

Business of Story Podcast with Lee Gutkind - "Create an Epic Business Narrative"

Park: Welcome to The Business of Story where we explore the intersection of creative storytelling and brand strategy. Hi, I'm Park Howell, and my job is to ignite your inner storyteller by introducing you to some of the most amazing story artists we know. On today's show, we're honored to have the founder of Creative Nonfiction, author of more than 25 books, distinguished writer-in-residence in the Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes at Arizona State University and a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication, Mr. Lee Gutkind. Welcome, Lee.

Lee: Hey Park, how are you?

Park: Oh, I'm doing great. Great. Thank you so much for joining us here on The Business of Story, and I certainly have to start off with the big question of, what in the world is Creative Nonfiction and why did you create it in the first place?

Lee: Well, what we call Creative Nonfiction is, there's a little tagline. Creative Nonfiction, first and foremost, is a magazine that's 21, almost 22 years old. It's a literary magazine, was once a journal, now a magazine. And the little tagline under the title Creative Nonfiction is "True stories, well told." And that's pretty much the way to kind of capture what Creative Nonfiction is. It's everything is true and it communicates ideas and information, not directly, but sometimes a bit indirectly through story.

Park: And this is any kind of nonfiction story, anything that is true, be it a business or personal endeavor, I think memoirs, or what are the different kinds of nonfiction stories do you generally see?

Lee: Well, I like to kind of divide them into what I like to call the "public creative nonfiction" and the "private or personal creative nonfiction." And if you look at the bookshelf these days, I'll start with personal, memoirs is really big. People are unloading. People are talking about themselves, talking about what they do, sometimes outing themselves in maybe embarrassing ways, but they're pouring their hearts out and connecting with readers in many different areas, and that's a memoir. And it's usually a personal true story. That doesn't mean that it's fiction. It doesn't mean that anything is made up. But the personal or private creative nonfiction is on one end, one end of the spectrum.

And then there's the public creative nonfiction. And that is also story, but stories written to communicate significant information about a person, a place, or a thing. So I do a lot of writing in both areas. But more often than not, I do this public creative nonfiction. And that means I take a subject that is of importance in this world and of interest to many people, and I try to turn that information into a fascinating story so that people want to learn whatever it is I'm trying to tell them, whether they're really interested initially in the subject or not. Many creative fiction writers immerse themselves in different areas for longer periods of time so that they can capture those subjects.

So for example, I did a book about organ transplantation called "Many Sleepless Nights." And I spent four years inside a couple of organ transplant centers hanging out with nurses and surgeons and the patients and the patients' families and looking for stories that gave me the opportunity to communicate valuable and interesting

information. Not only about every aspect of organ transplantation, but how it works and what the people are like who are part of that milieu.

And I did another one about robotics. I spent a similar amount of time in a robotics institute at Carnegie Mellon, and again, captured the milieu. And the book is called "Almost Human: Making Robots Think," and I was able to communicate to my audience, my reading audience, how roboticists build robots, how they design them, why they do that, how they write the code, how they test the robots, and how they succeed or fail.

So you may or may not have an interest in a subject like organ transplantation or robotics, or for that matter, baseball. But the whole challenge, the entire challenge, of creative nonfiction, especially in this public realm, is to take information that you have. Whether it's about you, whether it's about your skills, whether it's about your business, your corporation, your foundation, and make people interested, whether they're interested really at the outset or not, by figuring out a true story to embed the information in.

Park: Now I first came across your work when I met up with you at ASU and you've been so kind to be a guest lecturer for our Executive Masters Program a couple times. And I was sort of fascinated by this whole genre of creative nonfiction and so often, you just think of writers and fiction and the screenplays they're writing. But to really, truly focus on nonfiction the way you do, I mean, you have really had this global reach. You've been on "The Daily Show" with Jon Stewart, "Good Morning America," NPR's "Talk of the Nation," "All Things Considered," the BBC. What is it about creative nonfiction that is attracting such an audience?

Lee: Well, look, Park, there are so many important things that the world has to know. And we're inundated with information every single day. We can't, for the life of us, listen to every news report and read every article that might touch us one way or the other. And so what we really do, "we" meaning readers and listeners, what we really do is listen for something that we can connect to, and that's the story. That's the scene. That's the story.

