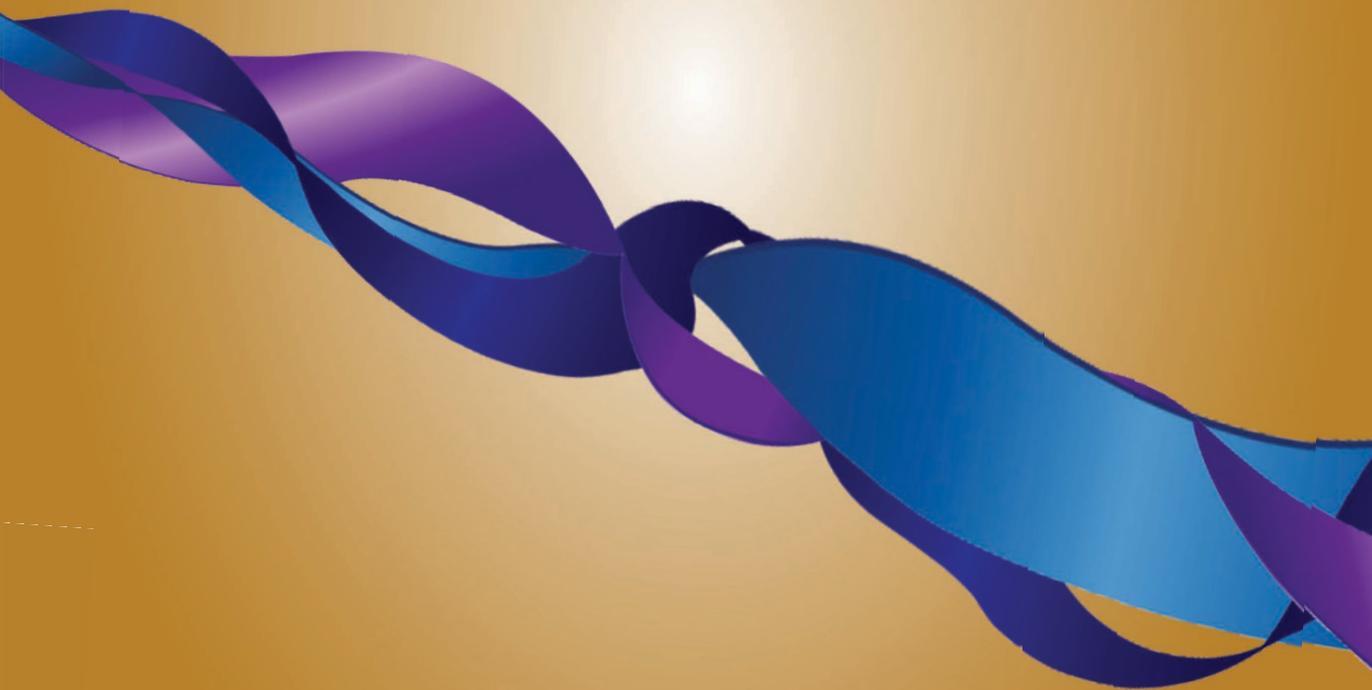


# Storytwisting

A Guide to Remixing  
& Reinventing Stories



Jeri Burns & Barry Marshall

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Printed in the United States of America

First Edition, 2017

2018 2019 2020 2021 2022 2023 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data: [Pending]

ISBN: Hardback 978-1-62491-096-8

ISBN: Paperback 978-1-62491-097-5

ISBN: e-book 978-1-62491-098-2

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Cover, interior art and design by

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Proofread by

Bill and Barbara Paddack

Acquired for Parkhurst Brothers Publishers and edited by:

Ted Parkhurst

012018

*Alice: "Would you tell me please which way I ought to go from here?"*

*Cheshire Cat: "That depends a good deal on where you want to get to."*

LEWIS CARROLL<sup>1</sup>

## CHAPTER TWO

# Storytwisting Strategies

STORYTWISTED TALES ARE A GREAT WAY TO MAKE CONNECTIONS with audiences and to re-connect with our own experiences of traditional literature. As we write this book, we are working up a fractured version of the "Snow White" story. It is the first time we have attempted this tale because Jeri harbored disdain for the title character ever since she was a child. But the writing process broadened her relationship with Snow White. Jeri puts it this way:

I never liked Snow White. But, through fracture and twisting, I've learned that there is more to her than petulance and a desire for indentured servitude to dwarfs or princes. These characteristics offended me when I was growing up, and when we started telling stories, I didn't want to imprint another generation of children with them. But our Snow White is different.

Thanks to the Storytwisting process, we are no longer constrained by the paternalistic themes of the widely-known version. A new side of the Snow White character has emerged. We never would have seen our way to reinterpreting the story for modern times *without* twisting the familiar tale. Without twisting it, we never would have made peace with this fairy tale and found a fun new way to tell it.

