



(A Podcast About) Making Better Podcasts  
Season 1, Episode 2  
"Narrative"  
Transcript

*(Music begins)*

**David:** This is a podcast about how to make better podcasts.

I was talking to my friend and colleague Anna the other day, and I asked her this:

*(Music fades out)*

If you're listening to a podcast, what are the elements that makes it something you want to listen to? What separates a compelling podcast from one that you turn off?

**Anna:** Yeah. There are some elements that the things that I like definitely have in common. I like when things are sonically rich. And I like when something makes me either feel or think something that I didn't anticipate going into it. I leave the listening experience with a feeling or an idea that I wouldn't have gotten elsewhere.

And, the main thing is that there is some kind of a plot. And I guess what I mean by plot is like there is a beginning, middle, and end.

*(Music begins)*

**David:** Now, that's a popular thing to say, that a piece of media needs to have a plot, and a plot needs to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But what does that mean exactly? How do you do that on a practical level? How do you know if you've done it?



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These sound like kind of abstract questions, but they have pretty concrete answers that have been developed over thousands of years of people thinking about storytelling and how to do it better.

To get started, let me give you an example.

*(Music ends)*

I'm going to tell the same story two different ways. All right, story number one:

*(Sound effect: harp glissando)*

My dog has a favorite cushion in the living room. I know that long walks tend to tire her out.

*(Periodic sound effects illustrate the story)*

She stays there most of the day dozing looking out the window. I try to guide her to the shorter path at the park directly behind my house, the one that goes straight to the center and then back, but she pulls me to the longer one that goes all the way around the perimeter. She's an old dog. She can't run like she used to but whenever I pass she smiles, thumps her tail on the floor. Today, like every morning, I woke up. I put some shoes on, threw a coat over my pajamas. I went to the kitchen.

I took her out. She was waiting by the back door, leash in her mouth, ready to go on our walk. By the time we got to the turn that goes by the turtle pond, she was starting to tire out. By the time we got back to the gate, she was walking very slowly. I



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picked her up and carried her across the street and back to the house and put her down.

*(Music begins)*

That is a very boring story. It's flat. It's dull. It doesn't go anywhere. If I told you that at a party, you might listen out of politeness. You might even be a little bit interested in the state of my dog, but you would not be interested to hear more of the story. If I went on that way for another paragraph, you would tune out completely. Maybe you already did.

Now, let me tell the same story in a different way.

*(Sound effect: harp glissando)*

Today, like every morning, I woke up and went into the kitchen, and my dog was waiting by the back door, leash in her mouth, ready to go on our walk. She's an old dog, she can't run like she used to, but I put some shoes on, threw a coat over my pajamas and took her out to the park directly behind my house.

I know that long walks tend to tire her out, so I tried to guide her to the shorter path, the one that goes straight to the center and then back, but she pulled me to the longer one that goes all the way around the perimeter. By the time we got to the turn that goes by the turtle pond, she was starting to tire out.

When we got back to the gate, she was walking very slowly, and I picked her up and carried her across the street and back into the house, putting her down in her favorite cushion in the living room. She stayed there most of the day, dozing and



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looking out the window, but whenever I'd pass, she'd smile and thump her tail on the floor.

*(Music begins)*

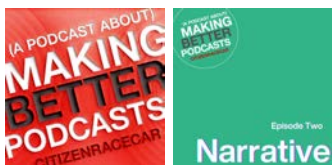
I think anyone would agree that that is a much less boring story. I bet you're more interested in my dog now than you were after the first story. I should come clean, I don't have a dog, I made the whole thing up, but I bet some of you were disappointed to hear that. Because the picture at the end, that tired old dog on the cushion, still happy to see me walk through the room, that's sweet. It has emotional resonance.

Maybe you don't even remember that same image was in the first story, but I bet it didn't land like it did the second time. It probably went right past you without registering much, if at all. In fact, in terms of the information it contained, the first story was almost exactly the same as the second. All the individual sentences were almost cut and paste identical. The only real difference was the order those sentences were in, the way the information was organized.

