

# UNDERSTANDING



John Kelly

# THE STORY INITIATIVE

# NG BACKWARDS



by Erin Ryan

Clay Morgan never thought he'd learn the meaning of life from a cocktail napkin. He was a graduate student sharing a beer in a Missoula bar with his mentor, the distinguished American writer William Kittredge. Kittredge, who was teaching at the University of Montana, had just sold the film rights for "A River Runs Through It" to Robert Redford. As Morgan jokingly puts it, "He had been charmed."

#### CLAY MORGAN

Creative writing professor Clay Morgan is founder and director of The Story Initiative, a new project of Boise State University devoted to teaching, exploring and celebrating story.

"So we were crying in our beers," Morgan says. "Then Bill pulled out a napkin and started outlining

Aristotle's Poetics, what a story is and how it works in a screenplay — the beginning, middle and end. I realized that in six years of higher education I had learned a lot about writing, but nobody had told me about story."

# CHAPTER 1

Many years later, Morgan is a successful novelist and creative writing professor at Boise State. He still has the napkin, and the insight he gained from it is partly to thank for The Story Initiative, a new project of the university founded and directed by Morgan. Its mission is to teach, explore and celebrate story as a simulation of life, a system of communication, a means to insight and a distinct way of remembering.

While storytelling is ancient and inherent in the lives of all people, Morgan says the basic concept and elements of craft too often are left out of discussions about writing.

“Writing is simple to teach because it involves technique. Story, which everyone grasps intuitively, is harder to get across. How do you teach art versus brushstrokes, music versus a succession of notes?”

Morgan says. “What I’m trying to do with The Story Initiative is help Boise State engage the community in an exploration and realization of what story really is.”

The exploration began in May when the Initiative partnered with The Cabin, Idaho Writers Guild, Idaho Media Professionals, Idaho Screenwriters Association and SilverDraft Studios to bring veteran Hollywood director Donald Petrie to Boise’s Egyptian Theatre for a benefit screening of his romantic comedy, “My Life in Ruins.” In front of a packed house, Petrie expressed his support for the Initiative.

“The Story Initiative will increase people’s awareness of how stories work and what we try to do in our movies,” he says.

While The Story Initiative includes all media, from the page to the screen, Morgan thinks film is especially relevant in the 21st century.

“When I was in college, I wanted to be the next great novelist, a Faulkner or a Hemingway. My own kids want me to be the next Spielberg,” Morgan says. “Film is the dominant literature of our time, and the cool thing is, most people are very film literate.”

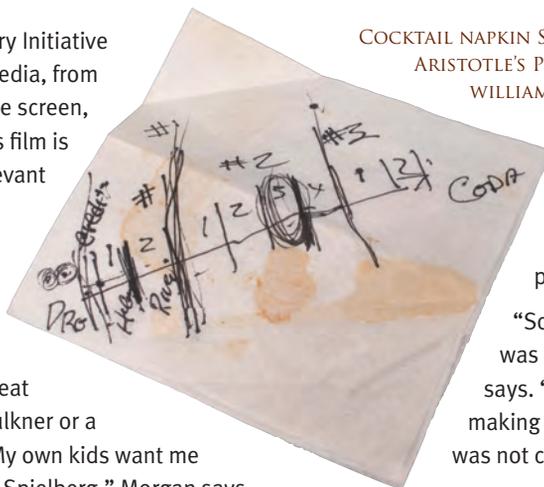
What they may not be is story conscious. According to Morgan, movies seldom fail because of actors, effects or subject matter. He asserts that if the action is not rooted firmly in story, it lacks what most people call “heart.”

# CHAPTER 2

Michael Hoffman agrees. The Rhodes Scholar and Boise State graduate is an inspired storyteller who wrote and directed his first movie while a student at Oxford. “Privileged” starred classmate Hugh Grant and sparked Hoffman’s career in film.

A trained stage actor known and respected now as a writer, producer and director, Hoffman’s directorial credits include “Soapdish,” “Restoration” and “The Emperor’s Club,” among other popular films. He says his mother loved books and movies and exposed him to narrative constantly in his youth. But even after

COCKTAIL NAPKIN SKETCH OF  
ARISTOTLE’S POETICS BY  
WILLIAM KITTREDGE



becoming a successful director, he had doubts about his purpose.

“Some part of me felt it was indulgent,” Hoffman says. “I asked myself, does making movies matter? And I was not convinced that it did.”

Then he had dinner with Robert Redford, the very same who played an indirect role in Morgan’s awakening about story. Hoffman confided that he wasn’t sure he was living a “real life.” Redford told him to spend a few days at his house in Santa Fe — that something would happen that would change his life. While there, Hoffman stumbled on a tape of the epic interview between journalist Bill Moyers and mythologist Joseph Campbell.

“It was six hours on the function of narrative in human drama. Campbell said that for all cultures, there are four ways to get to God: singing, dancing, storytelling and silence. It occurred to me that maybe I was a storyteller,” Hoffman says. “Story stems from something fundamental, biological. It touches every part of our lives, and the study of it is basically a study of the human soul.”

