

ROBERT MCKEE'S CREATIVE WRITING MAGAZINE

# STORY

ISSUE.05

EXCLUSIVE:  
**DREW CAREY**  
ON COMEDY

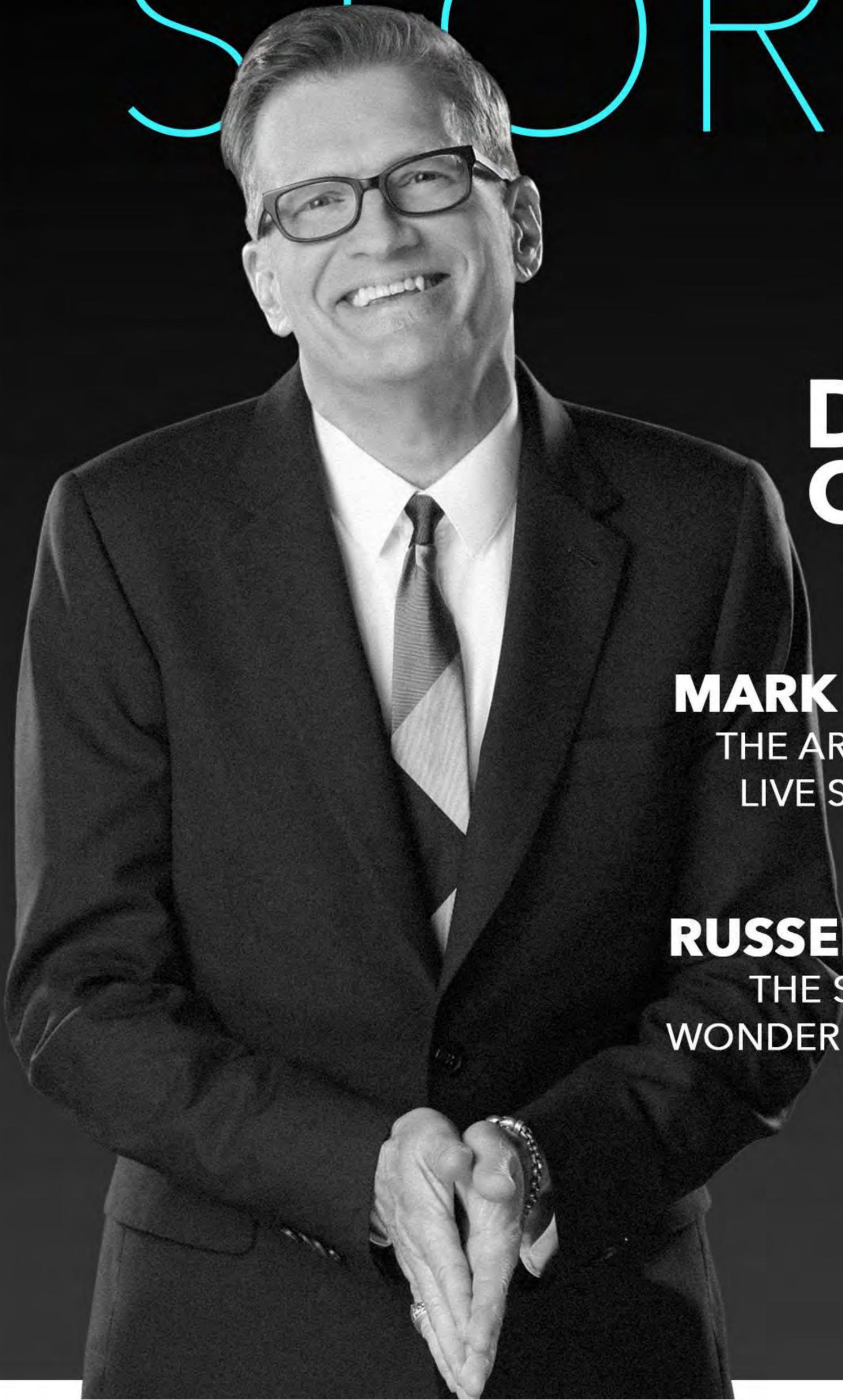
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**MARK WHITNEY**  
THE ART & CRAFT OF  
LIVE STORYTELLING

+

**RUSSELL BRAND**  
THE STRANGE AND  
WONDERFUL COMEDIC  
MIND (PART 2)

**& MORE!**



# FADE IN:

## WELCOME LETTER - MARCH

What do Drew Carey, Russell Brand, and Mark Whitney all have in common? They make people laugh. This angry art – famous for its difficulty in execution – is the focus of this month's issue.

Drew Carey – is there a more down-to-earth master comedian on earth? We think not, and McKee's interview with Carey will make you fall in love with him if indeed you haven't done so yet.

Russell Brand's strange and wonderful comedic mind paired with McKee's sharp insights will also continue to amaze this month, and while Mark Whitney may not be as much of a household name as the other two, he is a true student and master of the storytelling craft – as one must be to stand on stage for an hour, telling a riveting and hilarious story to a live audience.

Robert McKee knows the craft as no one else alive, and you'll find his interviews with these three masters to be illuminating, inspiring, and deep.

We don't stop with the comedians, though. In addition, we have another installment with Steven Pressfield – an interview that features so many insights into Pressfield's world-class process we lost count long ago. Also, Shawn Coyne tells us the story of a novel writer who continues to shoot herself in the foot by trying to fit her novel into a formula rather than disciplining herself to master the form.

Put all of this alongside the ongoing lessons on Dialogue and Character from Robert McKee, and you will find yourself full of story knowledge for another month.

Write the Truth,  
Zander Robertson & Matthew Lutz



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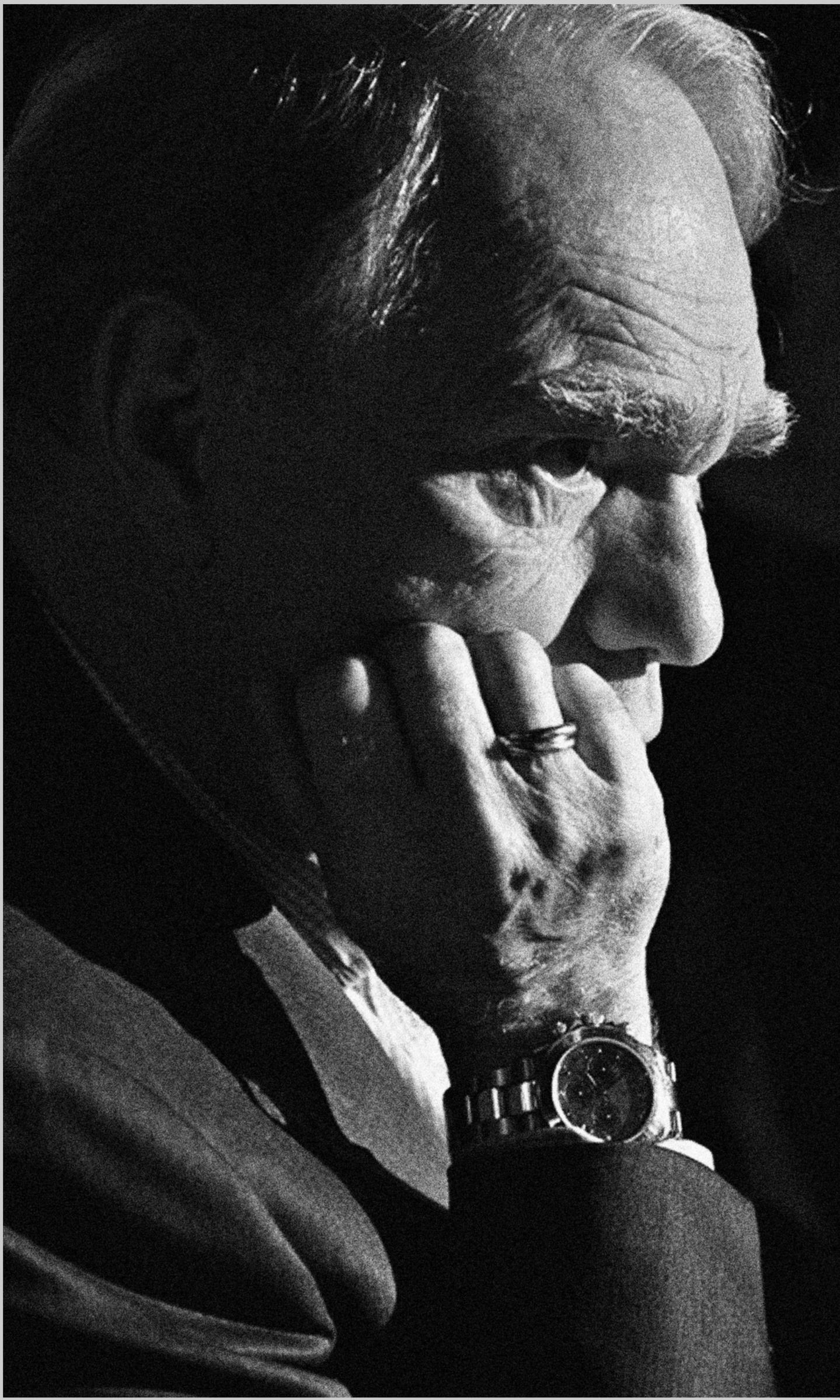
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# THE K C A



# ROBERT MCKEE, A FULBRIGHT SCHOLAR, IS THE MOST SOUGHT AFTER SCREENWRITING LECTURER ON THE PLANET.

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*He has dedicated the last 30 years to educating and mentoring screenwriters, novelists, playwrights, poets, documentary makers, producers, and directors internationally. Peter Jackson (writer/director The Lord Of The Rings Trilogy, The Hobbit) has lauded him as "The Guru of Gurus." For the writers of Pixar (creators of Toy Story 1, 2, & 3, Finding Nemo), McKee's STORY Seminar is a rite of passage. Emmy Award-Winner Brian Cox also portrayed McKee in the Oscar-nominated film Adaptation.*

McKee's former students include over 60 Academy Award Winners, 250 Academy Award Nominees, 170 Emmy Award Winners, 500+ Emmy Award Nominees, 30 WGA (Writers Guild of America) Award Winners, 180+ WGA Award Nominees, and 26 DGA (Directors Guild of America) Award Winners, 52+ DGA Award Nominees. A winner and nominee of BAFTA for his popular Channel Four series REEL SECRETS, McKee also wrote and hosted 12 episodes of BBC's FILMWORKS series. He was profiled by Bob Simon of 60 Minutes for CBS news.

McKee's articles on Story have also appeared in hundreds of newspapers and magazines around the world including Harvard Business Review, The Wall Street Journal, Vanity Fair, The New Yorker Magazine, Swiss Business Magazine, Sueddeutsche Zeitung, CBS

Morning News, BBC, Channel 4 in UK, RAI (Italy), CBN Weekly News & Morning Glory (China), MBC TV, KBS & Arirang TV, Korea Times (South Korea), Kiev Weekly, Kultura Moscow, all major TV, Radio and/or newspapers of Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Germany, France, India, Israel, Mexico, New Zealand, Portugal, Russia, Turkey, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, and Switzerland and given seminars in all of the above countries.

