



Useful Fictions: Evolution, Anxiety, and the Origins of Literature (Frontiers of Narrative)

Michael Austin

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"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Joan Didion observed in *The White Album*. Why is this? Michael Austin asks, in *Useful Fictions*. Why, in particular, are human beings, whose very survival depends on obtaining true information, so drawn to fictional narratives? After all, virtually every human culture reveres some form of storytelling. Might there be an evolutionary reason behind our species' need for stories?

Drawing on evolutionary biology, anthropology, narrative theory, cognitive psychology, game theory, and evolutionary aesthetics, Austin develops the concept of a "useful fiction," a simple narrative that serves an adaptive function unrelated to its factual accuracy. In his work we see how these useful fictions play a key role in neutralizing the overwhelming anxiety that humans can experience as their minds gather and process information. Rudimentary narratives constructed for this purpose, Austin suggests, provided a cognitive scaffold that might have become the basis for our well-documented love of fictional stories. Written in clear, jargon-free prose and employing abundant literary examples--from the Bible to *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights* and *Don Quixote* to *No Exit*--Austin's work offers a new way of understanding the relationship between fiction and evolutionary processes--and, perhaps, the very origins of literature. Named an Outstanding Academic Title for 2011 by CHOICE Magazine.

"My hope is that Austin's persuasive, approachable book will allow those reluctant to entertain the notion of universals and biology a chance to see that doing so does not mean engaging in that misnomer social Darwinism. Austin's book is a must read."--Kathryn Stasio, *The Eighteenth Century: A Critical Bibliography*

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