When we tell stories straight, we exert ourselves to preserve their cultural integrity as fully and faithfully as we can. But the ones that are storytwisted—from quirky odes to word nerds to the simplest retelling of a tale in a new time or place—those are the tales that carve a special place in our hearts because we've gone through the journey of creating a reconfigured piece. Storytwisting

changes our relationship with those stories. The novelty that we, as creators, perceive when we develop a new story impacts our connection to it and stays with the story from conception to performance on stage. It invigorates our work as artists.

We have twisted many tales. Yet every time we start a new one, we are as surprised about the process as we were the first time. Traditional stories and fairy tales are rich fountains of image and meaning, and they have perpetuated for good reasons. They touch the human condition and resonate with cultures all over the world.

Transformations and twists can be applied in a multitude of ways to any public domain story. Although creativity and intuition are key components, it helps to have guidelines. While teaching workshops, graduate, and public school classes, we developed a set of usable tools, drawn from our writing experience, that help others craft their own twisted tales. Not only is Storytwisting useful for reimagining traditional folk and fairy tales, it can also be used in educational settings to teach the literary elements that form the architecture of narrative.

### **A Way to Look at How Stories Fracture: The Rock Metaphor**

The term *Storytwisting* connotes flexibility. Although bending and shaping story material is certainly part of the process, it is not as taffy-like as that sounds. Whether the new tale is a wildly re-envisioned parody, a faithful rendering in a historical setting, or a prose tale told entirely in rhyme, all storytwisted tales begin with a *fracture*, which we call *the fracture point*.

We thought seriously about this the year that our son took earth science. He bubbled about his science labs at supper. One night, he recounted the process of breaking rocks into new forms. “Dad, if you hit a rock just right, a piece of it breaks off and makes it look like a baby version of the first rock.” Then he pulled some rocks out of his backpack and poured them on the supper table. “You see?” He pointed to a pair of rocks, one smaller than the other. “I broke that small one off!” he said proudly.

“Look!” our son continued, “The two rocks look like each other. That’s how we know that the little one came from the big one.” He explained that a resemblance between rocks is crucial to identifying the new rock as one that

was fractured from the old.

A fractured rock exposes material that was embedded in the “parent” rock. So does a fractured story. After the fracture, something new is brought to light, something that couldn’t be seen when the pieces were fused together. Like tiny windows into time, the newly exposed side of a story offers a glimpse into cultural life of the past and how it applies to the present—or how it doesn’t. It is like a blank page, waiting for explanatory words and images.

The rock analogy made a world of sense to us. But what sealed the deal was when our son continued his earth science lab story. “The teacher told us that the best way to make a baby rock is to use a tool.” He smiled. “I chose a hammer.” Then he raised an imaginary hammer high over a dinner biscuit. “Mr. Nightingale told us that we have to aim carefully when we hit the rock, or we won’t get a nice, new one.” Zack guided his hand down through the air and broke the biscuit in two.

A tool helps to break rocks without shattering them. A tool starts the process that produces a baby rock. A tool can also be used to find a tale’s fracture point. For us, this tool is Storytwisting.

### **Retelling**

Before sharing strategies for Storytwisting, it is helpful to review what it means to retell traditional tales. Myths, legends, and folktales are windows into the past and snapshots of culture. Telling these tale pays tribute to human history and world culture; it also encourages folklore to persist.

In addition to developing cultural knowledge, traditional stories offer primal, prototypical story vocabulary. Understanding the structure, symbols, and meaning in traditional tales improves the writing and telling of all stories, including fractured ones.

How does one retell a story? Retelling a story means restating the basic plot points and images of a traditional story and representing them so that listeners recognize the retold story as a version of a literary or oral tale told throughout time. Retelling creates faithful renderings of stories. Nevertheless, it is not a copy-and-paste process.<sup>2</sup> Professional storytellers evaluate several versions of the same traditional story to find common threads. After careful consideration, new language is composed to convey those commonalities. That

is retelling in a nutshell.

Memorization of a story's text is not the same as retelling it. There are some storytelling traditions where stories are passed intact from one tradition bearer to another.<sup>3</sup> This bardic process of traditional cultures requires words *and* storyline to remain exact.<sup>4</sup> In contrast, retold stories, as we define them, have an intact storyline with words composed and arranged by the storyteller.

### **An Example**

When telling a story like “Goldilocks and the Three Bears,” particular events must be there for it to be a faithful rendering of the widely known tale. It features three bears, porridge served in three bowls, and Goldilocks. After the bears leave to take a walk, Goldilocks enters the house, tests the porridge, chairs, and beds, before falling asleep in the smallest bed. The tale ends when she runs off upon the bears' return.

What we have presented are recognizable elements of this tale, which storytellers affectionately call the story *bones*. In addition, there are iconic phrases about the porridge being “too hot” or “too cold,” and the chairs and beds being “too hard, too soft, and just right.” Furthermore, there are repeated refrains, like “someone's been sitting in my chair,” “someone's been eating my porridge,” and “someone's been sleeping in my bed.”