And so creative nonfiction has become so popular. It's the most popular genre now, the fastest growing genre now in the publishing industry and also in the academy. It's so funny. And I'm not talking about the Academy of Creative Writing programs, where's it's also the leading genre, but we're talking about biology departments, chemistry departments, MBA programs, law schools.

In order to get people to hear your message, you have to tell a true story. And let me just say, that you can't just . . . this is the title of my book, and I hope all of your listeners are, as they're listening to me, going to Amazon to order the book. The book is called "You Can't Make This Stuff Up." And that's really an important message, that you just can't make up a story because your reader or your listener is uncertain what they can believe and what they cannot believe.

So the whole idea is to write a true story that is accurate, that is believable, and communicate your information through that true story. And so your readers will listen if you attract them with this idea of a story. And I'm not just saying that because this is what I do for a living, there's all kinds of research these days that shows that people

remember more facts for longer periods of time when those facts and that information is communicated in story form. So it's quite clear that the better the story, the stronger your message.

Park: Well, Lee, at that point, let's take a break here for just a second so one of our sponsors, our terrific sponsors, can tell their story. And when we come back, I'd like for you to give us some examples of some great creative nonfiction that we're all digesting in our public lives today, whether it's a book, a movie, or whatever. So we'll be back with Lee Gutkind right after this.

Welcome back to The Business of Story and our phenomenal guest today, the founder of Creative Nonfiction, Lee Gutkind. Lee, thanks for being here. Before the break, you talked a little bit about how creative nonfiction has become one of the most popular genres today in all of our lives. Can you give us some examples of books or movies out there that reflect great creative nonfiction?

Lee: Well, there are very few movies, of course, because directors and actors intervene, but a movie that's intervened by adding their own dramatic elements. But one that's close is "Apollo 13," which is really quite close to what happened in space sometime ago, starring Tom Hanks. But that's a nonfiction book. There are a number of nonfiction books that are turned into, kind of fictionalized in order to make the movies more popular.

Some of the books that have come out lately that are true creative nonfiction and absolutely accurate, one, perhaps one of the most popular over the past three years is "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks." And that book has been on the Bestseller List for three years. And it deals with cell biology. It deals with the fact that Henrietta Lacks, in the 1950s, early 1950s, was the wife of a very poor sharecropper in Maryland and she got cancer. And she went to John Hopkins Hospital, was diagnosed with cancer, died soon thereafter.

But they took a number of her cells and began experimenting with the cells. And as it turned out, they were the fastest multiplying cells that the physicians had ever seen in their entire lives. And they began to share those cells with other people. And right now, I can't remember the metaphor anymore. But right now, if you took those cells and you went back and forth to the moon four or five or six times, that's how many cells there actually were that have multiplied and been used by scientists all over the world.

So Rebecca Skloot took a biology story, a science story, and really made it dramatic. And she made it dramatic by making it personal. The Lacks family vaguely knew what had happened to their grandmother's, mother's and grandmother's cells, and Rebecca introduced herself to those people, ingratiated herself with those people, spent lots of time and helped them discover the amazing miracle that Henrietta's cells provided to this world and developed many, many important experiments that took place over the years using Henrietta's cells.

And that also gave her the opportunity to look into other areas, like, what's the ethics of taking parts of someone else's body and sharing it with the world, without even telling the person or the family, and without even allowing the family to benefit from

the profits and the good deeds that the cells provided. So not only was this a biology story, but this was a story about scientific epics.

And it turns out that the Lacks family is African-American. And Rebecca also wrote about certain racial aspects that took place because she felt that at certain points, the family was taken advantage of because they were so poor and because they were black. And so you have a book that . . . Now this book has been adopted by school colleges and school districts all across the United States. She has received awards all across the world for being able to immerse herself with this family and talk about the story in many different ways.

And so that's a great example of pure creative nonfiction, and which blends, if you remember the first part of our talk, I talked about the personal and the public. It takes a public story and makes it quite personal, which makes the entire story much more compelling. So that's a great example of what creative nonfiction can do.

