

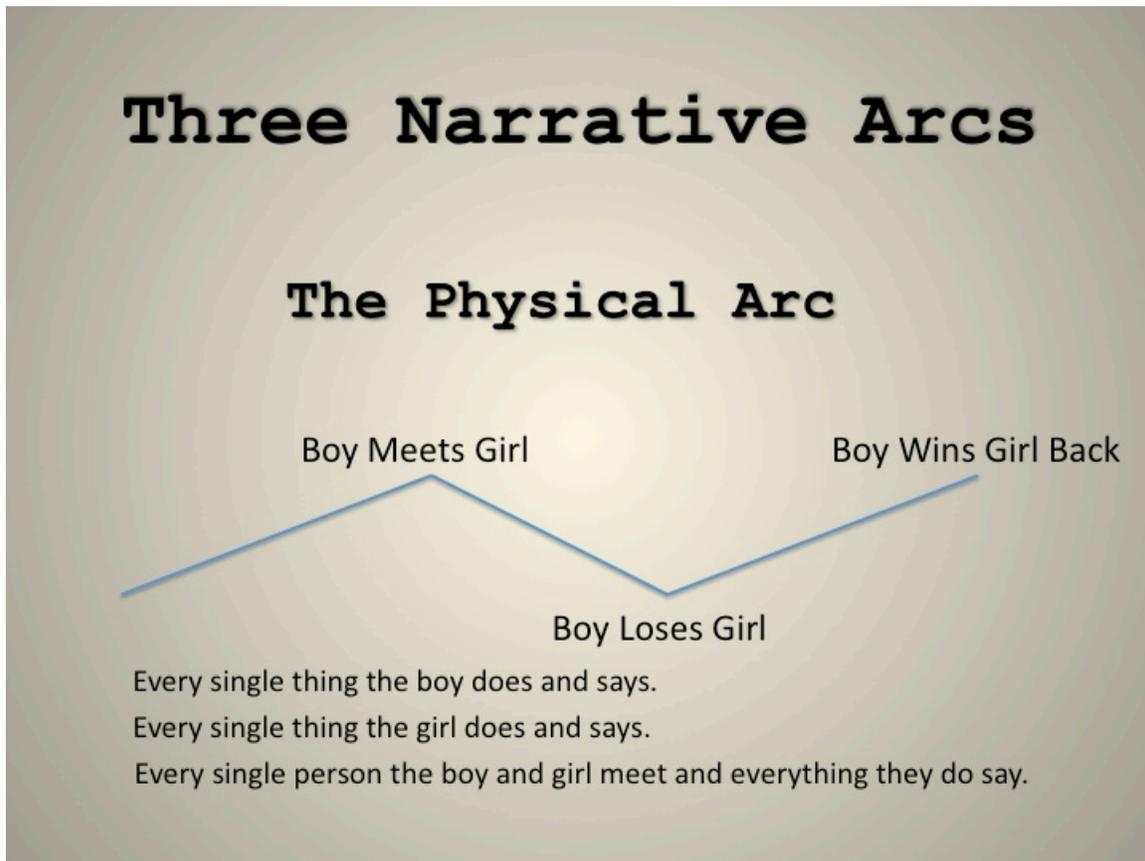
The Three Narrative Arcs

- Every story has three narrative arcs, as I will explain below. But before I describe these arcs, there is something you must remember, something every writer, from Dickens to Shakespeare to Agatha Christie to Steven King, has had to remember and contend with:

There Are No Right Answers

- Books are not formulas. Stories are not formulas. The blank page is blank for a reason – you are to fill it with whatever you want. Do you want to fill it with randy space pirates? Then do so. Do you want to fill it with girls learning to share? You can do that too. You can have one protagonist or two protagonists or no protagonists. You can have one villain or many villains or no villains.
- While stories often fall into categories, while stories often follow certain patterns—The Heroes Journey, beginning, middle, end—there are always stories that do not follow these rules and yet are wildly successful anyway.
- This is good. We do not want rules. We come to the blank page to become authorities, to author our books. We come to the blank page to seek our own answers. It is what frightens us and excites us.
- The Three Narrative Arcs, then, is not so much a blueprint for all stories, but a guide to finding that authority.

The Physical Arc



- The physical arc is every single thing that happens in a story. Everything that is said, everything that is done. It is the *plot*, as we say. When we read or watch a story, it is what we see, the top layer. Often when people ask us what our books are about, we tell them about the physical arc, the first arc.
- This is the least important arc.
- Because all these things being said and done are being said and done by PEOPLE. Everyone who does anything does it for a reason. These reasons make up the second arc.

