

## **Business of Story Intro Podcast with Robert McKee - "Hollywood Storytelling in Business"**

**Park:** Welcome to this edition of Business of Story. I've got to tell you a little story leading up to this guest because he's really quite a force in the world of storytelling. I had read a lot about Robert McKee, well, when I first started studying story and how can we use storytelling in marketing and branding and social cause work to have more of an affect. So, it was 10, 15 years ago that I really started reading his phenomenal book called Story. At the time our son was in film school at Chapman University and has since graduated, is working in Hollywood as a motion graphics artist, has written his first film, a lot of it based on what he learned from Robert McKee.

A couple years ago, I joined this legendary story conference, screenwriting conference that Robert does around the world, and he held this one at the LAX Sheraton. It was a couple years ago. It's a four-day marathon session where Robert absolutely owns the stage, and he comes across, not only as a brilliant story artist, but a thespian. You get to see his worldviews, his approach on all kinds of social issues, but more importantly, he teaches this roomful, and I think there's about 200, 250 wannabe screenwriters in there, what does it take to really put together a great story to sell it in Hollywood?

Now, I was there from a business standpoint, because I wanted to know, what does Hollywood know that I need to know to do a better job of connecting with my audiences. And my son Parker joined me, and he went to say, what do I need to know, as a young aspiring director in Hollywood to tell and create great stories? So we had this wonderful father-son interaction over there and we both took away decidedly different aspects of storytelling. And I've gotten to know Robert a little bit over the years since then, and his wonderful wife, Mia. And they are so kind today to come on the show and share with us, what does he know about story that all of us business leaders and communicators need to know? Robert, welcome to Business of Story podcast.

**Robert:** Well, thank you very much. Great pleasure.

**Park:** Now, just so some of our folks who may not be quite aware of your work, you have had a fingerprint on a lot of major movies over the course of decades. How many Academy Award-winning screenwriters have taken your story course?

**Robert:** Well, I think it's now over 60. I'm not sure the exact number. And I know that the numbers of Emmys are in the hundreds. But there's also Pulitzer Prize winners and Booker Prize Winners and because the people who take that class are not necessarily screenwriters or television writers. There's also playwrights and journalists and novelists and documentary filmmakers, everybody who tells a story. So but as far as Oscars it's something like 60 plus. I don't know. I've lost count.

**Park:** You've had a number of film stars take your course as well, not only for writing but for them to have a better appreciation of story.

Robert: Yeah, a lot of actors, of course, are trying to develop work with writers, to develop screenplays for themselves that they will produce and star in. And so they need to be able to talk to writers and have a judgment that they can make themselves as to whether or not the story is really worth doing. And so, a lot of actors, yeah. A lot of actors take the class for that reason. And of course, there's no better preparation to be a writer than to have acted. When you look into the background of many, many successful playwrights and screen and television writers, you'll see that somewhere in their youth, they all acted, virtually all acted.

And because acting is just sort of a natural path into show business when you're young, when you're a kid. And so the answer as actors and then become writers, producers, and so acting is a great preparation. So anyway, actors, yeah, there's a lot those, lot of those. It's always nice when a movie star is sitting out there. It sort of raises the temperature in the room for everybody.

Park: Well, I see you've been running around with Russell Brand a little bit, or at least he's been running around with you at your workshops.

Robert: Well, I, you know, he runs. Either you can keep up with him or you don't. Russell's an incredible talent.

Park: Yeah. You were featured, or your character was featured, in the movie Adaptation with Nicholas Cage, and Brian Cox plays you, I believe, and has a wonderful scene of you up there railing against Nicholas Cage. I believe he asks you, what if nothing happens in the story? And it's just a wonderful--

Robert: He says, I think he says, "What if nothing happens, just like life?" And it's a wonderful question because I've met these people who are often intellectuals, people who spend most of their time in books, people who rarely go out of the house, so to speak, and have very tepid relationships with other people. These people become convinced that their life is like everybody's life, and that basically nothing happens to other people using their life as a measure of that. And so, I know those people and I feel sorry for them because they have very little self-awareness, and if they think that nothing is happening to them while they're doing their research, they're wrong. And they just choose to ignore the dynamics of relationships with other people, with themselves. And so my character in Adaptation goes down his throat, saying "What do you mean, 'just like life?'" And the answer is just, read a newspaper. If you want to know what is life, just pay attention to the world around you and you see that life is anything but static. So yeah, I give him hell for that. But then he comes back and we have a nice scene in a bar where I give him some coaching on his script and urge him just to take wherever he is and head toward a great ending and then of course, the irony of all that.