Park: And the title of that book again, Lee, was?

Lee: "The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks."

Park: There you go. Well, and speaking of great books, and the one you mentioned earlier and is one of my favorite on my business storytelling bookshelves is your book about "You Can't Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction—From Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between." And I suppose I fall into that everything in between, because I took a lot of tips from that book, and it's my reference manual. I think at beginning of the book you talk about feel free to flip through it, jump to section to section, depending on what your needs are at the moment, and that's exactly how I use this. A little bit of my, I suppose, creative writing Bible, but I use it for business and content marketing more than anything. And I use it in our course, of course.

One of the things you talk about in your book is about writing and thinking in scenes. And you have kind of a, well, you do a very nice job of teaching us how to do that. And I'd like for you to cover that with our listeners today. Why is it important to think and write in scenes, and how you do that. Especially when you're strapped with having to write a business story that may not be the most romantic story that you have? But how do you make it interesting?

Lee: You know, it's incredibly challenging. You're not going to be able to sit down. A newspaper reporter can sit down and knock out a five-paragraph essay or a five-paragraph story, the who, what, why and where of the story, you know, in a half an hour. And it's possible to do that with a news press release as well, because you only have one message, you want to sell your product, or you want to tell what happened on that particular day. And so if you believe in the power of story and you believe you want to reach as many people as possible, you have to take a little bit more time to figure out why, to figure out what story will carry your message. And you have to think small. And by thinking small, I mean that you have to think about an event, a moment, a situation that represents what it is you want to communicate, a little scene, just like in a movie.

If you kind of think about cinema, and you always have to think cinema, if you think about that then cinema is put-together movies, whether they're documentaries or fiction movies, they're put together in a series of scenes. And each scene accomplishes a certain thing. It communicates one or two major ideas, and no more, and they build. And so you have to sit down and figure out what it is your scene is going to be.

So last night, I went to a startup entrepreneurs meeting. And everybody was supposed to stand up and talk about what their company or what their vision was. And one person stood up, the only person who really seemed to know what she was doing with her product, she stood up and she said, "Wait. There are two people in the living room and they're watching television. And suddenly the phone rings and they find out that their son is coming over and bringing a bunch of his pals along, and they want something to eat, and there's nothing in the refrigerator. Suddenly without even a clue or an instinct, they get a text message. And the text message is an advertising message. And it says, 'Two pizzas for the price of one. Call now,' and got on the phone and they called, and the kids came over and they had their pizza a they had their Pepsi." And that was the story.

So her service, her entrepreneurial business that she was just starting, was doing this marketing text messaging. But she started out with a need, with a scene. You have two people who needed something suddenly and didn't quite know how to get it. And suddenly they found out. And so that is kind of the way you think about what your product, how to sell your product, or how to sell your service. You just don't say, "Hey, look. I have this business and I market to people through text messages." That's interesting, but if you kind of put the customer or the receiver or the recipient of your service in a situation of great need or suspense, then you have people listening, and then you have a message that they can respond to.

Park: So of all the people that you heard the pitches from last night, how many pitches were there and how many do you actually recall because of stories like that?

Lee: One. There were . . . Well, I take it back, two. Mine. But aside . . .

Park: Okay.

Lee: But aside from that, I told them. I told them in language you probably don't want me to say on this podcast. I told them that they were full of it, and they have to kind of think of what their service, what their idea represents.

So I'll give you another example. There was a guy there who had quite a successful business with a hangover pill. Manufacturing, selling, distributing a hangover, or an anti-hangover pill. And he started off by saying, "Well, I was working for a corporation and I realized that this corporation was downsizing. And I have three young kids. And I was worried about whether I was going to be able to support them. And so I looked around for businesses that I could maybe go into." And he went on and on about his life.

And it took him about five minutes to get to the fact that he had this amazing pill that could delete, get rid of, hangovers almost immediately. And so by that time, we could walk out. We could go to sleep. We could go to the bathroom, or we could go to the telephone and order some pizza. His product was a hangover pill and he needed to start

with somebody who was drunk, or someone who was sick, and make it happen much sooner.

Park: So he had a genesis story that wasn't really working for him or his product. I've got you.

