

Angus Fletcher, **Storythinking: The New Science of Narrative Intelligence**, New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2023, 200 pp., \$25.00 (softcover).

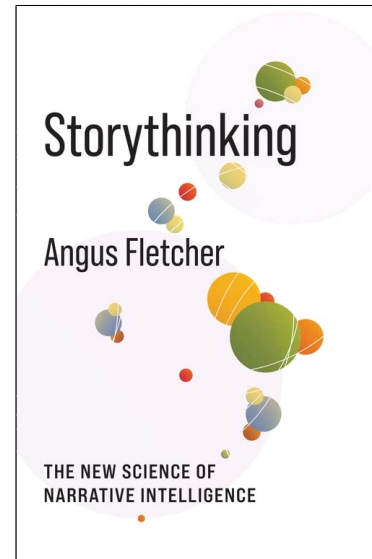
Reviewed by
Géraldine Bengsch
University of York

Stories have arguably been always central to human interaction. They connect generations, teach history and culture, entertain, and bring humans together. However, their importance to humankind is often underestimated and treated as mere narratives that have little value to humans beyond themselves and a nice evening by the campfire.

Author Angus Fletcher, screenwriter and professor of story science at Ohio State University, has a different philosophical approach to stories and elevates them from reproduction of knowledge to a distinct way of thinking—a type of critical thinking. Fletcher’s central thesis in **Storythinking: The New Science of Narrative Intelligence** revolves around the concept of “storythinking,” which he argues is a distinct cognitive function that goes beyond storytelling as mere communication. Unlike logical deduction, which aims for a single, predictable outcome, causal speculation entertains multiple possibilities. It involves asking “what if” questions, pushing beyond current knowledge into potential futures. While logical reasoning evaluates pros and cons to reach one conclusion based on ethical rules or likely outcomes, causal speculation explores diverse paths. Each offers unique insights and emotional truths, reflecting the complexity of real-life decision making, where outcomes are rarely straightforward. Fletcher contends that this narrative mode of thought is crucial for navigating the complexities of life, where rigid logic might fail. Both have their merits for solving problems, but stories might be so important to humans because our brains naturally think in stories.

Fletcher starts with the history and evolution of narrative, giving an overview of philosophy approaches, covering thousands of years of human storytelling. Starting from Aristotle and his approach to logic as the basis for intellect, Fletcher aims to do the same for basing his own understanding on stories. However, it should be noted that he is not advocating one approach over the other. Instead, he highlights that each approach has merits and presents the parallels between them and how they can complement each other.

The argument then moves to the distinction between storytelling and storythinking and argues that the natural inclination toward storytelling is not simply a cultural phenomenon but a cognitive function that has evolved to help make sense of the world and navigate complex situations. Fletcher then presents storythinking as a tool for personal and social growth and suggests how narrative intelligence can foster innovation and creativity, particularly in fields where traditional logical reasoning might fall short. He encourages the reader to reconnect with the principles of not just telling stories but thinking in stories,



and essentially being stories. Stories are more than communication, yet they are also not perfect, since they can confidently overlook flaws in data and cater to humans' innate ability to form irrational thoughts.

In today's world, thinking in stories creates a counterpoint to artificial intelligence (AI), by focusing on the exceptions to the rules, the outliers in the data to encourage different viewpoints of past and future to create original action. While AI can process vast amounts of data and identify patterns more efficiently than humans, it lacks the ability to engage in narrative thinking. Algorithms typically operate based on predefined rules and lack the capacity to imagine or speculate beyond the data they have been fed. This is where human cognitive skills, especially those rooted in narrative, become indispensable. Fletcher's emphasis on narrative intelligence as a counterbalance to machine logic is compelling, especially when considering the limitations of AI in understanding context, emotion, and the nuances of human experience. For instance, AI might be able to predict consumer behavior based on previous purchases but would struggle to understand the motivations, desires, or fears that drive those purchases. Storythinking, by contrast, encourages a deeper engagement with these qualitative aspects of human life, providing insights that purely data-driven approaches might miss.

However, Fletcher's understanding of the role of human creativity and its development appears somewhat one-sided. While he rightly champions the irreplaceable value of narrative thinking, he tends to underplay the potential for AI and machine learning to complement and even enhance human creativity. Recent advancements in AI, such as generative models and creative AI, do not replicate human creativity exactly but can inspire new forms of creative expression and collaboration between humans and machines.

For example, AI tools are increasingly being used by writers and artists to brainstorm ideas, generate content, and explore creative directions that might not have been considered otherwise. These collaborations suggest that the relationship between human creativity and machine logic is not strictly adversarial but can be synergistic.

Fletcher's focus on narrative thinking as a uniquely human skill also raises questions about how we define creativity and intelligence in the age of AI. As machines become more capable of performing tasks that were once considered exclusively human, it is important to consider how these technologies can augment rather than replace human capabilities. However, his somewhat traditional view on the limits of AI might overlook the nuanced ways in which technology and creativity are evolving together—an approach that seems to contradict what he describes as the essence of storythinking.

Fletcher's exploration of narrative intelligence offers a fresh perspective on how stories shape our cognitive processes. His use of historical and philosophical contexts to trace the evolution of storytelling adds depth to his arguments, making the book both informative and engaging. Maybe not surprisingly, Fletcher's style of writing is reminiscent of a story, leading the reader from one plot point to the next, one story that effortlessly connects to the next, hopping from one point in time to another, using a plethora of colorful adjectives, subordinate clauses in complex syntax, and vivid action verbs that propel the narrative forward. The reader is immersed in the author's own story and its associated universe. While this is eloquently done overall, it invites the mind to wander and makes the content more difficult to absorb, not

unlike this little passage: "In this chapter, the narrative has glibly lumped the Common Core teachers into a single grinning entity, when those teachers were different people with diverse perspectives and professional experiences" (p. 55). However, this approach also poses challenges: The dense prose and complex syntax can sometimes obscure the key messages, making the book a more demanding read. Readers who prefer straightforward, easily digestible content might find themselves struggling to keep pace with Fletcher's elaborate narrative style.

While the book promises to supply answers to questions on personal and social growth, and nothing less than story's answer to the meaning of life, it all remains ultimately a thought exercise and while the concept of storythinking is intriguing, the book could benefit from more concrete examples or case studies that demonstrate its effectiveness in real-world scenarios. Fletcher frequently refers to the education system's preference for logic-based education, including his own, but there is little recommendation on how to implement change. The focus lies on presenting the history of education and how logic became so prevalent.

However, the book remains thought-provoking read that challenges conventional views on intelligence and cognition. Fletcher's arguments are particularly relevant in today's world, where AI and machine learning are becoming increasingly prevalent. By valuing this form of narrative intelligence, Fletcher argues, we can develop a more holistic approach to understanding and engaging with the world, one that goes beyond the capabilities of artificial intelligence and deepens our appreciation for the human mind's unique abilities. Through advocating for the importance of narrative, Fletcher reminds the reader of the human element that lies at the core of all our thinking and decision making. Despite its occasional verbosity and lack of practical application, the book challenges readers to reconsider the value of stories not just as entertainment but as a vital tool for thinking and learning. It is a recommended read for anyone interested in the intersections of storytelling, language, psychology, and cognitive science.