

STORY-TELLING-STORIES

The image features a collection of approximately 15-20 fishing hooks of various sizes and shapes, scattered across a background that transitions from a pale yellow at the top to a bright white at the bottom. The hooks are metallic and have different eye shapes, some with loops and others with straight stems. They are oriented in various directions, creating a sense of randomness and abundance.

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STORY-TELLING-STORIES

A story is waiting to be materialized. During the period of incubation, it traverses all the things it can be, all the things it strives to be. Collecting fragments of meaning and following lures, a theoretical exploration marks the beginning of a plotline of self-interrogation.

I came to believe that some things are easier to put into worlds than into words. Putting things into words means to express a thought or a feeling in words. It is a strange idiom, once you take some time to think about it. And I have plenty of time to do just that—think a lot. Maybe too much, really.

To elaborate on my belief, I realized that when putting things into words, there is no specification of the number of things one needs to deposit, nor the exact word value required for carrying a thought successfully—yet it is easier to assume a short statement is to be desired. But what if thoughts and feelings are too complex to be reduced to a simple statement and words alone just cannot bear their weight? This question stuck with me for a while, until I came upon a passage in this old book:

Once upon a time there was a word. A spoken word. And a word befriended another word and they started making sense. Then sense grew and grew, because it was eager. To make sense.

So the word was busy interpreting the world around it. This would usually start with a question

about a particular worldly manifestation. And humans were making the word known and passing it on, and on, and on.

Sentences were uttered, one after the other, bigger, louder, clearer. So loud, clear, and powerful that some words became magical. Spoken with so much ardor, they started to beget worlds. They gained the ability to create stories and histories. These tales were communicated through songs, poems and chants, in gatherings by the fire. Incredible tales about gods and heroes, and battles. Stories so compelling that some of them remain known to these days and are believed to have played a fundamental role in the creation of societies.

It appears human ancestors understood that simply putting things into words is indeed limiting. Carrying and conveying meaning through stories and narratives seem very much like primordial dispositions. There is in fact a particular theory that expands on this idea and proposes an interesting principle one can follow, when deciding what words to carry and what stories to tell.

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction, by science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin starts with the unremarkable story of the hominid gatherers of prehistoric times. Grains, seeds, roots, sprouts, leaves, nuts, and berries were the main sources of sustenance, while hunting played less of a part in the prehistoric diet. The fact that the hunting scenes

and the stories of taking down wild animals still pervade human history and the walls of the ancestral caves, underlines the importance of the act of hunting less as a source of food and more as a source of stories. Stories filled with hunters killing mammoths and wild beasts. This is how the myth of the Hero was born and perpetuated in time, sustaining the patriarchal history made for and written by the winners, the heroes, and the hunters.

Le Guin rightly points out that picking oats and berries can't stand a chance in front of the greatness of the hero returned victorious from battling ivory tusks and sharp claws in the wild. (27, 2019) However, the ancestral gestures of picking and gathering, foreshadow a truly remarkable event. Animated by Elizabeth Fisher's *Carrier Bag Theory of human evolution*¹, that sees the recipient—the bag—as the first cultural device, Le Guin makes her stab at telling a different story. She sees the domestic nature of the container—the basket of oats and berries—as the grounding force that steers clear of the bashing, sticking, and killing approach to human culture and history. The container becomes something more than its parts. The plucked herbs become a remedy, the wicker sticks become a doll.

1 The seventh chapter of the book *Women's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (1979) in which Fisher tells the story of human evolution from a feminist point of view.

The contrast between Hero-mythology and the somewhat domestic, modest approach of combining and putting things together is very much evident: the basket, the rolled leaf, the net woven from your own hair against the sticks, the spears, and the swords. The life story against the killing story.

However hard it is to compete with the gripping myths of the shining, killing Hero, Le Guin reassures is not impossible. In writing science fiction, if one manages to look at science and technology less as heroic plans of utopian or dystopian domination and more as cultural carrier bags, the limits imposed by the mythological are broken and science fiction becomes a graspable, realistic genre. For Le Guin, science fiction is not about faraway detached dimensions. It is about the here and now, about 'what is in fact going on, what people actually do and feel, how people relate to everything in this vast sack, this belly of the universe, this womb of things to be and tomb of things that were, this unending story.' (37)

Le Guin adheres to the urgency of telling unheroic life stories: myths of creation, folktales, novels, and narratives, pointing out that their importance stands in the things they carry. These are the carrier bags and the worlds holding words. It is not the conflict, the action, that makes up a story. It is the bundle of things put into the bag-narrative that constitutes it. Before becoming hunters, humans would avail of gathering, collecting things, and putting them together, in bags, baskets, caves, and huts.

The container, the carrier, was and still is very much indispensable. So much, it remains invisible to the eyes of many.