*(Music fades out)*

So why the big difference? Why did the second story have forward motion and emotional impact when the first one felt so inert? It's because my second story sticks much more closely to a basic set of rules about narrative structure that the first story ignored.

It has, to put it one way:



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**Anna:** A beginning, middle, and end.

*(Music begins)*

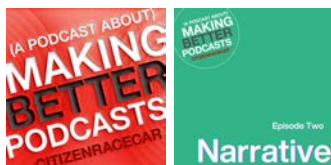
**David:** The idea that a good story has these three steps was codified by no less an authority than Aristotle, who laid out a theory of what these sections are and how they work all the way back in 335 BC, in a book called Poetics. Since then, it's usually been called "Three Act Structure".

And this wasn't something he invented. A lot of other people have written about this since, and all of them were making an observation about the way people listen. We all know what the difference is between an interesting story and a boring one, even if we couldn't tell you why. For whatever reason, a craving for this particular structure seems to be deeply hardwired into our consciousness.

To oversimplify, the structure goes like this. First, we meet the person who the story is about, and we learn what they want. Then we hear about all the struggles they have in attempting to accomplish that thing. And then we see what it's like for them when that thing either happens or doesn't happen.

One, two, three.

People usually talk about three act structure in terms of works of fiction, but the principles of this, the "beginning, middle, and end-ness", are crucial to any kind of good storytelling. If you learn about this structure and start looking for it, you're going to see it everywhere. Books, movies, TV shows, plays, articles.



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Anywhere where people are relaying information, they tend to pull towards this three act way of doing it, because it's fundamental to the way we think and organize our ideas. To put it bluntly, if your podcast episodes are boring, there's a good chance that's because you're not understanding and applying this structure.

*(Music ends)*

To start to understand this, let's go into detail about each of those three acts, one at a time. and talk about what's going on in each.

To start with, one of the things that often happens in a traditional Act One is that our protagonist gets a guide: a mentor, a teacher who helps guide them through their journey.

So let's get one of those.

*(Spacey sound effect)*

Could you introduce yourself? Who are you? Who am I talking to?

**Michael:** I'm Michael Shaw Fisher. I am a, um, writer, composer, sometimes actor, recovering poet, and a full time professor of screenwriting at the Los Angeles Film School, here in LA.

**David:** What happens when you experience a piece of work composed by someone who does not understand structure?

**Michael:** Um, I mean, I think people tend to drift and they don't know why they're drifting. People don't necessarily say, "Oh,



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there it is. There's your Act One, there's your Act Three", but they do get a sense when it's lacking. They can't consciously say what it is, but if you don't understand that there has to be a setup, a journey, and then a conclusion - resolution - if you don't have that, people do notice and they can't say why it was unfulfilling for them. it's just embedded in them to think of it that way.

**David:** So, at the core of the thing, this structure is that there's a protagonist, there's a... not necessarily a hero, but a, but a person who is the main character of this story. They are in a place at the beginning.

**Michael:** Right.

**David:** They take a journey, whether it's a physical journey, an emotional journey, through a set of obstacles and complications and challenges that brings them to a new place.

**Michael:** Exactly.

**David:** And then at the end of the story, they're... they are different in some way than they were at the beginning.

**Michael:** Exactly.

**David:** Let's start breaking that down, Act by Act.

*(With a cavernous vocal effect)* Act One

In Act One, you establish your main characters and the world they live in.



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**Michael:** You have to set up your protagonist. And you have to set up their objective...

**David:** Oh, okay. What our protagonist is trying to accomplish.

**Michael:** Right.

*(Sound effect: harp glissando)*

**Protagonist:** I am the protagonist...

*(Music begins)*

...and I'm over here but I really want to go over there so I can get the important thing.

**Michael:** And you have to set up what obstacles that might be in their way, the thing that's gonna stop the character from getting what they want.

*(Throughout this section, the Protagonists actions are illustrated with sound effects)*

**Protagonist:** It's hard to get over there because it's really far, and there's all this stuff in the way like a river and a mountain and a bunch of bad guys.