Since 1984, more than 100,000 students have taken McKee's courses at various cities around the world: Los Angeles, New York, London, Paris, Sydney, Toronto, Boston, San Francisco, Helsinki, Oslo, Munich, Tel Aviv, Auckland, Singapore, Madrid, Beijing, Shanghai, Barcelona, Lisbon, Malaga, Hamburg, Berlin, Johannesburg, Rome, Stockholm,

São Paulo, Santiago, Buenos Aires, Bogota, Beijing, Brussels, Rio de Janeiro, Moscow, Seoul, Istanbul, Hyderabad, Mexico City and many cities regularly. Some notable writers, directors, and actors such as Peter Jackson, Jane Campion, Andrew Stanton, Geoffrey Rush, Paul Haggis, Akiva Goldsman, William Goldman, Joan Rivers, Meg Ryan, Rob Row, David Bowie, Kirk Douglas, John Cleese, Steve Pressfield, Russell Brand, and the writers of Pixar to name a few, have taken his seminar. McKee continues to be a project consultant to major film and television production companies such as 20th Century Fox, Disney, Paramount, & MTV. In addition, Pixar, ABC, BBC, Disney, Miramax, PBS, Nickelodeon, Paramount, GLOBOSAT, MNET and other international TV and Film companies regularly send their entire creative and writing staffs to his lectures. ■

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Mark Whitney occupies a unique place in the world. As a successful entrepreneur with a one-of-a-kind background (including a jail stint) he decided to undertake to become a life performer. Mark is a keen student of the human experience and writes the truth into his live shows.

## **CHARACTER CREATION: PART 4, BUILD A COMPLEX CHARACTER AROUND A NEED**

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## **ROBERT MCKEE INTERVIEWS STEVEN PRESSFIELD : PART 3**

In this final part of Robert McKee's interview with Steven Pressfield, we learn about the genesis of Pressfield's beliefs on war – its inevitability and virtues.

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Robert McKee and Drew Carey discuss what makes a good joke, the structure of a joke, and some of Mr. Carey's comedic challenges.

## **HOW HOLLYWOOD WORKS, PRODUCERS: THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY**

In this month's exploration of the inner workings of Hollywood, Ed Saxon explains how producers think.

## **ASK ROBERT MCKEE**

In this edition of Ask McKee, we learn why unknown writers should try to sell a whole screenplay, not just a treatment.

# CONTRIBUTORS:



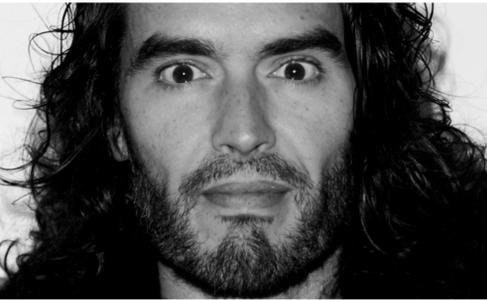
## SHAWN COYNE

*Shawn Coyne is an editor, publisher, literary agent and writer responsible for helping his clients and writing projects generate more than \$150 million in gross revenue (in North America alone).*



## CRAIG WALENDZIAK

*Craig Walendziak is a Harvard Educated screenwriter hailing from Boston, Massachusetts, beginning his writing career as a financial columnist for Seeking Alpha, Yahoo Finance and Morningstar News.*



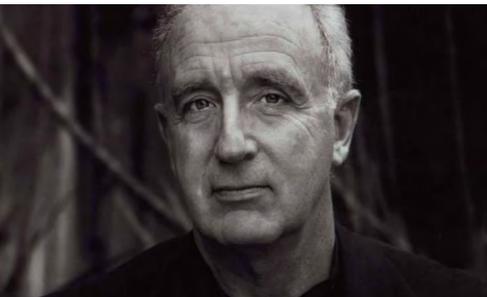
## RUSSELL BRAND

*Russell Brand is an award winning English comedian, actor, having played leading rolls in "Forgetting Sarah Marshall" and "Get Him To The Greek," radio host, author, and political activist.*



## DREW CAREY

*Drew Carey is one of the most successful television comedians and game show hosts of the past 20 years, starting in The Drew Carey Show which became one of the most popular sitcoms on television.*



## STEVEN PRESSFIELD

*Steven Pressfield is a Best-Selling author and celebrated screenwriter of The War of Art, The Lion's Gate, and The Legend of Bagger Vance.*



## MARK WHITNEY

*Mark Whitney is a former jailhouse lawyer turned tech entrepreneur, playwright and award-winning political satirist who spins non-stop, subversive tales of political and institutional corruption and graft.*



Many of the articles in *STORY Magazine* are based on lessons, interviews, and lectures given. As such, they may not represent the author's normal writing 'voice', but they are always true to their word. This content isn't available for free anywhere – [Enjoy your access to this private collection.](#)





# STAGE 32 HAPPY WRITER SPOTLIGHT

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BY CRAIG WALENDZIAK

*Learn how membership with Stage 32 has helped one screenwriter make a career for himself.*

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# STAGE 32 HAPPY WRITER SPOTLIGHT

As a screenwriter, trying to break into Hollywood from outside of Los Angeles can be a daunting task. Unless you know someone who knows someone, you are left staring at your finished screenplay wondering, "What next?" Trying to get a manager, agent, studio, or production company to read your material can be nearly impossible.

While listening to a podcast, I found out about Stage 32, and realized there might be hope yet. Founder & CEO, Richard Botto, talked about the community and the various offerings for all creatives. It seemed like the perfect place for people like me to gather online and make the ever-elusive "Hollywood" seem just a little bit closer.

When I signed up to Stage 32 I was immediately drawn to the Stage 32 Happy Writers, which offered unparalleled opportunities for writing, including exclusive pitch sessions with Hollywood executives. I could pitch my screenplays to managers, agents, directors of development and other big decision makers. It allowed a no-name writer 2000 miles away get in front of some of the biggest movers and shakers in Hollywood. I took full advantage.

Joey Tuccio, President of the Stage 32 Happy Writers, guided me through the pitching pro-

cess. He helped me hone my craft, and even pointed me in the right direction for producers and managers that were looking for my genre. He was a tireless advocate. During this process I also had support from creatives all over the world inside the Stage 32 Lounge.

On Joey's recommendation, I submitted a written pitch for *The Devil's Hammer* to Producer David Harris. A short time later I received an email from Joey that simply stated, "Call me!" I did. David Harris had read the script and "loved it". Joey set up a meeting between David and I, and we immediately hit it off. He agreed to shop my script.

As if this wasn't enough, David and his partners at UnLTD Productions, offered me writing assignments on a few projects they had in development, one of which led to a co-writing credit on a psychological thriller named *A Dying Art*, directed by David Moscow. The film goes into production this month and it was announced in the *Hollywood Reporter* - it was incredibly exciting to see my first credit announced to the trades.

And, I would be remiss not to mention that I met my manager, Kailey Marsh, through networking on Stage 32. I kept her in the loop on my career, and to

her credit, she helped guide me and brought me onboard as her client. I couldn't be happier. The "Search for New Blood Contest" that Stage 32 and Kailey host together is a great avenue for new writers to get their work reviewed by industry professionals!

Kailey and UnLTD Productions were kind enough to sing my praises around town, leading to two other writing assignments that should begin production in 2015. For this, I can't thank them enough.

None of this would have happened without the help of Stage 32 and their incredible network. I'm eternally grateful.. ■

## WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT STAGE 32?

Go to [Stage32.com](http://Stage32.com)  
and join for FREE.  
Established in 2011,  
Stage 32 is the world's  
largest social network  
and educational hub  
for film and television  
creatives with over  
400,000 members  
worldwide.

# HARPER WALTER

STAGE  
32



Craig Walendziak is a Harvard Educated screenwriter hailing from Boston, Massachusetts. He spent the majority of his youth touring in hardcore punk bands across the world. Craig began his writing career as a financial columnist for popular investment websites such as Seeking Alpha, Yahoo Finance and Morningstar News.

Later, Craig's love of the horror movies ushered him into the world of filmmaking. Craig's first screenplay, *The Devil's Hammer* was featured in issue #275 of *Famous Monster of Filmland*. His Second screenplay, *Hard Time*, was a finalist in the prestigious Page International Screenwriting Awards.

Craig has two projects set for release in 2015, IFC Films Contracted: Phase II and UnLTD Productions, *A Dying Art*, directed by David Moscow. In addition, Craig has three projects in various stages of development.

Craig Walendziak is a proud father, devoted husband, and devout animal lover and is represented by Kailey Marsh, of Kailey Marsh Management & Production.



# ROBERT MCKEE ON DIALOGUE

## Dialogue Example: The Great Gatsby

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BY ROBERT MCKEE

*In this installment of his series on Dialogue, Robert McKee shows us how F. Scott Fitzgerald expertly uses the third thing to dramatize a spousal conflict.*

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The next example is a far more complex dialogue from a famous novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*. Let me set the scene. In chapter 1, we meet the story's narrator, Nick Caraway. Nick has come to New York to begin his Wall Street career. He has rented a house in West Egg, Long Island. His neighbor is Jay Gatsby, a fabulously wealthy young man who has made his fortune as a

bootlegger. West Egg is home to the well-to-do, but it is far less fashionable than its very exclusive counterpart across the bay, East Egg.

Nick's cousin, the beautiful Daisy, lives in an East Egg mansion with her wealthy husband, Tom Buchanan, a powerfully built former Ivy League athlete. In her late teens, Daisy fell passionately in love with

Jay Gatsby. It was a rich girl/poor boy affair that broke up when Gatsby left to fight in World War I. Soon after their breakup, the socially ambitious Daisy married the wealthy Tom Buchanan.

In recent years, Gatsby has become rich and scandalously famous. Daisy has no doubt read and heard about his exploits. She may or may

# ROBERT MCKEE ON DIALOGUE

not know that he has purchased an estate across the bay. In fact, Gatsby bought the home so that he could look across the narrow waters to the lit windows of Daisy's home. One evening, the Buchanans invite Nick over for dinner, and there Nick meets Miss Jordan Baker, a female tennis star who, like the Buchanans, is also upper-class.

F. Scott Fitzgerald tells his novel in the first-person in the voice of Nick. The action begins as the four-some—Daisy, her husband Tom, her cousin Nick and her friend Jordan Baker—sip drinks before dinner. I'm going to read the scene to you exactly as Fitzgerald wrote it. It begins when Jordan Baker turns to Nick and says, "You live in West Egg," she remarked contemptuously. "I know someone there."

"I don't know a single..."

"You must know Gatsby."

"Gatsby?" Demanded Daisy, "What Gatsby?"