Park: Well, yeah. Your story wisdom is threaded throughout Adaptation, and the first time I watched it before I was aware of your work, I didn't really recognize it as much until after I was aware of your work, read your

phenomenal book, "Story," and then I watched it again and I go, "Wow, they actually have his elements threaded throughout this whole movie." So I thought that was very cool.

Robert: Well, it's true that they do, but it's not necessarily the elements that I outline in the book were then taken into that movie. Because the shape of stories, story form is as old as time. This is the way the human mind has always apprehended reality and expressed itself to other human beings in a story form. This happened unexpectedly and then we tried to do this to change things, but it didn't work. So we improvised that, tried this, that, this and that, and eventually the problem went away. And so putting life in story form is the very nature of thought. It's the way in which the mind organizes reality day in and day out. It sorts it into a story, and it is the nature of communication.

When people, even if they're not friends, if you're sitting in a bar, sitting next to strangers, when people meet and begin to talk, what do they do? They tell a story. It is the most natural form of human communication. Right? I mean, you and I did it before we started recording. I told you the story of my back surgery and you told the story of your back surgery. It's the way in which people make sense out of life.

And so all I did in my book was bring these elements to the foreground and say, "Look, this is the internal design of all stories." They have these elements. They work with this kind of rhythm and over a space of time. And people then, since the beginning of things, talented writers have always sensed this form. They've read it in other people's writing, and before you write, you read.

And people read, they go to the theater, and so forth, and so since ancient times, people who someday may become an Aeschylus or a Sophocles or a Euripides were reading and experiencing stories, and their mind then abstracted from their reading and their theater-going, they abstracted that form. At some level, they recognized the components in other people's writing. And so naturally when they went to write, they started to organize their storytelling as they had experienced it in their youth, and so these... I mean, the point is, I can't take credit for this.

Park: Right.

Robert: All I did in my book was make it clear so that people could read this and understand it. But I didn't invent it. This is as old as time.

Park: Well, you make it accessible to people and I think where Spike Jones's movie Adaptation got you exactly right was the demeanor in which you own the stage and it's really quite educational, but it's education through entertainment. When I was there I think, in fact, I think I shared my notes with you. I just had quote after quote that you said I've used several times in my business storytelling work. One of the first ones that caught my attention

was you said, "Story is about trying to make sense out of the confusion, chaos, and terror of being a human being."

Robert: Yeah.

Park: That sound about right?

Robert: It is a terror. We try to ignore that as best we can, but you know, deep down inside, subconsciously we all know we're going to die. That's a terror, and so you're always living in the dread, that someday, at least, you'll die. And so when we use a word like "terror," it's not exaggerated. It is a terror, but it's a quiet terror that you just live with, as I said, for the most part, subconsciously, but every once in a while, in your dream life, it comes to the surface. So yeah, and it's chaos and it's confusing. I mean, life does not teach you how to live. We need great storytellers to shine a light on the dim corners of human beings and relationships to give us the equipment we need to live.

Park: How long have you been coaching, training, teaching, screenwriting, storytelling, and being a story doctor?

Robert: Well, if you go all the way back to my days as a university professor, I'm 74 years old now so, it's 35 years.

Park: And you've worked on Broadway. You've worked, of course, in Hollywood.

Robert: Now, I never performed on Broadway. I was an understudy on Broadway.

Park: Okay.

Robert: But I worked in theater off Broadway and theater around the country for the first years of my career. Yeah.

Park: And when did you write Story, the book, and started your story seminars?

Robert: Well, I started the seminars about 30 years ago and immediately there were people approaching me from various publishers to do a book within a couple years of launching these lectures. But I knew that I hadn't heard every question. And so I felt I can't write the book until the questions get repetitious, until I've heard every conceivable question and found an answer for those young writers to those questions.

And after a while, I thought I had reached a saturation point where, yeah, there wasn't any question that I couldn't somehow answer. And so I started to write the book 15 years or so... let's see, the book came out almost 20 years ago. So after I'd been lecturing seven, eight, ten years, something like that, I began to put it in book form. I think the book came out in 1998, maybe.

