

The General Versus the Specific

In October 2006, nearly six thousand people worldwide perished in hurricane-induced floods.

Quick, what do you feel after reading that sentence? My guess is, you feel a little confused by the question. Now imagine a wall of water coming straight toward a small boy, who clings desperately to his frantic mother. Trying to soothe him, she whispers, “Don’t worry baby, I’m here, I won’t let you go.” She feels him relax in the moment of deafening calm just before the water rips him from her arms. The sound of his cry above the cacophony of destruction—trees ripped from the ground, houses smashed to splinters—will haunt her for the rest of her life. That, and his look of utter surprise as he was swept away. *I trusted you*, it seemed to say, *and you let me go*.

Now how do you feel? This time, the question is clear. Watching the flood claim that one little boy is far more gut-wrenching than hearing about six thousand anonymous people perishing in various floods, isn’t it? I’m not suggesting your heart doesn’t go out to all the flood victims and their families. But chances are, when you read that opening sentence, you didn’t feel much of anything.

Don’t worry. This isn’t a psychological test to reveal your deep-seated pathological tendencies; rather, it highlights how we humans process information. As counterintuitive as it may seem, even the most massive, horrendous event, when presented in general, doesn’t have much direct emotional impact, so it’s easy to sail right by it almost as if it wasn’t there. Why? Because we’d have to stop and *think* about it in order to “manually” do what a story would have done: make it specific enough to have an

emotional impact. And why would you do that? As Damasio says, “Smart brains are also extremely lazy. Anytime they can do less instead of more, they will, a minimalist philosophy they follow religiously.”⁶ Since your brain’s probably much more interested in thinking about something that matters, like why your spouse is late again tonight, it’s probably not going to work at envisioning—wait, what was that again? A terrible flood somewhere years ago? Especially because hey, there’s nothing you can do about it, and besides, it would just make you feel bad, and god knows you have enough on your plate with your knucklehead spouse, who your mother warned you about, but did you listen? *Huh?* Flood? You talking to me?

The point is, if I ask you to think about something, you can decide not to. But if I make you feel something? Now I have your attention. Feeling is a reaction; our feelings let us know what matters to us, and our thoughts have no choice but to follow.⁷ Facts that don’t affect us—either directly or because we can’t imagine how the facts affect someone else—don’t matter to us. And that explains why one personalized story has infinitely more impact than an impersonal generalization, even though the scope of the generalization is a thousand times greater. In fact, it is only via a specific personalization that the point of a generalization is shot home. Otherwise, as Scarlett said, we can think about it tomorrow—which, given how much brain energy it takes to think about something that hasn’t grabbed us emotionally, usually translates to a week from never.

Feel first. Think second. That’s the magic of story. Story takes a general situation, idea, or premise and personifies it via the very specific. Story takes the horror of a huge, monstrous event—the Holocaust—and illustrates its effect through a single personal dilemma—*Sophie’s Choice*. Thus the massive, unwieldy, unbearable vastness of its otherwise incomprehensible inhumanity is filtered through its effect on one person, a mother who must decide which of her two beloved children to spare. And because we are in Sophie’s skin, we feel the ineffable magnitude of all of it: the Holocaust, the unspeakable cruelty, her ultimate decision. We are not just being *told* about its effect; we are experiencing it.



*Indeed, feelings don't just matter—they are
what mattering means.*

—DANIEL GILBERT, *Stumbling on Happiness*

MOST OF US WERE BROUGHT UP to believe that reason and emotion are polar opposites—with reason as the stalwart white hat and emotion as the sulky black hat. And let's not even discuss which gender was said to wear which hat. Reason, it was thought, sees the world as it is, while that irrational scamp, emotion, tries to undermine it. Uh-huh.

