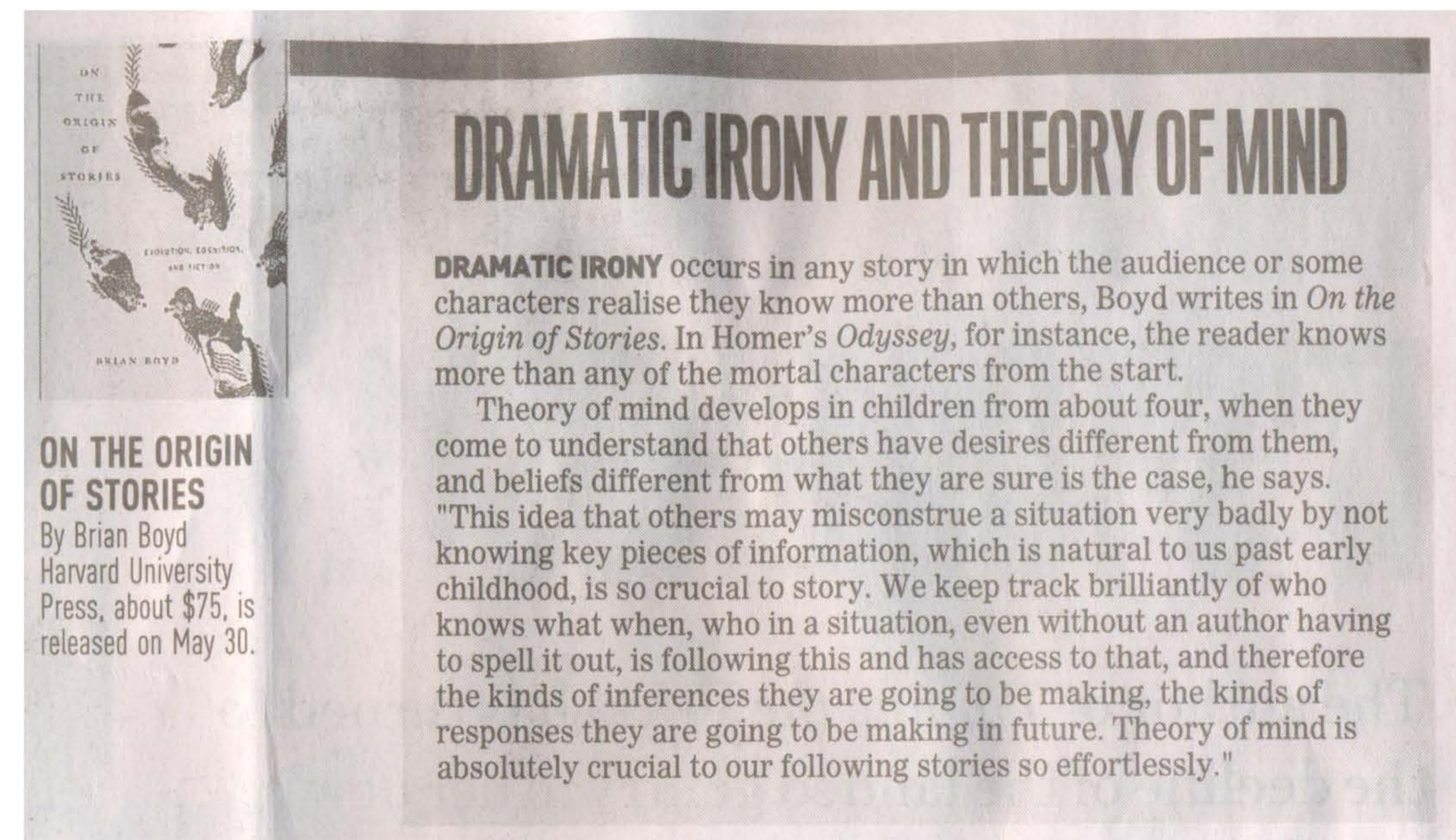




Storytelling is much more than a uniquely human pleasure, argues a New Zealand academic in a new book. It arose as an evolutionary adaptation to help us survive.
By Mark Broatch.



ON THE ORIGIN OF STORIES
By Brian Boyd
Harvard University Press, about \$75, is released on May 30.

DRAMATIC IRONY AND THEORY OF MIND

DRAMATIC IRONY occurs in any story in which the audience or some characters realise they know more than others, Boyd writes in *On the Origin of Stories*. In Homer's *Odyssey*, for instance, the reader knows more than any of the mortal characters from the start.

Theory of mind develops in children from about four, when they come to understand that others have desires different from them, and beliefs different from what they are sure is the case, he says. "This idea that others may misconstrue a situation very badly by not knowing key pieces of information, which is natural to us past early childhood, is so crucial to story. We keep track brilliantly of who knows what when, who in a situation, even without an author having to spell it out, is following this and has access to that, and therefore the kinds of inferences they are going to be making, the kinds of responses they are going to be making in future. Theory of mind is absolutely crucial to our following stories so effortlessly."

Storytelling is a kind of gym for the imagination that has given humans unique advantages as a species.

