Narrative Theory And Function: Why Evolution Matters

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I

T MAY SEEM a strange proposition that the study of human evolution is integral to the study of literature, yet that is exactly what this paper proposes. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, the practice of storytelling is ancient, pre-dating not only the advent of writing, but of agriculture and permanent settlement as well. Secondly, narrative is ultimately a product of the mind, which in turn is the product of a long history of evolution by natural selection. Thus, an understanding of why and how humans create and consume narrative requires an understanding of (1) features of ancestral environments and (2) features of the mind that made the emergence of this phenomenon possible.

There can be little doubt that narrative emerged in human prehistory. Language, an obvious prerequisite for storytelling, is likely to have emerged by at least 50,000 and possibly 250,000 years ago, depending upon whether one places one’s trust in archaeological or anatomical evidence.1 The most reasonable estimate is offered by Geoffrey Miller, who points out that, given its universality, the language faculty must have emerged by the time ancestral Homo sapiens began migrating out of Africa approximately 100,000 years ago.2 Although the oldest known written narrative (The Epic of Gilgamesh) dates back only 5,000 years, the written literary traditions of many ancient cultures are known to be rooted in longstanding oral traditions.3 The fact that many modern foraging peoples have rich and complex oral traditions further suggests that the emergence of narrative is not linked to the development of agriculture 10,000 years ago. Moreover, other forms of symbolic expression, such as the cave paintings, Venus figurines, and engraved bone
Philosophy and Literature

and antler that have been found at various sites throughout Europe, date back approximately 30,000 years, and rock paintings in Australia may date back even farther. Since humans were physiologically capable of speech long before they began producing these artifacts, storytelling is likely to be at least as ancient as these other representational forms. Indeed, one scholar situates the “dawn of the oral tradition” within this period (Pfeiffer, p. 189). Given, then, that modern humans (Homo sapiens sapiens) have been in existence for approximately 100,000 years and are the only hominid species or subspecies known for certain to exhibit storytelling behavior, we can safely say that oral narrative is a product of our hunting-and-gathering past, likely to have emerged between 30,000 and 100,000 years ago.

The universality of narrative is further testimony to its being an ancient cognitive phenomenon. Literate or not, all known cultures, past and present, practice storytelling. Moreover, all normally developing humans acquire the ability to process and generate stories: studies of Western children indicate that the ability to tell stories emerges spontaneously between the ages of two-and-a-half and three, and children as young as thirty months can distinguish between narrative and non-narrative uses of language. In contrast to reading, writing, and arithmetic, no special education is required for narrative competence to develop, nor is there any evidence that oral literacy is acquired through contact with other cultures; although subject matter is often exchanged between groups, the practice of storytelling itself arises independently among even the most isolated peoples. Nor does any type of culture have a monopoly on narrative sophistication: the stories of hunter-horticulturalist societies are no less observant, insightful, or artful than those of agrarian or industrial societies.

As with language, narrative takes the same basic form across cultures, which David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson define as “a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time.” Given the preponderance of human agents in narrative, most narrative theorists would probably modify this barebones description to include character (usually understood to have a human psychology), goal-oriented action, and resolution. Frank Kermode, for example, defines the “properties” of narrative as “connexity, closure, and character,” and John Black and Gordon Bower argue that the essence of storiness is the description of problems and of characters’ plans for solving them. Research by cognitive psychologists on the intuitive rules by means of
which stories are assembled, called story grammars, identifies the same set of essential narrative elements.\textsuperscript{8}

World folklore is also strikingly consistent in its subject matter. Studies of worldwide variants of particular folktales (e.g., “Cinderella”) and the classification of folktales by plot units (i.e., “motifs”) show that certain topics recur across widely divergent cultures: cosmology, topography, animal characteristics and behavior, birth and death, and a wide array of topics that may be loosely categorized as “human social behavior”—for example, sex, marriage, religion, prohibitions, punishments, deception, and violence.\textsuperscript{9} In sum, all peoples tell stories, and the stories of all peoples exhibit similar concerns.

To the evolution-minded scholar, cross-cultural patterns in human psychology and behavior are vital clues to both the evolved design of the mind and the ancestral conditions that shaped that design. The universality of narrative suggests that those individuals who were able (or better able) to tell and process stories enjoyed a reproductive advantage over those who were less skilled or incapable of doing so, thereby passing on this ability to subsequent generations. It would appear, then, that storytelling has played an important role in our development as a species and, conversely, that ancestral environmental conditions have played an important role in the development of narrative.