Turns out, as neuroscience writer Jonah Lehrer says, “If it weren’t for our emotions, reason wouldn’t exist at all.”¹ Take that, Plato! This is illustrated by a sad story that, even sadder, its real-life protagonist doesn’t see as sad at all. Because he can’t—literally. Elliot, a patient of Antonio Damasio, had lost a small section of his prefrontal cortices during surgery for a benign brain tumor. Before his illness, Elliot held a high-level corporate job and had a happy, thriving family. By the time he saw Damasio, Elliot was in the process of losing everything. He still tested in the 97th percentile in IQ, had a high-functioning memory, and had no trouble enumerating each and every possible solution to a problem. Trouble was, he couldn’t make a decision—from what color pen to use to whether it was more important to do the work his boss expected or spend the day alphabetizing all the folders in his office.²

Why? Because, as Damasio discovered, the damage to his brain left him unable to experience emotion. As a result, he was utterly detached and approached life as if everything in it was neutral. But wait, shouldn’t that be a good thing? Now that emotion couldn’t butt in and cloud Elliot’s judgment, he’d be free to make rational decisions, right? I think you know where this is going. Without emotion, each option carried the exact same weight—everything really was six of one, half a dozen of the other.

Turns out, as cognitive scientist Steven Pinker notes, “Emotions are mechanisms that set the brain’s highest-level goals.”³ Along with, apparently, every other goal, down to what to have for breakfast. Without emotions, Elliot had no way to gauge what was important and what wasn’t, what mattered and what didn’t.

It is exactly the same when it comes to story. If the reader can’t feel what matters and what doesn’t, then nothing matters, including finishing the story. The question for writers, then, is where do these feelings come from? The answer’s very simple: the protagonist.

When the events of the story are filtered through the protagonist’s point of view—allowing us to watch as she makes sense of everything that happens to her—we are seeing it through her eyes. Thus it’s not just that we see the things she sees—it’s that we grasp what they mean to her. In other words, the reader must be aware of the protagonist’s personal spin on everything that happens.

This is what gives narrative story its unique power. What sets prose apart from plays, movies, and life itself is that it provides direct access to the most alluring and otherwise inaccessible realm imaginable: someone else’s mind.

What Rapidly Unraveling Situation Have You Plunked Me Into, Anyway?

Let's face it, we're all busy. Plus, most of us are plagued by that little voice in the back of our head constantly reminding us of what we really should be doing right now instead of whatever it is we're actually doing—especially when we take time out to do something as seemingly nonproductive as, um, read a novel. Which means that in order to distract us from the relentless demands of our immediate surroundings, a story has to grab our attention fast.⁸ And, as neuroscience writer Jonah Lehrer says, nothing focuses the mind like surprise.² That means when we pick up a book, we're jonesing for the feeling that something out of the ordinary is happening. We crave the notion that we've come in at a crucial juncture in someone's life, and not a moment too soon. What intoxicates us is the hint that not only is trouble brewing, but it's longstanding and about to reach critical mass. This means that from the first sentence we need to catch sight of the breadcrumb trail that will lure us deeper into the thick-
et. I've heard it said that fiction (all stories, for that matter) can be summed up by a single sentence—All is not as it seems—which means that what we're hoping for in that opening sentence is the sense that something is about to change (and not necessarily for the better).

Simply put, we are looking for a reason to care. So for a story to grab us, not only must something be happening, but also there must be a consequence we can anticipate. As neuroscience reveals, what draws us into a story and keeps us there is the firing of our dopamine neurons, signaling that intriguing information is on its way.¹⁰

What Does That Mean?

As readers we eagerly probe each piece of information for significance, constantly wondering, "What is this meant to tell me?" It's said people can go forty days without food, three days without water, and about thirty-five seconds without finding meaning in something—truth is, thirty-five seconds is an eternity compared to the warp speed with which our subconscious brain rips through data. It's a biological imperative: we are always on the hunt for meaning—not in the metaphysical "What is the true nature of reality?" sense but in the far more primal, very specific sense of: *Joe left without his usual morning coffee; I wonder why? Betty is always on time; how come she's half an hour late? That annoying dog next door barks its head off every morning; why is it so quiet today?*

We are always looking for the *why* beneath what's happening on the surface. Not only because our survival might depend on it, but because it's exhilarating. It makes us feel something—namely, curiosity. Having our curiosity piqued is visceral. And it leads to something even more potent: the anticipation of knowledge we're now hungry for, a sensation caused by that pleasurable rush of dopamine. Because being curious is necessary for survival (*What's that rustling in the bushes?*), nature encourages it. And what better way to encourage curiosity than to make it feel good? This is why, once your curiosity is roused as a reader, you have an emotional, vested interest in finding out what happens next.

And bingo! You feel that delicious sense of urgency (hello dopamine!) that all good stories instantly ignite.