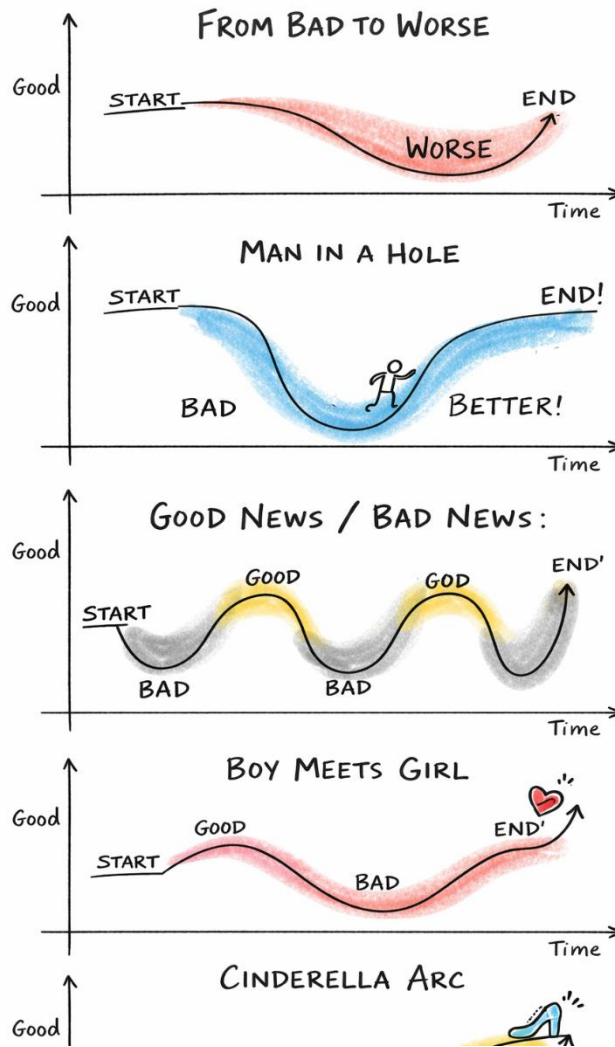




Ellison Editorial

MAPPING STORIES: THE VONNEGUTIAN ARC



MAPPING STORIES: VONNEGUTIAN ARCS

A couple of years ago I read Erik Larson's *The Splendid and the Vile*, a non-fiction account of Winston Churchill's first year in power that reads like an engrossing novel. Was this purely down to the author's engaging prose? Yes – at least in part. It was only when I reached the Sources and Acknowledgements section that I discovered much of the book's appeal lay in its fundamental structure. To achieve this effect, Larson reveals, he began with a simple mapping tool: the Vonnegutian arc (sometimes called Vonnegut's curve).

That discovery sent me down a rabbit hole into Kurt Vonnegut's deceptively simple way of mapping characters' emotional arcs.

WHAT IS A VONNEGUTIAN ARC?

Kurt Vonnegut's theory was that a story's shape reveals cultural reality and our place within it. In other words, story shapes are universal and emotional trajectories are graphable.

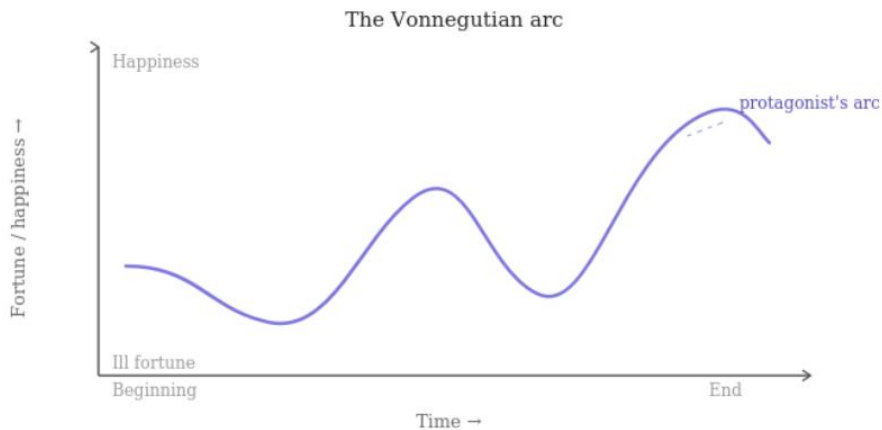
Imagine drawing a graph with two axes:

The **horizontal** axis reflects **time**, with the beginning of the story on the left, the end on the right.

