

WRITING FOR THE SCREEN:

Introduction.... The every-day experience of being a writer.

You see before you one individual - one way of going, one way of looking at things. I use my experience to illustrate what it is I teach. I have learned from experience and I can pass that on.

But there are many ways of writing a script and nothing I say is prescriptive. For me writing is a search. I suspect perfection will be elusive. And as far as teaching it goes, the maxim, the simple truth for me is - if you want to be a writer, you can get as much theory as you like - but you won't learn anything until you do it.

I personally don't believe anyone can teach the essence of writing. There are some things you can't learn, they are inside you, you nurture them, you learn the craft, but writing itself comes from the heart, the very blood that pumps through your veins - and nobody can give you that. It's what you're born with.

It could be called vision. Seeing it, before it exists. Calling it out of the realm of the fantasy life, making it real. Whether it's a book, television, or film, the principles are the same. The world has to be complete in the writer's mind, so that the viewer, the reader, can also inhabit that world. Turning that page - anticipating the next scene - this is what all good writing is about.

I AM INVOLVED. That is the most important aspect for writers and audiences alike. That they are involved. Engagement with characters - getting the reader/ audience to care, to feel, to think, is the writer's major task. You're not only taking your characters on a journey, you're taking the audience with you.

To write I need to listen to myself, need to hear within my mind's ear exactly what it is I want to say. Need to see the images as I would on a screen. For this I need to plan - but I also rely on my subconscious to help me do the work. Writing is partly skill - craft - knowing formulas, formats, reasons for why things work. But it is more than that. I do believe writing has to have a voice, has to have soul, in order to have any resonance. The quality of that kind of writing is hardest to achieve.

Existing in the climate of television writing:

Much of my work is not initially generated by me - it is my craft harnessed to the yoke of someone else's ideas. Not my themes, not my characters, I am a hired gun, working for others, for a period of time, then moving on.

The last few years seem to have had more hardship than most. It may be the climate of the free trade negotiations, where culture is bartered like so much coinage. It could be that the balance of the scales has been tipped towards economic necessity - there is not much money about, and so less and less product is being made.

It could be that the entire industrial climate is changing, and that writers, often introverted, need to become more extroverted, to survive. Need to become personalities to sell their goods. The very fact that I have a website, is evidence of this. You need to be out there. It is a business, after all.

Sadly, the act of writing is the exact opposite, is to remain untroubled, within that vast space of your own imagination, to be free to become other people.

Our industry was once small, people knew one another, respected one another - worked within the limitations that a small audience base afforded us. When the doors of the world market were opened, a certain amount of anonymity was encouraged, in terms of voice. A global voice was assumed, and cultural identity gets lost. The aim is to get bums on seats. Getting mass market saturation. As cheaply as possible. And because time is money, the less time taken, the better.

The result is that a writer is almost encouraged not to care about her work, because much of it will be taken away and reworked, according to someone else's style. It's hard to remain caring of one's work when you know so many other principles govern the finished product, that have nothing to do with what you set out to achieve. To quote a friend of mine on receiving her script - one the producers really loved - they told her they wouldn't have to touch a thing. She said: "Lines 72 and 73 are mine. The rest looks like it's been rewritten by a child, A demented child under the age of five." If writers adopt an attitude of "C'est la vie!" about their work - take the money and run - then we may as well invent computers to churn out the stuff, with

no human attached. But it becomes extremely painful when the same scenario is re-enacted over and over again - with you being the only constant character amongst changing personnel who hire you to write a script, don't contact when you've finished it, and send it back unrecognisable.

This then is the system under which television operates. You can't be precious. You can't be an auteur. You have to willingly lend yourself out, knowing that you don't have a hope of realising all the nuances of a show that is not yours, or know all the quirks and characteristics of the cast you have to write about. A team of script editors, story editors, story producers oversee the continuity, and the over-writing, and it is par for the course that additional scenes, additional dialogue are added once you've sent the script in.

