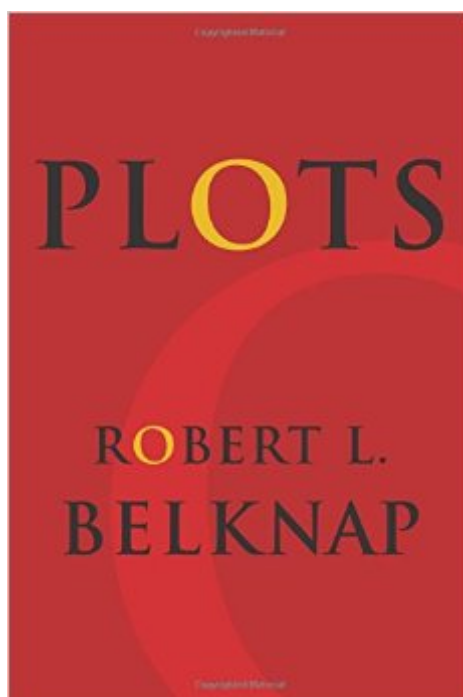


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Plots (Leonard Hastings Schoff Lectures)



Synopsis

Robert L. Belknap's theory of plot illustrates the active and passive roles literature plays in creating its own dynamic reading experience. Literary narrative enchants us through its development of plot, but plot tells its own story about the making of narrative, revealing through its structures, preoccupations, and strategies of representation critical details about how and when a work came into being. Through a rich reading of Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, Belknap explores the spatial, chronological, and causal aspects of plot, its brilliant manipulation of reader frustration and involvement, and its critical cohesion of characters. He considers Shakespeare's transformation of dramatic plot through parallelism, conflict, resolution, and recognition. He then follows with Dostoevsky's development of the rhetorical and moral devices of nineteenth-century Russian fiction, along with its epistolary and detective genres, to embed the reader in the murder Raskolnikov commits. Dostoevsky's reinvention of the psychological plot was profound, and Belknap effectively challenges the idea that the author abused causality to achieve his ideological conclusion. In a final chapter, Belknap argues that plots teach us novelistic rather than poetic justice. Operating according to their own logic, plots provide us with a compelling way to see and order our world.

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Customer Reviews

You may never look at a story the same way again after reading Robert Belknap's incisively

clear and illuminating book, titled simply, *Plots*. In her very helpful Introduction, Robin Feuer Miller calls Belknap's achievement "a magnum opus that is particular, profound, original, and short." • I absolutely agree. The first part of the book presents the fundamental dynamic that authors use to create plots: the active arrangement (and re-arrangement) of incidents in the story world to make a narrative for the reader. Belknap's explanation of the varieties of ways incidents can be linked is indeed particular and profound. The second part of the book analyzes two test cases, Shakespeare's *King Lear* and Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. As a Slavic languages expert and scholar of Dostoevsky, Belknap is especially at home writing about the distinctive tools Dostoevsky uses in his novels, but he has insights to offer on numerous authors and genres. The key tool he will use to do this are the distinction between the "fabula" and "siuzhet." These are Russian words drawn from Russian formalism, an approach to story structure put forward by Vladimir Propp in his 1928 book *Morphology of the Folktale* and also by Viktor Shklovsky. But we don't need to go back to these sources to figure out this pair of concepts; just read Belknap's title for his Chapter 3: "The Fabula Arranges the Events in the World the Characters Inhabit; the Siuzhet Arranges the Events in the World the Reader Encounters in the Text." In other words, the fabula is the "true" arrangement of incidents in the story world as they "happened" to the characters. The siuzhet arranges these incidents to present to readers in the readers' world.

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