Lee: Yeah. I mean, who cares about whether you have kids if you're selling a hangover pill. You're selling the pill. You're not selling your family. It just doesn't make any sense.

Park: Right. Well, let's take another break for one of our terrific sponsors. And when we come back, let's talk a little bit more about why business folks, leaders and brand strategists seem to be so reluctant to embrace story. So a little more right after this.

Park: All right. Welcome back to The Business of Story and our guest today, Lee Gutkind.

Now Lee, in your book, "You Can't Make This Stuff Up," which again, I highly recommend to anybody if you want to add it to your business storytelling library. I've gotten more out of this book than most books that I read on the subject. But you were talking about, people remember facts longer when they're wrapped in a story. And we hear that time and time again.

But we as business communicators often forget that. We are driven by PowerPoints and bullet points or charts and graphs and that kind of thing, where data is maybe the foundation for the story, but it's not the story. And if we know that stories like the Trojan horse that helps us deliver data, why don't more business leaders use it in their repertoire of tools to get people on board of an initiative or sell a product or so forth, in your opinion?

Lee: Well, they don't want to work that hard. First of all, I was talking right before about this group of young entrepreneurs, startup people, and they didn't even know that they weren't telling a story. Most people don't even understand the difference between just telling what you think and demonstrating by showing. And it's a cliché, show and tell.

But the fact of the matter is that we don't do that and we don't even understand that there is an incredible difference between showing and telling. You have to show in order to make an impact. You cannot tell and think you're going to get the same kind of responses from your customers and clients. And it takes a long time, one, to make that transition to be able to see things come in front of you with real people and real ideas in a real conflict situation. And it takes a lot more time and hard work. You just can't, to use my book's phrase, you just can't make stuff up, you have to take real things.

And so there's a lot of startup time. You have to learn how to tell a story, or show a story, but you also have to do your research necessary so that you can see what your product or service does in action. You can see it and you can communicate it with real people involved. So most people, I talked to a lot of business people and one, as I say, they don't know what a story is, what a real story is, too. And two, they are not really willing to give the time necessary to figure out how to do it and then to practice it.

Once you practice it, once you figure out how to do it, once you do your research, figure out how to do it, and once you practice this, if you practice it, you will find out a

couple of things. You'll find out that it's much more effective. Two, you will find out that you can probably do it fairly easily after you get to know it. And three, the most important part, it's a hell of a lot of fun.

Park: Yes, it is.

Lee: It is. It's so exciting to take what you know in your heart is a good product or a good service and show it like a film to the people you are trying to reach. So it takes some time. I should say, to give myself a commercial, my book "You Can't Make This Stuff Up" takes the entire situation apart for you and tells the reader exactly how to do it. Short and long. How to do it, how to make a scene, how to visualize a scene, re-create a scene, and communicate that with your information, your sales information, embedded inside that scene, to your audience. And I do that in my workshops, as you well know.

I make appearances all over the country, and this is what I do. I show people how to do it. So by the end of the day, you can kind of figure out how you can then move ahead and do it yourself. But it is not anything that you could just sit down and do right away until you learn all of the important techniques necessary to be able to accomplish such a skill.

Park: You know, Lee, I had Robert McKee, the famous screenwriting coach, on the show a couple weeks ago and he lamented the same fact that you did too, that a lot of people just don't know what a story is. How would you define a story for our listeners?

Lee: Something happens. Real people. Something happens. Real people are involved. And whatever happens has a beginning and has an end and has a message in the middle.

Park: The famous three act play. Exposition, conflict, resolution.

Lee: You got it.

Park: And it seems like in the business world we all love to avoid conflict. We don't like to talk about conflict. But in my experience, it is the marrow of every story. You've got to have that conflict in there because it's the universe pressing back on the human being, and then we get revealed. They reveal their true selves and in that process, we understand something more about them, their business, and more of a universal truth.

Lee: You know, you're right, Park, that we're really afraid of conflict. But always remember that conflict leads to resolution. And if you can slant or angle your story so that the resolution is positive in business, then you've made a great point to the people you're trying to connect with and sell. And that's what we're . . . We should not be afraid of conflict. We should seek conflict as long as we can figure out how that conflict can come out in our favor.