*Before I could reply that he was my neighbor, dinner was announced. Wedging his tense arm imperatively under mine, Tommy Buchanan compelled me from the room as though he were moving a checker to another square. Slenderly, languidly, their hands set lightly on their hips, the two young women preceded us out onto a rosy-colored porch open toward the sunset, where four candles flickered*

*on the table in the diminished wind.*

*"Why candles?" Objected Daisy, frowning. She snapped them out with her fingers. "In two weeks, it will be the longest day of the year." She looked at us all radiantly. "Do you always watch for the longest day of the year, and then miss that? I always watch for the longest day of the year and miss it."*

*"We ought to plan something." Yawned Miss Baker, sitting down at the table as if she were getting into bed.*

*"Alright," said Daisy, "What do we plan?" She turned to me helplessly. "What do people plan?"*

*Before I could answer, her eyes fastened with odd expression on her little finger.*

*"Look," she complained, "I hurt it."*

*We all looked, and the knuckle was black and blue.*

*"You did it, Tom," she said accusingly. "I know you didn't mean to do it, but you did do it. That's what I get for marrying a brute of a man, a great big hulking physical specimen of a..."*

*"I hate that word, 'hulking.'" Objected Tom crossly, "Even in kidding."*

*"Hulking," insisted Daisy.*

That ends the scene, and Fitzgerald

jumps ahead to describe the dinner that ensued. The first beat triggers the scene's inciting incident. Daisy discovers that Jay Gatsby has moved nearby and that Jordan and Nick know him. When Daisy asks, "What Gatsby?" she knows full well it's Jay Gatsby, but she cleverly uses the question to conceal her genuine surprise to learn that her former lover is now her neighbor, and her friend and cousin know him.

The realization that Gatsby has moved close to her, undoubtedly drawn to West Egg because of her, upsets the balance of Daisy's life and arouses in her the desire to see Gatsby. Daisy's fluidly fickle nature makes her incapable of decisive plans, but this much is clear: Her super objective throughout the whole novel is to, at the very least, see Gatsby. How much more she might want, who can say?

This puts two critical values at conflict in Daisy: marriage versus passion—the security of her marriage versus her passion for Gatsby. She must risk the former to gain the latter. So, in a split second, she must decide whether to keep the marital peace or to go to war. She decides to go to war with her husband.

Daisy's problem is that she cannot just pick up a telephone and call Gatsby; her pride and vanity won't allow that. What's more, if her husband and the rigid, snobbish society she moves in were to discover that

# ROBERT MCKEE ON DIALOGUE

she pursued the notorious Gatsby, the scandal would ruin her. So instantly, instinctively, she decides to put on a show in front of Nick and Jordan Baker so that one or both will carry a message to Gatsby—a message that says the Buchanan marriage is in trouble.

Daisy decides to humiliate her husband in public. As soon as she hears about Gatsby, she goes after her husband through third things. Her husband has had the household staff set the dinner table with candles. He may have done it for Daisy's sake, or perhaps he intended a romantic touch to encourage Nick and Jordan Baker. Indeed, in time, Nick and Jordan will have a summer affair. But whatever Tom's reason, as they step out to the table, Daisy frowns, objects to the candles, snuffing them out with her fingers. But Tom simply hides the hurt she has caused and says nothing.

So, when the candle insult gets no reaction, she tries another tactic. Daisy starts a conversation about the summer solstice, but, before anybody can respond to her strange question, she reacts to her own action and ends the topic by referring it back to herself.

Jordan Baker starts the next beat by suggesting that they should plan to do something. Daisy simply continues that action by repeating the question twice, but, not to her husband, to Nick. Before Nick can an-

swer it, however, she instantly and literally wraps the conversation around her little finger.

Daisy next accuses her husband of bruising her. Again, Fitzgerald gives Tom no visible reaction, not a word of protest. Daisy, then, with cool irony, insults her husband for the third time with a special emphasis on the word that she knows he hates: "hulking." Finally, Tom objects and orders Daisy not to say the word again.

Now, when I say order, bear in mind that these are educated, very upper-class characters, so I use the word "order" to name Tom's subtextual action. He is too well-behaved to say, "Damn it, Daisy, never use the word 'hulking' again." But under the phrase, "I hate that word" is an indirect command. So Daisy climaxes the scene by defying her husband's implicit order and repeating the hated word with emphasis. "Hulking," she said. In reaction, Tom once more takes her insult in silence and says and does nothing.

So Daisy wins her marital power struggle and humiliates Tom. This duel between husband and wife, Tom's defeat and Daisy's victory, would not be lost on her audience, the very sensitive, observant Nick and the gossipy Miss Baker. Daisy knows this; she knows that her little war has had the effect she wants, and now she hopes that these two characters will carry the news to Gatsby.

Notice the trialogues. Husband and wife do not talk or argue directly, but they carry on through a series of third things: Gatsby, candles, the summer solstice, Daisy's little finger, and, most importantly and climactically, the word "hulking." Notice also the dialogue pattern.

Daisy asks a question that opens up what could be a general topic for conversation with the others, but then without a pause, before anybody can answer, she instantly draws them back to herself. Fitzgerald repeats this pattern in Daisy's dialogue not only in this scene, but throughout the book. In ways that are at times amusing, sympathetic or even mysterious, Daisy constantly steers all talk back to herself. In other words, without saying it on the nose, Fitzgerald wants us to understand that Daisy is a very beautiful, very charming narcissist.

Looking even deeper, what is the real reason Daisy creates this scene? Why can't she just defy her husband, break social convention, and go to Gatsby herself? Why must she send a veiled message through Jordan and Nick? Because narcissists call attention to themselves. For Daisy, it is critical that Gatsby see her out. Gatsby must come to her. Fitzgerald uses these beats and many others elsewhere to express the dual spines of action that inspire his novel. *The Great Gatsby* is about Gatsby's obsession with Daisy and Daisy's obsession with Daisy. ■

# ROBERT MCKEE ON DIALOGUE



Robert McKee continues his ongoing series on dialogue in  
the next issue of *STORY Magazine*.





# **ROBERT MCKEE INTERVIEWS RUSSELL BRAND ON COMEDY**

## **Part 2**

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*McKee and Brand discuss the origins of comedy in part 2 of this interview series..*

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# MCKEE INTERVIEWS RUSSELL BRAND

**Robert McKee: I've always said that it's great fun on both sides of the stage. People in the audience, of course, are having a great time when the work is going well, but so is the comic. Doing it is great fun.**

Russell Brand: Yeah. Yeah, when it's good.

**RM: Yeah. There's another energy in comedy, as old as comedy, which is sex. The first great performers, comic performers on stage, wore a phallus down to their knees just so that the audience understood what the real source of energy was.**

RB: I didn't know that.

**RM: You didn't know that? It was literally down to their knees, and then over the...**

RB: Was this commedia dell'arte or what? Earlier than that?

**RM: No, this was Aristophanes; this was the Greek.**

RB: Euripides and all the frogs and all that stuff.

**RM: This was old comedy. Flies, frogs, all the bugs, and all that stuff. This was 2000, 600, and 500 years ago. Then over the centuries, that phallus got smaller and smaller. Then by the Shakespearean...**

RB: Not in all cases.

**RM: [laughs] Then in Shakespearean times, they just wore what was called a codpiece, which was like a jock strap on the outside of your costume. Then with Victorian repression, it became Charlie Chaplain's cane, Groucho Marx's cigar, Woody Allen's glasses, and on and on. Do you recognize the sexual energy of comedy, and if so, what is your phallus—your surrogate phallus?**

RB: Well, for me, there is constant use and reference to sexuality because of its explosive nature, and because of the implied privacy and the odd contradiction of the sanctity of sexual relationships and the profanity of sexual relationships. For me, I'm constantly referring back to that energy. I suppose because of its literal biological explosiveness of the active ejaculation.

My symbol of the phallus is the phallus. You know, I am forever grinding my hips and swirling around up there and referring to sexual energy, but I actually have never really translated it.

But I use sex quite a lot, even in a show like *Messiah Complex*. If it becomes theoretically dense, I will explode it with sexual content. In terms of the frequencies of consciousness we know,

where do we go with our sexuality? In that moment when you're caught up in your sexuality, with that thing that's either an animal or a child, if someone can touch you there, there's an, "AH!" And you're going to laugh, and it is just so private.

**RM: You might be the first tattooed comic.**

RB: Yeah, that's just one of my claims.

**RM: That's sexual.**

RB: Yeah, in a way. I think they're sort of like clowns as characters. There's like a topless sexuality—it's a chaotic sexuality. In terms of reputation, sexuality has always been sort of part of what I do.

On stage, for me, the sexuality is about the juxtaposition and the explosion between the profane and the sacred. That's where that stuff comes from. In terms of content, it gives you access to things that are very intimate and private.

When I talk about my sexuality, it's always in a humiliating way. Sometimes I'll make very bold show-off statements, but then I'm always deflated. The humor is surely coming from the flaccid phallus, not the erect phallus.

One of the jokes I've always had, actually, is that it's nice when

# MCKEE INTERVIEWS RUSSELL BRAND

women send you photographs (this is when I was a single man, before I had the great gift of love). It's always nice when women send you a rude photograph like of their boobs or whatever. But how do you respond to that as a man? Your only option is to send a photograph of your penis, but then what choice? If you send it flaccid, it's too pathetic, like a Smurf's hat, and it looks kind of like how Groucho Marx looks ill. You can't send that to someone. If you send them an erection, it's too, "ROAR!" It's too much of a powerful message.

Look at our culture. In New York City, we're surrounded by emblems of the phallus. It's inescapable in our culture—the phallus worship—but I suppose the phallus itself is contradictory. It knows two states. It is proud, it is thrusting, it is bold, and then it is limp and impotent and hopeless. Usually it makes those decisions itself.

**RM: [laughs] Let's, let's see if we can find a subject that's not funny. Nationalities, cultures—is there any line that you would draw around those?**

RB: No. I've been touring at the moment. I did a show in Istanbul, in Iceland in Reykjavík, and in Belfast. I was in all sorts of places, and I was doing comedy about common sexuality and Christ in

Belfast. I do a mime about anal sex and Jesus. When I finished the bit in Belfast and they laughed, I said, "Oh, thank you. I felt scared doing this in Belfast." Then they laughed again. When I was in Istanbul, I was talking like it was a Muslim audience, but they loved it. But, you know what, I was doing some stuff...

**RM: Wait, they loved it?**

RB: They loved it. It was interesting, Bob, because I do stuff, such as talk about Che Guevara. I say, "What's happened to us that our leaders look the way they do?" For example, in our country, David Cameron. I mean, Barack Obama is good—at least he's sexy, I guess, and he's a black fella so at least he's countercultural in terms of pigmentation, if nothing else.