**Michael:** You have to give them their, um, stakes. What happens if they don't get the thing.





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**Protagonist:** I have to get The Important Thing, because without it I can't stop The Really Bad Event from happening.

**Michael:** And, uh, I would say I like to present weakness as a thing for a protagonist, what is the thing about them that's lacking internally, that is going to be their main thing they bump up against in the story. I like to get to know what that person's internal struggle is.

**Protagonist:** I'm afraid to go all the way over there. Because it's very far and I don't like traveling and I'll miss everyone here and that will make me sad.

**David:** And then the protagonist starts their journey, which begins Act Two.

*(Cavernous) Act Two.*

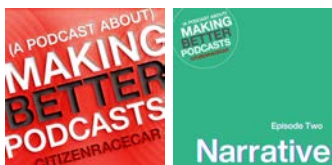
*(Music intensifies)*

**Michael:** Act Two is... it's the struggle. It's the journey that the character is set out upon.

**Protagonist:** Here I go off on my travels, off to get the important thing!

**Michael:** The first half of the second act, you know, you have rising action. We get what we call "fun and games" in Act Two.

**Protagonist:** I cross the river, I climb the mountain, I find the magic sword, I fight some bad guys. That person sure is cute, I think I'll flirt with them. But whoops, they turn out to be a



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bad guy too, and they try to steal my magic sword, but I stop them at the last minute. Now I'm confident and not afraid of the bad guys anymore.

**Michael:** Right around the midpoint, you get this huge shift, which could be a twist. It could be, um, an elevation in stakes. Right? But it's this massive thing that happens right at the midpoint.

*(Music darkens)*

**Protagonist:** I finally make it to the faraway place and I find the important thing. And it's a fake. It's been a fake the whole time. It has no power to stop the really bad event that's going to happen back home.

**Michael:** And then you have falling action. And now, we start to understand what we want is impossible.

**Protagonist:** I have to find another way to stop the really bad event, and I don't know where to begin.

**Michael:** And we start to have more... more obstacles with rising urgency, rising stakes...

**Protagonist:** Now there are even more bad guys around, and people are scared, because the really bad event is imminent.

**Michael:** You set off at one state of mind at the beginning of this, and you ended in another place. This is what we call the "arc", right? Whatever the character has to learn, they learn by the end of Act Two.



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**Protagonist:** I'm now an expert sword fighter, I cross the mountain and the river easily. What does it matter if I can't save my village?

**Michael:** And then you're ready to enter Act Three.

**David:** *(Cavernously)* Act Three

**Michael:** And Act Three is really the closing out of the plot. All of the obstacles, all of the antagonism, and all that stuff that's really just been sort of hammering at them throughout the process of Act Two: now is when we handle it. It is the place where a character is able to now apply what they've learned.

**Protagonist:** Now that I'm back home and facing the really bad event, I realize I cannot stop it. It happens, and everything about life in my village changes. But now that I have all these new skills, I'm able to teach my neighbors how to be brave and successful anyway. We come away stronger than ever, and now I'm their leader

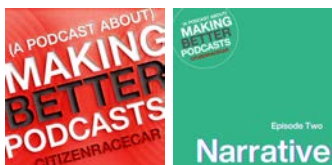
*(Music and sound effects end)*

**David:** Act One is the world as it was.

**Michael:** Yes.

**David:** Act Three is the world as it is going to be from now on.

**Michael:** Yes, the new status quo. Correct.



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**David:** The rising action in Act Two is the protagonist trying to make the Act Three status quo be all the things that they want it to be.

**Michael:** Hmmm mmm

**David:** And then the falling action is them realizing what it's actually going to be like.

**Michael:** Right, or it's realizing that it can't be what they want it to be.

**David:** Right. It's going some other way, and coming to terms with the actuality..

**Michael:** Right

**David:** ...of what the new status quo is going to be.

That's the shape of the three acts.

*(Music begins)*

But there's more to it. At strategic points in this structure – especially at the transitions between these acts – there are important moments in the story where the author needs to accomplish certain things in order to move everything forward.

These are sometimes called the “beats” of the story..

*(Music intensifies)*



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...small moments that define the rhythm of the narrative the way beats on a drum might define the rhythm of a song.