Park: Yeah, well, Robert, I would like to throw it to one of our sponsor's stories right now, but when we come back, I would like to talk about how you are taking, again, what Hollywood knows or what you know about storytelling

and starting to apply it in the business world through your storynomics work. So we'll be right back after this message.

Robert: Great.

Park: Welcome back to Business of Story and our wonderful guest today, Robert McKee, the legendary screenwriting coach, trainer, script doctor, one of the... I've taken his story seminar and I have lists and lists of great quotes and one of his quotes is "I'm a story doctor, but I can't resurrect the dead." So, he is all about story structure. And now, Robert, you are bringing into the business world, or have, over the last couple years, storytelling for business leaders, brands, and so forth through your work with storynomics. Tell us a little about that.

Robert: Well, what actually happened was, years ago, over the last few years, people from the business world, like yourself, were taking the seminar, and I came to realize as I chatted with them that they weren't interested in writing a screenplay. They were trying to master story form to enhance their business enterprises.

And this grew and grew until I finally decided that there was a market, that there was plenty of people who really needed and wanted to know how to execute story in their work in both directions, outward, into the world, in terms of marketing, branding, advertising, and so forth. All the stories we tell outward. And then in terms of leadership, how you manage and lead people by communicating with them in story form, and especially, well, in all cases, but especially in strategy, because a business strategy, of course, is a story yet to happen.

And so, to inspire people to follow you, if you're going to lead, you do have to create a story that inspires them, that they feel they can identify with, and come to work every day with enthusiasm to write the next chapter in that story. And so you tell story inward and outward, and I saw the need for this and so I started researching, of course.

There were many, many books on story in business, but they weren't very good. I didn't find one of them that I thought... I couldn't find one of them that actually did it. They, first of all, without exception, of all the books I've read on story in business, there must be 30 or 40 of them, not one of them defined "story." They never, ever explain to you the elements of story, the composition of those elements, and actually how a story works. Never.

They just assume that you know story, and they just go from there. It's clear to me they don't know story. If they knew it, they'd explain it, and often, these books were very confused, because they don't know the difference between narrative and story, and so they would use the word "narrative" a lot and that's very imprecise.

Park: What is the difference?

Robert: Well, all stories are narratives, but not all narratives are stories. So, for example, an automobile going down the assembly line being put together piece, by piece, by piece, and then driven off into a parking lot somewhere is a narrative. "And then, and then, and then, and then, and then, and then, and then." It's narrative. It's not a story. When I work with my corporate clients, in the beginning, one of the first questions I ask them is "Tell me the story of your company." And you know what I get back? I get their organizational chart.

They don't tell me the story of their company. They do a narrative of "This and that, and then links to that, and this division, they do this and they do that, and the CFO offices, and the Board of Directors." They give me their educational chart, and they think that that's a story. Or in business, often they think they're telling a story and what they're doing is providing you with a list. Could be a chronological list. "We did this in 1990, then in the year 2000 we did this, in 2005 we did that," They give you a chronological list of events or numbers.

That's not a story. It's a narrative. And so I don't use the word "narrative" because if people use "narrative" and think they're telling a story, then they don't understand why it doesn't work. The reason is it's just a list or it's a hierarchy or it's a process.

Park: How do you turn that into a story?

Robert: Well, first of all, you have to understand what a story is, and what all of those narratives, so-called, don't have that a story must have, is the negative side of life.

Park: Conflicts.

Robert: A story begins when life is thrown out of balance and processes and chronologies and hierarchies contain nothing negative. They are just descriptions of things happening in a hierarchy or over time or whatever. A story begins when life goes out of balance. It could go out of balance to the negative, of course. There's a problem that has to be solved. Or it could go out of balance to the positive. R&D develops a new wonderful product or a new application for an existing product and suddenly there's a great opportunity in the company to have wonderful success.

The moment that story that company turns sharply to the positive, it immediately becomes negative again, because now everybody's under enormous pressure. This is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. This new product can make us or break us, if we don't take care of it properly. And so no matter which balance is overthrown in life, positive or negative, it turns to the negative. And so, that's the basis of story.