I love my work, I love being what I am, I could not have been anything else. I give talks about writing in order to give back, in order to give a leg up to anyone who has a similar calling. But I am also jaded, and this year I seriously considered becoming a barmaid (or marrying a millionaire, robbing a bank or winning tax lotto) to fund myself to write what I want to write. The fact that I have 13 books to my credit keeps my belief in myself sturdy. But sometimes I do wonder. Most of all I wonder why writers are treated as nothing more than stenographers - to take dictation - bend our talent to the will of others. Seldom are you given an opportunity to follow your own heart. Sadly, I think it show on our screens.

But here, now, we're in a perfect world - the world of what could be. It isn't all doom and gloom, part of the job is to remain fresh and enthusiastic about the next project, the next dream.

THE PROCESS OF WRITING

Writing is the foundation stone of everything that you see on a screen.

One question I'm often asked is - where do I get my ideas from? How do I get started? What about writer's block? How do you face the blank page?

Writing is like Lego. Building blocks. Worrying at a certain problem, solving it and then moving onto the next. I trust now, after twenty two years, that with steady application and concentration, I can knit the jumper,

build the bridge, bake the cake - whatever analogy you wish to use - and a script or a book will result.

In many ways it's adding layer upon layer..... and those layers do not come easily, or quickly, they only come after the groundwork has been done thoroughly.

Sometimes the resulting product is a surprise - at other times the journey has been travelled with a Melways on my knees. I prefer to be surprised, but a little planning - at least knowing the direction, knowing my travel companions - helps.

For me there are several vital ingredients in a good story - and these are the things I look out for, when I begin writing.

A good idea. Nothing beats a good idea - and it is the hardest thing to come up with. The most vivid example on television shows I've worked on is Simone de Beauvoir's Babies, which I script edited. As soon as Deb Cox said she wanted to write a mini-series about a group of women whose biological clock is running out, and who want to have babies - any way they can - and to form a "collective" in doing so - I knew she had a good idea. As did everyone else. People could relate to it. They may have known of women in a similar situation, they may have felt it themselves. There was huge scope for exploration of characters, of putting together people who may normally not come together, and discovering what happens. The strength of that idea carried the writing of the show, and it was wonderful to work on.

Character. All plot derives from character. What does the character want? What does the character do to get it? What happens to the character when he or she sets out to get what they want.... ?

Vision - or having something to say: Wild Side. Phoenix. Good Guys Bad Guys. Grass Roots.

I name those shows and I'm sure, if you've see them, their style will be very graphically remembered. They stand out. They're different.

By vision I mean that the creators had a certain way of going, in mind.

This is different to having something to say. Having something to say is having the passion of one's convictions. Janus and Phoenix, for example, had a passion for police, and for showing police life as it was. This bleeds through every single story, and contributes to the shape of those stories. Police may have warts, they may cut corners, they may not be angels - but essentially, in those shows - the police were the heroes. In a much grittier sense though, than say Blue Heelers, or Water Rats. Vision - or having something to say is also called:

Perspective. Writing isn't simply mirroring life. It's adding a twist to it. Giving us, the viewers, or readers, a different understanding. A view point or point of view.

Know who it is you are writing for... your audience and your format. We'll be looking at the different types of shows later - knowing what type of program you are working on helps in terms of knowing where to pitch the content. There is a **connection** between myself and my audience / readers. I must not forget that. Must seek to establish it. Must know who it is I am writing for. For me, personally - I want to have a connection with other people, and writing is a means of communicating. That want comes naturally. But what must be thought about is who it is I am connected to. Knowing I am writing for kids will change my use of language, my complexity of ideas, my choice of characters.... Knowing my audience is important. Wanting to talk to them is equally so.

Being prepared is one of the key secrets to not fearing the blank page. We'll be talking about the value of research later, and how writers can build on either their own experience, or on the material they have gathered.

Research gives you a starting off point and is a rich source of minutiae, and of events that can illustrate plot points. Life is stranger than fiction is the rule.

Preparation of character is as vital -

Start thinking about what it is you want to say....