We won't talk about all the potentially important story beats that people who think about this have described, but let's hit a couple of them.

*(Music ends)*

**David:** The first one of these is right at the beginning, the introduction.

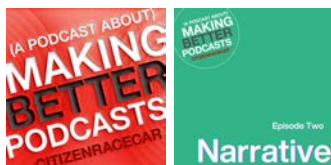
**Michael:** At the very beginning, there is the intro, the opening, something in the beginning which gives you a sense of what the genre is, what the beast is going to be, what maybe a taste of the threat will be, etc. If you're doing a podcast and you're listening to some murder podcast in the beginning, they're like,

*(Music begins)*

*(using dramatic voice)* she was 14 years old, you know...

*(normal voice)* blah, blah, blah. And like, and they lay out this horrible thing for you. And you're just like... your brain is recoiling at the idea of this mystery unfolding.

*(Music fades out)*



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But then they give you a tidbit at the very beginning. And they lay out this very basic groundwork for your character, for you to understand who this protagonist is and what she had to go through.

**David:** This is where and how you get to do something really important, which is set the tone for your piece.

**Michael:** Tone is everything. I always say, you know, if you're making a comedy, make them laugh early. If you're making a horror, make them scared early. If it's a drama, make them *feel* early. You have to find a way to, to get them on your... not just world, but tone.

**David:** Is it going to be scary? Is it going to be informative? Is it going to be, you know, am I going to feel comfortable or uncomfortable listening to this?

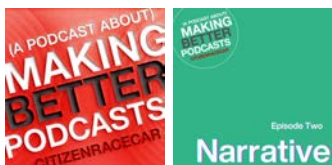
**Michael:** Am I supposed to laugh at this? *(Laughs)*

**David:** Right. Am I supposed to laugh at this? Right. Okay. Totally.

*(Music begins)*

**David:** Another important beat is the moment of transition between Act One and Act Two, the point where the setup is over and the journey begins.

**Michael:** You know, you could call it the "threshold", the "point of no return"... the "Act One turning point" is what I like to call it. It's essentially this moment where the character



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undergoes the journey. And I know this may sound like, "well, of course the character undergoes the journey", but you can't play that thing up *enough*. You know, that really is the definitive moment.

And if I'm sitting here, David, and I've got a story that I'm pitching you:

*(Music pauses)*

*(The story is illustrated with sound effects)*

Let's say it's about a guy who finds a lottery ticket on the street.

*(Music continues)*

Okay, and he has no money, but he finds this lottery ticket and he really, like, is like, debating, right? Because he thinks he knows who this lottery ticket belonged to. But he's thinking, I could hold on to it, right? I don't know... Maybe there's some dilemma inside him.

The time that, you know, he goes and he cashes that money in, he enters the story. He enters the conflict of all the things that that money will bring. Is he going to buy a car now? Is he going to quit his job? How does *that* feel, to quit that awful, awful job? You know, is he able to make his wife respect him again?

*(Music fades out)*



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You know, all these things that he felt so dejected and at a loss for before, he can do now. And, like, we get to feel that thrill.

Now the "inciting incident" is the thing that first starts a character off toward the conflict, right? That's when he finds the ticket.

**David:** Finding the ticket. Right.

**Michael:** That's the disruption of the daily life. But it's the turning point where he *does the thing with it*.

**David:** He's made a choice that he can't unmake.

**Michael:** Correct. He's past that point of no return. He's in it and we are in the story

**David:** This inner journey of our main character, The way we see them trying and failing and learning and growing, is what gives poignancy to the most dramatic beat of the whole story, the transition between Act Two and Act Three. This is where all the challenges and failures of the falling action reach their height of difficulty, and the protagonist has only two choices: change into a new version of themselves, or fail completely.

If this is done right, it's a moment of real heartbreak or real triumph for both the protagonist and the audience.

**Michael:** Your friends who you thought were your friends are no longer your friends. People who set off on journeys together are turning against each other.





