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MBS ([00:00](#)):

King Arthur, The Round Table. Ancient [inaudible 00:00:06] albion and three knights. Perhaps not the ones you've likely heard of. It's not Lancelot or Galahad or Gawain. These were Sir Michael, Sir Nigel and Sir Angus. Coincidentally, the same names of me and my two brothers. But there's peril in the kingdom. The three knights ride out. They encounter challenges, perils and traps, but with daring due and some clever thinking, they sidestep the danger. Finally, they face the dragon like Smaug from the Hobbit, but even [inaudible 00:00:43]. A battle of wills and wits, the three knights triumph and now bedtime. My dad was a great storyteller and this is the template of the classic story he told. I love stories. I love words. I love language.



MBS ([01:06](#)):

Welcome to 2 Pages with MBS, the podcast where brilliant people read the best two pages from a favorite book. A book that has moved them, a book that has shaped them. Now, when I think of the folk I want to invite onto the show to have a conversation with, I have a rule of thumb. I imagine that I'm at a dinner party and there's this person sitting next to me and to my delight and surprise, they are a fantastic fellow dinner guest. We have an unexpected conversation that leads me feeling smarter and more curious and more informed about life. And normally that's metaphorical.

MBS ([01:43](#)):

But Chris West is literally someone I sat next to at a dinner party. I was in Portugal, I was at the House Of Beautiful Business conference. All the speakers and presenters got together for a meal. Chris was my dinner companion that night. He is the author of Strong Language, a book about language. And we'll talk more about that in a second. And he learned his craft as a copy writer in the advertising business. Now, he helps company leaders elevate and animate the strategic vision of their business with powerful language. So like me, Chris knows there is something magical in language and in storytelling. Now, Chris remembers the first story he ever wrote and he was six or seven at the time.

Chris ([02:27](#)):

I remember just this morning, for first time in ages, I wrote a story about my mom and dad renovating our house. And my dad stripping off the paint with a paint strip on one of the windows. And my mom saying, "Be careful otherwise, you'll set light to it." And my dad said, "No, no, I've got it." As he said that the window frame burst into flames. My teacher loved it and sent it home with a gold star with me.

MBS ([02:59](#)):



This reminds me a bit of my first story, at least the first story I remember. Something to do with Sir Francis Drake and being a pirate. I just remember being in the classroom and demanding that I skipped recess, skipped the break to the surprise bewilderment really of my teacher, Mrs. Wright. When I asked Chris how stories have shaped his life, he responded of course, with a story.

Chris ([03:25](#)):

I was reading in the Wall Street Journal on this internal flight in America. I just remember a report about narrative and I was like, "Huh, narrative? What on earth can business do with once upon a time?" How ignorant was I in 2000, maybe we all were seeing what happened. But narrative in the sense of, this caused that, which caused that. And there's a logical cohesion in that. That to me is what narrative is. And then if you understand that our brains automatically search for the first nearest most applicable narrative, then you realize that our brains do work looking for stories, whether they're fictional stories or truthful stories.

MBS ([04:11](#)):

Here's how Chris brings this to life with nothing more than a single image and a simple question.

Chris ([04:17](#)):

I have done some workshops where I show a photograph. I took it on a street corner in EC1 London, on a rainy Tuesday morning. And there's a woman's boot, there's a piece of a newspaper and there's the empty wrapper of one of those polystyrene hamburger containers. And whenever I show this to people in a workshop, I say, "So what happened?" And every single person will write something down and they say, "So this what happened," right? So who knows what happened? But putting three objects together for everyone makes some kind of a story. That's what our brain search for this thing, of where's the story.



MBS ([05:04](#)):

Storytelling in business, both the marketing side and just the general nurturing of a culture side has become much more accepted, more mainstream now. But that doesn't mean that the stories businesses and marketers tell us and tell themselves are good stories. So what does make a good story?

Chris ([05:25](#)):

I think a story has to be convincing. So my background, despite what I'm doing these days, my background is nothing to do with English language or English literature or the arts or humanities. I was very much in science at school and all my education as an undergrad postgrad was in science. So, I know there's a kind of Aristotelian theory of unity, of place and character and something else. And I'll leave that to someone else to talk about. But I think for a story to be convincing, everything has to be there in the first frame. That person's-

MBS ([06:07](#)):

Oh, so good. I mean, I don't even know what that means fully, but I love it.

Chris ([06:11](#)):

The person's disposition, the setting where it's going to happen, the barrier that exists against them, all of it needs to be there right from the beginning for the story to be true and believable.

MBS ([06:23](#)):

Right.

