

# The Story Copywriter Podcast

Episode 35:  
Voyage and Return



## 35: Voyage & Return

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In 2009 I was traveling between Argentina and Bolivia, and I decided to take the less traveled route to get there through Paraguay. Paraguay is off the beaten track in South America. There isn't a huge amount "to do", and that held appeal to me. I'd been in Buenos Aires a few weeks and I liked the idea of venturing off somewhere unusual.

I traveled by bus over the border from Argentina to Paraguay, and arrived in the city of Ciudad del Este. I descended the steps of the bus and arrived into **chaos**. Ciudad del Este is the biggest market city in South America. There were people carrying televisions around, bartering in the streets, selling food, mattresses, all kinds of electrical goods. I'd read in the guidebook that it was very important to get your passport stamped on the way into Paraguay, because if you didn't there were fairly substantial fines.

I picked up my huge rucksack full of six months worth of stuff, and battled my way back to border control, where eventually I sat in front of an intimidating army officer. He asked me the same question every border control officer would ask me throughout my trip in South America: "A donde vas?" *Where are you going?* For a brief moment the idea of saying, "I don't know," flitted across my mind and then it passed. After a few moments I said, "Asunción." Which was true, at some points I would go to the capital, Asunción. I just didn't know when.

So they stamp my passport, and I headed back out into the mayhem. Feeling hungry, the first thing I did was buy a Paraguayan cheese bread, called a chipa. I went into a bank and exchanged \$100 for what seemed like a mind bending amount of the local currency, the Paraguayan guaraní. I also checked into a hotel.

Near Ciudad del Este there's a big hydroelectric dam called the Itaipu Dam. I'd read about the Itaipu Dam when I was studying project management as part of my degree. It said in the guidebook that there was a visitors center, and to get bus G to get there.

I went to the place where bus G was supposed to depart, and I waited. Eventually I stopped someone in the street and asked them in fairly broken Spanish how to get to the Itaipu Dam. The lady I asked had no idea what I had asked her!

So I carried on waiting. Three solid lanes of traffic streamed past me. Most of the buses just had a single letter or a single number on the front. They didn't even say a destination, just 'bus 1', 'bus C'. Everyone else around me knew where they were going. A guy next to me had a massive television on his head, and he hustled onto a bus, talking rapidly. The only buses that mentioned destinations were to destinations in Argentina or Brazil.

After almost two hours I plucked up the courage to ask someone, who told me, "Oh no, you want to be on line C, which departs him around the corner."

So I wait around the corner, and eventually, thankfully, line C turns up. I get on the bus. It's jampacked. There's people with animals on the bus, chickens in boxes. I managed to pay and get a seat. Soon enough, the huge outline of this dam appeared on the horizon. I got off just outside their visitors center, and was surprised to find a handful of other tourists there. It's an impressive structure, spanning a huge expanse of water.

After visiting the dam, I got back on line C, going in the other direction. Again, the bus was really busy. I quickly realised I didn't recognise any of my surroundings. Gradually more and more people got off the bus, until it was only me and a handful of people left. Eventually the bus pulled up at a bus terminal in the middle of nowhere that I didn't recognize, and everyone got off. The driver got off too, and switched off the engine.

I got off too, and looked around. There were people carrying watermelons around, and some children nearby were playing football. I poured over my guidebook, trying to figure out where I was on the map. "Where am I?" I thought, desperately. "Is there any way out of this?"

Up from the bus terminal I could see a large group of men on motorbikes, who were leaning on bikes, chatting. Once again I plucked up the courage and I went up and spoke to the men on the motorbikes. I tried to explain, in broken Spanish, where I wanted to go and which hotel I was trying to get back to. The men on the motorbikes had no idea of what I had said or where I wanted to go. "Vamos," one of them said to me. My first ever trip on a motorbike. I climbed on the back and I clung on for dear life.

We drove around Ciudad del Este, my driving pulling up occasionally to ask other colleagues, other people that he knew, if they knew where I was trying to get to. We stopped outside a restaurant and the chef came out. It turns out that in Paraguay, not only do people not speak Spanish as their first language, they also can't read maps. The chef held my guidebook, spinning the map around in his hands. I sat there glumly on the back of this motorbike, wondering, "How much is this going to cost me? Do I have enough money? Am I ever going to get back? Am I going to be lost forever? Am I trapped here in tourist hell?"