Curiosity and Empathy in viewing people around me helps, understanding people is an endless source of inspiration. I draw on those around me. Understanding the human condition. Being able to bring some kind of

perspective to it. Wanting to know what makes people tick.... laugh, cry, what makes them angry. Sometimes what makes them kill, even if that knowledge makes me personally ill. If I'm writing a murder story, I need to know what motivates my killer as much as what motivates my detective.

Observation. Seeing how people are. Listening to how they speak. It's very important for a writer to know how to recreate that. You'll often find writers listening in on other people's conversations. Or making a quick note about the catch phrases... words they may then put into their own characters' mouths.

Occasionally **inspiration** does strike - and you wonder afterwards - did I write that? When did I write that? You have no recollection.

Or you ask yourself - where did that come from? I was in the shower, day-dreaming, while I was writing two episodes for Something in the Air. I wasn't all that happy with the emotional content of my script, it was functional in that it told its story, but it didn't have many moments of character insight - and insight after all is what gives an audience an understanding of why characters are the way they are.

Why is Len so fixated on the gold nugget? I know he's dying, and he wants to avoid all thoughts of death, and filling his head with thoughts of gold, which then also lead to thoughts of his childhood, is a way of avoiding thinking of death... But why does he want to avoid thinking about death - what's the one key fear there? Because he doesn't want to leave his wife Mon. Because he loves her - and it's that thought - leaving her - that is unbearable.

That insight was nowhere to be found in my script. Until I had my shower. Suddenly this scene appeared. As if out of nowhere. In its entirety - I just had to write it down. A scene between Len and Mon. Where you can see how much he loves her. Where you can understand why he is behaving as he is.

That scene - even though it wasn't plotted, wasn't part of any story, was integral to the character, and I ended up cutting other, plotty scenes, to make room for it - and it is everyone's favourite scene in that script.

How did that happen? I was living in the character's pockets. I was thinking as though I were that character. A sixty five year old man with emphysema.

As a writer you become so focussed on a character's path, a character takes you by the hand and leads you to where they have to go and you forget all time, you forget yourself, your life. You become immersed. Totally. You inhabit another world - their world.

It is one of the greatest - and, I suspect, most selfish joys writing gives me - when I bring an audience to the world I have created.... with the help of my characters... What a tremendous past-time.

But it does also require a good deal of psychic energy. Once inside that world you are loathe to be pulled away from it, to be disturbed. It is like self-hypnosis, of going under, and you feel resentful if you are pulled away too soon.

I do have an established working pattern. Some writers write the entire first draft first, before going back over it. There's a rush of energy to get that first blue print down. I don't work like that. I edit myself as I go. I usually re-write the beginnings several times before I am satisfied, before rhythm and style and mood are established. I seek to establish mood and the nature of the story from the very first. And I always know my endings. It may not be the ending that eventuates, but I certainly always write knowing where I am going.

What is the difference between writing for prose, TV and film - and how do you go about writing say for a serial as opposed to a mini-series or feature film.

The very first and most important difference is that prose paints pictures with words, whereas in Television, and more distinctively in film you are telling stories in pictures.

Watching Fantasia, for example, or the early silent movies - you don't need to hear the dialogue to understand what is happening - or to be moved, to feel the emotion.

In prose the reader informs the story, brings his or her baggage and understanding to the piece, brings their own interpretation to what they read. It is a very private, individual and personal inter-action between author and reader - one that is as unpredictable and different as there are people who read a book or a short story.

In prose you also enter the character's head-space, you know what they're thinking, you know their motivations. You often hear their internal dialogue.

Yes, sometimes the device of Voice Over is used in film or television, to get closer to a character, to get a certain personal flavour. But for the most part television and film stories are a series of actions and reactions, an interchange between characters and events that lead you to understand those characters and to follow their story. You're standing on the outside, looking in. It's a potent form of voyeurism.

Writing for film and television is about showing characters in action - characters' actions / reactions inform the viewer.