Chris ([06:25](#)):

You're going to get hate mail after this, Michael. Well, you may get it. Maybe not get-



MBS ([06:30](#)):

I'll already get hate mail, yeah. Just add to the pile.

Chris ([06:33](#)):

I don't like Harry Potter stories.

MBS ([06:36](#)):

Huh, well that is a controversial stand. And I know that you're not transgender, so it's not a transgender thing, which is one of the reasons people don't like Harry Potter stories. But what is it for you that winds you up about Harry Potter?

Chris ([06:51](#)):

And so this is because I don't read them enough and I've talked to other people about it and they say, "No, no, no." It's like there's a tricky situation in book four or book six and there's another spell that extracts that person from it. And I know the author is a far better author and far more famous. I mean, I'm throwing little bits of corn, an [inaudible 00:07:17].

MBS ([07:17](#)):

Yeah.

Chris ([07:18](#)):

But for me, I thought, "I don't believe it because Sonny is this thing that gets you out of jail and gets you out of jail again and he has an invisibility cloak." Well, if you had an invisibility quote right from the beginning, wouldn't a whole other suite of possibilities have developed? To which those who have read the books more closely were saying, "No, no, Chris, you don't understand." But for me, it has to be there in the first frame.



MBS ([07:41](#)):

Right. One of the things I think might be powerful here is going, right, there are the stories we make up from the world we see around us. A woman's boot, a polystyrene wrapper from a hamburger or a rain in London. I mean, to be fair, it's always raining in London, so that kind of being too hard to get set up. But how might the wisdom that you've accumulated over the years around crafting stories be used as a way of crafting our own stories? How do we be author of our own sense of self?

Chris ([08:17](#)):

Oh, that's such a brilliantly challenging question. Well, I think a lot of us don't realize that we are the author of our own story. So if you and I choose to stand up now, throw our mics to the ground, walk out and never speak again to the world, we can do that

MBS ([08:40](#)):

Right.

Chris ([08:42](#)):

Now, we can't decide to stand outside and jump to the moon, but we are authors of a lot more than we think is possible. So, I suppose if we saw our life as stories and we saw ourselves as authors of the story, and we brought the power of imagination into that, then we could start creating more for ourselves, perhaps more for society, or even just cook a different dinner.

MBS ([09:12](#)):

And well, let me ask you this thing, because I don't really know you that well as a guy. When you think of the chapters that you've written already in your life, which is the most intriguing chapter you? Which one did you feel like you're like, "It's not exactly a Harry Potter [inaudible 00:09:28] in a moment where you've



introduced a spell," but where you're like, "Oh, I wasn't expecting that. There's a twist in the plot."

Chris ([09:36](#)):

Well, I suppose there are different moments. The one that impacted me was being dissatisfied with my career at age 26 and saying, "All this science education is great, but I think there's something else more inside me." And that story depends on a flashback to my last day at college, as a postgrad, where I'd had a most wonderful indulgent postgraduate year of rowing and drinking and partying and not really much studying at all, unfortunately. And the principal of the master of the college invited everyone that was leaving to chapel service in a speech in chapel. And I know this sounds all quite-

MBS ([10:22](#)):

Very privileged.

Chris ([10:24](#)):

Privileged, quaint, [inaudible 00:10:25], everything. He was the most wonderful man. He was the most open, generous, loving man. And he gave us speech about what we can all do with our lives and what we can offer to other people and how we can be of service. And I felt like a reformed character after.

MBS ([10:48](#)):

Wow.

Chris ([10:48](#)):

So I probably haven't fulfilled and mend much of that at all. Except, a couple of years later I thought, "Well, I can be author of something. Just because I've spent all this time in science doesn't mean that I have to just stay in science. I can be a creative person." Not to say that scientists aren't, but I can also have this thing in my life, which is this absolute creativity. So that, I think, and the other turning



points are how horrible some moments were in advertising. Well now as an employee in advertising. Would you like to hear this?

MBS ([11:29](#)):

Yeah, absolutely.

Chris ([11:32](#)):

I was in really my first proper job in advertising and I had the most wonderful art director that I was in a team with a guy who deserves a name check called John Messner, who's a wonderful art director and a wonderful human being. And we worked to these group heads who will remain nameless.

MBS ([11:52](#)):

We can draw our own conclusions from that.

Chris ([11:53](#)):

And we went... As in, you're doing advertising, you don't go out for a drink. You go out for several drinks altogether. And I think we were celebrating the engagement of one of our group directors who... Let's call her M because that's the initial of her first name.