But like I was saying, I show pictures of the country's leader. I show Che Guevara and say, "What have you said about Che Guevara? His ruthlessness and his homophobic. That is what a hero looks like, that is the face of a leader." Obviously people laugh, of course, because of the picture of me looking somewhat similar to it nearby. And then I go, "This isn't." And then I show a picture of their leader. In Istanbul, Erdogan is their leader.

When that picture of Erdogan came up, I was nervous. People

told me not to do that, but they stood up and cheered. They were like, "Yeah!" I was taken aback. This is why I love live performance, because you never know what's going to happen. The audience got on its feet.

**RM: Cheering for you or for him?**

RB: For me. They hate their leader; they hate him.

**RM: Yeah, they hate the guy.**

RB: So it was amazing; it was amazing. I had to leave the venue very quickly afterward because people said, "If that gets out, you're going to be in a lot of trouble."

**RM: Indeed.**

RB: Your intention is what's important in comedy. People always say, "Oh, you do jokes about Jesus. Would you make the same jokes about Mohammed?" I say, "Well yes, I would, but not just to antagonize people." I wouldn't deliberately say, "Oh, here's a depiction of Mohammed."

You want to provoke people as a comedian, but what is it you're provoking? You're provoking their prejudice, their bigotry, and their beliefs that they haven't really questioned. Humor is a good way of accessing those unaddressed

# MCKEE INTERVIEWS RUSSELL BRAND

hypocrisies. If your intention is, “How can I annoy Muslims?” Or, “How can I annoy homosexuals?” I think that’s stupid. Comedy is a tool to attack power, not to attack people who don’t have power.

When I’m doing these things and when I’m writing these things, I’m thinking, “Well, who is the target? Who is the victim of this joke? Who am I attacking here?” If it’s the Muslim community, who by and large are already subject to a great deal of abuse, prejudice, bigotry and attack, then I don’t. That’s not my side of the argument.

## **RM: Crippled children?**

RB: Well, there’s some humor to be had. In fact, I had to stifle a laugh when you mentioned the little bastards. It depends. There are situations where a crippled child could be humorous. Not when you’re dealing directly, but it’s like the death penalty, right? People say, “Oh yeah? You don’t agree with the death penalty. How would you feel if someone you loved was murdered?” I’d want to kill them. That is when I shouldn’t be making legislation. So, like I say, the legislation should be made by people who are even-tempered, even-headed, and humor has a place in that, I think.

## **RM: The excuse I make in my**

**comedy lectures is that if you make a joke about somebody who’s deformed, it’s not for their deformity, it’s for the way they think behind that deformity, because there’s a lot of really rude people in wheelchairs.**

RB: Yes, there are. It’s got to stop.

**RM: So it’s the rudeness that’s important, but a lot of people can’t make that separation.**

RB: No.

**RM: Joan Rivers does jokes about the Holocaust; she does jokes about blind people. It kills me. She said that here in New York, no blind person should have a view, right?**

RB: Yeah.

**RM: No, they should, and you could just tell them, “Yes, you have a view.” How would they know? So the view is, for us, the scene. I hope there’s truth in that—that it’s really not the deformity. But that joke, blind people shouldn’t have a view.**

RB: The key for me is...

**RM: It’s not about their point of view about their attitude; it’s about their handicap.**

RB: I think it is. But in a way, there’s

an absurdity in that, and it’s kind of a relief from the piety and nervousness we all feel around disability. We know that as human beings, we have to be compassionate and loving to people, but that doesn’t preclude our right to be humorous.

For me, Bob, it’s about creating the context where you earn the right to say those things. I don’t think you just go around saying hateful, disparaging things. You have to create a context. I always get in trouble when people take the stuff I’ve said out of the context that I’ve created and then say, “Well, see, that’s dubious that you’ve said that.” In those circumstances, it is, but that wasn’t when I said it. That’s the other thing about live work, because you hear when the audience is shocked, and you say, “Oh, God, I’m sorry; I didn’t mean it like this.” As an artist, you create the context, and then within that context you create whatever you want.

**RM: So if they groan, you apologize?**

RB: I sometimes tell them to fuck off for being so pious.

**RM: Yeah. Joan Rivers just says, “Oh, grow up.” Right?**

RB: Yeah, yeah.

**RM: Oh, grow up, get over it. I**

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did a two-day workshop in Madrid with Spanish comics for MTV and Paramount because they, they wanted stand-up comics to develop a TV series in Spain in the Spanish language. I was surprised by how good they were. My first take, because I'm full of prejudice, was, "Well, Spanish stand-up comics...really?" But when I got there, they were great, and their favorite subject was religion, and they did some wonderful material. They sent me a whole DVD called *Divine Comedy*, and it was all great jokes about religion. If you had to be restricted to one subject like that—religion, politics, military...

RB: Oh, I think I'd find that very difficult. For me, if it was one subject, it would be embarrassing. It would be something moral like that.

**RM: That's so English.**

RB: In the end, you can't escape it. Sometimes I think I'm very radical, avant-garde and very broad-minded, and so mystical and spiritual and New Age, but really I'm just an English person. For me, that embarrassment is the fulcrum of what we were discussing earlier—the inner voice and the outer voice.

**RM: Yeah. That incongruity**

**somehow that you can see in these things comes back to you as a form of embarrassment?**

RB: That you feel it. When I am embarrassed, my first impulse is, "Oh my God, I've got to flee this feeling. This is the worst thing that has ever happened." My second impulse is to write it down. I know that from the embarrassment, that's where the comedy is coming from. These things are always going to be universal—that the culture is an operating system.

The way that it's culture, the language may differ, but we are describing the same universal experience. This is why your system works, because all of us are part of the same grid. Joseph Campbell's exploratory work in mythology demonstrates this. Jung's work in psychology demonstrates this — that we are operating from the same template, but through culture it is expressed differently. So if I prove something as embarrassing, you have access to the essential ingredients.

**RM: That's all about institutions and social behavior. What about individuals, personality types. Moliere built a whole career out of savaging certain personality types, such as the miser, the hypochondriac, and so forth. Do individuals get your ire? Do you notice or do**

**you use that?**

RB: Well, yeah, but for me like...

**RM: Because most of your comedy seems to be social.**

RB: Yeah, I think you start big, but comedy comes from particularity and specificity. I don't think that you can be funny in a general way. There has to be a specificity. Even the Joan Rivers joke that you used has a specific cultural attribute. A hundred years ago, people wouldn't have cared about that the disability, or it wouldn't have been a release because you would have openly treated disabled people badly. It's a cultural view that's particularly pertinent if you live in New York and you understand what real estate is like in New York.

So, for me, the specificity is what it is. It is where the humor comes from. Understanding types is very helpful. For example, when I'm doing my work on leaders, I was able understand, "Oh, I'll fuck everybody." Regardless of whether it's a secular or sort of a Muslim-tending country, or sort of a sect-like a country driven apart by sectarian violence like the North of Ireland, they all feel this sense of disparity and dissatisfaction from their leaders. For me, it is like a recognition of types—a recognition of corruption. These things are just sym-

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bolic language. So yes, certainly I recognize types.

**RM: Yes. So, somebody who is not stepping forward and taking power, such as an individual walking down the street with a certain eccentricity, wouldn't necessarily draw your interest.**

RB: No. But I do torment the audience at the beginning of shows. I do get out, and then there are...

**RM: Individuals?**

RB: Absolutely. And then there are certain systemic things that occur regularly. I say, "Well, I know this type of person." A certain type of young boy that's ultimately innocent, a certain type of male, a certain type of older women, and actually always people in electric wheelchairs. I get in that electric wheelchair with them, and I sit on their lap and I drive it. People love it. People love the relief of like, "Oh, my God, he's going to fucking crash the wheelchair."

People are so excited when sometimes it doesn't crash. It's not so good when it does crash. There have been lawsuits, but what are you going to do? You can't be double in a wheelchair. You're already in a wheelchair, so what are you worried about if we did crash? What have you got to lose? I'm the one that can walk—I should be worried, so shut up.

**RM: To get back to the actual interview, jokes are two parts—setup and punch.**

RB: Yes.

**RM: If I see people who have problems trying to write comedy, it's that they focus on the punch first. It's all about getting the wit; it's about the language; it's about the gesture. If it's a piece of business or whatever, they're always in search of the punch. It's the punch, the punch, the punch. Then they want to work backwards to the setup. I argue with them that no, no—if you've got a great setup, you'll find 10 different ways to punch it. Pick the best one.**

RB: Yeah, you're right.

**RM: That energy gives them the setup, and the anger or whatever the subject is. When you have a really powerful setup, you can punch it many times over without setting up again.**

RB: Yeah, yeah, it's all in how you deliver it.

**RM: So it's really all about the setup.**

RB: Completely. There is a disproportionately high number of comedians that are good at mathematics. I'm unfortunately not one

of them, and I think it's because it's all about arithmetic to comedy; it's about formula and the establishment of it. I'm working on a script at the moment with Jemimah, as a matter of fact. The important thing is the establishment of this context and making sure that people are going to know it.

If you're doing a joke about a person that's overly dependent on New Age nonsense and astrology and believes in that kind of hocus-pocus stuff, you have to make sure that you've properly established that. Otherwise, your jokes later on in the script, when that person gets into trouble as a result of that belief, will not pay off.

For me, it's like the context of the joke is very, very important to make sure that you establish that, "Oh no, not only is this happening, but it's happening to this person." Tina Fey does that lovely joke—a normal person will laugh at a man dressed up as an old lady falling down some stairs. Comedians will laugh at an old lady falling down some stairs.

There is a refined brutality to comedy. Do you know what I think, Bob? The jokes take care of themselves. They're there ethereally waiting for you to reach them. You just have to choose

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the way that you're going to get there. You create the correct characters, you create the correct circumstances. When that has a strong base, you can return to that so many times; you can keep coming back to it.

**RM: Yeah we have a name for it—we call it callbacks.**

RB: Yeah, callback, stitchback, you know.

**RM: Stitchback, I like that. Is that English?**

RB: Yeah, we use stitchback, back reference, and then callback because there's so much cross-cultural pollination.

**RM: All three mean the same thing?**

RB: Yeah, pretty much.

**RM: That's a fascinating phenomenon—the callback. Don't you think? You can't call back to something that didn't get a laugh the first time.**

RB: No, you can't.

**RM: Right? So, you set up and you get a joke, and you leave it in the ground for 20 minutes, a half an hour, and then you punch it again, and for some reason, they laugh without having the setup again. That's**

**just a mystery to me.**

RB: It's like hypnosis, I think. You've planted. You've told them that it is funny. Sometimes I use neuro-linguistic programming, or like physical gestures with comedy. So when I'm setting up stuff that I know needs applause, I use this hand that you will be applauding when I'm doing this gesture. Then whenever I go back to that stuff, they automatically applaud because I've tied it in with that gesture. So you have to sort of plant these symbols throughout your work.

We watched a film the other day in preparation, like the film *East is East*. Do you know that movie? It's sort of a cross-cultural movie about Asian families living in the UK. It's a slice of life type film including rites of passage for a couple of sons. What's really interesting...

