

stock character (noun): a character in literature, theater, or film of a type quickly recognized and accepted by the reader or viewer and requiring no development by the writer.¹

Stock Characters?

Have you seen any good movies lately?

You know, ones with bigger than life characters, a robust plotline, and an ending you could have never predicted? Hmmm. They are sort of rare, aren't they?

Have you noticed that popular movies seem to have an awful lot in common? Many of them follow roughly similar plotlines. Is this an accident? Not really! One book on *Myth & the Movies* helps us trace the mythic structure of fifty unforgettable films.² One of its authors has written another book coaching aspiring writers to flex a kind of formula and write still more.³ And do you need characters for your plotline? Another book coaches you in developing forty-five master character types.⁴ Cookbooks for movies? Can we reduce storytelling to its "best practices?"

Many young people spend hours every day playing adventurous roles somewhere in cyberspace. There are a million ways to fail, get lost or die. Most of the time, there is only one final outcome if you win. And so young people play to win, hit the restart button dozens of times, and after who knows how many hours, attain some level of glory in a predetermined final outcome. If you can't figure it out for yourself, search on-line and find a cheat sheet. The plotlines seem like those in the movies. The players become stock characters. In the words of Star Trek's menacing Borg: "Resistance is futile."⁵

I'm a pastor in a fair-sized congregation in a suburb of Salt Lake City, Utah. I started serving my first congregation in 1979. That was a long time ago! Over the years, I have bought and read more "how-to-do-church-right" books than I care to confess. Some of them were even useful. As I talk with business people, I'm noticing they are reading similar books for their work. Are we all using cookbooks? And what do we cook up? Generic churches filled with stock religious characters? Offices filled with interchangeable managers? Factories and stores with nondescript but productive employees? What's the profit margin on this going to be, anyway?

¹ stock character. Dictionary.com. Dictionary.com Unabridged. Random House, Inc. [http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/stock character](http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/stock%20character) (accessed: April 15, 2013).

² Stuart Voytilla and Christopher Vogler, *Myth & the Movies: Discovering the Myth Structure of 50 Unforgettable Films* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1999).

³ Christopher Vogler, *The Writers Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*, Third Edition (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 2007).

⁴ Victoria Schmidt, *45 Master Characters: Mythic Models for Creating Original Characters* (Cincinnati, OH: Writer's Digest Books, 2001).

⁵ Michael Okuda, Denise Okuda, and Doug Drexler, "Borg," in *The Star Trek Encyclopedia: A Reference Guide to the Future* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1997), 51-52.

Movies. Computer games. Work. Our world is being reduced to a collection of manuals on “best practices.” Let’s face it. We are being homogenized. If we are paying attention, we can guess what comes next—we get pasteurized. There can be no real life if things carry through to this predetermined end. Hmmm. Again. If we don’t pay attention, we will all become paper-thin, stock characters. Really? Do we have a choice about this? Do we get to choose our roles? Are there any good parts left?

Have you lived any really good stories lately?

Both collectively and individually, we are living out a number of different stories. On the broadest scale, we are living some version of being a male or a female human being. We have and play gender roles. We have religious roles like Lutheran, Mormon, Orthodox, or Muslim. We have national roles as Americans, Russians, or maybe Sudanese. We have roles within our communities, within our schools or work environments, within our social groups, and even within our closest family relationships. Here’s the big idea: as human creatures we learn how to act a series of roles—we learn the scripts and how we are expected to perform—from our caregivers, teachers, employers, and peers. If we are well-integrated persons, these roles are not in conflict with one another and we can get along pretty well without having to think too much about our roles.

We choose some of our roles and intentionally learn the scripts: If you are going to be a medical doctor, you go to school and learn lots of useful information about how the human body works, how it malfunctions, and how it can be cured. But you also learn a code of ethics and how to “act like a doctor.” No doubt there is some flexibility in how doctors act, and each doctor gets to personalize his or her role—within limits. I’m thinking that garbage truck drivers have less flexibility in personalizing their role? But you get the idea: We learn what is expected of us and we play our roles within an expected range of performance.

If our lives are going as expected, we will leave some of these roles behind us and intuitively and gratefully accept others. As we mature, we add additional roles and our lives become more complex and hopefully, more satisfying. These various roles become second nature to us and we play them effortlessly. Development psychologists tell us that it is possible to look back at our lives in our eighties or nineties and feel satisfied.⁶ Life has been good. We have played well. At our funeral, our admirers remember us and praise us for being better than many of the other (stock) characters they have known. We dared to travel... We spoiled our great grandchildren... We weren’t entirely bland.