It's getting dark now. We've been riding around for what seems like an hour. The sun is setting on the horizon. Just as I think we're never going to get back, I recognise a street. A few minutes later, we're back into the chaos. We're back onto the street where everyone is selling TVs, microwaves, and mattresses. Finally, we pull up at my hotel.

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Today's episode of The Story Copyrighted Podcast is about the next of Christopher Booker's Seven Basic Plots, which is Voyage and Return. Which is the second plot out of the seven that is based on a journey. Today's plot has echoes of The Quest, but in some fundamental ways is a very different story structure. We're going to examine how the plot is different. I actually think Voyage and Return is a more versatile, and potentially a more useful plot than The Quest from a business storytelling perspective.

As always, we're going to cover three ideas. The first idea is anchoring, the second idea is frustration, and the third idea is transformation. So let's go ahead and have a look at the first idea.

## 1. Anchoring

You're already familiar with the concept of Voyage and Return from the world of literature. *Back to the Future* is perhaps the classic archetypal Voyage and Return story. In literature we've got stories like *Alice in Wonderland*. I was reflecting just the other day, watching *Toy Story* with my kids, that *Toy Story* is also a Voyage and Return story. And yes, in a Voyage and Return story there is always a journey.

The journey can be a physical journey, but it can also be a social journey. It could be a time where you got involved in a group or club that was in fact toxic or dangerous. You were following the winds of life. You weren't maybe being as intentional as you might like to think, Then the return is getting back to your core values, and extracting yourself from that situation.

As we'll explore in this podcast, the return is really the point of the story. The voyage is actually of less importance. What the voyage does, whether it's a physical journey, or a social journey, is it removes anchors that you have to daily reality.

Your journey to a place, either physically or socially, where the regular rules of the world, or the regular rules of business, don't seem to apply. In my story about the Itaipu Dam, I visit

Paraguay. And in Paraguay, the Spanish I'd learned in Argentina didn't seem to work. My ability to catch a bus in Argentina was of absolutely zero use in Paraguay, where they had this bizarre system of letters and numbers for traveling around cities.

So the first idea is anchoring; your anchors to reality are abruptly removed. You are put into a situation that you never intended to get into. This is one of the key differences between The Quest plot and the Voyage and Return Plot. The Quest is very directional. There is a goal; there is an objective. There is a bad evil force, perhaps at some distance, that needs to be fought and overcome. So in a quest story, you are being very goal-orientated. You are setting out on your journey to achieve a certain objective, or overcome a particular adversary.

In Voyage and Return, the journey is almost accidental. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice is daydreaming one day and then falls through a series of successively smaller doors, and ends up in Wonderland. The journey was accidental. She was just feeling bored and drowsy. In *Back to the Future*, Martin McFly ends up in 1955 because he's trying to get out of a really tight spot. He doesn't want to end up in 1955, and it takes him 5 to 10 minutes of the story to realise he's in 1955.

Once the protagonist of the story arrives in this new situation, for a while the world is strange and wonderful in some respects. I arrive in Paraguay, and I'm blown away by the absolute chaos of this market town. But I managed to get my passport stamped. I managed to buy a cheese bread called a chipa. I managed to exchange some money. I managed to check into a hotel. So for a while, things in some respects are going well. This is the dream stage, where everything is strange and wonderful. In *Alice in Wonderland*, Alice is fairly captivated by the creatures that keep coming up to her and speaking in riddles.

For me, Voyage and Return is a very natural story to use. All of us, at one time or another, get blown around by things happening to us. We get thrown or thrust into situations that we had never anticipated. In these situations, the things that we thought we knew about how to navigate the world simply don't apply anymore. The world we thought we knew has been disrupted. Our anchors to reality are removed.

So have a think: when have you been put in a situation like this? When have you journeyed to a place where your anchors to reality were abruptly removed. Where for a while things seemed strange and wonderful. But then we get into the second idea, which is frustration...