**RM: Got by me, sorry.**

RB: Well, I'm using your language, so you should know roughly what I mean from the shorthand. It uses symbols brilliantly. The father wants his sons to go through with these arranged marriages, so he has this chest in which he keeps their arranged marriage paraphernalia. But that chest is that man's heart. The youngest son won't ever take off his hood, he stays within there.

Throughout the film, we see people looking at each other through windows, between doorways. The makers of the film understand that there's stuff that they can't do with language that they can do with symbols, but these symbols can be created linguistically through non-visual medium or through an erratic medium like stand-up comedy or through a written screenplay. You just have to know this symbol—that's just how the phallus works, because we have a presumed knowledge of the phallus. We have an innate understanding of its inconsistent nature, and the possibility of castration all tied up into that symbol that applies as well in Africa as it does in Northern Europe or wherever you use it.

**RM: In order to get to that performance, let's talk about your stand-up work to begin with before we go to fiction. Let's talk about the process. Do you sit down and write?**

RB: No, I don't. I collate experiences that I know have been humorous and impactful. With *Messiah Complex*, I knew that I could talk about whatever I wanted to talk about. It was like, what do you find most fascinating? I thought it was genuine heroes—Che Guevara, Malcolm X, Jesus Christ, Gandhi.

I thought I would have to take

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them as a starting point. I researched those four areas. Anything that I thought was funny, I made a note of. Then I did shows in front of small audiences where I talked about the things that I thought were humorous. Anything that sort of got laughed at, I would put to one side. Anything that didn't, unless I was really certain there was something in it, I would let go.

**RM: So you had an outline. Was the outline just in your head, or did you sit...**

RB: I work mostly with bullet points, but there's not a structure at this point. I don't have a climax or anything like that. I just know, "Here is a list of things I think are funny, and here are ways that they may relate to one another." But I don't presume to know. I let the thing be what it's going to be.

**RM: Okay, we're getting mystical now, let the thing be what it wants to be.**

RB: Well, if I sort of say, "I'm going to go talk about Gandhi because Gandhi was historical or first Jesus, and then Gandhi." I don't say it is going to work chronologically. I can see there's a similarity between Hitler, who was in the show also, and Che Guevara because they're both militant figures. I can see that Gandhi and

Malcolm X are both religious, so there's sort of a connection there, but I won't impose. I don't say, "No, that's the only way." I'm open to the idea of changing.

The theme is something I won't fuck with, if I know what the theme is. We all have the capacity to be great. We all have the capacity for heroism, and we have more of a chance of achieving that if we focus on heroism. That won't change, and that's sort of a guiding principle.

**RM: Right. I'm still trying to get it down to what is in your pocket when you walk out on stage. You've got these four characters, these four personages. You've done research, meaning you've read up on them or looked at Gandhi in the magnitudes and him giving speeches or whatever you did. Do you take notes, physical notes, out of that research?**

RB: Yes.

**RM: Does it ever get formalized on paper, or does it just go into your head and stay there?**

RB: I record the shows and go back, but I do make notes on the inexplicably mandatory yellow legal pad. I also make notes on those, but bullet pointed and in very short form. ■

**MCKEE  
INTERVIEWS  
RUSSELL BRAND**



Stay tuned next month for the third and final part of Robert McKee's interview series with Russell Brand.





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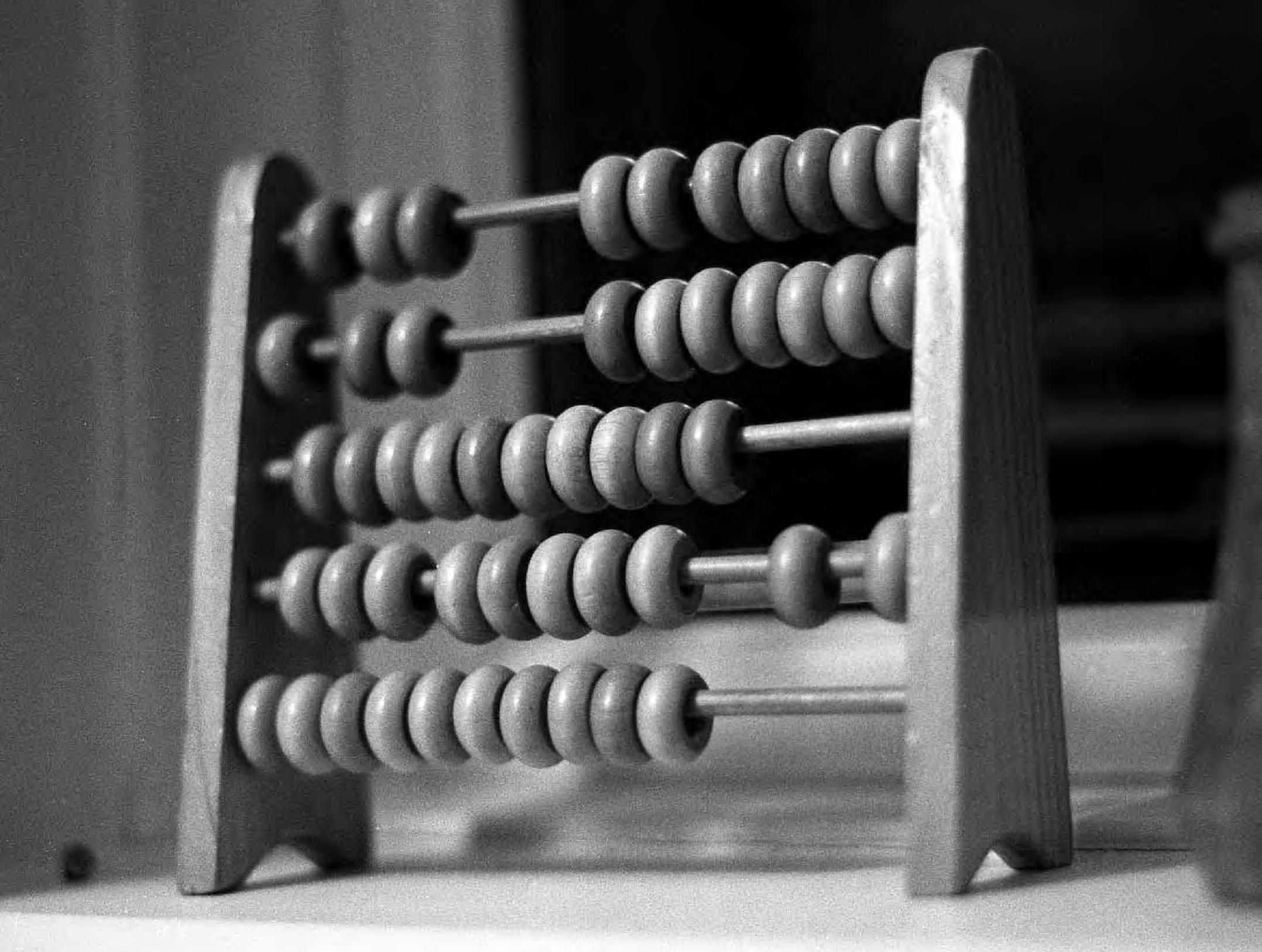
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# YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY

## Form Over Formula

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BY SHAWN COYNE

*Shawn Coyne tells a story that illustrates the best example yet of why form beats formula every single time.*

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# YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY

A few years ago, a very talented line-by-line writer came to me for help.

A publisher I respected had recommended her to me. The publisher believed (rightfully) that the woman had what it took to write bestselling thrillers. The publisher had passed on a number of her books – not because he didn't find them compelling, but because ultimately they "didn't work."

The writer asked me to work with her from first idea to final draft. That is, she wanted to start from scratch – seek my opinion about the right kind of character to feature, the particular genre of thriller that I felt was the most underserved and to basically engineer a new novel from start to finish using *The Story Grid*. She could not afford to pay my usual editorial fee, but I too believed in her, so we came to a profit-sharing relationship.

We would be business partners, just like a couple of scientists figuring out how to create a new kind of light bulb. I'd done this sort of thing before with narrative nonfiction as well as fiction and while the work requires a multiple year commitment, I've never regretted taking it on. I always learn something new.

We got to work.

I walked her through *The Story Grid*, how I work, etc. and she was over the moon. It turned out that she was as much of a story nerd as I was. She had read and studied many of the same Story experts I had, so we spoke the same language. She immediately understood my principles and jumped right in to the process.

We began by both agreeing that she'd write a contemporary thriller that would introduce a brand new series character, a woman with a Jason Bourne-like ignorance of her past. While the external genre was "spy thriller," the internal genre of the book would be a "disillusionment plot." (More on this later) Coincidentally, she told me that she had a draft of a book she'd written with a similar character in her closet.

She suggested that we begin with that draft to see if there was anything salvageable from it.

This is when I started to get nervous. But I relented. Maybe the manuscript could give us some direction – never say never, right? Why reinvent something that has already worked?

I read her abandoned book and it had some really great moments. Innovative turns of phrase, some seriously frightening scenes. Overall, it gave me even more confidence in her abilities. But

it most certainly did not work. *It never paid off the promise of the hook in an inevitable, yet surprising way.* She did not disagree.

I ran it through *The Story Grid* and then we sat down to go through the places where it went off the rails. Weeks later, I thought we had a very clear understanding that the new lead character for our reverse engineering project would not be based on the character from her previous unsold novel.

Rather, we'd use a few of the scenes from the novel that really worked and perhaps adapt them to suit as major turning points for the new novel. I left her with a working map of about 60 scenes/chapters that included all of the conventions and obligatory scenes of the spy thriller form (more on this later on). I thought the conventions and obligatory scenes that we'd sketched out were uniquely twisted and innovative to a degree that would delight a thriller fan.

I even cold pitched the story, like Hollywood screenwriters do, to a few friends who held very high editorial positions at Big Five publishing houses. These friends had purchased millions of dollars worth of stories from me before, so I knew they had zero interest in humoring me. They wanted me to give them the first crack

# YOUR OWN WORST ENEMY

at the book for their publishing houses, so they were happy to give me quick notes and/or tell me what worked and didn't work from their point of view. This is what happens at agent/editor lunches sometimes and it's the only reason I still occasionally have them.

I was now finished with my job as the "creation editor/agent" and now it was time for my business partner to do hers. We shook hands and she walked away with the road map to complete the novel.

Keep in mind that it took us a good nine months to get to this point. We debated scene after scene until we both felt it was the best solution we could come up with at the time. Were they turning correctly? Were we mixing up the positive and negative resolutions enough? Did we progressively complicate the Story effectively? Did we pay off the hook?

We both recognized that there would be a very great chance that what we anticipated to work, would need to be completely rethought after we had a draft in hand, but as a reference guide to write a workable thriller, it was spot on.