MBS ([12:09](#)):

And her name. Her name is actually Emily, but that's another-

Chris ([12:13](#)):

We spent all this time together, all of us as this group drinking and being nice and then we went to this club I was a member of. And about nine o'clock in the evening, this person whose name begins with M, turned around to me and said, "Thing is Chris, everyone in the department hates you."



Chris ([12:33](#)):

And I burst into tears. I was like 27, 28, 29. I just burst into.... I was like, "Ah, what?" And the lovely man, John Messner kind of was like, "No, Chris it's okay. Everyone in the department, of course they don't hate you. Of course not." And duh, duh, duh. But in some ways, I mean, I didn't realize that at the time, but that awful interpersonal relationship of advertising was in itself a turning point.

Chris ([13:03](#)):

I mean, there were other horror stories from that working life and I couldn't carry on working in advertising like that. And I had it easy, right? I'm a white male with some education. There were other people that couldn't get a foot in the door. There were other people that were in the door and got treated far worse than me, but I knew that I wouldn't be able to stay there. So I'm not a natural entrepreneur, but I know I'm not a happy employee either.

MBS ([13:31](#)):

I recognize that. And as a quick story, as an aside, I almost ended up in advertising. I got through a final round of a job interview for one of the big firms in London. And then was just decimated by a terrible job interview with Nigel Short, who's a chess player. A grand master chess player. And he just moved me around the board, had me dancing like a clown. I walked out there going, "Oh, well I won't be getting that job." And that was an accurate prediction.

Chris ([14:04](#)):

And you were saved.

MBS ([14:04](#)):

Oh, you know what? I found a better path for me, I think. Chris, what book did you choose to read from?



Chris ([14:11](#)):

When we sat next to each other at that dinner, at the House Of Beautiful Business and they deserve recognition as well for doing such a wonderful organization and such humanity, just love there. I mean, amazing place. He said, "Chris, what's your favorite book?" And I just said straight away, "Where The Wild Things Are." And I chose it because I remember how old was I. Four or five going to the local library in Southfield, was in south London with my mom. We'd taken Where The Wild Things Are. We'd taken it out and we had to take it back because it was due back and we checked it in and my mom said to me, "Right, what book would you like to take out now?" I said, "Where The Wild Things Are." She said, "This is the fourth time we've done this, Chris." Yeah. But I mean, there's no other book like it.

MBS ([15:02](#)):

And what is it about this book that felt so magical for you?

Chris ([15:07](#)):

Magic. It is magic. I've got strong theory about what language does and what it can do. And I only understood that at the end of writing my own book about how businesses can use language. It was just at the end where I understood that's what I've been trying to get to. And I was thinking about Where The Wild Things Are now, why it means so much to me and what it did to me. And it was because of the magic, that language can create, not just reflect. And if we want to go into the linguistics of it, there were two broad schools of linguistic thought. One was that language was really just reflecting what was out there in the world. And there was another school of thought, which was Hammond, Herder, Humboldt. And they said, "No, language can be used to create a new mental concept. To put in your brain, something that you didn't know already." And that for me is what's going on in the world of writing for business.



MBS ([16:16](#)):

Right.

Chris ([16:17](#)):

That there are people being reduced to parts of a penny per word for what they're doing. And what they're doing is writing a description of what exists already. And then there are people who are being paid extravagant amounts because they're being paid to create new mental concepts. Who thinks that you could love, have an emotional connection to a mobile phone. It's ridiculous, right? A mobile phone is glass and this, and it's got a speed of that. And no, no, no. Through language, coming out of the mouth of Steve Jobs all those years ago. You could suddenly have a desire, an emotional want created in your mind with language. And that's why language is so amazing for me.

MBS ([17:05](#)):

Yeah. It is its own spell, another nod to Harry Potter, but it is magical. Well, I was stoked that you're reading from *Where The Wild Things Are*, because it hasn't appeared yet on this podcast. And before we hit record here, I was showing you again from the, *How To Begin* book, that there's a little nod to *Where The Wild Things Are* in terms of one of my little avatar characters that shows up in the book. So Chris, I'm going to hand it over to you and say, you're probably going to read it slightly more than two pages text-

Chris ([17:36](#)):

If you don't mind.

MBS ([17:37](#)):

Otherwise it's a very short read. But read the bit from *Where The Wild Things Are* that needs to be read for us.



Chris ([17:45](#)):

Thank you. So this is from *Where The Wild Things Are* by Morris Sandeck. And I start about a third quarter of the way into the story where Max, who is me when I'm four or five or six, has been sent to his room for being rude to his mom. And he... Language isn't everything, visuals are amazing. And this book is worth it just for the visuals of Max, this determined six year old, who is king of his own world. But finding out that maybe he's not, with his mother, king of everything after all. And he's been sent to his room and he's wearing his night suit, he's been sent to his room without supper. What greater punishment? So you're not king, you can't feed yourself.