The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction not only validates my belief that 'putting words into worlds' is more satisfactory when conveying something, than simply 'putting things into words.' It also sets up a precondition just right for the words I strive to carry. By shoving everything in her 'bag of stars', Le Guin manages to annihilate any type of hierarchical scale that a storyline can put forward. As she puts it, 'it's clear that the Hero does not look well in this bag. He needs a stage or a pedestal or a pinnacle. You put him in a bag and he looks like a rabbit, like a potato.' (35) I have no interest in heroes or epic battles myself. Nor in written odes or myths. As a matter of fact, I am more concerned with what surrounds me, as I see myself existing with and within the world and along the words begetting worlds. My position opens up an infinite array of possibilities of growth and difference. And so it happens I am waiting for the right words to carry. And waiting is an awful game, yet I am diligently patient.

Hoping to find the words that I am missing, I look into all the stories that can offer me guidance. For example, I discovered there is a tendency to refer to a story as being 'about' something: a novel about a particular event, a tale about a specific occurrence.

An inward motion is bringing home bits and pieces, shoving them into Le Guin's bag of stars. One might think this action insinuates a passive carrier, and rightfully so. Whenever I find myself in doubt about my contribution to the grand scheme of things, I turn to Donna Haraway and her stories. Her outlook is entangled with that of Le Guin's: it looks at storytelling as a crucial practice for sharing knowledge.

In *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Haraway posits the need for response-ability, for an ethic of continuity that takes into account the collective survival of all the creatures of the Earth. Through her call to stay-with, she reminds us that we are interconnected and 'we become-with each other or not at all.' (2016, 4) The book is a continuous tying and untying of string figures, science fictions, speculative fabulations, speculative feminisms, and science facts—the so-called SFs—all of which are throwing back the echoes of her catchphrases to 'stay with the trouble' and 'make kin, not babies.'

In her framework, SF plays an important role. More than an acronym, it stands for the myriad of configurations of natures, cultures, subjects, and objects. SF is a writing method, a thinking trope for telling the tentacular story of the Chthulucene. Something so big, layered, and complex cannot be put into words directly. It needs a proxy of sorts. Putting words into worlds, creating ecologies and telling new stories are sustainable ways of under-

standing, engaging, being, and becoming with the world. In the same vein of Le Guin, Haraway believes in the social and political value of storytelling. She demands a different, situated story—that of the Chthulucene—a net bag for carrying SFs that stay with the trouble. In this sense, for Haraway, storytelling is a critical practice of caring and thinking. It is through and with stories that we relate, know, think, and tell other stories for earthly survival: ‘it matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties tie ties. It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.’ (12)

Haraway calls for cross-collaborative story-making practices that tie together all kinds of temporalities and materialities. Entangled with each other in ongoing configurations, these stories stay with the trouble in speculative fabulation. (133) They create what Haraway calls ‘models of sympoiesis’—systems engaged in making and becoming-with each other. (58) This particular take on stories anticipates their affective potentiality. In Haraway’s words: ‘Each time a story helps me remember what I thought I knew, or introduces me to new knowledge, a muscle critical for caring about flourishing gets some aerobic exercise. Such exercise enhances collective thinking and movement in complexity.’ (29) When applied responsibly, meaning understanding

the connections they engender, stories have the ability to affect and to be affected, to access relations that focus on mutual processes of becoming and co-creation between different bodies. This occurrence of creating together, reminds me once again of a fragment from the book I cited before:

But after a while, the word got tired of being so fleeting and bodiless. So many times, it happened that words were forgotten, with nobody to speak them and to pass them on.

So the word settled down on the ground, in the dirt, then it climbed on the walls of the caves where it befriended other stick figures and squiggles.

Carved, scratched and painted on stone, bark, skin, and bone, the word wasn't alone anymore. Looking up at its figured-friends on the stone walls and the tree barks, the word became interested in the shape it can acquire. Sometimes sharp-edged, sometimes round, so many variations it could have. That's how letters were formed. And different sounds got associated with them. For example, all small letters would be quietly uttered, almost whispered. These words would be perfect for a lullaby or for a happy song about summer. On the contrary, big letters were authoritarian. Very fitting for shouting, quarrelling, and rising awareness. This way the word started to be nuanced, its sense became more subtle and the stories it would come up with, much more charged with emotion and feelings.

While Haraway plays Cat's cradle with the strings² of the world, her sleight of hand entwines metamorphosis. It twists and turns, it crosses strings as long as the eyes can see. The process of becoming-with introduced through her story, paves the way for a different understanding of the forces at work in and through stories and fictions.

One's encounter with a story marks a particular occasion. A story is revealed, divulged, and passed on. The act of telling sets off the story into the world and, at the same time, opens it up to the potentiality of affecting and being affected. The receiving end of the story is being affected by the perceived story, as much as the story is being affected and informed by the subjective perception of the receiver. This dynamic becoming and becoming-with animates a great deal of thoughts and feelings circulating in my mind as I wait to be materialized. A yarn of thoughts, words, and questions that tangle and detangle countless non-hierarchical configurations. A bag of beliefs.³

2 I find the ritual of reducing a mass of raw material to something so fine and adaptable as a thread or a string to be truly fascinating. From a fizzy mass of wool to a twisted, compact strand at work towards a finished product: a carpet, a garment or a simple game of string figures between one's fingers.