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*(Music begins)*

Things are starting to fall apart because of the blind spots that you set off with at the Act One turning point. And now things are dropping and peril is rising and the character hits, really, the "all is lost" moment, ultimately, when there is just no chance of any success. There is no chance of redemption. The person has hit rock bottom. Maybe death is imminent.

And then comes the turning point. Then comes the "aha" moment, right? This is the big shift at the end of Act Two, which we were just referring to, the Act Two turning point. The Act Two turning point is the thing that... is where the character realizes what they need as opposed to what they've wanted the whole time. If there's a chance to save this thing, if there's a chance to do this thing, then I can turn around and enter Act Three, the resolution, where I can get it all done.

Because we've been following the Act Two story, and the significance of that character's change. And if that character's change has been documented, well, then we do feel satisfied by that. And then Act three ends up being, like I said, any sort of new reality. Um, it is the... it is the new status quo. It is the neo human. It is the new species that's emerged from the old crust.

*(Music fades out)*

**David:** *(Cavernously)* The End.



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*(Normally)* Have you ever told a story, or experienced a story, that threw the structure completely out the window, but still worked?

**Michael:** I think, you know, even the most bonkers things that we see, really have, if they're successful, have a start, a middle, and an end. And really do have these moments of shifting and a lot of these elements that I talk about. It's a story, right? You're anything is a story, whether it is a podcast or a film or a TV... it's just a story that someone's telling.

*(Music begins)*

**David:** Now, at this point, you may be saying, "okay, awesome, now I know how to write a screenplay for a fantasy movie, but what does that have to do with my podcast about fishing? Or quantum physics? Or skincare? Or lacrosse? Or whatever?"

Well, like I said earlier, when you start thinking about this structure, you're going to start noticing it everywhere.

*(Music intensifies)*

And I mean *everywhere*. Think of something as simple as a joke.

Act One: A piece of string walks into a bar, sits down, and orders a beer. The bartender says, "I can't serve you, buddy. Pieces of string aren't allowed to drink in bars. Get out of here."



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Act Two: The string leaves and stands on the sidewalk. He musses himself up, ties himself in circles, then walks around the block a few times and goes back into the bar.

Act Three: The bartender says, "Hey, don't I know you? Aren't you that piece of string who was just in here?" And the string says, "no, I'm a frayed knot."

*(Music fades out)*

But a joke is still a work of fiction. How about stories that are definitely not fiction? Let's try a few.

*(Music begins)*

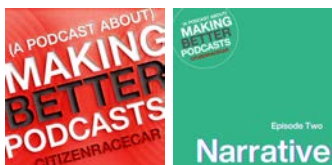
Let's say you're putting together a piece about a scientific discovery.

Act One: There was a scientist. He was working in a laboratory, but he was bored there and wanted to do something else. One day he noticed something weird in his test tube. He thought it might be a new discovery.

Act One turning point: He managed to get some funding and he started his own lab.

Act Two, rising action: He hired awesome people. They did great work. They thought they were getting closer to a solution.

Midpoint: Then one day, everything went wrong. They realized it was all unstable. They blew up the lab.



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Falling action: He had to go back to square one. He tried to rebuild, but his funding was almost up.

Act Two turning point: Then, when all hope was lost, he made a new discovery, and everything worked great all of a sudden.

Act Three: This new discovery changed everything, and now everyone's lives are better around the world.

The End.

Shall we do another? How about a celebrity interview:

*(Music shifts)*

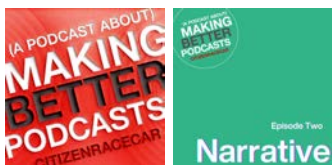
Act One: I was always unhappy when I was a kid, living in my small town. Then I discovered acting, and it showed me what I wanted to do with my life.

Act One turning point: So I saved up 50 dollars and I took a bus to LA so I could be a movie star.

Act two rising action: It was hard at first, but I met interesting people. I started to get work. Pretty soon I was in the movies, just like I wanted to be.

Midpoint: But then I became a drug addict. I started embarrassing myself at work.

Falling action: No one would hire me anymore. I ran out of money. I had to sleep in my car.



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Act Two turning point: But then a friend paid for me to go to rehab. I got clean and I began acting again.

