The plot thins . . . fiction reduced to seven tales

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TWO hundred years ago, Dr. Johnson surmised that fiction was limited to a few plots “with very little variation”. Now a major study has worked out that there have been just seven since storytelling began.

*The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*, published today, explores every form of fiction — myths and folk tales, classic plays and novels, films and television soaps.

Christopher Booker, its author, found the same archetypal themes everywhere—from *Beowulf* to *Jaws* and from *The Epic of Gilgamesh* to *The Lord of the Rings*. He said: “in fact, there is no kind of story, however serious or trivial, which does not spring from the same source and is not shaped by the same source and is not shaped by the same archetypal rules.”

His findings initiated debate among authors and scholars yesterday, with Philip Pullman, whose *The Amber* *Spyglass* won the 2002 Whitbread prize, suggesting that there may be 11 plots.

Booker, the founding editor of *Private Eye,* whose books include *The Great Deception*, an academic history of the European Union, was writing another book when he found his attention drawn to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Nabokov’s *Lolita* and Truffaut’s 1960 film *Jules et Jim*.

“On the face of it, these stories might not seem to have much in common,” he said. “But what haunted me was the way that, at a deeper level, they all seemed to unfold round the same general pattern.”

Booker set out to widen his search for basic plots, listing stories such as *David and Goliath* and *Dracula*, where a hero or heroine over overcomes a terrifying monster; rags-to-riches tales such as *Cinderella* and *David Copperfield*; and quests for priceless goals, as in *King Soloman’s Mines* and *Around The World in Eighty Days.*

He said: “Before long I began to make a startling discovery. Not only did it seem that there were a number of basic themes or plots which continually recurred in the storytelling of mankind, shaping tales of very different types and from almost every age and culture; even more surprising was the degree of detail to which these basic plots seemed to shape the stories they had inspired.” Pullman has long been interested in the subject. His 11 basic plots include a “beauty and the beast” category, where the monster is transformed by the love of the pure, innocent one (*Jayne Eyre*), a Shane plot, named after the novel turned film, in which a stranger arrives, settles a problem and rides on, and “the ugly duckling”, where the overlooked, downtrodden girl or boy is transformed into a winner (*The Tortoise and the Hare, David and Goliath.*

John Carey, the writer, academic, broadcaster and former chairman of the Man Booker Prize, was less impressed.

He said: “If there are only seven plots, you ought to be able to explain it in fewer than 700 pages. What’s the point of reducing what is an infinite field? The important fact is how a book’s written.”

Dame Beryl Bainbridge, whose novels include *According to Queeney*, a story of Dr. Johnson’s relationship with his benefactor and her daughter, said: “I’m fully in accordance with the book. It’s what you do with the seven plots and how you alter them around that matters.”

Fay Weldon, whose novels include *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*, which became a Hollywood film, said: “I want this book to go to all creative writing groups.”

* **RAGS TO RICHES** Story of an ordinary person who finds a second, more exceptional, self within.

Examples include *Cinderella, David Copperfield, Great Expectations, Jane Eyre* and Hollywood films, such as *The Gold Rush* and *My Fair Lady*

* **THE QUEST** A long, hazardous journey to reach a priceless goal far away.

Examples of this include *The Odyssey, Jason and the Golden Fleece, King Solomon’s Mines, Around The World in Eighty Days* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

* **VOYAGE AND RETURN** Story in which some event—a fall, crash, shipwreck—propels the hero or heroine out of their familiar surroundings into a disconcerting and abnormal world.

Examples include *Alice in Wonderland*, *Robinson Crusoe, The Ancient Mariner, The Time Machine*

* **COMEDY** Not just a general term, but an identifiable form of plot which follows its own rules.

Examples include *Tom Jones*, the novels of Jane Austen, *The Importance of Being Earnest, Fawlty Towers, Some Like It Hot*

* **TRAGEDY** Is an archetypal plot, with a five-stage structure culminating in destruction and death. The main character is overcome by a desire for power/passion, which destroys them or they become monstrous.

Examples include *Macbeth, Doctor Faustus, Lolita,* and *King Lear*

* **REBIRTH** Someone falls under a dark power or a spell that traps him or her in a state of living death. A miraculous act of redemption takes place and the victim is released and brought into the light.

Examples include *Sleeping Beauty*, *A Christmas Carol, The Sound of Music*

* **OVERCOMING THE MONSTER** A hero or heroine confronts a monster, defeats it against all odds and wins treasure or a loved one’s hand.

Examples include *David and Goliath, Nicholas Nickleby, Jack and the Beanstalk, Dracula, James Bond* stories, *Jaws*