The **vertical** axis is the protagonist's **fortune**, with ill fortune at the bottom and happiness or success at the top.

You then trace a single line that follows the main character's ups and downs as the story unfolds. That squiggly line is the Vonnegutian arc.

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THE MAIN SHAPES

Vonnegut noticed that most great stories follow just a handful of these basic shapes, and they're satisfying because they mirror how we experience life: things get better, then worse, then better again (or sometimes just worse).

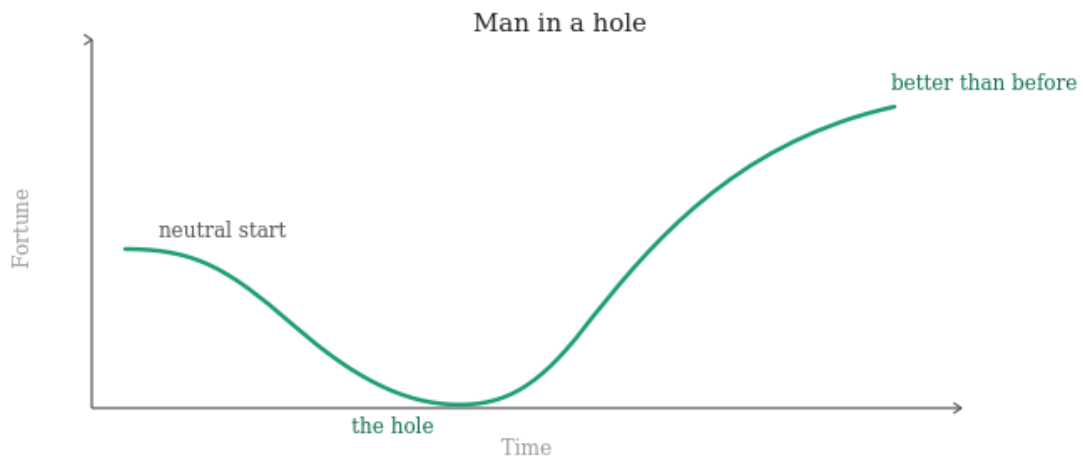
Here are a few of the most common shapes.

MAN IN A HOLE

The protagonist starts as neutral or happy, then encounters a problem, crisis or disaster (the hole). The story is about how they climb out of that hole, often ending up better than they began. In *The Splendid and the Vile*, for example, we see how Churchill takes power as Britain faces the Blitz (the hole), then rallies the nation and emerges stronger. As Vonnegut himself said: 'Somebody gets into trouble, gets out of it again.'

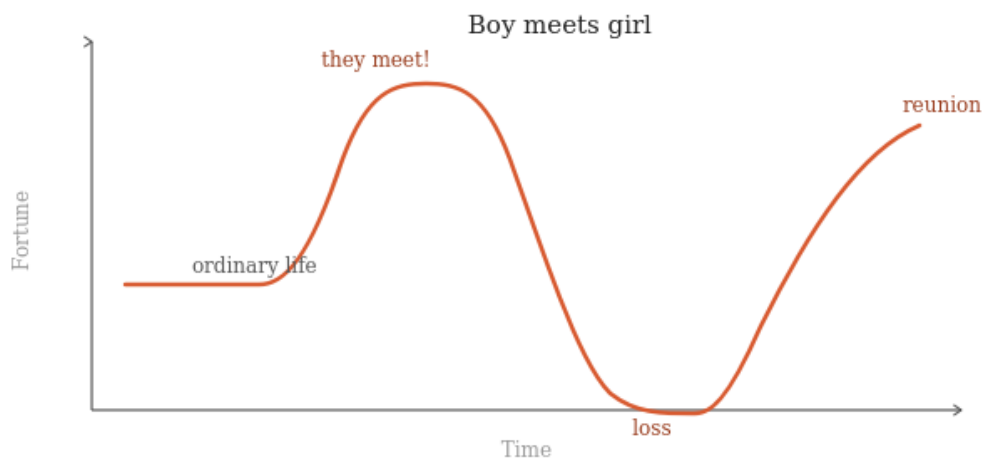
Another example is *The Martian*, in which the protagonist is stranded on Mars and uses his ingenuity to survive and eventually be saved.