When evolutionary theorists talk about the function of a physical or mental trait, they are typically talking about its \textit{adaptive} function—that is, the survival or reproduction problem it evolved to solve (such as circulating blood, regulating body temperature, eliminating toxins from the body, making tools, locating food, recognizing faces, communicating with conspecifics, negotiating a trade, selecting a mate). Our minds and bodies are not general-purpose organs but, rather, a set of specialized organs, each of which has evolved to surmount a specific obstacle to survival and/or reproduction (an \textit{adaptive problem} or \textit{selection pressure}) that recurrently beset our ancestors throughout their evolution. To the adaptationist, then, questions about function are questions about a species’ evolutionary past. It follows that, given the probable antiquity of narrative, explorations of its function ought properly to begin with a consideration of the recurrent adaptive problem or problems to which it may be an effective solution.

Such explorations must begin in the past because the evolution of complex mental capacities takes at minimum tens of thousands of
generations. Thus, the cognitive capacities we refer to collectively as the human mind are solutions to the problems of day-to-day Pleistocene life (between 1.6 million and 10,000 years ago), and some, such as the suite of behaviors associated with the close physical bond between mothers and infants, are even more ancient. For the overwhelming majority of their existence, humans have likely lived in nomadic foraging groups of approximately fifty to 100 individuals. Thus, the world of our ancestors—the world to which our present mind is adapted—was in some ways very different from the present. It was a world in which everyone knew everyone else and, like proverbial small-town life, privacy and solitude were rare. It was a world in which locating, extracting, and processing food were highly time-consuming tasks; in which transportation was chiefly by foot; in which the only tools or amenities available were those that could be manufactured by hand; in which animal attacks were a real threat; and in which the least sickness or injury was potentially life-threatening. In short, it was a world with no grocery stores or restaurants, no contraception or daycare, no police or disaster relief, no health or unemployment insurance, no social security or retirement. It is under these conditions that storytelling emerged, and it is here that we must look for its function.

Conceptualizing the mind as a set of evolved survival strategies does not negate the importance of environmental contributions to mental content. On the contrary, cognitive capacities are strategies that have evolved in response to specific environmental conditions, and many, such as language, will not develop (or will not develop properly) in the absence of appropriate environmental stimuli. All living organisms consist of adaptations ("nature") designed by natural selection to interact with the organism’s environment ("nurture"). Human thought and behavior are the output of this interaction, and hence fundamentally dependent upon both influences. As Martin Daly and Margo Wilson explain, “Nothing occurs in the absence of environmental influence. And since gene action is intimately involved in the metabolic processes of every cell throughout life, it too is relevant to every developmental process in the organism.” This paper underscores the role environment plays in human behavior by considering the function of storytelling in terms of environmental factors that may have led to its emergence.
What, then, are the ancestral environmental conditions that could possibly have led to the emergence of storytelling? The answer to this question can be found in the costs involved in firsthand information acquisition. Although the mind contains strategies designed to solve problems that occur across all habitats and cultures (e.g., mate selection, kin recognition, predator avoidance), many of these strategies require local environmental input to be fully operational. For example, all humans are faced with the task of locating healthy, nourishing food, and the mind and body are apparently equipped with strategies for accomplishing this. Hunger is the most obvious, of course, but there are others, such as food aversions—to rocks, sticks, feces, vomit, mucus, decayed fruit/meat, for example—and the emotions requisite to attacking and killing an animal. Our species occupies a wide array of habitats, however, and items that are edible—not to mention the methods for extracting and processing them—vary across those habitats. Universal rules cannot specify what is good to eat in particular locations; this information must therefore be gleaned from the environment itself.

Information-gathering is thus essential to human survival. There are a number of constraints on this task, however. Acquiring information firsthand can be costly, inefficient, and downright risky. Trial-and-error learning often requires a substantial investment of time and energy, both limited resources that might be better spent on other fitness-enhancing activities. Moreover, it is extremely improbable that a single individual could acquire through experience all information necessary or potentially useful to the multitude of fitness-related tasks encountered over a lifetime. Finally, acquiring knowledge at first hand is risky, a fact of which at least one hunter-gatherer group is keenly aware: when !Kung men were asked whether baby lions’ eyes were open at birth, the reply was, “If you go over there and look, won’t you be dead?”