Like Petrie, Hoffman plans to screen his new film in Boise to benefit The Story Initiative. Called “The Last Station,” it examines the end of iconic Russian writer Leo Tolstoy’s life. The screenplay is an adaptation of the novel by Jay Parini, and



The Cabin, Boise’s award-winning literary center, and Alley Repertory Theater (ART), a progressive arts organization in Garden City, are partnering with The Story Initiative on Story Story Night, an innovative performance series that will bring storytelling into the spotlight. The Cabin’s artistic and executive director Paul Shaffer and ART’s marketing director Jessica Holmes were key players in the creative process and will manage storytelling workshops at The Cabin and stage performances at the Visual Arts Collective.

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the cast includes Christopher Plummer, Helen Mirren, Paul Giamatti and James McAvoy. The film is scheduled for release in select U.S. cities early next year, but it already has generated Oscar buzz and been honored with several major awards in Europe. Hoffman credits much of that success to the graceful construction of the underlying story.

“The whole notion of story is the most compelling aspect of film,” he says. “What’s essential about it and what generates its power doesn’t change, and that’s something I hope The Story Initiative can convey.”

## CHAPTER 3

Conveying the power of story has long been the charge of The Cabin, Idaho’s award-winning literary center. Founded in 1995, it is known for programs such as Readings and Conversations, an annual lecture series that brings literary heavies to Boise, from Michael Pollan to Joan Didion and Richard Ford. Its Idaho Writing Camps program was named one of 10 model arts education programs in the U.S. by the National Endowment for the Arts, and with Writers in the Schools, it sends world-class writing teachers throughout the state.

“Our mission has always been about helping people engage with language and the power of story, to become literate about their own lives,” says Paul Shaffer, The Cabin’s artistic and executive director.

Crucial to that mission are The Cabin’s workshops, and a new workshop focused on storytelling will anchor a developing partnership with The Story Initiative and Garden City’s Alley Repertory Theater (ART). The collaboration grew from a conversation between Morgan and Shaffer, who have known each other for 20 years. Both had a hand in Boise State’s annual Writers and Readers Rendezvous, which happened in McCall back when Boise was, as Shaffer puts it, “a literary desert.” They were discussing a storytelling event when ART’s marketing director Jessica Holmes

called and said she and ART’s artistic director Hollis Welsh were dreaming the same dream.

It took shape as Story Story Night, an innovative performance series that will kick off next year. The Cabin’s workshops will help participants polish materials and techniques, ART will provide a performance venue and prizes, and The Story Initiative will offer direction and support as the project evolves. Established talent will be given 10-minute blocks to tell their tales, and new voices can enter a lottery for five minutes on stage at the Visual Arts Collective, where ART is housed.

“We’re hoping for stories across the spectrum, from cab drivers to mountain climbers,” says Holmes. “They have to be true stories, and there are no notes, no props, no music allowed — just raw storytelling.”

“For some participants, that will involve helping them recognize that they do have a story to tell and that it has value,” Shaffer adds. “Story is about making sense of experience, finding meaning in the moments that change us and sharing it.”

## EPILOGUE

For Morgan, the story doesn’t end with the Initiative.

“I want to create a Center for Story at Boise State,” he says. “As far as I know, it would be the first one anywhere.”

His vision includes an undergraduate film degree covering everything from history to finance to screenwriting. He is building a story archive and other resources for the Initiative’s forthcoming Web site and designing classes that would weave films and readings with traditional lectures on how story works. When asked what he says to those who believe story is understood and requires no further examination, Morgan smiles.

“If it’s so easy,” he says, “why is it so hard to tell a great one?”



Boise State alumnus Michael Hoffman is a venerable writer, producer and director in the film industry whose credits range from Hollywood hits to small-scale projects close to his heart. He has worked with dozens of celebrated actors, and his forthcoming film, “The Last Station,” explores Leo Tolstoy’s life through the inspired performances of Christopher Plummer, Helen Mirren, Paul Giamatti and James McAvoy.

The film premiered in September at the Telluride Film Festival, where the Los Angeles Times called it “the darling” of the event. Mirren won the Rome Film Festival’s Best Actress award for her portrayal of Tolstoy’s wife, and Hoffman received the award for Best Adapted Screenplay at Germany’s Frankfurt Book Fair. Distributor Sony Pictures Classics plans to release the film in Los Angeles and New York City in January, making it eligible for the Academy Awards.

While Hoffman’s work takes him around the world, he makes his home in Boise with his wife, fellow Boise State grad Samantha Silva, and their children, Atticus, Phoebe and Olivia. Hoffman graduated from Boise State with a B.A. in theater arts in 1979. While earning his degree, he co-founded the Idaho Shakespeare Festival, was student body president and a Top Ten Scholar. At his own commencement, he was given a Silver Medallion Award, Boise State’s highest recognition of service.

Hoffman then attended England’s Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar. It was there that he directed his first film, “Privileged,” starring classmate Hugh Grant. That project was the beginning of a distinguished career, recognized in 1989 with Boise State’s Distinguished Alumni Award. In 2004, Hoffman accepted the university’s first-ever honorary doctorate.

“Boise State has been a huge part of my life,” he says. “It’s where I began my directing career.”