

## REVIEW FOR JOURNAL OF MEDIA PRACTICE

- *STORY AND CHARACTER: Interviews with British Screenwriters*  
Alistair Owen (ed) Bloomsbury Publishing 2003
- *SCREENCRAFT: SCREENWRITING*  
Declan McGrath and Felim Macdermott Rotovision 2003

“ I think every writer, if they are honest, admits that they taught themselves to write. You cannot be prescriptive and say this is how you write a script, and these are the secrets. There are no secrets.”  
Paul Schrader

Teaching screenwriting with reference to structural paradigms and formulaic textbooks may give the novice or insecure teacher a sense of power as the one who *knows* and has great secrets to divulge; but the abstractions of mere technical knowledge soon pale for anyone interested in genuinely supporting a writer’s creative progress. Alongside a more pressing need for imaginative empathy and personal development must come a curiosity shared by both teacher and student on how professional writers actually practice and understand their chosen craft. Two recent and contrasting books offer this kind of insight through a series of interviews with contemporary screenwriters.

*Story and Character*- Alistair Owen (ed) claims to be the first ever anthology of interviews with British screenwriters and wonders why this is the case without considering the unspeakable thought that most British screenplays are not very interesting and that the most intriguing films tend to be made by writer/directors. One of the more pungent interviewees – Frank Cottrell Boyce – goes further “ What I truly dislike about the British film industry is its poverty of ambition, visually, emotionally, philosophically.” Simon Beaufoy also has a critical word for the rationalised approach to filmmaking and writing in the UK, but like most of the interviewed writers agrees that what counts is finding an original character and story – something which you won’t find in a textbook but can surely be encouraged by committed teachers and tutors. Many of the writers offer technical tips and good advice on how to survive the rigours of an uncertain industry as well as touching on working methods but the real strength of the book lies in the revelation of typical UK career trajectories; the writers’ journey to screenwriting success via soaps, film school or novel writing. We read of the lowly position of the writer, tortured power struggles, endless rewrites, the dominating role of the director, the need for patience, humility and above all resilience: in short the familiar roller-coaster ride of rejection, dejection and occasional exhilaration. If there is a moral to the story within the story it is the importance of luck, perseverance and creative partnerships – useful lessons for any neophyte. A clear limitation lies in the narrow range of those interviewed (6 out of 9 writers are from an Oxbridge background) but the interviews feel like genuine reports from the frontline of a fragile industry and there are nuggets of inspiration and hope for aspirants to cling onto (and good reason to sneer for arty intellectual types) as our most successful screenwriter in financial terms – Richard Curtis - reveals his weaknesses that go completely against the grain of conventional textbook wisdom, “ I don’t write visually and I don’t know about three-act structure.”

*Screenwriting* by McGrath/Macdermott is a series of interviews with high-achieving world league screenwriters who speak with the clarity and confidence of established players. The book is therefore able to avoid discursive accounts of adventures in the screen trade; the focus here is directly on the way these writers approach their work, their sources of inspiration, and their definition of a distinctively cinematic form of writing. While the approach of the editors is reverential (almost fetishistic in the lovingly reproduced pages of famous screenplays) the content is sharply edited and full of useful insights for writers and teachers. From Paul Schrader’s macho account of crashing the problem into a metaphor and watch it break into shards of plotlines to the more lyrical description of a double thinking process from character to audience offered by Jean Claude Carriere – the writing is always intelligent, original and stimulating. The Americans are here of course; represented by Schrader, Towne and Goldman but there are also interviews with writers from Japan, Italy, France, India and Poland: an international array of talent with credits ranging from *Bicycle Thieves* and *Belle Du Jour* to the *Double Life of Veronique* and *Schindler’s List*: there are no British screenwriters in this selection.

The lessons of the masters will be familiar to readers of screenwriting texts: finding a subject, having something to say, the importance of research and emotional truth – but this hard won wisdom is

inflected with personal insight and pithy comments on everything from the place of storytelling to the expression of the invisible. Several of the writers talk particularly about the importance of developing a cinematic language, an understanding of how what is written arrives on the screen: the director's work, the actor's performance, the juxtaposition of image and sound, the technical process of editing: an approach often lacking in UK screenwriting education. What they all share is an excitement about writing for the screen and what might be distinctive and mysterious about that kind of writing. The frustrations and disappointments of the writers' journey contained in the first book have all been thankfully air-brushed out of the second and the reader is free to dream of the perfect screenplay - free also from the jargon and promises of the evangelical screenwriting manuals. If all creation is based on the opposing faculties of forgetting and remembering – forgetting the rules and formulas, remembering the impulse to write – then reading interviews with practising screenwriters helps remind you of the prior importance of the latter and the pointless pursuit of the Key to all Mythologies. In the end the compulsion to write and the strength of your ideas are what is important.

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