⁶ We’ll fill this note out with stuff about Erik Erikson, James Fowler, etc.

Have you lived any difficult stories lately?

Not everyone's life goes as expected! We don't choose some of the roles we have to play. Who chooses to get cancer? Or lose a child in an accident? Who even knows how to play such roles? These tragedies make us painfully aware of how much of our lives are lived at a somewhat shallow level. Many of the roles we play aren't even worth playing. We may suffer a thousand indignities in this life! And many of us have not learned to suffer gracefully. Questions begin to scream within us: Where did all this pain come from? And why does life have to be so difficult and even harsh for all but a very few privileged human beings? What does it all mean? Or is it just mean?

Step outside and do a few "person on the street" interviews near one of those pricey coffee shops. Ask just one question: What is the meaning of life? Brace yourself. Many people will insist that *life is mean and meaningless*. They argue vigorously that there can be no satisfying answers to questions about life and suffering. An educated woman in a nice business suit sips an iced frappe and quotes William Shakespeare's Macbeth:

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Macbeth, 5.5.25-27)

A young philosophy student agrees with Thomas Hobbes' famous claim that life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."⁷

A man in his late sixties drinking plain black coffee tells you a story about Peggy Lee: "Beautiful voice. Body to match. She won a Grammy in 1970 singing, 'Is that all there is?'"⁸

A mid twenty-something punker drinking her mocha-caramel latte doesn't remember the album name or even know the band, but still quotes the title of Cerebral Fix's debut album: "Life sucks, and then you die!"⁹

⁷ This is the dramatic judgment of seventeenth century philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his *Leviathan*. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, edited by Edwin Curley (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1994), chapter 13, paragraph 9.

⁸ Peggy Lee won a Grammy for Best Female Pop Vocal Performance in 1970 asking, "Is that all there is?" The lyrics, written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, echo Thomas Mann's *Disillusionment (Enttäuschung)* from 1896. There are several recordings available on YouTube.com.

⁹ You can find Cerebral Fix's debut album, *Life Sucks and then You Die* (Birmingham, England: Vinyl Solution, 1988) on Youtube.com. Wow! It is not my kind of music.

A fifty-something surfer-dude reports that the most horrifying and perhaps entertaining judgment on “life as we know it” appears at the end of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*. Full of trivia, he tells you that Eric Idle's lyrics for “Always look on the bright side of life” couldn't be sung on British radio when the song found increasing popularity in the 1990's. He begins to sing, “Life's a piece of sh*t, when you look at it...” All right, he can sing! He adds one more tidbit as you thank him for his time: A British Broadcasting article reported that this song was the third most requested sing-a-long at British funerals in 2005.¹⁰

A biology professor overhears the surfer-dude's song and can't resist giving her own opinion: “Leave the scatology aside. Life is all about reproducing your DNA. Everything else is epiphenomenal.”

Oh really? Nothing else matters? Can there be any meaningful or satisfying roles if life itself is meaningless? If the biologist is right, then we are pretty much doomed to be merely stock characters. Maybe we should mix her answer with Cerebral Fix's claim: “Life sucks. Raise children so their life sucks. And then die!”

“Please sir, may I have some more?”

Okay. You're not exactly holding your breath, but since I confessed above that I'm a pastor, you have been expecting me to attempt to answer all of this negativity. I will attempt this in due time because I do indeed think that we should ask for more of a very different kind of life. But first, I want to invite you to think about your life as a story.¹¹

Imagine that we are back in the same neighborhood and inside our pricey coffee shop. I'm buying. And I am inviting you to “tell me your story.” You are the main character. As suggested above, you have (or have had) several different roles. Try summarizing each role with a word or two. Can you see a plot line—a pattern of meaning or significant action moving through your roles? Maybe ask it this way: Are you moving toward a goal?

Stay with me on this. Imagine we are gathered with a couple dozen people: women, men, younger, older; some richer and some poorer than others. If we shared about our lives (in 3 minutes or less!), we would hear a range of stories. A few people might be sort of smug and say, “I had these roles. I moved toward this goal. I'm pretty much who I want to be. I did it my way.” Others might say, “I have these roles. I see how some of them fit. I'm still developing my vision of success.” Others might

¹⁰ Sony Pictures, UK, released director Terry Jones' *Monty Python's Life of Brian* on August 17, 1979. The BBC article “Angels 'favourite funeral song',” March 10, 2005, can be found at: news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/4336113.stm.