One way around these constraints is to take advantage of others’ experience and acquire information at second hand. In support of this suggestion, quantitative studies of cultural transmission indicate that humans learn many of their survival skills from their fellows. Barry Hewlett and L. L. Cavalli-Sforza, for example, selected fifty Aka skills (divided into the categories of net hunting, other hunting, food gathering, food preparation, maintenance, infant care, mating, sharing, special skills, and dancing and singing) and asked each person in
the study population (N = 72) how they had acquired the skill. The average percentage of individuals reporting that they were self-taught was a remarkably low 0.9%. For net hunting, the percentage of self-taught individuals was 0.9%; for all other hunting, it was 2.4%. The highest percentage of self-taught individuals was in the category of mating, at 3.7%.17

Evidence suggests that, like skills, information is also commonly acquired from others. Perhaps the most familiar example of this is the collection and dissemination of social information—otherwise known as gossip—which appears to be a universal human behavior.18 Another important class of fitness information is animal knowledge, which is crucial to hunting success and predator avoidance. One way to acquire this knowledge is to spend large amounts of time observing animals. Among hunter-gatherer peoples, however, encounters with animals are relatively infrequent: men do not usually hunt every day, women typically gather rather than hunt, and children tend to stay near their mothers or camp.19 Moreover, most animals don’t want to be seen, and many animal encounters are potentially dangerous. A much more efficient, not to mention less risky, means of acquiring such information would be to get it from someone else. Clearly, then, there are circumstances that favor secondhand rather than firsthand information acquisition.

Indeed, a growing number of evolution-minded anthropologists and psychologists have reached the conclusion that many patterned cultural phenomena, such as ritual, art, narrative, may be conceptualized as means of exchanging information relevant to the pursuit of fitness in local habitats.20 The florescence of art in the Upper Paleolithic, for example, has been explained as a response to sweeping climatic change. Specifically, these art products are believed to have been used to exchange information requisite to the implementation of novel hunting strategies necessitated by changes in faunal dispersal patterns.21

Upon examination, the salient features of storytelling offer a fairly reliable solution to the above-mentioned constraints on information acquisition and storage. Firstly, because narrative processing requires no physical exertion, it involves minimal energy expenditures. Secondly, because narrative compresses time (ellipsis), the audience gets more information for its investment relative to time and energy spent than it would through direct experience. Thirdly, because narrative is a representation of experience, its participants need not undertake the physical and social risks of firsthand experience. And finally, narrative
may be easily tailored to meet the specific information needs of local habitats. The stories of the Dreamtime illustrate this point nicely. The Outback is an environment where, if you don’t know where to look and how to get there as efficiently as possible, you’ll die before you find food. Tellingly, Aboriginal myths focus “on the naming of places and the movements of ancestral beings from one spot to the next. . . . [B]ecause many tell of journeys covering hundreds of miles of desert, through areas that Mardudjara in many cases have not seen, they broaden the cosmological and geographical outlook of the Aborigines.”

Moreover, more than any other ancient cultural practice (e.g., oratory, visual art, the plastic arts, dance, music), narrative appears well designed for comprehensive simulation of the human habitat—that is, for the creation of a “diegetic world” made up of the salient constraints on human fitness: people, events and phenomena, time, topographical and/or architectural space, and the animate and inanimate objects that occupy it (Leitch, p. 4). Unlike other art forms, furthermore, narrative is highly goal-oriented (Black and Bower). Narrative can thus be seen as a means of simulating certain goals and obstacles of day-to-day human existence and providing local information necessary to pursue and/or surmount them. As Walter Benjamin observes, “The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”

Anecdotal ethnographic evidence supports this hypothesis, indicating that adult males amplify their hunting knowledge not only by watching other males but by sharing information, including listening to others recount their experiences. Blurton Jones and Konner, for example, held a series of “seminars” at which small groups of !Kung men were asked to discuss animal behavior. The anthropologists observed that during these sessions “the participants seemed to gain a lot of new information,” and concluded that “Perhaps verbal transmission of information is indirect, through people telling the story of their day’s excursion as opposed to direct lecturing” (pp. 338, 334).