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BOY MEETS GIRL

The baseline for many a romcom! Life is ordinary, but then the protagonist meets their dream (often love, but it can be an opportunity or goal) and everything feels amazing. Then they lose it. The rest of the story is the struggle to bring it back.

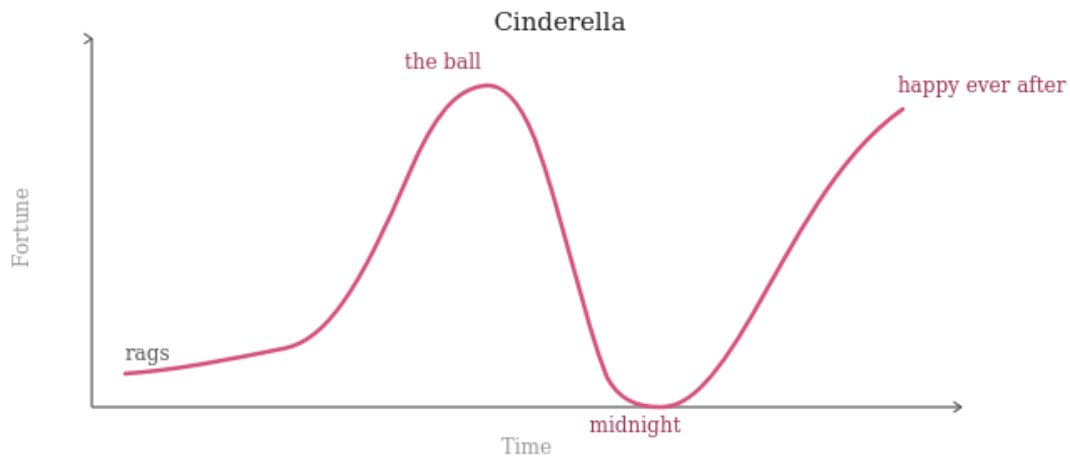


CINDERELLA

This has a rise-fall-rise structure and is sometimes called a New Testament story. It starts low (rags, misery), then a magical stroke of good fortune lifts them high (the ball, the prince). But it

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all crashes down when the clock strikes midnight. Finally, through perseverance or fate, there is a happy ever after – think *Pretty Woman*.



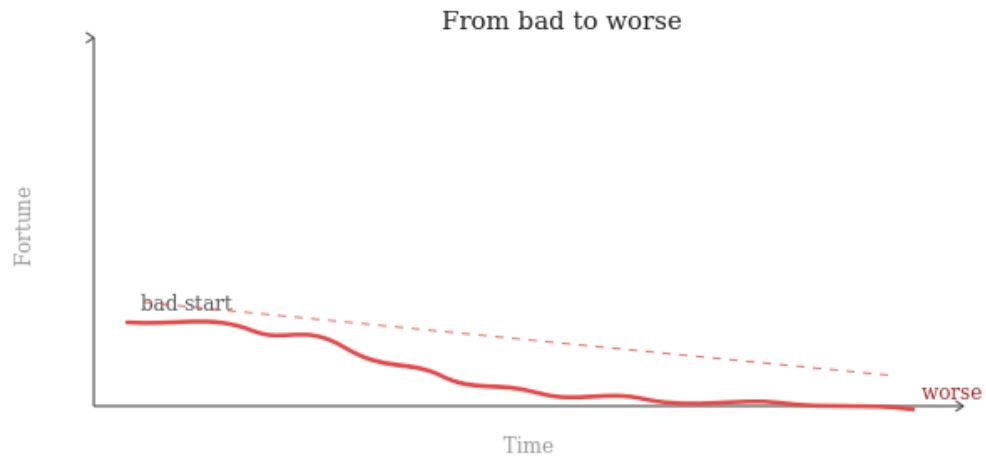
FROM BAD TO WORSE

This is sometimes seen as a Kafkaesque or Old Testament structure. Unlike tragedy, where the protagonist falls from a great height, things start badly and descend further and further into a personal hell.

