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PREFACE

"A word after a word after a word is power."~ Margaret Atwood

Sometimes it seems as though each new screenwriting book on the market, perhaps in an effort to offer some new ground-breaking, sure-fire formula, contains ever more complex graphs and charts and elaborate jargon and theories of writing. These things make my head spin. I become hopelessly mired in trying to even understand the concepts set forth, let alone apply them to my own work. And if they do that to me, somebody who's actually written and sold screenplays and had movies produced, I can only imagine how daunting they must be to writers just starting out.

Having worked as a screenwriter of "major motion pictures," in development as a Vice President of Creative Affairs for Academy Award-winning director/producer Sydney Pollack, as a story consultant, and as a writing instructor for the UCLA Extension Writers Program, I wanted to share what I've learned to help empower other writers. So one of my main goals here is to try not to make matters any more complicated than they already are, because they're already complicated enough.

I've boiled down what I believe are the most essential principles and elements that go into writing a satisfying story and successful screenplay. I've also put a lot of emphasis on story structure, as I think creating a solid one is challenging, yet key to crafting a great script. And since screenwriting is a spare art, I've

endeavored to take novelist Elmore Leonard's advice and have done my best to "leave out the parts people skip."

All of that said, I'll be the first to admit that there simply is no single rock-solid formula to this craft. Would that there were! There are principles, but this is art, not math, and one of the big challenges of creating something original is that it's the prototype every time out. On the plus side, you are free to—in fact, I would say you are charged to—create something the world has not yet seen.

And on that note, I salute you. The creative path in life is often not an easy one. It can sometimes feel like the path of most resistance and it takes courage to pursue. But as the Zen proverb tells us, "The obstacles are the path." It is in the process of striving to overcome the challenges in life that we and, not at all incidentally, our fictional heroes, grow.

May you, like any good protagonist, allow the creative and personal challenges in your life to help bring you to a higher realization of yourself. And may this book help encourage you to do that. May it provide you with some useful tools with which to share your own unique voice and vision and, as Tolstoy advised, "Add your light to the sum of light."

Get Your Story Straight

INTRODUCTION

"To make a great film you need three things – the script, the script and the script."

~ Alfred Hitchcock

I have structured this book to provide an insider's guide to what it actually takes to get your story straight as a screenwriter. I will take you on this journey from the outside in, first discussing story and movies, then zooming in on the specifics of screenplay construction, and finally describing what it's really like to work in "the" industry.

In the first couple of chapters, I address the larger topics of why we write and what movies are really about. In Chapters Three and Four, I'll take a step closer and describe how to choose a concept, and how to distill a short but pithy "log line" from that concept. Creating a log line is imperative in crafting your story, as it serves as an abbreviated map or spine for your script. It's also a tool required in the business; an intriguing log line can help sell your screenplay.

In Chapter Five, I give you an overview of the classic three-act structure of screenplays: what it is, how it works, and why it's necessary. It's so important that even if you choose to abandon this traditional paradigm of storytelling, you need to understand it before you discard it. As the saying goes, you need to know the rules before you can break them.

In Chapter Five I also begin my analyses of ten screenplays that were each the basis of successful movies. In each chapter thereafter, I use these "Structurally Speaking" sections to illustrate the concepts I cover in the book. I also deconstruct the three acts in each script to expose their working parts. In teaching screenwriting I've found that explaining a concept is great, but demonstrating it in action is even better. I endeavor to show how the same screenwriting concepts and elements are used time and again in different ways in well-known, commercial films. Please refer to the section at the end of this Introduction entitled "Suggested Movies to Watch" for more information.

Starting in Chapter Six and continuing through Chapter Eight, I explore each of the three Acts in greater detail. I cover their specific aims, elements, timing, and how they fit into the larger picture. The diagnostics I provide in these chapters are intended to enable you to create your strongest work possible. They'll serve a roadmap as you write, or a guide as you re-write, and help you pinpoint and correct problems that may stem from issues specific to each Act.

For the following few chapters, I explain how to populate those Acts: with interesting characters, especially heroes (Chapter Nine) and villains (Chapter Ten); with well-structured scenes in Chapter Eleven; and with evocative dialogue that keeps the story moving in Chapter Twelve.

Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen focus on the business. I discuss what you can expect in Tinseltown, how best to try to break in, and how to protect yourself and your work. Finally, in Chapter Fifteen I close with a few words about what it's really like to be a content creator, and how to keep the inspiration flowing.