Act Three: Now I'm doing my best work ever, and I was just nominated for an Oscar.

This structure is everywhere, and I promise you will start seeing it now wherever you look.

*(Music fades out)*

So, does a good podcast have to follow this structure exactly and all the time? No, of course not. This is a wide open medium, podcasting, and sometimes you're relaying news headlines, or making a game show, or whatever, doing something that has a different way to pull people from one section to the next. But whenever you're working on something and you feel that a particular section, or the episode as a whole, or even the series as a whole, seems formless, rambling, lacking a beginning, a middle, and an end, this structure is probably what you are missing. Look for those beats. Reorganize things into those acts, and you will likely make the change that you need.

*(Music begins)*

**David:** But there's another lesson in all of this also, one that might be even more important. Think back to when Michael was describing the Act 1 turning point. He told a little story about a man who finds a winning lottery ticket.

If you remember, the most important moment of transition wasn't when the guy found the ticket, but rather when he decided to



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cash it in. This is interesting to think about, because finding the ticket was clearly the event that drives the plot along, but cashing it in was the moment of emotional investment: the point when the man committed to all the moral ambiguity of what having that money was going to mean in his life.

This is because what these beats in this arc define are not actually the *plot*, but rather the *story*. It turns out, these are not the same thing. But rather, two separate threads running in parallel.

**Michael:** People confuse plot with story, and this is a very important thing. The plot is the machinations of events, you know, whether or not a person takes a cab to the airport or whether they take, you know... they drive their motorcycle there and drop it off at the front, like, really a lot of the physical things that are going on. And a lot of the times it can be, you know, an orchestration of characters discovering things and these sort of things and that's that's wonderful, to have a really solid plot. But the problem is if there's no story there It doesn't matter what a character is discovering, doesn't matter what information is being revealed, if it's not Taking any effect in that person's life catharsis, right?

Character and story are bound to each other and, and it's intrinsic that they're like, you know, the character's growth and the choice that they make. I mean, that tells us who they are. Right?

**David:** Is it fair to say that plot is external and story is internal?



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**Michael:** Absolutely, yeah.

**David:** the plot, the plot of the things that happens to the character and the story is the way that the character develops through the course of the thing.

**Michael:** Exactly. Yes,

**David:** Let's see what that difference was in the story of our adventurer.

*(Music begins)*

**Protagonist:** The plot of my adventure was this: I heard the very bad event was coming, so I left the village to find the important thing. I crossed the river, I climbed the mountain, I found the magic sword, I fought some bad guys, and so on and so forth.

The story, on the other hand, was this: I was happy in my village, but it was in trouble, and I wanted to help. I was afraid to travel, but I decided to go anyway, because my desire to save my home was stronger than my fears. I struggled to find the important thing, and then I was devastated to learn that it's a piece of junk. I fell into despair as I traveled home. But then, in the aftermath, I learned my true strength.

The story is about what I learned and who I became, not what I did.

**Michael:** Exactly. Yes.



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*(Music fades out)*

**Michael:** And I think, you know, when you're looking at something like a podcast: if it's like a murder, or something, and, you know, we want to get the details. We want to find out the facts of the thing, because that's part of the fun, right? But then we also want to know its *weight*, and how that is going to be shaping the person who we set off at the beginning of this thing.

**David:** No matter what you're talking about, or what format you're in, you can't just give the events of the plot if you want to hold people's attention. You also have to give them the story. Yes, you have to tell them what happened. But if you want to make it memorable, you have to tell why it mattered to the people involved: how they changed, how they grew, how their lives became different because of it. These are the reasons people will care and have an emotional connection to what is being said. That's the real key to narrative, and one of the keys to good podcasting.

*(Closing theme music)*

This is a podcast about how to make better podcasts.

I'm your host, and the writer and producer of this show, David Hoffman.

My guest today was Michael Shaw Fisher, with an appearance from Anna Van Dine.

The role of The Protagonist was performed by Luca Evans.





(A Podcast About) Making Better Podcasts  
Season 1, Episode 2  
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Transcript

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