In Television and Film the interpretation of material is filtered through a team, is packaged and interpreted by actors, directors, editors, producers. Mood is brought to you by their choice of music. Suspense is brought by the cutting of imagery and the insertion of sound. Everything you do as a reader, is done for you by a team. It's brought to you finished, and there is perhaps, less room for interpretation.

And there is a difference between writing for film and writing for television.

Television is small screen pictures as opposed to large screen pictures. Television is closer to theatre than Film in relying on dialogue to relay stories. This is partly due to budgetary reasons - television productions do not have the same kind of money week after week to make mini-films - they're more set-bound (ie interior studio pieces), and thus focus more on who is in the set - PEOPLE. But it's also the nature of the small screen, that it does not have the same power as the large screen - its power lies in representing people - rather than grand vistas.

Television is better suited to stories involving people and interactions between people. Thus the stories are smaller in scope...

Most feature films deal with big stories, set in grand places that the big screen enhances. It is truly the medium of pictures telling the story. Exposition is not carried by dialogue, rather it is carried by watching a character behave on screen.

One of my main objectives in writing a feature film this year was to ask myself constantly: How can I say it, without saying it? How do I show it?

Specific topics are chosen as stories for a feature film - as opposed to stories for television. Look at some of the most successful films of all times - Lawrence of Arabia. Gone with the Wind. Star Wars. Raiders of the Lost Arc. Blade Runner. LA Confidential. Look at them in terms of scope.

On the other hand, there are no rules. A film called My Dinner with Andre, for example., was a two-hander conversation set in a restaurant.

STRUCTURE:

Simply put, all stories whether they be prose, series, serials, mini-series or films, are mostly about someone wanting something, and someone or something else, getting in their way. Stories are journeys. From point A to B, with a few ups and downs in between. It's a physical journey, but mostly it's dictated by an emotional engine. Quite often a character not only journeys through a story - being in contact with other characters in the piece, but they journey emotionally - they end up somewhere else, emotionally, as well. For example a love story - the princess ends up living happily ever after with the prince.... is not just a story about how she gets to meet the prince - and whatever obstacles she faces - thorns, dragons, wicked witches - but it's an emotional story too - from loneliness to happiness, or fulfilment - because of that journey. There could even be a theme attached - again simplistically - goodness will bring its reward.

Obviously films today are far more complicated than that, with far more levels layered in - but essentially they are what I've just said - a journey on several planes.

SCENES:

Scripts are written in units called scenes. The scene is like the paragraph is to prose - a unit within the whole that conveys mood, story and character.

The energy of that unit is to flow onwards, to move forwards. A scene carries us forwards, it doesn't stop to mark time.

A scene can be a shot long - but not all scenes are single shots. A scene can be five seconds, 30 seconds, or five minutes long. The length is dependant on the importance of the information, and on the pacing of the sequence of scenes around it. A pattern of scenes can create a mood.

The way scenes are cut together can make a point. Juxtaposition. The way scenes are cut together can contextualise a character's emotions.

A scene is a unit in time, and place. There is the present, the past as in flash backs, and the future as in flash forwards.

Everything - every scene, every piece of dialogue, every gesture has a reason:

To intrigue us

To disguise

To bring us closer to understanding a character

To forward the plot - taking us somewhere else...

Films, television shows, even half hour or three minute shows are told in a three act structure that has a:

Beginning

Middle

End

The beginning sets up place, characters, theme, and problem. Beginnings are extremely important, because in a short time you have to grab your audience by the short and curlies - give them enough for them to want them to stay with you.

Style, theme, character traits and quirks, wants, and then a complication, get the story going.

The characters are drawn, the problem is established, the journey begins.

When thinking about beginnings ask yourselves:

Is it interesting?

Will it hold an audience?

Does it introduce the theme?.. The Mystery? The problem?

Does it send the protagonist on a journey?

In the middle you up the ante. Things become more complex. All the complications unfold. Opponents reveal themselves more fully - you, the audience, begin to wonder if your main character is ever going to get what he/she wants.