If we take *1984* as an example, the protagonist's attempts to rebel against an oppressive state lead to capture, torture and ultimate brokenness. And in *The Handmaid's Tale* we see increasing restrictions as the theocratic regime of Gilead tightens its grip. This story structure is clearly well suited to dystopian narratives.

On TV, shows like *Breaking Bad* and *Black Mirror* demonstrate elements of the 'bad to worse' framework.

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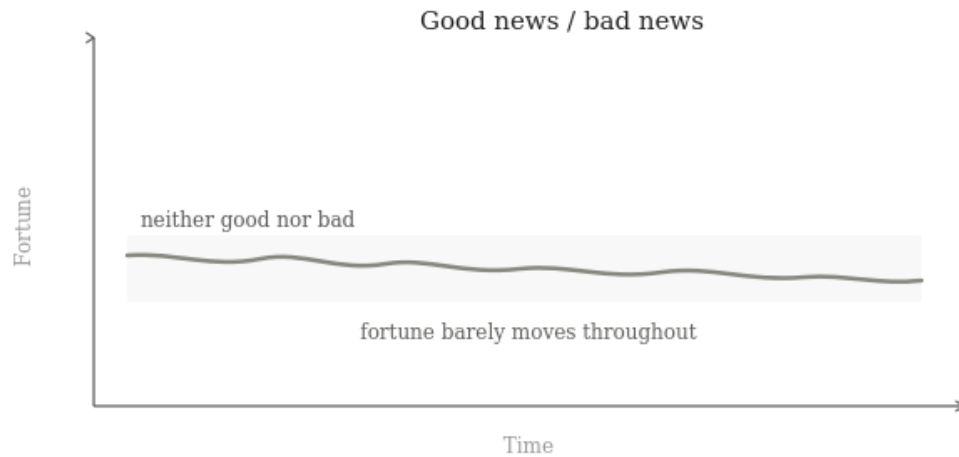


GOOD NEWS / BAD NEWS

This is sometimes likened to *Hamlet*. The protagonist's fortune barely moves throughout the whole narrative ('to be or not to be ...').

Rather than emotional swings, the power comes from irony, ideas, moral complexity or a steady sense of unease or decline. Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is a classic example: the prince's situation remains bleak and stagnant even as he gains certainty of his uncle's guilt. Stories in this vein often explore paralysis or quiet tragedy. The stories in James Joyce's *Dubliners* exemplify this stasis: most stories build to an epiphany, which can be either good news (the potential for change) or bad news (crushing awareness of entrapment).

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REASONS TO TRY THE VONNEGUTIAN ARC

On its own, the tool could be reductive. Used as an initial mapping exercise, however, the Vonnegutian arc offers a tangible framework from which nuance and complexity can be built. It's an excellent starting point for managing pacing and increasing reader engagement.

Here are four reasons to try it:

- It resonates with fundamental human experience, reflecting our universal highs and lows.
- It's a powerful structural tool that helps authors to identify plot and pacing issues early.
- It boosts creativity: the physical drawing of the curve (multimodal engagement) lets you both see and feel the story's shape.
- It strengthens character development. Vonnegut famously advised writers to 'be a sadist' and that advocated that even innocent characters should have 'awful things happen to them – in order that the reader may see what they are made of'. Easy, comfortable lives don't really show who someone is – only pressure, loss, failure or moral dilemmas do.

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The rabbit hole I fell into after reading after reading Erik Larson's book has changed how I approach storytelling, as a reader and someone who helps writers. The Vonnegutian arc doesn't dictate every detail or rob your story of originality. Instead, it gives you a clear, visual map of the path you're asking readers to take.

So, if you're stuck with pacing or wondering why a character feels flat – or even trying to shape a non-fiction narrative that feels as gripping as fiction – try sketching your character's curve. It's surprising how quickly the strengths and gaps become obvious.