaning lives as much in gesture and silence as in words. This chapter reads plays as both text and event, from village performance traditions to the written stage.

Dialogue does everything

A play has no narrator to explain; characters must reveal themselves by speaking and acting. Every line therefore works twice — it says something, and it shows who is speaking. Flat dialogue fails at the second job.

Stage and audience

Drama is the most communal literature: a story completed by an audience's presence, laughter and silence. African performance traditions — storytelling with song, dance and audience answer — remind us that the silent, separate reader is only one of literature's homes.

Tragedy, comedy and the middle kinds

Tragedy follows a consequential fall; comedy follows confusion toward harmony; between them stand histories, satires and the modern problem play. Naming the kind sets the reader's expectations — and lets a playwright break them deliberately, for effect.

Key points

- In drama, dialogue must reveal as it speaks.

- Performance completes the play; the audience is part of the work.
- Kind sets expectations that artists may honour or break.

Exercises

1. Write a page of dialogue in which two characters' speech reveals their characters.

2. Describe a performance tradition you know and its audience's role.

3. Retell a known story as a three-scene play outline.

Chapter 5

The Novel and the Short Story

Prose fiction gives literature its longest breath. This chapter distinguishes the novel's wide world from the short story's single lightning flash, and introduces the African novel's place in world literature in general terms.

The novel — a world in a book

A novel sustains characters across years and societies, weaving subplots into a whole vision of life. Its special power is duration: we live alongside its people long enough for them to change — and to change us. Reading novels is the closest reading comes to living extra lives.

The short story — one effect

The short story aims at a single effect achieved in a single sitting: everything in it serves that effect. Where the novel is a journey, the story is a well-aimed arrow. Masters of the form prove that brevity is not shallowness.

African literature in the world

In the last century, African writers took the novel, the play and the poem — and older oral forms beneath them — and made literatures the whole world now reads, in English, French and many African languages. Their recurring themes — the meeting of cultures, the village and the city, power and its abuses — belong to everyone who reads.

Key points

- The novel's power is duration; the story's is concentration.
- African literatures stand in the world's first rank.
- Oral and written forms feed each other.

Exercises

1. Compare a novel and a short story you know: what can each do that the other cannot?

2. Summarise a novel's world in ten lines without retelling its plot.

3. List three themes you have met in African writing and one example of each.

Chapter 6

Reading Well — The Reader's Craft

The final chapter turns to you, the reader: how to read literature actively — questioning, connecting, judging — and how to build a reading life that keeps educating you long after examinations end.

Active reading

Read with a pencil: mark what surprises, question what persuades too easily, note where a character's choice turns the plot. Literature repays interrogation; the passive reader gets the story, the active reader gets the meaning as well.

Context without chains

Knowing a work's time, place and author's life can illuminate it — and can also imprison it, if the work is treated as mere evidence about its era. Use context as a lamp, not a cage: the work must still be allowed to speak to your own time.

Building a reading life

Keep a reading notebook: title, author, three lines of judgement, one sentence you wish you had written. Alternate the near and the far — your own culture's books and the world's, old and new. A shelf read deeply beats a library skimmed; begin where you stand.

Key points

- Read actively: mark, question, connect.

- Context is a lamp, not a cage.
- A reading notebook turns reading into education.

Exercises

1. Start a reading notebook with three entries.
2. Write a one-page response to a story: what it asked, what you answer.
3. Plan a month of reading: one near book, one far book.

Appendix — Worked Examples and Practice

From Chapter 1 — Why Stories Matter

Worked example: the tortoise of West African folktale — small, slow, and forever outwitting the strong — teaches audiences to prize wit over force and to suspect the boastful. One character, carried in a thousand tales, becomes a whole people's lesson in intelligence. That carrying power is literature's oldest technology.

From Chapter 2 — The Parts of a Story

Worked example: 'A farmer found a stone. He sold it. He became rich' is sequence. Add causes — 'because the stone was a diamond, because a travelling merchant recognised it, because the farmer had once fed that merchant in a famine' — and the list becomes a plot about kindness returning. Causality is the difference between a report and a story.

From Chapter 3 — Poetry — Language at Its Densest

Worked example: 'the harvest came like an answered prayer' is a simile — it compares with 'like'. Strike the 'like' — 'the harvest was an answered prayer' — and the comparison hardens into metaphor, claiming identity rather than resemblance. Two words removed, and the line's boldness doubles: that sensitivity to small choices is poetry reading.

From Chapter 4 — Drama — Stories Acted

Worked example: 'I am not angry,' said through clenched teeth, slamming a cup — the words deny, the performance confesses. Drama lives in that gap between line and act, and actors and audiences are trained by a lifetime of reading people to catch it instantly. On the page, stage directions carry what the theatre shows.

From Chapter 5 — The Novel and the Short Story

Worked example: a novel may spend thirty pages letting a young man's idea of his father slowly crack; a short story must crack it in one scene — a letter found, a debt revealed. Same human material, opposite economies. Knowing which form a story wants is the beginning of writing one.

From Chapter 6 — Reading Well — The Reader's Craft

Worked example: a notebook entry — 'Finished the novel last night. Judgement: the middle sags, the ending earns everything. Sentence I envy: the one where the mother forgives without speaking. Question it left me: what do the old owe the young — truth, or protection?' Four lines, and the book is now part of the reader's own thinking, permanently.

Further Practice — Review and Discussion

Work through these prompts in writing; they are the revision spine of this book. Answer in full sentences, with examples from your own place of study wherever the prompt allows.

Chapter 1 — Why Stories Matter

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Stories are archives, rehearsals and exercises in imagination.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Every culture keeps its memory in narrative.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Reading widely widens judgement.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — why stories matter — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 2 — The Parts of a Story

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Plot is causality, not just sequence.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Conflict is the engine; theme is the question underneath.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Support every reading with evidence from the story.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — the parts of a story — touch your own community, farm,

school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 3 — Poetry — Language at Its Densest

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Poetry compresses: image, metaphor, rhythm.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Read poems aloud; sound is half the sense.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Form is a trellis, not a cage.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — poetry — language at its densest — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 4 — Drama — Stories Acted

- Explain in your own words, with one example: In drama, dialogue must reveal as it speaks.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Performance completes the play; the audience is part of the work.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Kind sets expectations that artists may honour or break.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — drama — stories acted — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you

would research next.

Chapter 5 — The Novel and the Short Story

- Explain in your own words, with one example: The novel's power is duration; the story's is concentration.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: African literatures stand in the world's first rank.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Oral and written forms feed each other.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — the novel and the short story — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Chapter 6 — Reading Well — The Reader's Craft

- Explain in your own words, with one example: Read actively: mark, question, connect.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: Context is a lamp, not a cage.
- Explain in your own words, with one example: A reading notebook turns reading into education.

Discussion: where does the subject of this chapter — reading well — the reader's craft — touch your own community, farm, school or workplace? Write one page, naming real places and real constraints, and end with one question you would research next.

Glossary of Key Terms

Theme — The underlying question a story keeps asking.

Plot — Events arranged by cause and effect.

Metaphor — A comparison declaring one thing to be another.

Simile — A comparison using 'like' or 'as'.

Dialogue — Speech between characters; in drama, the carrier of the whole story.

Folktale — A traditional story passed down by telling.

Free verse — Poetry without a fixed metre or rhyme scheme.

Protagonist — The central character of a story.

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