

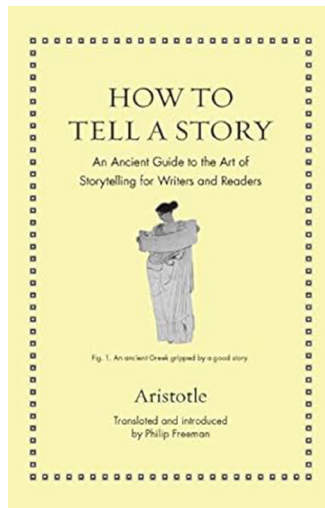
Book Review

How to tell a Story. An Ancient Guide to the Art of Storytelling for Writers and Readers

Freeman (P.) (trans), Pp. 264, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022. Cased £18. ISBN: 978-0-691-20527-4

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In the 'Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers Series' published by the Princeton University Press, Philip Freeman has added his voice with a new translation of Aristotle's *Poetics*. His new translation is by far the most accessible for a few very practical reasons which immediately become apparent once you start reading the book. Freeman explains that the *Poetics* was originally compiled as series of lecture notes hence the cumbersome nature of the material. In many cases there are parts missing from the text, most notably the entire section

that deals with Comedy. Freeman thus makes use of bullet points and sub-headings to make the work in any shape coherent for readers who might not be schooled in Ancient Greek.

Furthermore, Freeman focuses on the brilliant insights within the imperfections like 'What are your Characters like?' The Ancient Greek on the opposite side of the page may be of some use to a person versed in the language. But for me it gives the book that wonderful allure of looking like being from the Loeb Classical Series published by Harvard University. These usually expensive volumes are many times the envy of scholars around the world. Thus, we must congratulate the Princeton University Press for their marketing genius in formatting these works not only in layout but also in size the same as Harvard's Loeb editions. It certainly makes for an attractive purchase, not only a useful one!

The lessons contained in the book for any aspiring writer – such as a story should have a beginning, middle and end or that the plot of your story is far more important than your characters – are the very basics that are taught in novel writing. But these even very simple lessons have been the focus of very heated debates by many of the world's most famous writers. Freeman in this little book doesn't delve into any modern arguments on these basic lessons. Instead, he proceeds merely by trying to shed additional light on them. His introduction on the lessons also provides no new context, but just gives the historical basis for Aristotle's arguments existing in the first place. This should in no way put the modern reader off from reading the book as it is very enjoyable in returning to Aristotle and brushing up on some other great lessons like 'never have a truly admirable person undergo a change from good to bad fortune. This evokes only shock and disgust in an audience, not pity and fear'.

Just as we do today, Aristotle experienced the writings of great writers, good writers and utterly bad writers. In this volume Freeman continues on this theme showing why Aristotle thought that these disparities existed between writers. And to Aristotle it was always pretty obvious why this happened. They abandoned and disregarded his rules of writing. Aristotle, as translated and shown by Freeman, gives instructions, and these instructions are based upon Aristotle's own knowledge and study of literature.

The *Poetics* does remain a necessary read for both readers and writers. What it previously lacked was clarity and cohesion, not to mention readability! It required a concise translation that would go beyond the mere words and become concise in method and user-friendliness as well. Freeman succeeds in creating just such a concise work because he does not eliminate any of those elements that are the most important aspects of the book. By eliminating only the contradictions and convulsions Freeman brings to life a work that is invaluable in the traditional history of writing. The expounding of the very Natural Law of Storytelling is enshrined in this volume for future generations. It allows the reader to focus on the pivotal elements of what is good literature.

Although young writers should try to adhere to the principles that Aristotle laid out in his *Poetics* when they start out in their writing careers, these principles can also guide readers in identifying good literature. And in our age of Netflix and streaming it may even guide viewers into identifying good movies or series! And we can thank Philip Freeman and his new translation for that. He has modernised and revitalised a book that had become an irksome task to writer and reader alike. Again, Freeman does not part from the historical narrative or tradition even in his footnotes, but the key contributions will be the revitalisation of an ancient Classic and a philosopher who knew how to tell a story.

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