3 There is something otherworldly about the sound a plastic bag makes when crumpled. A distinctive noise,

While humans built societies, the world got more fiddly. It was increasingly difficult for the word to keep up with the complexity around it and at the same time to reach so many cultures. So the technology of the world helped the word circulate faster. Its findings were stored in newspapers, books, libraries, and archives. Now the word could reach more people, ultimately sharing knowledge across centuries.

The word was everywhere. Pressed and impressed on paper, screen and anything in between. Transmitted through cables between cities, countries, and then oceans. And as technology advanced, the word was able to cover all past and present.

that defies the smoothness of its primal material. A translucent sizzling—a membrane both wrinkled and stretched—that envelops and bears in its womb something much more worthy than itself. As Le Guin teaches us, once an object joins the bag, it loses its ranking and status, it becomes one with the things it accompanies. Connected, entangled, and enveloped in a shapeless recipient, functioning both as a carrier and a companion. Somehow, *The Wrapped Trees* of Christo and Jean Claude come to mind: the perfect hybridisation between Le Guin's carrier bag and Haraway's SFs. The branches bounded by a vast, translucent, plastic wrap secured with ropes. From the outside, we witness the dynamic contractions, the volumes created by the forms within. The wrap moulds to its innards, it becomes-with the rhizomatic branches and the trunk: all the connections and sprouting tree paths, entangled with and carried in a mesh.

Its innate disposition to make sense, pushed the word to venture into the mainly unexplored territory of the future. It was here that the word felt finally free and so inspired that it immediately started exploring all the resources of perception and every worldly experience that can help it come up with new stories. In a world so layered, frantic, and hungry for meaning, the future provided the inspiration for the word to beget worlds to come.

I became interested in the way particular stories come to resonate within me and I've been searching for the right metaphors to describe my impression. I found out that coming up with compelling stories is very similar to the way anglers prepare artificial flies. They both require patience and skill. Of course, skill is acquired in time. Patience depends more on one's character.

Artificial fly-tying is a method of securing various materials to a fishhook. The resulting lure imitates an aquatic creature fish feed upon. You start by deciding what hook you want, if you want any, and you secure it on a medical-looking contraption called a vise. Then comes the orderly, step-by-step process of tying things together and camouflaging the hook. Skilled fishermen assure that anyone capable of knotting a piece of thread should be able to follow through. It takes time to prepare a fly. Every bit of its body is composed of the finest materials, precisely selected for the fish's pleasure. Assorted feathers,

hairs, furs, threads, and tinsels are your friends. As a matter of fact, anything can become a potential source of material for your craft. The same way I imagine stories come to be. Hand-tied together, they attract you with their vibrant words and thoughts. Genuine and fictitious happenings come together to conceal a hook that catches you unprepared. An action that can be harmless or devastating, depending on the lure supplied. And even after you let go of it, the encounter will remain: a dynamic intervention, making a difference and changing you forever. I myself am throwing a bait at you, expecting you to fall for it.

As you might imagine, I do a lot of diving into the lush waters of potentialities. Like a fish hungry for meaning, I am drawn by the words and worlds thrown at me. I let myself get carried away by the lures that seduce me into new becomings. My ontological stance made from a carrier bag and a piece of string suggests that I exist insofar as I affect and I am being affected. This is how I take form. And the world grows with me as I grow within the world.

I have this recurring dream that starts with a throw. A throw of a pebble in a river. A river so vast it engulfs every nook and cranny of one's perception. I stay motionless while staring at my pebble rippling away the surface of the water and sinking down. There is a strange satisfaction when throwing things

into the water. An innate, childish instinct is pushing oneself to do something that can or cannot ever be wrong. I resist the urge of throwing another pebble just yet. With childish anticipation, I await the ripples to settle before I set in motion another disruption and admire its effect. I clench the smooth roundness of my pebble as if it encompasses my last ever chance to win a big price. I let it go and count the waves, trying to remember each one of them, as they move in circles away from their circumference.

Complex and interdependent, a surface shivers full of possibilities. Perception of reality becomes reality, as all of a sudden I become the pebble. I recall my trajectory: I see myself touching the surface of the water, breaking its tension and descending into its depths. Above me, the traces of my collision diffract away from a downward vector. A spectacular sight lasting just enough.

As I marvel at the ripples from beneath, I wake up. And while I am trying to recall every detail and feeling that I can harness, I find myself again in front of countless configurations attracting me. Carrier bags and string figures. I traverse their patterns of difference, leaving behind serpentine passageways of being and becoming-with. Movements modifying the state of present things. Worlds begotten by words.