There are peaks and troughs in the middle, twists, but the story is inexorably heading towards a climax - a pivotal confrontation.

There could be internal opposition - is the hero too cowardly to be a hero - will the hero overcome all his/her own internal obstacles? Or the villain, as in *SISTER ACT* could be in the guise of Harvey Keitel, who is after Whoopie Goldberg, who has dressed up as a nun in order to stay alive so she can give testimony.... and the complications that arise, are not only the fact that Harvey's getting closer, but also that she is starting to establish relationships with the nuns - she is, because of her well-drawn characteristics, creating chaos in the convent.

Thus the middle becomes much more complicated..... will the heroine win? Will the villain get to her and kill her? What will become of the nuns when they find out she is not who she says she is....

The end - usually with a twist - trying to come at it from left of field - be bold and unexpected - but also stay within character - resolves all you have set up. Everything is utilised. Nothing that is introduced in film is ever wasted. If you've written that a character is left-handed, then somewhere in the story, that must have an important story context. Don't just write it for the sake of doing it. Whatever characteristics you give your character, whatever words you put into their mouths, have to be paid off somewhere within the story. Nothing is written in isolation.

TELEVISION STRUCTURE:

Series are told in segments that are structured by the commercial break, if you're writing for a commercial show.

Thus an half an hour would have a first, a second and a third or last commercial break. An hour would have six commercial breaks. The most important of these breaks are:

The first commercial break or teaser - get the audience in and hooked.

The third commercial break, at the half hour mark - so that the audience won't switch over to another show at 8pm.

The last commercial break - so that they'll come back next week.

Serials are long form stories that may have a beginning, middle or end over the arc of the entire series, or have many beginnings, middles and endings as characters come and go.

Serials have A, B, C and sometimes D stands - concurrent stories running together. The well-plotted stories usually echo one another, complement or augment each other - either by the plots dissecting at some further stage, or by sharing a theme, which, although they are independent stories, when told in unison, inform an audience thematically.

Mystery thrillers, and police shows are always in demand. The ratings of shows like Blue Heelers and Water Rats attest to that. For production companies there is a simple, financial reason why this kind of show is practical. It is a natural community of people that revolves around a hub. The hub means there is a setting that will not change - that will be the same each week. For budget reasons this is vital. One cannot afford to build totally new sets each week. The community of police will provide an ongoing group of people who have a *raison d'être*... a reason for being. They have an identifiable job, and a reason to be at the police station set in which we meet them, and where we see them work. For ongoing series there are no end of guest-stories that can be brought in each week, which still involve the regular characters. Crime is active, creates mystery, provides instantly identifiable antagonists and protagonists - it is a very fruitful area for a writer, a production team to delve into.

CHARACTER.

If you think of scripts being made of building blocks, and those blocks forming say a pyramid, then, for me at least, the base of the pyramid is character.

For me, plot is generated through character, and so I begin there, with character.

- * Characters make us feel.
- * Interest us
- * Alienate us
- * We identify with characters
- * They entertain us
- * We journey with them.

Characters should never stand still.

We learn about characters through what they say - their dialogue - through what they don't say;

Through our seeing the meaning beneath their words - subtext;

Through the contradictions between what they say and what they do;

Through looks they give;

Attitudes they display;

Motivations they have - as shown by what they do, and what they say - hidden motivations and evident motivations.

Character is revealed as the drama unfolds....

Heroes are Protagonists. It is their journey we follow.

Villains are Antagonists. They are the fly in the ointment... the barriers... they are out to stop the Protagonist from getting what they want.

The interest for us is to see whether the hero will achieve what he or she sets out to achieve.

A writer's preparation for a character is similar to an actor's preparation for a character, but whereas the actor begins with what is on the page, and makes that character grow through further exploration with a director, the writer starts elsewhere.

The writer looks towards people she has met in her life. The writer looks towards the needs of a story, and fashions a character that best serves those needs. A writer learns all about the existing characters of an on-going TV series by watching other episodes, reading other scripts, and getting to know those characters hopefully as well as she knows her closest friends.