Park: An example I use often, and it may be a little bit corny, is think about a fairytale that may start, like this may start and end. There's this beautiful, fabulous kingdom with a very handsome prince and a gorgeous princess, and they got married and lived happily ever after. So there's no story there, unless you add "until the abduction." And now you've got a story and you've got something going on. But I think we are always in

business trying to get to the "happily ever after" without having to go through the difficult work of conflict and resolution in the process.

Lee: Let me tell you something about whatever that conflict is that's really an important aspect of telling and writing good stories, and that is that once you create the conflict, you never resolve the conflict for your listener or reader until you present, communicate, in one way or another, your message. Because once there's a conflict and the conflict is something that attracts a reader or a listener, they're going to stick with you to the bitter end because they want to figure out how the conflict is going to be resolved.

And so what you try to do is keep them dangling for as long as possible. And while they're dangling, whatever it is that's important to you about your service or product, you communicate that because they're going to listen to that. And whether they want to listen to it all or not, because they want to know what happens, how the conflict is resolved in the end.

Park: And then they become a true participant in your story. So you're just not yakking at them the whole time. You involve them and wrap them in the story.

Lee: They're in it, man. That's right. They're in it to stay. And as good as your conflict is and as good as your characters are, they're going to stay a long time.

Park: Yeah. Well, that's great.

Well, let's take one more break here Lee. And when we come back to wrap up the show, I hope you have a few tips that you can offer our listeners that they could maybe try and practice and use right away to make them more compelling storytellers. So we'll be right back after this.

Welcome back to The Business of Story and our guest, Lee Gutkind. Lee, thanks again for being here today. Before we wrap up, I was wondering if you've got two or three tips that you could share with our listeners that they can apply immediately to help them become more intentional and powerful storytellers?

Lee: Visualize whatever it is you are selling or communicating in scenes, and write in a scene every single time you have the opportunity. And focus not on two or three or four different aspects of your product or service, each scene should delve deeply or should delve at least part of the way through one aspect. Get your readers and your listeners to think about one thing, one conflict, one idea, one mission at a time, and then move forward. And make sure that you have realistic characters, and make sure that something happens in the beginning, and make sure that in the end, whatever happens is resolved. And think about it just kind of as a little pocket of a film. And the next time you watch TV, look at commercials, because many commercials now are stories that have a conflict and . . .

Park: Speaking of conflict, I think we just lost Lee's connection.

Lee: No. I'm back here, it looks like . . . I'm talking on the phone, I'm sorry to say, and someone has just buzzed in.

Park: And we have resolution.

Lee: We do, indeed.

Park: Well, I know you're busy on that end, Lee. And I would just like to thank you so much, again, for being a part of Business of Story. Our goal here is to help business leaders and brand strategists, content marketers do a better job of connecting their world with their customers' worlds, and help empower their customers. Help get them to where they need to be.

Lee: And with my website, it's www.LeeGutkind.com, L-E-E-G-U-T-K-I-N-D-dot-com. You can e-mail me, LeeGutkind@gmail.com and I'd be happy to help you in any way that I can.

Park: And I got to let everyone know that Lee is one of the most generous storytellers I have ever met. We were introduced through an e-mail and he responded within 24 hours. And the day after that he and I were sitting together in person having lunch, and he's been a great asset to our program and the Executive Masters for Sustainability Leadership. And then to be kind enough to come on our show again here today, I really, really appreciate it Lee.

Lee: Well, thank you for the opportunity to talk to all your listeners.

Park: All right. And that's it for today's show, The Business of Story.

I want to remind you to go to iTunes. And if you like what you're hearing, please, please give us a rating. Give us a review. If you would like for me to be covering other things or have some thoughts on the show, feel free to e-mail me. And you can do that through the website, businessofstory.com. And while you're there, we have a number of storytelling tools that you can download for absolutely free, and you can apply it to your business, your personal mission, so any story that you really want to write. So that's at thebusinessofstory.com.

So thank you for listening and we will be back with you in two weeks with another exciting story artist to learn from.

Thank you.