And a business story always has a positive ending, but a positive ending has no impact in a positive way unless it's in contrast to the negative beginning. Because if something's just positive, positive, positive, positive, it has really no meaning. The movement from negative to positive has meaning. It

expresses how and why we can change life to the better. From the negative, from the worst, to the best, the process then, story is a dynamic of events that moves us from a negative state to a positive state and makes it clear, expressing to the person listening to the story how positive change is brought about.

And so, that's a story, that dynamic movement against negative forces, forces that would keep you from getting what you want out of life, the struggle against negative forces to turn life to the positive, that is the essence of a story. That's what we call a story arc. In a business story, the arc is the movement against negative forces from a negative state to a positive state. And so the books that I've read about business story never talk about this. They just assume everything is positive.

So first of all, they didn't understand story, they never expressed it clearly. And I often read in these books a kind of fanaticism for story that I thought was really over the top. Story is not the be-all and end-all of business. You still use PowerPoint presentations. There's a place for rhetoric. There's a place for arguing inductively, point, point, point, point, point, point, therefore. Big data is a huge resource and for some reason these people writing these business stories wanted to create some kind of conflict between the use of story versus the use of data, versus the use of rhetoric and whatnot, and I think that's nonsense.

My attitude is, "whatever works, works." If you can get people to follow you by creating a great story, do so. If what these people really need is data, give it to them. Then they'll follow. Who knows? And so a businessperson needs to be multi-skilled. You can't make that kind of artificial division between techniques. And often, in the telling of a business story, they get mixed. In the telling of a business story, you're going to dramatize a lot of data.

I mean, a story, you can't tell a successful story if you don't have anything to say. And if what you have to say is knowledge about the reality, based upon research and the gathering of the data, and so you need material. You need content to fill the story in order to give it real credibility and strength. And so I saw this real silly division between, about advocating the elimination of PowerPoint and the substitution of story and I thought that was over the top.

**Park:** Yeah, you know, Robert, what I tell our students at ASU and work with our clients, data is the foundation for a story, but it's not necessarily the story, that somehow you have to bring that data to life through the use of story. One of your quotes, again, I have to keep going back to my wealth of resources from you, you said, about data, "Business leaders think that facts are the truth, but fact is neutral. It has no meaning. It is what happened and why that's the truth."

**Robert:** Yeah, it's the how and why is the thing that's the truth. And so what you need to express to people, based on knowledge, of course, of what the facts are, is how, underneath these facts, there are forces that are bringing these facts to the surface and then there are consequences. Now that the situation

has changed and now that this percentage of that is greater than it was before, you can start to see a certain trend or whatever, there will be consequences of that.

And the forces that bring about change and the forces that pay off in society are not data. They are social forces, cultural forces, economic forces of all kinds, and attitudes and beliefs that cannot be quantified, and so those... understanding the human psychological, sociological matrix in which we all live, and this data is just a result of certain forces operating in the world somehow. Ad numbers, then, can be discovered from that. But going back from those numbers to discover how and why those numbers are those numbers, and then moving forward from those numbers, what is the implication of all of this and how will this turn out. All of that then, means putting it in story form, so that the data's in a context of a living experience that makes sense to people.

If a CEO called everybody together and said, "Okay, everybody. This number, put it up there on the board, is where we're going to be six months from now. Then 12 months from now, that's our new number. We're going to hit that 12 months from now, and 18 months from now, that's our goal. That number there. Okay, guys. Go do it." They'd be paralyzed.

Park: Right?

Robert: Right. They wouldn't have the foggiest idea what to do. The number, okay, that's what we're hoping to achieve. What's the strategy? How and why are we going to get from where we are now to that number, that number, that number. And so those goals have to be inside of a story context so that people can understand how and why we're going to get from one number to the next. And that means thinking in story form.

Park: And ultimately about creating meaning for us. I've got an algorithm for you. I'm curious what you think of this one. I get these engineers and folks that cross their arms about story and it doesn't really work and it's a soft skill and whatever. I said okay, well let me in an algorithm for you. To me, if you want to create meaning out of these numbers, it's data plus context plus metaphor times story equals meaning, and you are going to move nobody to action if it's just all numbers, numbers, numbers. You have to express it, I think you said, turning data into drama. You have to bring narrative to it, story to it, so our brains can kind of connect the dots here and what are you trying to tell me about these numbers.