¹¹ For me, the single best resource for thinking about your life as a story is Daniel Taylor, *Tell Me a Story: The Life-Shaping Power of our Stories* (Minneapolis, MN: Bog Walk Press, 2001).

respond with, "I've had to do these things. Success is having some fun—including good free coffee. But for the most part, life sucks, and then you die."

Maybe nothing is really surprising in these answers? But what if some of them get religious on us? What if we ask them, "How has religion helped you in any of this?"

A man in the back jumps up and tells us his religion provides good direction for his family. They know the roles they are supposed to be playing. They are making modest progress in achieving their goals. They know for sure that if they died tonight, they would go straight to heaven. His wife nods in agreement, and looks around the room to see if anyone returns her nod. Most people are not making eye contact, and a few are shaking their heads as if to say, "No way." Or maybe, "That's not me."

A younger couple, closer to the front, look at each other. He nods to encourage her and she voices their frustration: "We were raised together in church and did everything we were supposed to. We heard people talking about Jesus but no one took him seriously enough to practice his teaching. Its like our parents believed his words but not his life. We finally got sick of the hypocrisy and dropped out. Our goal is to be kind to everyone, but not religious. It's working okay for us. I don't know what we'll tell our kids when we have them. We're still working out what our story means to us."

A middle-aged man off to one side finally says, "I was a true believer and I did everything I was asked to until I discovered that it was all built upon lies. I started researching the history of my church and nothing checked out. I was promised everything. I don't trust them to deliver anything. They just want my money. I'm pretty much an agnostic at this point in my life. Christianity doesn't make sense to me anymore. My life story feels fractured. Maybe it's true that 'Life sucks and then you die?' But I don't buy this yet, either. I'm still looking for how the story ends."

Again, let's get real. I don't have much fun to say to the "I did it my way crowd." The group that thinks they are going straight to heaven will also tune me out pretty quickly. And I don't think that many of the younger, "Life sucks and then you die" crowd will bother reading this book. So *who am I writing for?* I'm writing for you if you are a seeker: An emotionally honest person asking about the meaning of life. I'm writing for you if you are unhappily — and emotionally — agnostic. I'm writing for you if you are trying to bless and mentor others in either of these groups.

Some of you are wondering: What is it like to be unhappily and emotionally agnostic? There seem to be quite a lot of people who are not opposed to believing in God. But they also don't think that Christianity makes a helpful difference in the daily lives of most believers. They are disappointed with religious people. They don't want to apologize for all the stupid and hurtful things religious leaders have been caught doing. And they are embarrassed by any number of moral claims that

seem to border on bigotry. In a nutshell, people don't want to be affiliated with movements that are perceived as being anti-homosexual, judgmental, and hypocritical.¹²

Tough crowd? Not for me. I share much of their disappointment with organized religion. My gut tells me they are more right than they are wrong.¹³ Collectively, they are telling a story about how and where today's Christianity fails to communicate God's love in our world. As a Christian leader, I am ready to listen.¹⁴ I'm not alone.

Western Christianity is undergoing a thorough critique — from within. Voices are crying for a “generous orthodoxy.”¹⁵ Others are crying for nothing less than a revolution.¹⁶ Some pastors are already offering helpful diagnoses about how our lived versions of the Christian story are flawed or even dangerous.¹⁷

I do not think God's love is failing or at fault. I do believe that much of established Christianity in the western World is communicating God's love poorly to people who are emotionally agnostic. The lives we live are often “unChristian” or even more like “Christian atheists.” I do want to insist that Christian character matters.¹⁸ But I also believe with all my heart that the story we have told is still too much about us.¹⁹ Once again, I am not alone.

Many pastors and scholars are stepping back from the way things have been done over the past several hundred years in order to ask a pointed question: Whose story are we telling? Ours? God's? And many of them are offering useful retellings of *God's grand story* for Christian audiences.²⁰ My own retelling is geared for honest seekers

¹² David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, *unChristian: What a New Generation Really Thinks About Christianity... and Why it Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007), 27. See also David Kinnaman with Aly Hawkins, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving the Church... and Rethinking Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011).

¹³ Here I am agreeing with Kinnaman and Lyons, *unChristian*, 37.

¹⁴ David Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons help us listen in terms of six broad themes: Christians are perceived as being hypocritical, too focused on getting converts, anti-homosexual, sheltered, too political, and judgmental (see *unChristian*, 29-30).

¹⁵ Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004).