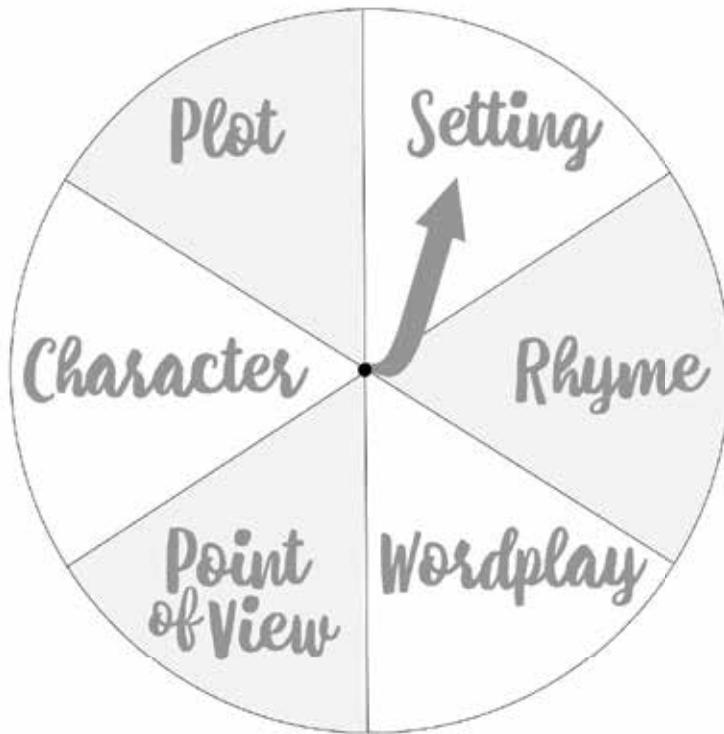
This content forms a very basic storyline gleaned from reading or hearing multiple versions of the story.<sup>5</sup> They are the common threads. With original language woven around these common threads, a new retelling of “The Three Bears” is crafted. If the tale is lifted out of its usual forest setting and placed in another time or place, the resulting story is what we define as an adapted retelling. If instead, we reverse roles so that a baby golden bear enters a girl's home, that is an example of a fractured story. Both fractured stories and adapted retellings are produced through Storytwisting. (See Chapter One inset, “Definitions of Key Terms Used in this Book”)

### **The Storytwisting Process**

Articulation of the Storytwisting Method first occurred while we were teaching graduate storytelling classes. Our students wanted to learn how to fracture stories, so we conceived a model to teach different ways to accomplish

it. We quickly realized that it was more than an academic exercise. It could be of practical use to storytellers, writers, and others. As it became a regular feature of our workshops and classes, we christened the method Storytwisting, after our storytelling recording series, *Classics with a Twist*.

Storytwisting starts just like a board game. Imagine a game dial or spinner, like the one from the classic game called Twister. Its appearance is similar to an analog clock or watch. Instead of a circle of numbers for telling time, however, the Twister dial is framed with a circle of colors. It also has a pointer, like a clock's hand. With one spin of the Twister dial, the pointer goes round and round until it rests on, or selects, one color. The dial tells the player what color is selected for action in the next turn.



The Storytwisting dial is a conceptual tool that works just like game dials. Before twisting a story, we spin this imaginary dial to guide our intention. Instead of colors or numbers, however, our dial is framed with several classic literary elements of stories. Every twist of the dial highlights or selects a different literary element. When we speak about spinning the Storytwisting

dial, we speak figuratively. Instead of spinning an actual pointer, we consciously select one literary element—the fracture point—for our new story.

Six literary elements appear on the Storytwisting dial, though there certainly could be more. Entire books and in-depth websites are devoted to defining narrative literary elements. Such compilations are encyclopedic in scope. Despite the wide array of options in the literary marketplace, it is generally agreed that all stories have certain basic components, like *plot*, *character*, and *point of view*. In addition to those, the Storytwisting dial also includes *wordplay*, *rhyme*, and *setting*. We selected these because they are the six literary elements that we twist the most.

Suppose we decide to storytwist the tale of Rapunzel. Our first step would be to twist the dial and choose a story element. Let's say that we select point of view as the fracture point. Instead of telling the story in the voice of an impartial, third person narrator, we tell it from the perspective of the tower. With that intention, we are now ready to begin the writing process.

We begin with a review of the basic Rapunzel storyline. Confined by a witch in a door-less tower, Rapunzel's only means of human contact occurs when she lets down her legendary, golden, hair. It is so long that her step-mother the witch climbs it like a rope to Rapunzel's window. One day, a prince discovers the secret and develops a relationship with the young woman in the tower. Trouble ensues. After banishment, blindness, and twin babies, many versions of the story conclude with a happy reunion between Rapunzel and the Prince.

Once we start writing, we enter a trial and error phase. To determine what other parts of the story need to change, we engage in literary massage therapy, twisting plot, motifs, and messages to fit the new story. Periodically we stop and scrutinize the tale like a rock under a microscope. By turning it this way and that, we study the surfaces of the newly formed story to see what we learn about the reimagined tale and how it can inform the writing. We continually look back at our source Rapunzel tale(s) to see what insights the fracture and twists reveal when compared against the widely-known story.

Some changes are decided consciously in advance. Others are revealed through writing. There is no stiff formula about what must or must not change.