Robert: Well, and people who live and die and breathe numbers day in and day out, they're essential to the process. Somebody's got to measure things. But often the reason they resist talk about story, is because they have a prejudice, based upon all of their life experience, that story is fiction, that it is made up, that it is not rooted in anything concrete. And often story is a distortion, or story is bullshit, and it's just lies, fabrication, whatever. And so they have a negative attitude toward story because they don't understand it as a technique.



And so I try, in my lectures and in the book that I'm going to write one day, to make them understand that it is a form, and that you can't tell story if you can't think in story form. And the first step is to understand what story is and recognize your own personal proclivity to telling story that you had when you were a child, and you knew how to talk to another kid and tell him what your mother did. And you knew how to put life together as a story as a child.

But in your education, this was erased from you because you were taught that this was a bad thing. Stories are fiction. They're bullshit. They are, as your engineers would say, soft thinking. And so, they've been taught this. What I do with those people when they tell you that, I say, "Okay, then tell me one, if it's 'soft thinking.' Tell me a story and make it work." And they can't.

Park: And they're paralyzed.

Robert: They're paralyzed. They have no idea what to do, right? If it's so easy, if it's really soft thinking, why can't you do it? Because they don't know how to think this way. So the first step that I do with businesspeople is to get them to teach them to think, to understand what story form is and to get them to look at the life and all the data surrounding that, and all the people and personalities, and market, and all the rest of it. And to be able to pull back as if they were writing the novel of their business and see it on all those levels, and then abstract from that, the key events that they're going to put together into a story.

So I teach them first that they have to think in story form, and this is a revolution. They are not used to this. They've been taught, in fact, that this is not the thing to do, that they must, instead, think in deductive and inductive logic, and think in what they believe is a scientific way. And they, engineers of the type you're talking about, believe themselves to be scientist, but they're not. Not really. Because they all have an axe to grind. Science has no axe to grind. Science does not want to know one thing versus another. It wants to have a total knowledge so that it can find the median.

Park: Yeah.

Robert: How often does this phenomenon actually happen? What are the laws of reality? How and why do these things actually happen? That's what science wants to know. When a businessperson gets up with a PowerPoint presentation, this is rhetoric. They are out to persuade. They are not interested in the complete truth the way a scientist would be. They eliminate everything that contradicts their PowerPoint presentation. They exclude half of everything in order to build an argument to persuade the people in the room to do what they need them to do or think the way they want them to think.

And so rhetoric is not science. It's an imitation of science. It pretends to be science, because it uses deductive logic and inductive logic that science does, but it's not science. It's rhetoric. It's persuasion. And data, as it gets gathered in the world, is always prejudiced this way. Data is not science. Data,

somebody chose to look for a specific kind of data. That is already prejudiced. They're not looking for all data. They're looking for a specific kind of data. And then it's subjective as to what data fit their purpose. And so data is, you know the expression "raw data?"

Park: Right.

Robert: It's nonsense. There's no such thing as raw data. All data is cooked. It's all cooked inside of a cultural furnace that is full of prejudices and biases of all kinds, and so what you get out the end is a number of how often something happens, not how and why something happens, but how often something happens. But that number may or may not reflect reality given all the bias and prejudice that went into selecting the data in the first place. And so a businessperson has to be very, very careful that they don't buy the wrong data, that in fact, what they're looking at is a clear reflection of reality. And that's not easy to discern. You're easily fooled.

Park: Well, we need to take a break right now for one of our wonderful sponsors. But when we come back, I'd like to wrap up this show with some quick tips, if you have them, that can help a business leader, marketer, content marketer start looking into and really having an appreciation for story form. So let's talk about that when we come back right after this message.

Park: Okay. So. All right. So we're back with the Business of Story podcast and our guest today, Robert McKee, legendary screenwriting coach and now a coach that are helping business leaders and communicators do a better job of crafting and sharing their stories. Robert, can you give our listeners a few quick tips on how they can become better storytellers?

Robert: Well, the first tip would be to, the choice you make of core character in the story is critical, and you have a choice of three. Your story could star the corporation, it could star the product, or it could star the client, the customer. And there are cases to be made for times when, in branding and so forth, you do want to star the corporation. There are times when a new product comes along and you want to tell the story about the product and let that be the core character. But in most cases, today especially, you want to star the consumer, the customer.