Photo: Mark Broatch

Literary Theory – of the capital T kind. I certainly think literary theory – with small letters – is very important. But the idea that everything is convention and arbitrary just doesn't seem to make sense to me."

And Literary Darwinism, as it is sometimes called, or "evocriticism", has science on its side. It is a "genuinely theoretical literary theory, one that depends on the presence of evidence and the absence of counterevidence", Boyd has written.

Moreover, Boyd, who has been going to evolutionary theory conferences since 2001, wrote his first article on the subject, *Jane, Meet Charles: Literature, Evolution, and Human Nature*, in 1997: "Those reluctant to read outside Theory's approved reading lists may not be aware of it, but evidence has been accumulating for more than 30 years, and with steadily mounting momentum, that not only is it not the case that biology is a product of culture, but that culture is a product and a part of biology, and that it is impossible to explain cultural difference without appreciating the complex architecture of the human mind, of a 'human nature [that] is everywhere the same'."

In the book, Boyd takes a close look at Homer's mythological epic *The Odyssey* and *Horton Hears a Who*, by Dr Seuss. He chose the first because it's a "masterpiece" of literature and storytelling; the second, a 1954 children's book about an elephant protecting from harm a planet of inhabitants the size of a speck of dust, he chose because of Dr Seuss's ability to write first-rate stories for the youngest of children. Both authors are "brilliant holders of attention". Only space restrictions stopped him

including similar investigations of the likes of *Hamlet*, *Pride and Prejudice*, Art Spiegelman's Holocaust graphic novel *Maus* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*. These might end up in another book.

Boyd says his book is different from Dutton's recent *The Art Instinct* in several ways. It's a sustained argument that synthesises information from areas such as evolutionary biology to psychology and the theory of narrative. Dutton's deals with art in general rather than as a precursor to storytelling. It focuses on visual art and music, and critiques standard recent philosophy of art. It also argues that sexual selection such as the urge of many male animals to display drives art, whereas Boyd says that's "another gear for art but not the engine".

I ask Boyd, a world expert on Vladimir Nabokov, how *Lolita* would appear through the prism of "evocriticism". He's just done this, he says, in *The American Scholar* (read it at theamericanscholar.org), focusing on the novel's cognitive play with pattern and how it maintains our attention ("Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul. Lo-lee-ta: the tip of the tongue taking a trip..."). He stresses that taking an evolutionary look at art and literature does not involve imposing a template, and that it's expansive rather than reductive. The book has six chapters taking different approaches to *The Odyssey*, and he could imagine taking a dozen different tacks on *Lolita*, including the sex drive going awry in wretched old Humbert Humbert.

For the impatient, a slimmer, more mainstream anthology of essays on evocriticism co-edited by Boyd is in the pipeline for 2010 – *Evolution, Literature and Film: A Reader*.

SURVIVAL OF THE CRAFTIEST

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY has, in the past couple of decades, muscled its proto-reptilian snout into other scholarly fields. Most notably, biology and psychology, offering suggestions about, among other things, why so many of us are afraid of snakes and why boys can usually throw better than girls. But also anthropology, religion, economics and, 150 years after the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* and thanks to the efforts of Christchurch scholar Dennis Dutton, art.

Brian Boyd, Distinguished Professor at the University of Auckland, argues in a compelling and attractive new book, *On the Origin of Stories* (Harvard University Press), that art in general, and storytelling in particular, evolved universally within humans as an

adaptation from play. Our unique predilection for open-ended pattern – as a species we depend on our ability to master information, and information needs patterns – and enthusiasm for others' attention has helped us survive and prosper. "It helps us process key information faster, and turn it around more easily within the space of the possible, and down the line it also encourages us to co-operate and fosters creativity."

Our now-innate ability to note pattern also gets us into trouble – we love conspiracy theories and infer supernatural agents at every turn. But, says Boyd, this ability to see patterns in events and behaviour, even in circumstances we have not encountered before, has given us a unique advantage over other animals.

It lets us understand things more deeply and therefore control them in new ways. And "we become able to use the imagination to sustain thinking beyond the here and now because our minds just effortlessly track agents, real or imagined, in complicated convolutions. So storytelling's a kind of gym for the imagination."

Apart from being a form of "cognitive play with pattern", art gives the human species tremendous pleasure in its ability to help us engage the attention of others. "The greatest artists are those who manage to hold people's attention intensely, over repeat exposures, and over long stretches of time, even aeons."

Stories are patterns of patterns, and fiction is "a kickstart for the imagination". In evolutionary terms,

moreover, those with less inclination to play become isolated. According to David Sloan Wilson, a fellow "literary Darwinist" whom Boyd thanks in his acknowledgments to the book, "literature is the natural history of our species".

But the book – eight years in the making and involving the mastery of a bunch of expanding scientific fields – is not only a detailed (540 pages) laying-out of a new critical framework. It is a counterpunch to those in contemporary literary criticism who have obscured "both the individual and universal", as the book's backflap puts it – the likes of Derrida, Foucault, Lacan. "I've been critical of literary theory for a long time. I remember doing a seminar against Derrida in 1983. I've never been impressed by