She came back six months later with a book far closer to the original manuscript she pulled out of

her closet than I thought possible. While scenes were changed, the very problems that made it unworkable a year and a quarter before riddled the narrative. And an obligatory scene—the hero at the mercy of the villain scene, crucial to nail in a thriller—was gone entirely.

I took a deep breath and went through her draft scene by scene again and confronted her about the lack of the crucial obligatory scene.

"Well, I wrote it, but then I didn't like it, so I cut it," she said.

I explained that it was fine to do the scene differently, but without it, the book wouldn't work.

"That's not true, I read THE LATEST BESTSELLING THRILLER BY BESTSELLING AUTHOR X and he didn't have that scene...why do I have to?"

So here's when I knew this project would never come to fruition. I now knew the reason why this very talented writer kept getting to the one-yard line and was never able to score a touchdown—a working thriller. Instead of dedicating herself to nailing the form of the thriller/story, she decided that she was above it.

She wanted the fruits of the labor (bestsellerdom) more than

the labor itself (writing a brilliant and innovative hero at the mercy of the villain scene no matter if the book was published or not). She wanted to be a bestselling thriller writer so badly, that she decided that doing what BESTSELLING THRILLER WRITERS did was more important than abiding by centuries' old Story form.

In her mind, conventions and obligatory scenes were all well and good but because a BESTSELLING THRILLER WRITER was able to ignore one or two in his novel and still become a best-seller, she felt she must do that too. No matter how hard I tried to explain that she couldn't copy what a BESTSELLING THRILLER WRITER did and get the same result, she refused to change her mind. Over and over again, I told her that there was no Formula, just Form.

Her argument of course was that if a BESTSELLING THRILLER WRITER was able to break the conventions of the form, she should be able to too.

Here's a hard thing to grasp and I'm sure I'll go to my grave trying to explain it. Just because a book becomes a bestseller, it doesn't make it something to emulate. There are myriad of reasons why some books become bestsellers and still don't work as Stories (See *The Emperor's New Clothes phe-*

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*nomenon*). Sometimes, there's just a hunger for a particular kind of book (Vampires, Zombies, BDSM novels) based on some ephemeral need in humanity's collective unconscious that drive sales. Trying to write one of those books that get swept up in the tide or even, the ultimate for some, a book seen as the cause of the tide is folly. It's like selling your house and putting all of your money on number 7 at the roulette table because you have a feeling #7 is going to hit!

Chasing the vagaries of the best-seller list (believing in formula and not form) is the mark of the amateur. That's putting the by-product of the Story (money, fame, etc.) ahead of the Story itself. Your contempt for form and lust for formula may even give you what you want. You write the next huge thing that makes you hundreds of millions of dollars. Now what? That kind of writing is equivalent to winning a lottery.

Why not just play the lottery?

The truth is that I don't think my business partner really had contempt for Story form, I think it scared her. She had the stuff to write a terrific Story that played off of century old themes, but to do so requires adherence to fundamentals. Not formulaic rules. Despite all of their desire to live by their own lone wolf ways,

ironically what amateur writers really want is a recipe. And certainty. And guarantees.

Form scares the big bestselling writers too. That's why they often do write books that do not abide the obligatory scenes and conventions of their genres. But just because they have a wide audience of people who will buy whatever they write and make those books bestsellers, does not mean that they wrote a story that worked.

In our desire to be unique and powerful, creative people become their own worst enemies. To abide by "rules" seems antithetical to why we're artists in the first place. So when presented with things that look like rules (form) we unconsciously rebel. We resist it with everything we have. And even when we talk ourselves off of the "I'm not going to write that scene because it's stupid" cliff, it's really hard to actually see the form for what it really is—an opportunity. Form gives you the place to throw down your best stuff.

Take the Hero at the Mercy of the Villain scene. It's been done to death. Try not picturing Bruce Willis or Liam Neeson chained to a pipe and being tortured when you hear "hero at the mercy of the villain." How do you not write that set up, but instead, innovate

it and still deliver the form?

Thomas Harris did it in *The Silence of the Lambs*. He didn't run away from it. Instead, he probably wrote two hundred versions of it and none of them worked. He probably didn't really figure it out until his tenth draft. What's important to remember is that he didn't quit until his thriller WORKED. And working means abiding conventions and obligatory scenes of genres.

The writer/business partner and I never did get on the same page about her thriller and we parted ways. Unfortunately, it's five years later and she still hasn't been able to get a publisher to take her on. I think about her every day and have faith that she will one day set aside her Resistance to form and create something remarkable. ■



Stay tuned next month for more on The Story Grid from  
Shawn Coyne.



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# ROBERT MCKEE INTERVIEWS ONE- MAN SHOW LEGEND MARK WHITNEY

## Part 1

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*Mark Whitney occupies a unique place in the world. As a successful entrepreneur with a one-of-a-kind background (including a jail stint) he decided to undertake to become a life performer. Mark is a keen student of the human experience and writes the truth into his live shows.*

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# MCKEE INTERVIEWS MARK WHITNEY

**ROBERT MCKEE:** Mark, it is a real pleasure to have an opportunity to interview you. I've seen, of course, your marvelous one-man show, *Fool for a Client*, and it is, for the most part, autobiographical, although it builds and builds into something quite universal. But my first question is one of medium. When people have compelling life stories that went through great experiences, some often, of course, write a book about this or they want to write a screenplay to dramatize it. They might even write a play. But very few people ever choose to get up on their feet and do a one-man show venting about their life and all the great implications in it. How did you choose that particular medium of expression?

MARK WHITNEY: Well it was an evolutionary process. I've always wanted to be a comedian and I kind of got into stand-up comedy—sort of the Rodney Dangerfield model. Rodney started doing a little bit of stand-up in his early twenties, but then he stopped, and he raised a family as an aluminum siding salesman [laughter]. When his kids were grown, he went back into stand-up, but he really didn't start stand-up seriously until he was about forty. I started really devoting myself to it when I was about 45, and I'm a guy that's been on my feet in a lot

of different situations.

**RM:** Well, you used to sell vacuum cleaners.

MW: Right, exactly. That's where I did my first one-man show—right there in a living room. I was familiar with being on my feet from acting in plays as a high school student and at the local colleges in the area, and I've always enjoyed being on my feet having a conversation with people. I talk, they laugh; I talk, they cry. It's a conversation. What I really wanted to do was stand-up comedy, and I grew up listening to—not listening—*memorizing* George Carlin.

**RM:** Yes, yes of course—the greatest.

MW: The best. And my mom is a product of a union between an O'Neill and a Mahoney, so there's that whole Irish Catholic thing there. But when I started getting serious about doing it, I didn't understand what was involved—it was like this whole separate art form.

**RM:** Yep. It is. It is.

MW: So many people who do stand-up comedy tell the story of how they just got up on stage and they just sucked, and I was just like that. My friend Curtis Mathew, who runs the San Francisco Comedy College (a great guy, who you

would really like), he talks about how I think this is probably true with a lot of different art forms, but particularly with stand-up comedy. He said that it always starts below the waist, then it moves to the heart and then to the head. When you get good at it, it moves to the head and you really start using your brain. When I started to get good at joke writing and joke performing and joke talent, I quickly got bored with it.

I got really bored with just rattling off the same ol' jokes over and over again that were disconnected. When I got into the business, I threw myself into trying to learn everything I could about the business—not just the creative side but also the business side. Once people learn how to do stand-up comedy, how do they become working comedians? How do they become paid comedians? So I ended up at the HBO Comedy Festival in Aspen. I think it was 2006. It's the biggest industry showcase there is. Everybody's there and their producers, the producers of that festival, scan the universe looking for people that perform one-person shows. So they had a handful of them there. They had a girl that pretended to be the daughter of George Bush who did half an hour. Then they had this guy who came out and I was sitting there. He comes out and he sits down at a table, and he's the most unassuming guy I've

# MCKEE INTERVIEWS MARK WHITNEY

ever seen. He looks like the guy everybody stole the lunch money from in high school and spent a lot of time being shaken upside down by his ankles. He walks out and he sits down at a table with a three-ring binder and reads his show to the audience!

**RM: Really?**

MW: Yes! He doesn't even know enough—he's not well-versed enough on the stage to know to look left and right. I'm thinking he must be right-handed because he would only look to the right. He'd look straight, and now and then he'd look off to the right, but he's reading this story and it's hilarious.

**RM: Yes.**

MW: It goes for half an hour but feels like thirty seconds. The audience is on their feet and he wins the one-person show competition at the HBO Comedy Fest! I'm sitting there watching this guy, and I was like, "You know, if you get off your ass, and walk around a little and use some hand gestures, you really have something here." Well, his name is Rick Cleveland.

**RM: Ah!**

MW: He writes with Aaron Sorkin.

**RM: Yes.**

MW: He wrote for *West Wing*.

**RM: Yes.**

MW: He's an accomplished writer.

**RM: Yes.**

MW: I got in touch with him through his agent, Creative Artists, and we went and I bought him a nice lunch in Beverly Hills. The first thing I wanted to know is: Was it a true story?

He tells a story. It's called *My Buddy Bill*, and he tells a story about how he and the writing staff of *West Wing* visited Bill Clinton in the Oval Office. Buddy the dog came in and piddled on the rug, and Rick who has a "way with dogs" said, "No Buddy! Bad dog!" Bill Clinton wrote Rick Cleveland a little thank-you note.

Cleveland took this experience and spun it into a show, and suddenly he's smoking reefer with Billy Bob Thornton and Bill Clinton in Amsterdam. They're down there at the library opening and he spun this story. The audience completely believed every word, and that's what made it great.

With my show, the struggles in my show actually happened.

**RM: How much of it was true? Factual?**

MW: His story? The point where he received the note [laughter].

Everything else was bullshit—the part with Bill Clinton coming out and then throwing the ball with the dog, and everything.

**RM: Did you think that his strategy of sitting at a table with a binder and reading it was a credible technique in order to make it seem more factual?**

MW: I was familiar with Spalding Gray, who is someone that has done that, and my friend Mike Daisy, who is sort of like if Spalding Gray and John Candy had sex then you would have Mike Daisy. He's that kind of guy.

Mike Daisy does a similar thing where he comes out and sits at a table and works from notes. I suspect it's because maybe he's just really enormous and can't stand-up. What I wanted to know with Rick Cleveland was why he performed the show that way.

Here's what he told me. He gets to the HBO Comedy Festival. He's got a one-hour show, and he finds out the day before that they're only giving him half an hour. So, he had to rewrite, and so on the last minute, he just came out and read it.

What I learn from watching Rick Cleveland was the power, not of a story well told, but a story well written. It had no production value. This was a guy who does not belong on stage, sitting at a ta-

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ble reading, but he's such a good writer that nobody cared. That was an epiphany for me because I saw what he did, and I stopped wanting to be a stand-up comedian. I wanted to be Rick Cleveland standing up without a binder.

The show that you saw—the movie of my show that you saw—that's the result of five years' work of touring.