In the past, the past 100 to 150 years, advertising, marketing of all kinds has had three fundamental techniques of bragging, "We're the best, we're the biggest, we're the newest, whatever." Promising, "We'll change your life for the better, we'll do this for you, you'll be happier about this, and so forth." Or some sort of emotional manipulation surrounding the product or the company with beautiful imagery of one kind or another just to give it a positive glow or sometimes using negative emotions, the threat of illness, or in political ads of course, attacking your opponent.

But one of three, bragging, promising, emotional manipulation. Those have been the cornerstones of advertising and marketing, as I said, for over a century. Today, none of that works, because the modern audience, the Millennials, absolutely react against any of those efforts. They do not want

to hear the bragging. They do not believe in any promises. They see emotional manipulation coming a mile away. None of those three techniques works on the modern audience. What the modern audience wants is, they say, "Tell me a story, and this time, make it good for a change."

And to get that story started, you work backwards from that audience. And the most that this story's designed to move, in what I call in my lectures the "purposeful story," the story whose purpose is to get people to act, change their attitudes, to take an action. And understanding who that audience is, then, the most important question you ask is "Where does it hurt?" In these people that I'm telling this story to, what is their problem in life? What do they need solved? What do they need? What do they lack? Where does it hurt?

And then, you go back to the beginning and you design a story that brings that problem into the foreground, and says you need this, you lack that, you want that, you're hurting in this place. And then tell a story that moves from the negative to the positive about how that person then can act in a way that will better their life and help solve whatever hurts. And so it's a technique. Telling the business story is a technique. And the people can learn. This is not fiction. We base business stories in concrete fact and reality and we use the truth of what it is, what's going on in this world, what people need, what people want, the way things actually work. We do that in order to move people to follow us as leaders or buy our products as consumers or whatever.

But what's very important for them, for business people to understand is that I'm not asking them to write a novel. I'm not asking them to create a piece of fiction. I want them to know what reality is and then develop a technique to take that reality, put it into story form that will move people to a positive action. And the first step is figuring out who they are.

Park: Knowing your audience in a godlike way. That's what you talk about in your story seminar.

Robert: Yeah, you have to understand them better than they understand themselves. This was Steve Jobs's genius. He understood people better than they understood themselves. He understood that just making a product that was efficient was not enough. It had to be beautiful. It had to somehow enrich their life and that it was a thing that was a pleasure to hold and a pleasure to work with and a pleasure just to look at. And he knew that there was an aesthetic need in people for an instrument that would physically enhance their life as well as practically. And so understanding that need, he generated enormous success. So it takes real brains, real insight to look at your audience and answer that question, where does it hurt? What do they need? They may not be able to tell you.

Park: Well, what we talk about with our clients, Robert, just to your point, it's find the hurt, amplify the pain, and heal the wound. Kind of three act story structure right there.

Robert: Well, there you are. I'm only telling you what you already know.

Park: Well, but there's a lot of people who need to learn this, and they can learn this with you from the master of story and story structure through your storynomics courses online. Tell us a little bit about that. I know you've got courses coming up in Los Angeles, October 8th, in New York, October 22nd, in London, November 12th, and people can learn all about this and more from you at [storynomics.org](http://storynomics.org). How long are these particular seminars?

Robert: One day.

Park: One day.

Robert: It's a business day. They start at 9:00 in the morning and go to 5.

Park: Awesome. Great. Well thank you, Robert. I really, really enjoyed it. Appreciate you coming on the show and I look forward, I went to one of your first story seminars and I'm eager to see how it has evolved over the last couple years. So you may see me out there in the front row in Los Angeles on October 8th.

Robert: That would be great Park.

Park: Thank you, Robert.

Robert: Take care, now.

Park: All right. Take care.

Robert: Bye. And thank you all for listening to the "Business of Story." If you like what you're hearing, please give us a rating. I guess even if you don't like what you're hearing, give us a rating. We want to know what's working for you and how we can make this program better. Review it, subscribe, share it with your world, and if you would like business story tools that you can use immediately in your business go to [BusinessofStory.com](http://BusinessofStory.com) and there are a number of downloadable materials there for you. So thank you for listening. We will look forward to having you back in two weeks on the Business of Story.