## 2. Frustration

Like with all of the seven basic plots, the pressure on the hero doesn't just ramp up, it escalates slowly. It rises and it falls in successively larger rises. In my story about the Itaipu Dam, firstly I have trouble finding the bus. Then I have problems speaking Spanish to people. Eventually I'm abandoned and lost in a bus terminal in the middle of nowhere, with no phone and just a guidebook to help me.

In literature, we'll start to see the antagonist of the story start to exert pressure on the hero. In *Alice in Wonderland*, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Queen of Hearts is actually a psychopath.

This pressure ramps up slowly. To begin with it's maybe slightly distanced, but the threat to the protagonist becomes more and more real, until there's a real possibility that our hero of the story may be trapped in this situation and never return.

As you're telling this story it should look for all the world like you might get trapped. In my story about the Itaipu Dam I did think internally, "How on earth am I going to get back to my hotel?"

Something I'm finding, in talking through each of the seven basic plots is that each plot requires space to tell. They're not generally short stories. The reason is because of this idea of escalating frustration. The idea that the pressure on the hero rises and falls, rises and falls, until we get the climatic points of conflict or frustration. It's at that point that we get the miraculous escape.

At this climatic point the pressure on the hero will be at its max. There will often be a moment of character transformation, and that's the third idea...

### 3. Transformation

In the best Voyage and Return stories, the return is only possible by the protagonist growing internally in some way. They transform, and become a better, fuller, more complete version of themselves.

They're put in a challenging situation where the regular rules of the world don't seem to apply. They're forced by the escalating pressure to change, or transform. It's that transformation that enables the return. In a business story, this point of transformation should echo a transformation your customer is looking to achieve. By telling the story you're illuminating the path for them.

In my trip to Paraguay, approaching a group of guys on motorbikes and asking them for a lift back to my hotel was actually out of my comfort zone. That's also where we start to get the 'One Idea' of the story coming through. The one idea could have been bravery. It could have been courage, it could have been persistence. You can use that one idea as a bridge to connect to your sales message.

In *Back to the Future* the climatic point of the story is where Martin McFly acts as a parent to his own dad. He facilitates the meeting of his parents at the ball. And in so doing, prevents himself from fading from the photo in his pocket. But he has to grow internally to be able to do that. He returns back to 1985, older, wiser having grown up in some respects.

So yes, after the ball we've got all of the drama to do with the car hitting 80 miles an hour, and timing that with the lightning striking the town hall. But in some respects, a lot of that is cinematic drama, because the character arc or point of transformation is already complete. The

story is about the transformation, not the drama of getting back to 1985. So yes, we've still got the drama of actually returning, but the return is now inevitable because the transformation has already happened.

In *Toy Story*, Woody and Buzz end up in Sid's room. And again, they don't end up in Sid's room deliberately. It's an accidental voyage that they never intended to make. The real challenge in the story is getting *back* to Andy's room. But before they can return to Andy's room, there's a moment of transformation that has to happen where Woody overcomes his jealousy of Buzz. He grows into a better leader. He grows into someone who isn't as concerned with petty jealousies.

There's a moment in Sid's room where this happens, when Woody is trapped under a toolbox. In his excellent book *Storyworthy*, Matthew Dick talks about having five second moments in a story. There's a five second moment in Sid's room where Woody realises the way forward, and Buzz realises it too, and that's the point at which the transformation happens.

Yes, there's a lot of drama after that point. They have to get out of Sid's house. They have to evade Sid's dog. They have to chase the moving van. They get strapped to a rocket. All of these things happen, but the outcome of the story is now inevitable because the transformation has already happened.

In planning out the story, yes you can have the drama. But you want to really focus on the transformation. At that point of transformation you want to slow down the story by describing the details, introducing internal conflict, letting the reader know what is going on in the hero's head.

So my advice to you really is focus on the transformation, perhaps more so than the drama of the return.

The Voyage and Return story has wide-ranging applications for business because we've been blown around by the winds of life and ended up in challenging situations that have felt very strange to us. Then there has been a great challenge in returning, and it's through the return that we grow as individuals.