Stylistically, you'll note that throughout I use the default pronoun "he" whenever referring to characters or writers, something which honestly kind of bothers me. I'd hoped to use the more gender neutral "they" and "their," as I do in my teaching, but my copy editor slapped my wrist

for that impropriety and I fell back on traditional "he." I promise to level the playing field and invoke Title IX in my next book.

Finally, you will see that at the end of each chapter I include a summary list of Takeaways as well as a list of thought-provoking questions or exercises to help keep your creative juices flowing. Throughout the book, I've also included links to relevant videos and other websites which accent or illustrate my points. The videos offer advice, insights and humor from some giants in the industry, most of whom have faced the same sorts of challenges you will face as a screenwriter.

In short, I have endeavored to provide you with the kind of book I wish I'd had when I was first starting out as a screenwriter.

SUGGESTED MOVIES TO WATCH:

I'll analyze some of the films listed below in detail; others are referenced more sparingly with regard to particular elements. I've endeavored to mix things up, between new and old; solo hero, buddy picture and ensemble; male and female leads; drama; comedy; animation; indie; superhero; action and thriller. Most are critically and/or popularly successful movies, many of them based on Oscar-winning screenplays. You learn best from the best.

500 DAYS OF SUMMER
*ARGO**
BRIDESMAIDS
ERIN BROCKOVICH
GOOD WILL HUNTING
*IRON MAN**
IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE
*LITTLE MISS SUNSHINE**
LOST IN TRANSLATION
MR. & MRS. SMITH
ONLY YOU
PULP FICTION
*ROMAN HOLIDAY**
*SIDEWAYS**
*THE 40-YEAR-OLD VIRGIN**
THE HANGOVER
*THE KING'S SPEECH**
THE PLAYER
*THELMA & LOUISE**
*TOOTSIE**
*TOY STORY**
WHAT WOMEN WANT

CHAPTER ONE

WHY WRITE?

"Who wants to become a writer? And why? Because it's the answer to everything. It's the streaming reason for living. To note, to pin down, to build up, to create, to be astonished at nothing, to cherish the oddities, to let nothing go down the drain, to make something, to make a great flower out of life, even if it's a cactus." ~ Enid Bagnold

We all love good stories, we crave them from a very early age. I believe it's something deep in our DNA, perhaps because stories allow us to vicariously live beyond our own limited mortal experience. Certainly stories are something human beings have been sharing since the days when cavemen and cavewomen first gathered around the firelight at night. They are a time-honored tradition and practically a birthright. And whether we're consciously aware of it or not, I believe their primal pull is this:

STORIES TEACH US HOW TO LIVE MORE FULLY

Stories are not just diversions; they are intimately woven into our lives in an endless multitude of ways. They not only entertain us, they inspire us, teach us, and can make us feel a part of something larger. They're the way religious and family traditions, history and principles are communicated and passed down from one generation to the next. They humanize us. The abstract is just that—abstract. Stories are the details, the specifics, and we human beings relate to one another via the details.

The wonderful website "Humans of New York" created by Brandon Stanton (if you're not familiar with it, ***http://www. humansofnewyork.com***) is a great illustration of this principle. It takes a photo of a person on the street and in a seemingly simple, short paragraph or two tells you a lot about who they are via a few specific, often poignant details. The words and stories allow us to emotionally connect with them, their struggles and dreams, and often nudge us to contemplate something about our own lives as well. In the process, we're enriched.

And on a personal, vocational level, to be a writer seems a sort of glamorous occupation, at least on the surface of things, right? It conjures romantic notions of whipping up a masterpiece in some rustic cabin in the woods. There are no special tools required, a computer or even just old-school pen and paper will do. Plus there's always that outside chance that one can become rich and famous.

But anyone who's ever given writing a serious go soon comes to the undeniable realization that it's deceptively hard work, the sort of work that can easily drive one to Margaritaville long before it's five o'clock anywhere. And then they may start to wonder: Why do it at all?

Here are five good reasons I can come up with; you will undoubtedly discover your own.

1. You get to live more.

Anaïs Nin wrote, "We write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect." And if your own life is not enough, or even if it is, as a writer of fiction you get to vicariously live the lives of your characters, play with your fantasies and maybe even see them brought to life.