**RM: I didn't look at the cassette, but how long is that show?**

MW: The show was 90 minutes.

**RM: Ninety minutes? That's three times what he did. That's a feature length.**

MW: It's a feature length and my goal over the five years was to have, not just ninety minutes, but to write so much that I was actually hopefully throwing out ninety minutes or three hours' worth of really good stuff. Just being left with ninety minutes of premium wine, you know where the whole thing is just—

**RM: Do you give them an intermission?**

MW: No.

**RM: Great.**

MW: You just rip.

**RM: You just ripped for ninety**

**minutes. They can do it obviously. They do it all the time.**

MW: Yup. My friend Mike Daisy—I've seen him do three hours. He does a show on Steve Jobs for three hours and it feels like five minutes, and he's sitting down working from a set list.

**RM: Once you decided you're going to do the one man show format, how did you find the material? As I said, it's based upon your own life experience to begin with, but it's much bigger than that.**

MW: It is. The chief theater critic of the *Washington Post*, Peter Marks, who was one of the first major critics to review my show when it was in the 4-5 star time of its evolution, he said that the trick of the one person show is to deceive the audience into thinking you're telling them something that's going to help them, when in fact you really just want to get up there and run your mouth. My wife says I'm narcissistic. I'm like, "Why? Because I stand on stage for ninety minutes and say 'look at me?'" [laughter]

**RM: I stand on stage for 32 hours.**

MW: Exactly, well there you go. [laughter]

**RM: And I'm not a narcissist.**

MW: Of course not. Just ask him. He'll tell ya'. [laughter] When I would work out a lot at the San Francisco Comedy College, my friend Curtis Matthews would do these round robin classes where people come up with five minutes of material. We'd perform for each other and everyone would comment. Early on, Curtis would always comment about what a fearless performer I was—not funny, but fearless.

I think that's the most important thing—being willing to commit. A lot of people are scared to look back at their mistakes. We don't want to do that. To me, a mistake is just an opportunity. It's all part of the process.

**RM: This is the wonderful thing, I think, about stand-up comedy. You say when you first started you sucked. Right? When everybody first starts, they suck. Right? The difference is a stand-up comic knows he sucks because they don't laugh.**

MW: Exactly.

**RM: If they laugh, it works. If they don't laugh, it doesn't work. So you immediately understand "I suck." How many people sit in a study somewhere writing page after page after page for years, not realizing that they suck because there is no audience; there is no response.**

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MW: You don't have any way to know.

**RM: You have no way to know except your own taste—your own judgment. With stand-up, you get the message real fast, real clear. When you make it, you understand immediately that you've made it.**

MW: Right.

**RM: Because they laugh. It's so pure.**

MW: It is. Like you say, if they're not laughing, you're failing.

I owned a comedy theatre in San Diego for a while called the San Diego Comedy Co-op. I told everyone that came there to perform—Hollywood headliners would come down to the Co-op and perform in this.

We put a hundred-seat theater in an old warehouse where Dream-Works used to be and put up shows free for the community. We produced over 500 shows down there.

I did that because I couldn't get stage time so I just got some platforms, and some lights and some chairs. I thought, "Fuck it, I'll have my own stage." People would come down from Hollywood to perform for free because they couldn't get more than 10 minutes at the Improv.

So, they'd come down and work

out their shit.

**RM: Because they have to work.**

MW: They have to work. People like Wyatt Cenac, who now writes for the *Daily Show*, performed in my theater. Anthony Jeselnik, who writes for Jimmy Fallon, performed down there.

So all these comedy writers—they're not stand-up comedians; they're comedy writers; they're coming down and getting up on stage to find out what's funny,—getting up on their feet, because—like you say—you don't always know if the humor will come across.

Also, I still look at every performance as a workshop. Every performance is a workshop, so when I walk back through the curtain after I deliver that last line, the first thing I do is grab a notepad and write down the five or six things I've learned in that show.

**RM: Do you record your shows?**

MW: Yeah, I record everything on audio.

**RM: On audio? How soon after the performance do you start listening to yourself?**

MW: The next morning.

**RM: The next morning. So you**

**can go to sleep and not worry about it?**

MW: I can't do anything after a show for about three or four hours. You're just so pumped up, especially if the room was full. The critical mass that you get out in some of these festivals is amazing. It's practically impossible to get anybody to get off their ass these days and get out from behind the flat screen and do anything. If you're not famous and you tour a show, it's very hard to get people to come out to see the theater, but there are all these independent festivals around the United States based on the Edinburgh Fringe model. All these independent artists pay 75 dollars for a lottery and their number goes into a hat; the producers have 50 slots for shows and six venues, so if they pull your number out, you have a run and you're going to go there and do 7 to 10 performances in two weeks. Some of them are juried; the New York International Fringe Festival is juried and so is the Midtown Festival.

The point is, up in Minneapolis, they've had a festival running there for about 20 years now, and they sell 50 thousand tickets at this festival. So if you go into town as an independent artist—

**RM: Comedy festival?**

MW: It's not a comedy; it's essen-

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tially a spoken word festival. So people are doing a play that they wrote for 60 minutes or they're doing a rewrite of Shakespeare or they're doing a lot of one-person shows. They're fringe festivals, so people come in and they get an hour and they're uncensored—

**RM: To do whatever they want.**

MW: You do whatever you want. You end up paying like 500 bucks, and you get to keep the money! You keep the money—at least 70%, sometimes 100%

**RM: You lost me there. You pay to perform?**

MW: You pay for the venue. That's basically what you're paying for. It's usually about 500 bucks if you get in. You pay an application fee of about 50 bucks, they pull your name out of the hat, and you pay about 500 bucks for your venue. You get a tech person, someone selling tickets and they have a website and people buy tickets. The point is this—

**RM: With the tickets sales—you get your money back?**

MW: You get to keep the money. You get at least 70%, sometimes a 100% and the point is this: These are independent art festivals, which means 95% of it is pure shit. When you go to one of these festivals, with a great show, you will

sell out the run!

**RM: Of course you do.**

MW: You make 20 to 25 thousand bucks and nobody knows who you are. The same guy who is reviewing the Broadway tour of *Mary Poppins* for the *Washington Post* is reviewing your show. You end up with a portfolio full of reviews. Mark Twain meets Lewis Black. Fine, I can work with that.

**RM: That's marvelous: the people, the opportunities.**

MW: Unbelievable opportunities.

**RM: Now let's talk about this. You get an opportunity and you decide you are going to go to one of these festivals, or maybe there's an open mic night somewhere. Let's talk about material. You want to be a comic. I think that is a common ambition. Not for everybody, but there are people—enough of them.**

MW: There's a lot of them. Like cockroaches.

**RM: They want to be comics. One of the questions I would always ask of anybody who wants to be a comic is, "What is pissing you off?"**

MW: That's how George Carlin started every one of his 12 HBO specials.

**RM: Some things are pissing you off.**

MW: He walks out and says the same thing every time: "I'm gonna start tonight with a few things that are pissing me off."

**RM: "Children."**

MW: And then he's off. Exactly.

**RM: Children, right? Then he starts in on kids. [laughter] Comedy, in my point of view, is the angry art. What motivates the comic is anger.**

MW: Yeah. Imagine a comedian comes out for an hour and talks about how great things are. Oh I really want to see that show!

**RM: Now, you got a lot to be angry about because you got dealt some really bad cards. But did you start with that when you were a stand-up—when you first started in the one-man show business? Did you start with your biography—your autobiography—or something else?**

MW: Yes, the one-man show was always intended to use my story as a metaphor to reflect back "zero-tolerance America" to the audience. That's what it's always been.

**RM: From the beginning?**

MW: Well, it's taken me five years

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to get to the point where I can say that in a sentence. You know what I mean? I had a very unclear vision early on. I had a clear vision of what I wanted to do, but I was completely unclear as to how to do it.

That was the problem, and this was very frustrating to me because I'm a guy who has worked on radio shows, I've done a lot of TV commercials, and I've toured the United States doing seminars for corporate America. I'm no stranger to being on my feet, but the business of connecting my personal story to the universe really fucked with my mind for about three years. I just couldn't figure it out. Everybody that does this says, "Well, there's no road map." I want a fucking roadmap! [laughter] Okay, somebody give me a roadmap. So you're just out there—everybody starts with a zero sum game and everyone has the story of how they figured out how to do what they do. Well, for me, what I wanted to know how to do was I wanted to know how to—comedians disagree on this—Since George Carlin died, I have learned by reading about him and stuff that he has written and that people have written, I have learned that his HBO shows that he performed were one-person shows. It wasn't stand-up comedy—he wrote it out in script form, in Courier New, double space, and he committed it to memory.

**RM: Yup, yup.**

MW: He went out and he delivered it the same way every time, word for word.

**RM: Why does that surprise anyone?**

MW: I think the reason it surprises people is because there's a whole contingent of people that perform stand-up that say you need to be doing your writing on stage,

**RM: Oh yeah, yeah.**

MW: If you're not writing on stage, then you're not doing it right, and what I wanted to do is to be able to do both. So my one-man show is now a hybrid. I have the set piece that is committed to memory, and I rehearse for every minute of that show. If I write a new minute, I rehearse ninety minutes or two hours to own that new minute—to really own it.

When I say own it, I mean that I will be able to deliver it frontwards and backwards with music playing in my ears at a high volume and my wife telling me to make the bed and all these distractions going on, because the one-man show in stand-up comedy is very different from acting. If you and I are doing an Oscar Madison or Felix Ungar, we're performing for each other; we're not really performing for the audience. That's

why they talk about the fourth wall. It's actually a wall between us and the audience.

**RM: Indeed. I've directed over 60 plays, and the constant note that I gave to actors was, "No, no. Don't you do it. Make him do it. Make him do it!"**

MW: Perfect, that's exactly what I'm saying.

**RM: I don't care what—"make him do it!" As long as actor A is trying to make actor B do what character A wants B to do...**

MW: You're telling them to push each other, in a sense.

**RM: "Make him do it." And that's acting, and you're right, stand up is...**

MW: So I walk out in the studio theatre there—the show you watched. I got 250 sets of eyeballs staring at me. They're talking to each other and they're checking their pocketbook and she's going, "What did he say?" There's all this shit going on and I'm trying to do a show. It's like, "Can you people just dummy up and receive the show, please?"

It's so difficult to master it at a level where you can deliver it at a high level. I want to take it to another level—I want to be able to leave my script and be in the room like

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a stand-up comedian. I want to be able to leave the script and talk to the audience or if something comes to my head, I want to be able to say it and then be able to go back to the prepared material. There is a joke in the show that you watched last night about Sarah Palin, and I wrote that joke on stage in that performance where I say, "Sarah Palin, John McCain's parting gift to America: note to the war hero—we're even." I wrote that right on my feet, and it got an applause break, and that doesn't happen every day. I thought, that was a keeper, but that was just organic. The only way something like that can happen is if that piece that you're going to perform is so much a part of you that you can leave it and go back to it and be in the room. Somebody says something weird or somebody is laughing in the wrong place, and you can make a joke about the woman over here with Tourettes, and everyone can have a little chuckle, and you can come back. That's really what I wanted to be able to achieve as a spoken word artist. It's all a work in progress. I'm getting there.