Chris ([18:44](#)):

That very night, in Max's room a forest grew and grew. And Max now is in his room in his romper suit. And instead of being distressed, he's smiling. And grew into this ceiling, hung with vines and the walls became the world all around. And the ocean tumbled by with a private boat for Max. And he sailed off through night and day and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to *Where The Wild Things Are*. And when he came to the place *Where The Wild Things Are*, they roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth and rolled their terrible eyes and showed their terrible claws till Max said, "Be still," and tamed them with his magic trick of staring into all their yellow eyes without blinking once. And they were frightened and called him the most wild thing of all and made him king of all wild things.

MBS ([20:01](#)):

That is the least wasted words per sentence, per impact ever. I love that. Oh my goodness. What's the magic trick here for you Chris?



Chris ([20:18](#)):

So four, right? I'm almost 60 now. I remember over 50 years ago saying to my mom, "How can a forest grow in his room?" And she said, "That's the magic. That's the magic of Max's imagination."

MBS ([20:38](#)):

Yeah.

Chris ([20:39](#)):

And the distress. Well, first of all, the charm and then the thrill as it grows and grows. And then the wonder is a private boat for Max. And then for me personally, the distress that he left his mom, he sailed away for weeks and a year. And then he came to this place and visuals in the book, the drawing... These crazy, crazy animals. And he's this little determined kinglet in his boat and these terrible phantasmagorical creatures who are doing their worst to scare him. And what does the little king do? He says, "Be still," and he's got his magic trick of staring into of the yellow eyes without blinking once.

MBS ([21:30](#)):

Yeah.

Chris ([21:33](#)):

Yeah.

MBS ([21:37](#)):

What did this give you permission for? To do or to be.

Chris ([21:47](#)):

Well, he goes home and his mom loves him again. We know that because she puts the supper back on the table for him in his room. He's not going to be deprived of food. So we can believe in happy endings, we can believe in



wonder, we can believe in magic. The biggest world is inside our heads. And what greater gift could you give to the world than a book like this?

MBS ([22:22](#)):

You and I are about the same age. I'm in my 50s, you're in your 50s as well. And I'm wondering... For me as you read that book and it's such a good book, it's such a great choice. I'm so glad you did.

Chris ([22:35](#)):

Thank you.

MBS ([22:37](#)):

And this idea of the room turns into a forest and you have your unbound. How do you maintain that spirit when at our age, there's all these invitations to stay in your room and sit with the comfort and the status and the predictability and the accumulation of 60 years of playing the game and succeeding in society... And I'm just wondering how you get back to the forest.

Chris ([23:19](#)):

A slightly negative answer to that is a lack of feeling that I have of any status in society or any achievement. So I feel like I've got no choice. But what's a more positive answer than that? To continue with the story of myself, which is incredibly so [inaudible 00:23:43] and indulgent and embarrassing for me to say. But to believe that each of us through our lives is an evolving story which we might not know the meaning of, until our very last moment. Or understand the significance of, until our very last moment.

Chris ([24:05](#)):

To embrace difference, to spend time with people who are different, to spend time with people who have different opinions and just sit on your hands and shut your mouth. To not believe that the world is quantifiable in every aspect.



To spend time once a week, trying to find something that you can do that gives you wonder, whether that's going to look at a painting or whether it's going to a shop and buying 12 peel off sticky stars and putting them on your daughter's back when she's not looking and seeing how long you get away with it.

Chris ([25:05](#)):

Yeah. I mean, I suppose maybe it's the avoidance of status, allows you to be more flexible with other consequences, perhaps. And my son is bright and challenging. And so if you have children and they grow up and you have a focal family, then you're not going to be allowed to stay... Hopefully you're not going to be allowed to stay with your beliefs and you will be challenged and asked. And if you have someone significant in your life, whether that's a partner or the person that serves you coffee in the morning, you might also find that you are challenged to think differently.

MBS ([25:53](#)):

Yeah. I love the idea of sitting with people who see the world differently from you, who have different stories to tell. How do you find those people? I'm asking for me. I find myself often in conversations with people where we're violently agreeing with each other around a range of things. How do you put yourself in circle with people who are not you?

Chris ([26:30](#)):

I'm not very good at it. Yeah. I'm not very good at it and I shouldn't claim anything more than that. I remember if we refer back to the House Of Beautiful Business, if you don't mind me giving them another name check when I was there in 2018. There was a bar then and I'm normally in bed by nine o'clock. Good night for me is if I can be in bed by nine and asleep by 9:30. And I was in the bar at one o'clock thinking I can't remember when I was more tired and more energized.