Both fictional and nonfictional representations may serve as models of experience. For example, a myth that relates impossible phenomena may nevertheless contain accurate geographical, botanical, or psychological information. Although animals may talk or metamorphose, information about where, when, and how to find, kill, and process them may correspond to real-world practice. Similarly, story characters may be imaginary beings, but so long as they exhibit human psyches, their
interactions can be used as models of the human social environment, enabling one to observe the consequences of a wide variety of actions (e.g., betrayal, rape, murder). Obviously, the application of quasi-fictional representations to real-world problems requires that the mind be able to distinguish factual from nonfactual information. This process, known as *decoupled cognition*, has been modeled by cognitive and evolutionary psychologists.25

III

The hypothesis that narrative functions as a medium of information transmission begs the question. What benefit does the storyteller gain from this behavior? One answer, paradoxically, is information. As noted above, it is extremely unlikely that all the information necessary or useful to the performance of fitness-related tasks could be acquired through experience within a single lifetime. Even if one did manage to accomplish this, there’s the problem of human memory being finite. As Mithen points out, information exchange safely and efficiently surmounts these obstacles to information gathering and storage, vastly expanding the effective knowledge base and memory capacity of the individual (p. 75).

A strategy of information-hoarding might very well lead to starvation: all else being equal, group members will not be inclined to share information with an individual who does not share information with them. Conversely, a strategy of information-sharing through storytelling or other means might make the difference between life and death in lean times: in such circumstances, group members will be more inclined to share information with an individual who has shared information with them in the past. We would therefore expect selection to have favored judicious exchange of information among group members.

Yet another reason we would expect selection to favor information transmission is that human minds are impermanent storage containers: they die. This fact is especially critical in the case of environmental fluctuations occurring at intervals that are longer than the average human lifespan. In these circumstances, a group may lack individuals with the firsthand knowledge necessary to survive them. Mithen suggests that the transmission of oral traditions and rituals from generation to generation may be a means of coping with this circumstance. Tiwi ritual, for example, includes ceremonies in which initiates are
taught how to process toxic plant species that are only eaten in times of famine, which occur at relatively long intervals (Mithen, p. 75). Individuals who were motivated to teach such traditions to their offspring would have increased those offspring’s odds of survival should such an environmental fluctuation occur. The same effect could be achieved through oral narrative which, like ritual, is interactive, enabling information to be broadcast to several individuals and generations simultaneously.

As a means of broadcasting standards of acceptable and unacceptable behavior as well as their consequences, storytelling can also be a means of imposing social control and, hence, of achieving power. Hinrich Rink, for example, observes that Greenland Eskimo tales include “a system of religion and morals as well as of laws and rules for social life.” Thus, the skillful storyteller is in a position to bend the listener to his or her will: through the selective deployment of story information, the storyteller may manipulate the audience’s perceptions in ways that serve his or her fitness interests. This deployment may be well-intended, as when parents tell instructive fables to their children to better their odds of survival and reproduction, or it may be malicious, as when Iago deliberately misconstrues and manufactures events to suggest that Desdemona has been unfaithful.

Folklore research and ethnographic evidence bear this prediction out, showing that: (1) different narrators (e.g., male/female, older/younger brother) tell the same story differently; (2) the same narrator will tell the same story differently depending upon audience composition; (3) stories are deployed as a means of persuading individuals to pursue certain courses of action. Moreover, there is a striking correspondence between “editorial” choices and a given narrator’s fitness interests. One study examined some 150 known variants of a Nordic tale about a woman who doesn’t want to have children because she is afraid of dying in childbirth. Not surprisingly, “negative attitudes [toward the woman] were more frequent among men than among women [narrators].” In other cases, narrators refrain from telling certain stories to certain audiences. Nyman, for example, reports that one of her informants was reluctant to tell stories in the presence of her husband, because her repertoire “belonged to the women’s tradition, a tradition she did not want to perform in the company of men” (Klintberg, p. 41). At a later opportunity, when no men were present, the woman told three tales, two about unfaithful wives, and a third in which a wife was portrayed as the victim of an unfeeling and brutal
husband. The woman’s reluctance to tell these stories in front of her husband is understandable: it would not be prudent for her to show sympathy for an adulteress in her husband’s presence.

