

The Power of Storytelling and the Placebo Effect

by Rafael Mendez

It is 1908. Oliver is running through the woods of Alabama. He is fleeing law enforcement with warrants for his arrest. He is accused of fraud after swindling tens of thousands of dollars. Oliver would buy products on credit and then sell them at extremely low prices. So low, it caught the attention of authorities across multiple states. They went searching for him. Oliver's personal life is also collapsing, his wife has filed for divorce, alleging abuse, financial ruin, and violence toward their daughter. Oliver is broke, desperate, and preparing to do what he has done many times before: disappear, change his name, and start over.

It's still 1908, and a scrappy, young, ambitious journalist sits across from one of the richest men in the world. The industrialist Andrew Carnegie, having conquered steel and reshaped the American economy, now turns to legacy. He is giving away his fortune to universities, libraries, and foundations. He offers the young man a challenge: spend decades studying the most successful figures alive and distill their secrets into a philosophy anyone can follow. There will be no salary, only access to the most successful men in America, and the promise of discovering the formula for wealth itself. The task was to share his discoveries with the world.

These two stories unfolded at the same time. One reveals someone running from deceptions, failure, and crime. The other suggests a man on a noble quest to uncover the secrets of success. They appear like opposites. However, they are, in fact, the same person.

Oliver reinvents himself; he is now Napoleon Hill.

Years later, Napoleon Hill would publish *Think and Grow Rich*, one of the best-selling books in history and credited by millions with transforming their lives. *Think and Grow Rich* pioneered the psychology self-help industry. In Napoleon's telling, the book was the result of decades spent interviewing titans of industry, people like Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, and John D. Rockefeller, under the guidance of Andrew Carnegie. Yet historical records cast serious doubt on this origin story. Carnegie kept meticulous notes of his activities. Biographers of Carnegie found no evidence that the meeting ever occurred. Hill's own life, meanwhile, was marked by questionable ventures, legal troubles, and repeated accusations of deception and fraud.

And yet, despite all of this, a central question remains: how did a man with such a dubious past and corrupt morals create a book that genuinely helped millions?

Part of the answer lies in the ideas themselves. Beneath mythology, many of Hill's principles are grounded in recognizable positive psychology. Hill's focus on goal clarity, perseverance, social capital, and specialized knowledge aligns closely with what contemporary studies identify as the foundations of long-term success. But that alone does not explain the book's enduring power. What *Think and Grow Rich* truly offers is not just advice, but the power of belief.

Hill's readers did not simply follow instructions; they bought into a story about success, about possibility, about the hidden forces shaping their lives. Even if the credentials behind that story were exaggerated or fabricated, the belief it generated often produced real-life results. People acted differently because they believed differently. In that sense, the story worked, not because it was true, but because it was effective.

This is where the transition from self-help to science becomes clear. Hill's "useful beliefs" mirror a phenomenon long observed in medicine: the placebo effect.

In 1957, psychologist Bruno Klopfer documented the case of a man known as Mr. Wright, who was dying of lymphoma. His tumors were massive, and conventional treatments had failed. However, Wright became convinced that an experimental drug called Krebiozen would cure him. Against their better judgment, his doctors administered it.

Within days, his condition improved dramatically. Tumors shrank. He regained energy. He was discharged, nearly symptom-free.

Then reports surfaced questioning the drug's effectiveness. Wright read them and relapsed. His tumors returned.

The pattern is striking. His belief appeared to drive his recovery, and the loss of that belief coincided with his decline.

The placebo effect is not imaginary. It produces measurable physiological changes in brain chemistry, reductions in pain, and even shifts in immune response. What matters is not just the treatment, but the meaning attached to it. The ritual of healing, trusting a doctor, believing in a cure, can trigger real biological outcomes.

The same dynamic operates in psychology and behavior. People who believe they can succeed are more likely to persist. Those who expect setbacks to be temporary are more resilient. Belief shapes expectation, expectation shapes action, and action shapes results.

In this light, many self-help systems can be understood as structured placebos: frameworks designed to generate a belief strong enough to change behavior. They are often just plausible enough to be convincing, yet flexible enough to avoid disconfirmation. Their power lies not in perfect accuracy, but in their ability to mobilize people.

This idea was anticipated by philosopher William James, whose work in the late 19th century challenged the notion that truth alone should guide belief. James argued that, in many cases, we must choose beliefs without complete evidence. In those situations, he suggested, the value of a belief lies in its consequences. A belief is not merely something to be verified; it is something to be lived.

This was a radical shift. Instead of asking, "Is this belief objectively true?" James asked, "What happens if I believe this?" If a belief leads to courage, persistence, and meaningful action, it may be justified not because it perfectly maps reality, but because it improves one's ability to navigate it.

Seen through this lens, *Think and Grow Rich* becomes less a fraudulent text and more a pragmatic tool. Its claims about secret formulas and elite mentorship may be questionable, but the behaviors it encourages, goal setting, persistence, and confidence, can produce tangible results. A belief system doesn't need to be entirely 'true' to work; even a partially constructed one can still guide behavior and make life feel coherent.

This raises a more uncomfortable question: does it matter if the story is true, if it works?

The final chapter of Hill's story complicates that question further. For years, he struggled to produce successful work. His manuscripts were long, disorganized, and largely unsuccessful. Then, in 1936, broke and couch-surfing, he met Rosa Lee Beeland.

She declined his quick marriage proposal but saw potential in his ideas and chaos in his execution. Over the next year, she took his sprawling drafts and transformed them, editing and structuring the material into something clear and compelling. The result was *Think and Grow Rich*.

Only then did she agree to marry him, on the condition that she received the rights to the book. He accepted. Her role reframes the entire story. The book that helped millions may owe its effectiveness not merely to Hill's ideas, but to Beeland's ability to shape them into a coherent, persuasive narrative. The power was not only in the content but in the storytelling.

Which brings us back to the central question. If a belief system, crafted, edited, perhaps even partially fabricated, helps people act, persist, and succeed, how should we judge it? By its truth, or by its results?

Postscript. Three years later, Beeland divorced Hill and kept the rights to the book. She later published her own book: *How to Marry Men with Money*.

Karma, perhaps.