I'm sure you can think of a situation like that. Perhaps even multiple situations. The versatility comes from the fact that it can be a physical journey, or it can be a social journey.

In literature, we also have examples of Voyage and Return where the voyage is a complete change of physical outward appearance. We have stories like *Big*, we have always like *Honey, I Shrank the Kids*. We have movies like *Face Swap*, where the voyage is a complete change in your physical attributes. *Honey, I Shrank the Kids* is perhaps the best example because the return is far more challenging than the voyage. And the voyage only happens by accident. It's an unforeseen consequence.

So we have a third type of voyage and return story, which is this complete change of outward appearance. I don't know how useful it is from a business perspective, but it's worth knowing.

Voyage and Return holds appeal to me is because it allows you to demonstrate transformation on a real human level. The structure of the Voyage and Return story also has plenty of places where you can insert conflict, where you can insert drama, where you can have ups and downs. Potentially you actually get into quite a dangerous situation, and either you fear for your life or fear that you're going to be trapped forever in a damaging situation. That sense of entrapment should really come across in the story.

As we work through each of these seven plots, you'll listen to some plots and immediately think of a situation that is applicable to you. And some plots you'll listen to and think, "Well, maybe that doesn't apply so well to me." And that's fine, you don't have to use all seven plots. You just have to identify one. Identify one that's going to sit at the heart of your marketing, at the heart of your communications. Craft ONE of these stories to communicate your purpose and reason for being, to new potential customers. That's what's going to build trust and establish you as a credible provider.

## Recap

This week's episode has been about the fourth of Christopher Booker's 'Seven Basic Plots', Voyage and Return. We've looked at three ideas. Firstly that the voyage should be accidental, and remove key anchors you have to the nature of reality. The things you thought you knew about the world no longer hold true.

Next, we have the idea of escalating frustration. For a while, things are strange and wonderful. But then the situation turns increasingly sour, culminating in a critical point of danger or entrapment.

Thirdly, we had the idea of transformation. At the critical point of entrapment, you discover a key insight you never knew you had inside you, and make a miraculous escape. The hero returns, slightly older, slightly wiser. It's that wisdom we are trying to pass on in the story.

As Christopher Booker says in *The Seven Basic Plots*:

*We see that, by definition, he (the hero) has begun the story in a state of limited awareness. It is this which has plunged him into a world of existence he had never previously imagined, an experience which leads to a nightmare threatening him with annihilation. But as a result he has learned something of fundamental importance. He has moved from ignorance to knowledge. He has reached a new and much deeper understanding of the world, and this has led to a complete change in his attitude to life.*

Let me pose the question to you again: when has this happened to you, either physically or socially? That's a potential Voyage and Return story.

On next week's episode, we'll have a look at the next plot, which is the comedy plot. I'm pleased to say that, fortunately, you don't have to be conventionally funny to use the comedy plot. We'll talk about why next time.

What else is going on in The Story Copywriter land?

Well, I'm training through a half marathon again next month. As you might be able to tell from the wind in the background on this episode, we're in the middle of a series of fairly relentless storms. So my running has been frustratingly curtailed.

The other thing I do routinely, that I would like to tell you about, is take my kids to swimming lessons.

I only work four days a week. Every Monday I spend with the kids. I call Monday's 'Daddy Daycare Day'. And on Daddy Daycare Day, I take my 1 year old daughter swimming to a local swimming baths, where she has a lesson. She really loves it. She loves being in the water.

She's the youngest of my two kids, and it's perhaps the only time that I get with just her. So it feels like a really special thing to do. And actually, if I was telling you about my week, the absolute best thing I do each week is take my daughter swimming. It's not the glitzy, glamorous thing, but it's the day-to-day reality. Being able to do stuff like this, being able to be hands-on, being present to see them grow up and participating in that, is what drives me.

Once again, if you find this episode helpful, please do share it in any groups that you're a part of. Perhaps with your email list, if you have an email list. And please do take a moment to leave a rating and review in your favorite podcast app. Otherwise, all that's left for me to say is thank you as always for listening, and I will speak to you next time.

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