IV

The evolutionary psychologist is immediately struck by the correspondence between recurrent themes of world folklore and evolutionarily relevant domains of information: social relations (e.g., kinship, marriage, sex, social status, morality, interpersonal conflict, deception), animal behavior and characteristics, plants, geography, weather, and the cosmos. Indeed, this correlation is so pronounced that one anthropologist has argued that “those enduring themes and characters that Jung and the folklorists have so diligently described and classified” might be characterized as “domain-specific information-processing myth modules.” While this proposal may overstate the case, it is nevertheless true that folk literature repeatedly treats adaptive problems. Trickster tales, for example, address the problem of preventing, catching, and punishing cheaters. Similarly, Cinderella stories address the problem of being widowed with children: it is difficult to find a mate who is willing to help raise another person’s offspring and, as Daly and Wilson have shown, stepchildren are often abused by their stepparents. The folklore of foraging peoples exhibits a thematic pattern similar to that documented in European and Asian folklore. Common Ju/'hoansi folklore themes, for instance, include “problems of marriage and sex, the food quest, sharing, family relationships, the division of labour, birth and death, murder, blood-vengeance, and the creation of the present world order” (Biesele 1993, p. 17). This thematic universality lends support to the hypothesis that storytelling originally emerged as a means of storing and transmitting certain types of fitness-related information.

This is not to say there is no intercultural variation in folklore content. Not all human groups make their living in exactly the same way: some live as hunter-gatherers, some as pastoralists, some as peasants, and so on. While adaptive problems are constant across cultures, the means to solving them varies depending upon local conditions. Take the adaptive problem of mate acquisition, for example. In some cultures, a man must pay a certain number of pigs to his prospective in-laws in order to marry their daughter, whereas in western
industrialized countries one approaches this process quite differently. We would therefore anticipate thematic universality in literature largely at the macro level: obstacles to survival and reproduction that are common to all cultures (e.g., finding food, acquiring a mate, rearing children, forming alliances). We would anticipate variation at the micro level: (1) local solutions to adaptive problems, and (2) fitness-affecting constraints that are unique to a particular locale or way of life.

The oral literature of modern foraging peoples is a case in point. Given the importance of hunting and gathering in such societies, we would expect their oral traditions to contain a high degree of foraging-related information about, for example, what things are good to eat; how to locate, obtain, and process them; how to avoid environmental hazards; how to find one’s way across the local terrain. Tellingly, in a quantitative survey of Crow, Selknam, White Mountain Apache, and Yanomamo oral literature, I found an abundance of information regarding geography, hazards, plants and animals (e.g., habitat, physical characteristics, behavior, uses), as well as hunting, gathering, and processing techniques. My informal surveys of Tehuelche and Greenland Eskimo oral literature evince a similar pattern.

One of the most striking differences between forager narrative and the literature of other peoples is that the former often concerns itself with the lay of the land, travel routes, or orienteering-knowledge critical to undertaking extended hunting, trading, or visiting trips, which are an important part of forager life. In a Greenland Eskimo tale, for example, two brothers decide to visit their sister. They locate her village by searching for ravens: “When people are found to be living at the foot of the mountains, the ravens will be sure to be soaring in the air above” (Rink, p. 129; see also Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, p. 173). Seasonal markers, such as migration patterns, weather changes, and availability of resources, also feature prominently in these tales. In a Tehuelche story, for instance, we learn that in winter, the califate bush’s yellow flowers turn into an edible purple fruit, thus enabling people to survive the scarcity of the season (Wilbert & Simoneau 1984, p. 121; see also Rink, p. 178). Forager narrative also contains information regarding hazardous terrain or conditions, such as the dangers of traveling through the mountains in inclement weather (Wilbert, p. 53) and how to avoid predators.

Forager tales are also replete with information regarding plant and animal habitats and physical characteristics, such as indicators of
ripeness or edibility. In a Crow tale, Old-Man-Coyote’s wife declares that “we’ll make it [the cherry] black when it is ripe” (Lowie 1922, p. 29). A Yanomamo tale explains how to tell the difference between rasha fruits and manaka fruits: the latter are bitter and have no pulp; the former grow on palms that have spiny trunks (Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, p. 194; see also Wilbert & Simoneau 1984, p. 121; Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, p. 164–67). Animal behavior, too, is often imitated or described with striking accuracy (Blurton-Jones and Konner, p. 330).36 Among other things, a story may provide information regarding an animal’s seasonal and residence patterns, such as the Crow tale in which Old-Man-Coyote tells the prairie-chicken to “stay here all year and dance in the spring” (Lowie, p. 27). Because the presence of one species can indicate the presence of another, animal stories may also be used to locate other prey or plant foods. For example, a Yanomamo tale mentions that Yellow-Green Grosbeak, purple honeycreepers, red-rumped caciques, and gnats all eat hayi fruits, and that blue-headed parrots eat wakamabe and krebuube fruits (Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, pp. 164–67). In comparison to fruit, swarms of noisy, feeding birds are relatively easy to detect.