A writer always asks those tricky psychological questions - but why - why is he doing that? What's behind her saying that? What does that really mean?

When I attended drama school we learned about Stanislavsky and an actor's preparation for a character. We were asked to think about our character in physical terms - what they wore, where they lived, how they felt when they got up in the morning, the first things they saw, their ritual, their likes, their dislikes - in short we had to get to know that character inside out, before applying her to a particular scene that had a particular stance or view-point.

A writer does the same. They get to know the people they are writing about.

You will not have an interesting story if you don't have an interesting / engaging character. We the audience need to be emotionally involved with a character in order to invest the time to follow their journey. Love them or hate them, we have to feel something for them. There is nothing worse than seeing a story about people you care nothing about.

The relationship between a writer and her characters is as intimate as that of the best informed psychiatrist with his/her patient. You know your character's life inside out. You know where they came from, you know what they look like, and most importantly, you know what's going on inside their heads.

Knowing what your character feels and wants will give you that character's actions - you know what he/she will say - what he/she will do.

If you know what a character feels you have an internal engine that will drive the scenes and the stories. Without a character you will not have a story.

And, in everything you write - you must ask - would my character do it that way? Once you've got a firm idea who your character is - you are locked into how that character would behave. Your characters must be as real to you as your husband or wife, sister or brother, friend, enemy.... if they are not real to you, they will not be real on the page. They will not exist on screen - or they will exist badly, as caricature - half drawn.

Time spent thinking about character.... using bits of people you know... basing a character on someone you know.... seeing them as clearly as though they are walking into a room and sitting down beside you, are all useful tools.

How do these characters come into being?

Is your character idiosyncratic? (Individual, different.) What makes your character interesting? What is it about him or her that makes them different. Appealing. Not appealing. What is it about them that provokes you to feel something about them?

Speech patterns? Hear them speak. Know what kind of words they use. Do they speak fast and off the top of their heads, or slowly, thoughtfully? Are they extrovert or introvert - are they a surface character or do still waters run deep? Do you get what you see, or does it take time to understand who they are? Do they play games? What do they look like? Does what they look like affect their behaviour? Are they vain? Has life been easy? What is their history? Are their traumatic events in their lives, they have not yet overcome? Has something happened recently - are they wounded? Do they cover what they feel, how many barriers are up? Or are they happy-go-lucky, not a care in the world.

This is applicable to both prose and screen writing. In terms of preparation, there is no difference, other than that in film / tv there'd be more dialogue interaction, and less prose used to describe the characters.

Look at the difference, for example, of Phoebe and Dale. How are they different? How did I show them to be different? Is there a difference in tone - when each of the characters speaks? Both girls come from the same place, are best friends, have the same dreams, and yet they are as different, on some levels, as chalk and cheese.

Your choice of characters is as vast as the amount of human beings on this earth.

WHAT DO THEY WANT???? Is a very big question. What is the most important thing in their lives? Does this have something to do with the story? Remember, extremes are interesting....

That's why there are constant stories about rich, beautiful, successful, or really brave people.... or really really bad characters.... they take us out of the norm, and push the envelope. Now-a-days, our heroes are not as clear cut. Our heroes have flaws.

Or is your character really decent? Is that decency about to be put to the test?

What do you have in mind for your characters? If you are going to tell a story about a certain theme - power corrupts and total power corrupts totally - is your character going to have certain qualities that will allow you to illustrate your theme? What do you want to say? Is your character going to be your mouth-piece?

If it's an on-going series, is your character interesting enough to push continuing stories?

DIALOGUE:

Listen to how people speak.

Do individual characters have individual voices within your script? Does each character have their own voice?

Ask yourself - is there a more idiosyncratic way of saying things?

Will a look or a behavioural action say something better than words?
What is hidden underneath the words - and how can you reveal it and when?

Is the dialogue sayable.... the test is reading it aloud yourself....
Remembering always that written English is totally different to spoken
English.