¹⁶ George Barna, *Revolution* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2005); Shane Claibourne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006); Brian McLaren, *Everything Must Change: Jesus, Global Crises, and a Revolution of Hope* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2007) and *A New Kind of Christianity: Ten Questions that are Transforming the Faith* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010).

¹⁷ David Platt, *Radical: Taking your Faith Back from the American Dream* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2010); Kyle Idleman, *Not a Fan: Becoming a Completely Committed Follower of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011); and Craig Groeschel, *The Christian Atheist: Believing in God but Living as If He Doesn't Exist* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *After You Believe: Why Christian Character Matters* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010).

¹⁹ Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven® Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2002), 17.

²⁰ Here I must ask readers to consult the bibliography for the dozens of books on God's grand story.

and for emotional agnostics like the younger couple or the middle-aged man who can't trust in his past religious affiliation (all introduced above).

Popular Christian author John Eldredge tells us "every story we tell borrows its power from a Larger Story, a Story woven into the fabric of our being."²¹ There are indeed deep archetypal stories that draw us into themselves and shed light on our struggle to find meaning in the midst of very busy and hectic lives. But here's the catch: *There is more than one story being told*, and more than one story has been "woven into the fabric of our being." John knows this and courageously devoted a chapter to "The entrance of evil" in his fine little book.²² Most of us underestimate the extent and effects of evil in our lives. I do it much of the time also. Let me explain.

We easily identify life-altering traumas — an advanced cancer, forms of rape, or the intentional death of a child — as powerful experiences of evil. The consequences may be with us for many years. Some things so transform us that we feel we can never return to our previous level of wellbeing. Let's recognize these as type-B traumas (B is for bad). This stuff makes the news and we spend time talking, worrying, and maybe even trying to change it.

What if there is another kind of trauma, so subtle and so perverse that it changes the very way we experience the world? There is. To one degree or another, we have all experienced the absence of some good things in our lives. This leads to type-A traumas (A is for absence). Is this absence really evil? Well, for many years, educated people defined evil as "privation," or "the absence of the good."²³ Research during the "Decade of the Brain" (1990-2000) has helped us understand how appropriate this definition is. Here is the gist of it: The absence of attentive and smiling caregivers actually causes physiological changes in the brains of infants during their ninth month of life.²⁴ A significant absence of responsive attention in the first two years of life leads to strong tendencies towards addictions and a higher incidence of very troubled and dysfunctional adult relationships.²⁵ Healthy scripts

²¹ John Eldredge, *Epic: The Story God is Telling and the Role that is Yours to Play* (Nashville, TN: Nelson, 2004), 12-13.

²² Eldredge, *Epic*, 28-40.

²³ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book IV, paragraph ???; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, prima pars, Q 49, first article.

²⁴ Here I am only briefly reporting the findings of neurophysiologists, physicians, psychiatrists, contemporary attachment theorists, and therapists. Listed chronologically, explore Daniel J. Siegel, *The Developing Mind* (New York: Guilford Press, 1999); James G. Friesen, et al., *The Life Model* (Pasadena: Shepherd's House, 2000); Daniel G. Amen, *Healing the Hardware of the Soul*, reprint edition (New York, NY: Free Press, 2008); Edward M. Khouri, Jr., *Restarting: Student Workbook* (Pasadena, CA: Shepherd's House, 2010); Curt Thompson, *Anatomy of the Soul* (Carol Stream, IL: Saltriver/Tyndale, 2010); and Karl Lehman, *Outsmarting Yourself* (Libertyville, IL: This Joy! Books, 2011). Karl Lehman's website (kclehman.com) will give you the most functional bibliography for making progress in understanding this field.

²⁵ Freud was right about adult psychoses having their beginning in early childhood. But he would have made much more progress if he had looked at the right end of the child!

or patterns of behavior are not offered and so not learned. Our very ability to experience ourselves as healthy, relational human beings can be all but destroyed by significant failures in caregiving — and all of this occurs before we even have words! These preverbal experiences impair our ability to reason within relationships and cause us — and those who love us — unimaginable grief. We may become unable to sympathize with others or feel their pain. Through no fault of our own, we become monstrous. And we become the cause of both type-A and type-B trauma all around us.

Making matters worse, we have to recognize another level of evil. Through no fault of our own, we are born selfish. We are not by nature more concerned about the welfare of others. We will get to this is due time in the chapters that follow. Here I want merely to recognize and value an on-going conversation about the seriousness and effects of what has been called “original sin.” We weren’t the first to rebel against God. But sooner or later, we all do. Our inclinations to act and our interpretations of the acts of others are skewed.