Forager narrative also commonly contains information regarding the properties or applications of a given plant or animal. One Crow tale, for example, describes the uses to which various animal parts, like feathers and pelts, may be put (Lowie, pp. 26–27); another recommends chokecherry trees for making arrows (Lowie, p. 30); and yet another describes the effect of and cure for contact with a toxic plant (Lowie, pp. 47–48). Tehuelche tales note the usefulness of califate thickets as protection from the harsh Patagonian wind (Wibert & Simoneau 1984, pp. 121, 125). Stories may also tell how to cultivate or harvest a given plant or how to process a given food source (e.g., Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, pp. 157, 160).37 Directions for processing other raw materials or making tools may also be found. A Crow tale, for example, tells how to tan buffalo hide (Lowie, p. 29), while a Yanomamo tale tells how to make curare (Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, p. 217). Other stories describe fishing and hunting methods, such as throwing termites on the water as bait (Wilbert & Simoneau 1990, p. 389) and tricking a herd of buffalo into running off a cliff (Lowie, p. 19). Stories may also depict techniques or materials that may be used when normal resources are not available, such as the Greenland Eskimo tale in which a young man uses his sister as a hunting bladder (Rink, p. 102).
It is telling not only that we enjoy listening to stories, but that we enjoy listening to them repeatedly. The acquisition of useful information, or learning, is a plausible explanation of this phenomenon, as learning tends to be accomplished through repetition. Narrative provides a highly effective means of simulating critical features of the environment in which humans struggle to survive and raise their young. Because the story world and the real world correspond in certain consistent and predictable ways, individuals are able to apply narrative information to tasks associated with subsistence and reproduction in their local environment. By adulthood, a given individual is typically familiar with many of the stories of his or her culture. The aggregate effect of oral narrative, then, is to provide a broad base of knowledge pertinent to the pursuit of fitness in the local environment.

The hypothesis that narrative evolved as a means of simulating the human environment is diametrically opposed to the poststructuralist tenet that no reality exists outside of the text—that reality is illusory, indeterminate, or purely subjective. In spite of this proposition, the fact remains that humans have evolved in an environment where survival and reproduction have depended on locating food, avoiding predators, choosing a competent mate, forming coalitions, and innumerable other tasks. These tasks, in turn, require information processing, which is impossible without cognitive access to one’s surroundings. Many of these tasks also require cooperation and/or communication, which would be impossible if all normally developing humans did not perceive the adaptively critical features of their environment in a similar fashion.

The virtual reality hypothesis also challenges the poststructuralist tenet that there is no universal “human nature.” If there were no common human experience and no common cognitive means of representing and responding to that experience, storytelling would be futile. Because we are a highly gregarious species, the ability to empathize—to intuit the beliefs and desires of others—is requisite to our existence. Making a friend, appeasing a parent, negotiating a trade, wooing a lover, caring for a child—all would be impossible without the ability to anticipate what our fellows might want or do next.

Where my approach and postmodernist theory agree is on the fundamentally interested nature of narrative. Postmodernism takes as a given that, consciously or unconsciously, storytellers have ulterior
motives. However, its assumption that self-interest varies (e.g., due to sex, race, social status) is not an explanation but rather a phenomenon to be explained. Why and in what way, for example, should we expect the interests of women narrators to differ from those of male narrators? In order to answer these and other questions related to narrative function, we must first understand the selection pressures to which the mind was subject and the means it evolved to solve them. In the words of Tooby and Cosmides, we “should be interested in evolutionary biology for the same reason that hikers should be interested in an aerial map of an unfamiliar territory that they plan to explore on foot. If they look at the map, they are much less likely to lose their way.”

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36. Judging by Wilbert and Simoneau’s translations, Yanomamo storytellers, too, make frequent use of mimicry in their narratives.

37. Wilbert and Simoneau’s collection of Yanomamo tales also includes descriptions of how to plant tobacco and yams, as well as how to process *hayi* fruits, *pahi* seeds, tobacco and *huriya* fruits, pp. 171, 186, 166, 170, 191.