I wrote the script for my film *Only You* in a small, characterless apartment on the westside of Los Angeles. I'd been to Italy once before and dreamed of returning. The characters in the movie went to Positano because *I* wanted to go to Positano. I got to live their fantasy adventure in my mind as I wrote it, and then got to live it—not to mention hang with Robert Downey Jr.—in reality. As the saying goes, it doesn't get much better. Writing is a way to experience, a way to live, more.

2. It's a way to stay sane.

We write to remind ourselves of things we thought we knew but have somehow forgotten in the rush of daily life. The simple act of putting one's thoughts and ideas down on paper helps you catch them, contemplate them, savor them.

And let's face it, we're all a little bit nuts, right? I mean, given the times we're living in, don't you think anyone who *isn't* a little bit nuts is a little bit nuts? So I say make your angst and pain and confusion work for you. Why should those things get a free ride? When it all gets to be too much, don your invisible writer's hat and start taking notes.

One of the great beauties of being a writer is that suddenly everything in life, even the crappiest, most miserable situation or everything in life, even the crappiest, most miserable situation or experience, becomes potential material. If you choose to look at life from a certain angle, it's all grist for the mill. I think in some way this ability to take a step back and mine our own experience, to find the humor and share the pain, is our consolation for being the more sensitive, contemplative types that writers, by nature, often tend to be.

Isak Dinesen, in her book, *Out of Africa*, wrote, "All suffering is bearable if it is seen as part of a story." There is a principle in meditation of mentally identifying with the witness to one's thoughts, not with the thoughts themselves. To me, putting on your invisible writer's hat is a somewhat similar exercise. If you can manage to do this, to take this mental step back and see your life through the lens of your creative writer's eye, it often has the side benefit of making many daily irritating situations seem somehow comical or at least more tolerable and even the larger losses and pain slightly more bearable.

So, exercise your writer's consciousness. Take your neuroses, your fears and dreams, your secret wish, the most humiliating thing that you wouldn't want anyone to know, and put them down on the page. You can always cut them later. But remember that often these confidences and revelations make for the best stories. They can be what other people relate to the most, heartened to discover that somebody else has been there too. Filmmaker Joss Whedon says, "Whatever makes you weird is probably your greatest asset." And if you can manage to make people laugh at themselves, take themselves a little more lightly, I believe there are what a friend used to call "bonus points in heaven" for you.

3. You have a great excuse to explore and learn and observe.

For my former boss, director Sydney Pollack, making a movie was a way to explore a thematic life question that intrigued him. What question do *you* want to know the answer to? As a writer, you now officially have license to explore anything and everything you've ever wondered about and justify it as research.

When it comes to finding inspiration, take note of what you love and what you hate. Dorothea Brande, in her terrific book, *On Becoming a Writer,* advises that whatever inspires strong emotion in you, either positive or negative, deserves your attention. She adds, "Try to be one of those people on whom nothing is lost." To me, that's another way of saying be present, be mindful.

And on the subject of mindfulness, a slight digression here. I'm a big Ernest Hemingway fan. Okay, sure, there's the philandering and the alcoholism, the excessive machismo and wild animal slaughter (special condolences to the bulls of Spain, the elephants of Africa and the

marlins in the Gulf Stream. Though, on balance, he did seem to quite adore his kitty cats.) Regardless, then there is the *writing*, and that's the only reason we care about any of the rest of it.

So I was excited when, years ago, I happened across a collection of articles he wrote while working as a reporter, some before he achieved great fame as a novelist and some after, titled *Byline: Ernest Hemingway*.

The excerpt below is from an essay he wrote for *Esquire* magazine in 1935, when he was thirty-six. It details the advice he gave to a young man who'd hitchhiked from Minnesota down to Key West and shown up on his doorstep, claiming he wanted to be a writer. Hemingway gave the kid a job as night watchman on his boat, the Pilar, and was from then on pestered endlessly about what he calls, "the practice of letters." Because the kid played the violin, (badly), Hemingway nicknamed him Maestro, which he then shortened to "Mice."

Here is an excerpt from "Monologue to the Maestro." Hemingway refers to himself as "Y.C.," short for "Your Correspondent."