Societal ways of thinking and acting further blind our ability to judge the extent and effects of evil in this world. Often we are unaware of the violence we do to others — like racism and various forms of sexism.

Finally, if we admit the possibility of evil personalities that hate God, good things, and us; and if we are willing to consider that they want to blind us to the truth; we can begin to assess how dramatically we have underestimated the extent and effects of evil in our lives. And we can begin to understand how many conflicting stories may have been woven into our very existence: I didn’t choose this disease, I didn’t choose to be abused and neglected, I didn’t choose to be this race or this gender, I didn’t choose the economic status of my relatives, or the political traumas and philosophies of my country, I didn’t choose to be born selfish... Much of what I received was given me before I even had words, and so I cannot even choose to verbalize some of the scripts I’m acting out. I’m going to say this out loud: Won’t another story, even if it is God’s big story, just complicate things more? The last thing I want is Someone else giving me His scripts and forcing me to be one of the stock characters in His divine drama. And I can’t trust my own judgments about good and evil. Is there no good news, for me?

I wrote that last night in a scream.²⁶ But I want to be this real with God. I hope you do to. Join me in a conversation? Argue with me. But let’s not shy away from the hard questions.

²⁶ This is my paraphrase of C. S. Lewis, “I wrote that last night. It was a yell rather than a thought.” See *A Grief Observed* (New York, NY: Bantam/Seabury, 1961), 35.

A Preview of What's Coming

Feel free to skip to the next chapter if this introductory stuff bores you.

Why another book about God's Grand Story? There are dozens listed in the bibliography at the end of this volume. Why one more?

I find it odd that lots of folk are talking about God's big story without actually providing one. John Eldredge's fine little volume *Epic* would be an example of this. He artfully implies it, but never actually tells us the story. Others tell the story but seem blissfully unaware of just how manipulative their reading of things feels to oppressed people. Haven't meta-narratives (the really big stories about the structure of reality) been a key weapon in oppressing others? And then there are those narratives that just don't set the "big story" in a big enough context. I think we storytellers need to do a better job. Here is my plan:

Chapter Two is a tease. It tells God's Grand Story in dialogue a man in his mid-twenties. He has some cultural experience with religious people, but he wasn't raised going to church. He doesn't know much about the Bible, but he understands and he loves life. He isn't afraid to ask hard questions. You're invited to listen in on our conversation.

Chapter Three asks, "Which story are we telling?" It suggests that Saint Augustine changed the story we are telling, and that this has led to a profound loss of focus in many congregations.

Chapter Four expands the range of the story by telling a prequel that is essential for understanding the depths of God's Grand Story.

Chapter Five questions the mission of God and the reality of evil. Are we sure of a happy ending?

Chapters Six through Eleven develops God's Grand Story in six acts: Creation, Catastrophe, Covenant, Christ, Community, and Consummation.²⁷

Chapter Twelve challenges one of the most difficult doctrines in Christian theology: What does telling God's Grand Story this way do for our understanding of "predestination"?

Chapter Thirteen considers the challenges of telling God's Grand Story in competition with four other storylines: Muslim, Mormon, Secular Consumer, and Post-Modern.

²⁷ An earlier version appeared in John W. Morehead, et al, *Transitions: The Mormon Migration from Religion to Relationship* (Salt Lake City, UT: Western Institute of Intercultural Studies, 2011), 18-29.

Chapter Fourteen discusses some of the practical implications of telling God's Grand Story this way.

Chapter Fifteen is an appeal to open your heart and your imagination and consider how you will personalize your own role.

By the way, I'm serious about the invitation to converse and argue together. I'm going to try to keep things pretty light here, but not in the footnotes. I acknowledge my sources there. But you will find much more in the notes than just my sources. They are complicated, and at times, even technical. Please read them before you swing away at me on the website. The notes invite you deeper into two additional conversations. I'm in dialogue with younger post-moderns (and those who love them). Many post-moderns have some rather strong feelings about meta-narratives. I accept much of their critique and believe we need to listen to their hearts. I am also in dialogue with Mormons and post-Mormons and their alternative readings of the big story. In the coffee shop interviews above, the middle-aged man who researched his church's claims is on his way to being a post-Mormon. I believe both conversations may be useful to you as you think about telling God's Grand Story in your communities. If I touch a nerve, at least scan the footnotes and then join the conversations at Godsgrandstory.com.

And now, listen in as I try to tell God's grand story in conversation with a somewhat attitudinal, twenty-something male.