MBS ([27:06](#)):

Right.

Chris ([27:07](#)):

And I was having a conversation with someone and I said, "I completely disagree with you, but I'm really happy." And he said, "What? Why?" And I said, "Because I know we're going to keep on having this conversation and it's going to be okay." So, the spaces and the people that are in those spaces. But I suppose the first step is if you can be alert to, when you think, "Oh, talking to this person might be difficult," then that's a moment to pause and just say, "Well, so what? Can I? Should I?"

MBS ([27:44](#)):

When you're telling your story, starting in copy writing, but also the work you do now is a kind of more holistic way to help organizations and companies explain who they are to the world. What's the connection for you between language and strategy? Because people go, "Strategy is this stuff over here making some decisions. And my brand is my promise to the world over here." But my sense is that for you, language and strategy are entwined.

Chris ([28:22](#)):

Yeah, they are. So, to be honest, it's something I've that has wrestled me. I was going to say, I've been wrestling with. No, it wrestles me and has done for the 10 years I've had this business because... I'm not name plugging my business, but we're called Verbal Identity. So you imagine that people would come to us and say, "Chris, look, can you help us create the language that will crystallize our identity?" And that's the case about half time, other half time people come to us and say, "Chris, yeah, I'm not exactly sure I know who we are, what we stand for." So they're seeing something in language, which is about strategy. And I think that perhaps some answer to that is, I always say, we don't have a dictionary that no one else has. What we have is a process of thinking. We use language to



tease out that thinking of maybe a precision of language, which when you apply it means that you are being very, very clear about what you think.

Chris ([29:25](#)):

And doing it in a fun way, I hope, but what we are getting to is this idea of through... See, I think language reveals deepest beliefs and you can sometimes do that. If you listen to five people describing how they got into work that day in English, at least, there's such a variety of choice. The words people choose, reflect their deepest feelings. So I think that certainly when you are kind of trying to understand what a company feels about itself, if you can listen to the language, like some people can look at numbers, you see a story emerging. And so I think that language is a way into our deepest beliefs and that is one of the building blocks of strategy.

MBS ([30:04](#)):

Nice. And Chris, this is a great conversation. Thank you for bringing [inaudible 00:30:11] to us. As a final question perhaps, what needs to be said that hasn't yet been said in this conversation between you and me?

Chris ([30:23](#)):

I think we've talked a lot or we've sat in the same room a lot and talk about empathy. And this conversation has produced empathy between us, I hope. It's harder to talk about love, but I believe that many of us are navigating this world wanting to love more. And we find that the structures, the habits that we have and are around us, stop us engaging in a loving way. And so, Michael, I love you.

MBS ([31:08](#)):

Oh, thank you, Chris. Appreciate that.



Chris ([31:08](#)):

And we might be surprised to read the number of books by authors where the dedication at the beginning also includes a note to the guy that serves him coffee every morning. Right after the family is this thing that in society all around us are these acts of quite straightforward service and love.

MBS ([31:37](#)):

Max said, "Be still," and he tamed them with the magic trick of staring into their yellow eyes without blinking ones. And Chris said, "It's hard to talk about love, but many of us want to love more and I love you." And I think with that, stare at what you fear without blinking and tame the fear, be a source of love and tell those around you that you love them. You have or you need.

MBS ([32:10](#)):

Two possible interviews to follow up on this one. Oliver Berkman had to get to grips with reality, such a good conversation. His new book really is wonderful. I think it's called 40,000 weeks or 10,000 weeks. It's all about time management, but not like that. It's really about how do you live a good life. And Jordan [inaudible 00:32:29], young woman in advertising making great waves, doing great things. And my conversation with her is called, how to be your self. For more on Chris, you can check out his website, verbal identity.com and a reminder that his book is called Strong Language. Thank you for being a listener of the podcast. I really do appreciate it. Three things to mention before I go. One, if you have a chance to write the podcast, brilliant. If you have a chance to mention this episode, if it struck a chord for you, brilliant. We do grow by word of mouth.

MBS ([33:04](#)):

It's a slow process, but it's a sure process. I'm trying to be one of people's three favorite podcasts. If you think this episode might be that for somebody you know, then please do pass it along. And if you want a little more, there is a small



membership site. It's Duke Humphrey's through the website, mbs.works, follow the podcast link. It's totally free, but it gives you access to some unreleased interviews and downloads and lists of books I like and so on and so forth. So, that's all there. I think that's all I need to say other than you're awesome. You're doing great.