> Mice: *How can a writer train himself?*
>
> Y.C.: *Watch what happens today. If we get into a fish see exactly what it is that everyone does. If you get a kick out of it while he is jumping remember back until you see exactly what the action was that gave you the emotion. Whether it was the rising of the line from the water and the way it tightened like a fiddle string until drops started from it, or the way he smashed and threw water when he jumped. Remember what the noises were and what was said. Find what gave you the emotion: what the action was that gave you the excitement. Then write it down making it clear so the reader will see it too and have the same feeling that you had. That's a five finger exercise.*
>
> Mice: *All right.*
>
> Y.C.: *Then get into somebody else's head for a change. If I bawl you out try to figure what I'm thinking about as well as how you feel about it. If Carlos curses Juan think what both their sides of it are. Don't just think who is right. As a man things are as they should or shouldn't be. As a man you know who is right and who is wrong. You have to make decisions and enforce them. As a writer you should not judge. You should understand.*
>
> Mice: *All right.*
>
> Y.C.: *Listen now. When people talk listen completely. Don't be thinking what you're going to say. Most people never listen. Nor do they observe. You should be able to go into a room and when you come out know everything you saw there and not only that. If that room gave you any feeling you should know exactly what it was that gave you that feeling. Try that for practice. When you're in town stand outside the theater and see how the people differ in the way they get out of taxis or motor cars. There are a thousand ways to practice. And always think of other people.*

What I particularly love about this piece is not only its slightly jaundiced yet still good-natured wit, but also that the writing advice is real and good and honest. It might not be about screenwriting, per se, but the knowledge imparted, particularly about paying attention, is valuable for any writer, artist, or for that matter for any human being.

4. You get to share your life experience. You get to "be what you've come here for."

I think writers as a species tend to be outsiders. We're more often observers than participants, sometimes recluses even. But deep down, I think what everyone craves is to live more. As the novelist E.M. Forster famously observed, the goal is to "only connect." And when you do that, when you're able to capture and effectively communicate what is true for you, you feel less alone, and you make your audience feel the same way. Those are the moments of sheer creative exhilaration, when you feel the wind at your back and it's almost as if you're channeling something that's coming not so much from you as through you.

I believe it's a writer's job to tell the truth as we see it. Somebody's got to do it, right? But admittedly this sort of behavior can sometimes tend make one a teensy bit unpopular around, say, performance review time or the Thanksgiving dinner table. (Unless, of course, you have the gift of being extraordinarily funny about it. The court jester always gets away with murder.) Regardless, on the page you are free. You might want to change the names, but here's your chance. Go ahead and put whatever you want to say in your characters' mouths; you're not saying these things, *they* are. And on a related note, if you're one of those mere mortals who comes up with the perfect comeback twenty-four hours too late, then, ah, my friend, writing is for you.

5. If you work really hard and you're really lucky, you get to add meaning and pleasure to the lives of others.

If your goal is to write a movie, let's assume you've got two hours of somebody's—ideally, millions of somebodies'—precious time. What do you want them to know? To feel? To understand? Doing creative work is about adding meaning to your life, and in the process, ideally adding meaning to the lives of others.

A now a brief word about critics:

They have their place. *I guess…* And some of them—dear, lovely, departed Roger Ebert, I'm talking about you—bring a vast understanding of the art form as well as their own unique sensibility, passion, sensitivity and intelligence to the table. Still, the Eberts of the world are the exception. Never forget that writing about writing is a hell of a lot easier than *writing*. Trust me, I've done both. And talking about it is easier still. Everybody's got an opinion, especially online, everybody's a critic. You must shut them out, certainly while you're in the early stages, and this includes your mean inner one, too. And always remember, "Nobody ever erected a statue to a critic."

Finally, sometimes the many masters—commercial, structural, financial, personal, logistical, emotional, intellectual, spiritual and otherwise—one has to try to serve in the process of writing, especially writing for Hollywood, can feel overwhelming. It can be tough and disheartening, and you may find yourself asking, why bother? When that happens, remember that the real goal is for you to exercise your creativity and share your own unique vision, experience and imagination. The real meaning is found in playing with your dreams and neuroses, your fears and joys and giving them life on the page; it's found in living a creative life.

Write to remind the rest of us that we are not alone. Write what you know to be true.

*Recommended WATCH: Writer Elizabeth Gilbert's (Big Magic, Creative Living Beyond Fear; The Signature of All Things; Eat, Pray, Love) TED talk about your creative genius. (http://www.ted.com/ talks/elizabeth_gilbert_on_genius)(**http://www.ted.com/***