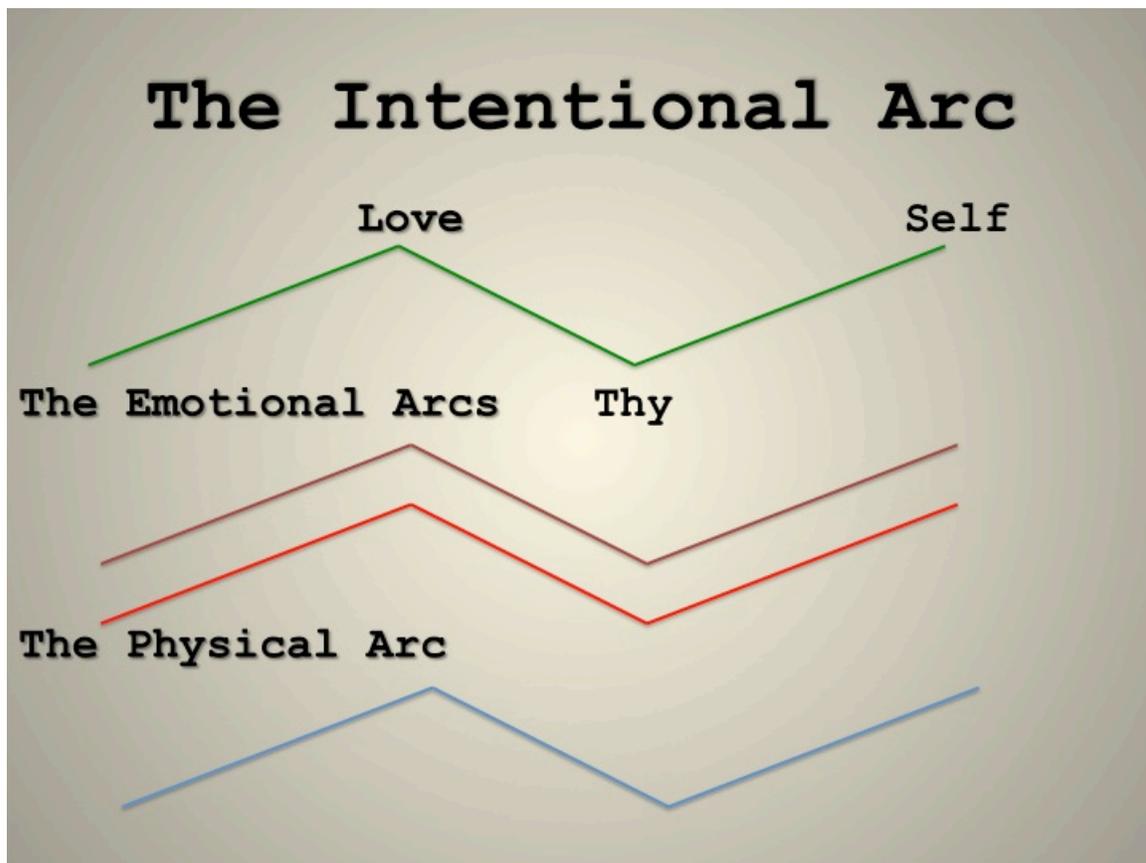
The Emotional Arc



- The emotional arc is the trace of every single character's emotional progress. What do they begin the story believing, and what do they end the story believing? As your characters move or do not move through their beliefs, their feelings and motivations change.
- Remember, every single action is preceded by motivation, if only by a split second. No one does anything in a vacuum. Behind every action is the belief that that action will make your characters' lives better. This is how human beings operate. Human beings all want to be happy, and they do things that they believe will make them happy. Often, they are wrong, but that is not the point.
- If I had only one question to ask about my characters, it would be: What does he/she believe she needs to be happy, and why does he/she believe she cannot have it. This is the story of most people's lives. What's more, it's useful to remember when you are stuck.

- Whenever I don't know what a character should do or say in a scene it is because I do not know what she wants. Every character always wants something, because human beings always want something, and that something is be happy.
- Moreover, stories are never about *what happens*; stories are about what it *feels like* when something happens. As E. L. Doctorow said, we are not reporting on the existence of rain, but creating the experience of standing in the rain. What does it *feel like* to be chased by a knife-wielding killer? What does it *feel like* to see the man you will marry for the first time?
- The physical arc, then, is merely what happens as a result of the emotional arc. Stories are about feelings. Stories look like a string of events, but they are really a string of feelings represented by actions and events.
- In this way the emotional arc is far more important than the physical arc. If you try to understand your story merely by pushing chess pieces around the board of your narrative, the story will make no sense. On the other hand, if you focus on the emotional journeys of the characters, you will begin to see the story's arc.
- Yet the emotional arc is still not the most important arc. After all, the emotional arc is the arc of people's feelings. There are a lot of people in the world. How do you choose which people belong in your story? And how do you choose what these people's emotional arcs should be?

The Intentional Arc



- The Intentional Arc is why you told the story. It is the theme, the metaphor, the message. Did you tell this story because you wanted to scare your readers? Did you tell this story because you wanted share the experience of falling in love with your readers? Did you want to write about heroism, or loss, or God?
- Think of a joke. Jokes are little stories. The punch line is a joke's intentional arc. Every character in that joke, and everything the characters do and say in that joke was chosen so that the punch line will be the funniest it can be.
- Your story's ending is its punch line. Your story's ending is why you told it. Everything you put in your story is there to guide you to that ending. And like a punch line of a joke, that ending leaves your audience in a particular emotional place. You are guiding your reader somewhere. Where are you taking them?

The Only Thing You Know

- The Intentional Arc, however, is more than a mere punch line.
- The Intentional Arc is you.
- The Intentional Arc is what interests you, what you love, which, in the end, is the only thing you know. You don't know who will buy a book or who will like a book; you don't know if it will win awards. All you ever know is what is of interest to you.
- If I gave ten writers the same story idea—say, *The Duchess and the Pirate*—those ten writers would give me ten different stories. That is because each writer will write about what is of interest to him or her. Each writer will choose a different intentional arc.
- And if you are not sure what is of interest to you, ask yourself this question: What is the book that I would like to read? Don't ask yourself what will sell, don't ask yourself what is hot—ask yourself what you would like to read.
- If you sit down to write *that* book, it will be the best book you have ever written.
- Every “successful” writer I have ever interviewed follows *that* formula. Every “successful” writer I have ever interviewed writes the book he or she would most like to read.
- If you want to know the secret to success, there it is. Write what interests you most.