**RM: That is kind of, in a sense, backwards, right? Stand-ups are writers who perform their material. They think the other way around. But you thought structure first and then improv; they think improv first, and out of that you find your structure.**

**I believe the way you think is really the most creative way—the strongest way to work. The other can just lead to spiraling to hell. What I'm curious about is why would that be your first idea and not the other way around? How did you know that that sort of structure that you could depend on would give you the freedom to improvise because you could always come back to the material you knew? Why did you know that that's how it had to be for yourself?**

MW: It was from watching Rick Cleveland.

**RM: Never before that?**

MW: You mean in terms of the medium?

**RM: I mean something deeper than that. A lot of people watch Rick Cleveland, but they don't necessarily come away with that kind of understanding. What do you think it was about everything that you did up to that moment in your life that gave you the kind of insight to realize, "First I got to find the arch, build the material, and then I can break off from that and do improv as needed." Is there something about your education or your experience?**

MW: Yeah, I mean it's just from sort

of immersing myself into studying how other comedians do what they do.

**RM: I'm going to interrupt you because I've seen your show, okay?**

MW: Okay.

**RM: I know a bit about your life. Maybe you're lying—I don't know—but I took it to be true that once you went to jail. You headed for the law library...**

MW: Right.

**RM: ...and you started educating yourself about the law in depth and breadth in order to be able to defend yourself to get yourself through the system. To not be the victim of it, but somehow to take charge. How many people would do a thing like that? Most people just lay down and say okay...**

MW: That's what I don't understand. There were 900 guys there. I say in my show that there were nine typewriters for 900 prisoners, and I could always get a typewriter. They thought I was crazy. They would say, "Oh ya, well, we understand you've got to do everything you can do." These were people who plead guilty telling me I was crazy, okay? People on their second and third conviction telling me I was crazy.

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**RM: It suggests to me a kind of mind.**

MW: It's about the questions.

**RM: It suggests to me a kind of mind that looks at the totality of it and begins to see a superstructure, begins to see an abstract form that holds all of this together and then goes to fill it in. I think that's genetic—most people don't think like that.**

MW: There are people that say that. I've read stories about that—people who have letters after their names and study these things and believe that the need to really get down to what it is and understand what it is. I've read that mostly in the context of entrepreneurs, people who start companies, people like Charles Ferguson who produced *Inside Job*—why does he wake up someday and decide, "Jesus, these people blew up the world and I'm going to make a documentary about it." What is it that makes him want to do that?

**RM: There are two ways to think, basically: induction and deduction. Most people think inductively. This happens, that happens, this happens and that happens—da da da da. Therefore, and they draw a conclusion or they try to make sense out of things. Other people**

**think deductively. They have a premise—the law works this way in a democracy under the constitution, right? Now, is that the case? This bit, that bit, this bit, that bit, this bit. It seems to me that you think deductively. You start out with a premise, you have a big idea, and then you start to fill it in, as opposed to what most people do which is just let experience slap them across the face enough times until they finally get it.**

MW: With the law, I want to know how it's meant to be, not how it is.

**RM: Yes, that's the premise.**

MW: That's what I want to know. It's like my show is all about how things were meant to be in contrast to how they are, and that's what's at stake in my show. There's a set of intangible ideals that are at stake that can't be measured by mathematicians and scientists. Ideals that defy measurement and the ideals speak to the core of individuality. That's what at stake to me, and as an artist, as an entrepreneur, and as somebody who has spent 30 years creating things from nothing, I don't want to see that lost. That is so upsetting to me to see that lost, you know.

When I see people dressed up in

powdered wigs and throwing tea over the boat talking about how they're afraid of "Sharia" law because they care about the constitution—I'm like, "You couldn't find a fucking constitution if it was in your ass! You worry about Sharia law—why don't you learn your own fucking law first, okay? Why don't you tell me, you fundamentalist asshole, what the first amendments is, okay? Tell me that. Tell me you know that and then you can lecture me about Sharia law." It's like cognitive dissonance. So I live in this alternative universe as a result of my experience.

**RM: You start with the ideal, and then you find all the really upsetting exceptions to that.**

MW: Exactly.

**RM: How do you know this is funny? A lot of people—once again, they don't think like you do. But there are people who think like you do, but they don't find it funny.**

MW: There have been people that have had some tremendous influence on me in terms of that. People who have given me permission to do what I do. If you start with the world of stand-up comedy in Southern California, it's a poisonous world. You go down to the Comedy Store on a Sunday night and you throw your

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name in a hat. If you're lucky, you can get three minutes, and that's the world of stand-up comedy. You get up there, and by the time you said, "Hello, my name is Mark," it's time to get off the stage. It's where comedy goes to die, and God help you if you kill during that three minutes because the other comedians will not talk to you. That's the kind of awful, poisonous culture that exists in the stand-up comedy clubs in southern California, because they're sitting there thinking, "That guy is funny. He's going to get the sitcom I'm not going to get." It's like, well you're not getting a sitcom and I'm not getting a sitcom, so we're meant to be doing this to discover a bigger truth and communicate that and to have a conversation with the audience.

I go from that, and one of the people that had a big influence on me, who is the opposite of that, is Curtis Matthews at the San Francisco Comedy College. San Francisco has a very different environment than the comedy scene down in San Diego. San Francisco is all "Kumbayah" with everybody supporting everybody. It's very Robin Williams. It's intelligent and it's smart. The smarter you are, the better, the more everybody likes it and the better you do. The people are patting you on the back. They understand that it's hard and they

are happy for you, and then they say, "When I first took your seminar, you started talking about, jeez, you know, you're meant to be preparing things for an intelligent sensitive audience." I'm like, "Really? You mean I'm not writing for comedians and their drunk friends, that's not who I'm writing for?" So that was an epiphany, too. Steve Rosenfield, at the American Comedy Institute, says, "Nothing is funnier than you in a struggle." Fine, then I'll list my struggles, because I've had a lot of them.

**RM: But that's not my question.**

MW: How did I know it was funny? The audience laughed.

**RM: No, no, how did you know that there was comedy to be mined out of the monstrous injustices and unfairnesses in the legal system in this country?**

MW: Umm, because...

**RM: Why didn't you get a gun?**

BOTH: [laughter]

MW: Oh. I see what you're saying. I think, to be honest, I didn't know. That was something I discovered through doing it. I didn't necessarily know it was funny, but I did know it was interesting.

I think you can get away with a lot if you're interesting. You can get away with not being very dramatic, and you can get away with not being very funny if you're interesting. Then along the way, you find out how to be funny; you find out how to be dramatic. The show that you watched (this is really the first year that I started to put some drama in) and the show that I started—it's really the first time...

**RM: Wow. It builds and builds to something that is really powerful.**

MW: That has been a work in progress, so I guess the answer to your question, now that we are kind of brainstorming together here in the room, is I know it was interesting. As a result of my willingness to get up on my feet and tell people something that was interesting, it came—I found the funny, then I found the drama. Through a lot of hard work, it ends up being something that is interesting, dramatic, and funny.

**RM: Do you think that if you hadn't gone through the meat grinder of the legal system personally, that you would still be upset about the way in which the legal system works?**

MW: I would be upset from a 35 thousand-foot view standpoint

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to see the way people seem to have abandoned their ideals and let a bad act on a single day redefine our society. I would be upset at how willing people seem to be at the notion that an entire free system should be reversed engineered on the altar of something bad that happened one day that defies any sort of statistical measurement. So I would be upset by that, but I wouldn't be able to articulate in any great detail why I was upset. It would just be a visceral feeling as an artist, as an entrepreneur.

**RM: If you hadn't gone through the judicial system the way you did, would you think you would have still found your way to wanting to do stand-up?**

MW: Absolutely. We moved to Southern California from New England in the summer of 2000. If you watch my show, you know that there are a lot of things that we were moving away from, but there were also a bunch of things that we were moving to, and one of the things that were moving to was being in an environment that had a comedy club and show business. When I was 18, the day I got out of high school I was going to get in the car and drive to New York City and I was going to be an actor. I had an aunt who was a lead actress in the soap opera *Another World*. I had con-

nections down there. She lived in Westport, Connecticut and commuted down to New York. I fell in love with a valedictorian in the last week of school, and then we had kids, and you give them one meal and they want another. You know how they are, so it's a 20-year timeout. To sort of flex my creative juices, I ran an advertising agency for a few years and I built these little companies, but it was all creative. Everything I created was due to my ability to write, and it's only the last couple of years that I identified myself first and foremost as a writer. I look back over my career of 30 years as an entrepreneur and as a guy that did advertising for years, worked in TV and radio and for a while did seminars across the country and it's all related to writing; it's all about the writing. Without the writing, I wouldn't have had anything. When we came to Southern California, the whole idea was that when my kids were grown, I was going to pursue a career as a performer. ■

**MCKEE  
INTERVIEWS  
MARK WHITNEY**



Check out next month's issue of *STORY Magazine* to read  
Part 2 of Robert McKee's interview with Mark Whitney.





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# CHARACTER CREATION

## Part 4: Build a Complex Character Around a Need

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BY ROBERT MCKEE

*In his ongoing series on character creation, Robert McKee explains how a character's need will affect the character's choices.*

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The second major directive is to build a complex character around a need. If you're working in one of the five character-driven genres, such as the redemption plot or the

disillusionment plot, you will soon realize that relatively uncomplicated characters of one or two dimensions cannot carry these stories to satisfaction. They demand

the three, four, five, or more dimensions of a richly complicated protagonist. To achieve such complexity, you must imagine beyond desire and ask this:

# CHARACTER CREATION

In addition to what my character wants, what does my character need? Desire and need are not the same thing. Every day you suggest—the two terms are often synonymous, but in the writer’s vocabulary, desire and need are two very different ideas.

So first, definitions: character desire. We’ve looked a good deal at desire, but let’s take our understanding of desire even further. A desire is an energetic intention aimed at something that exists outside the character’s private self. In all stories, the protagonist has at least one conscious desire. In many complex characters, this conscious desire conflicts with a subconscious desire as well.

If, for example, you were to poll aside Danny Archer, Leonardo DiCaprio’s protagonist from the film *Blood Diamond*, and whisper in Archer’s ear, “Danny. You can tell me, kid. What do you want?” Danny would tell you his conscious desire. Danny knows what Danny wants, or at least he thinks he knows, and he knows what he wants at this moment, next week, in his life. Danny believes that in this lawless world, it’s every man for himself. He wants to steal an enormous diamond so he can leave Africa and live somewhere else in style.

Consciously Danny wants riches, but only for himself. Yet at the climax of this story, Danny is faced

with a dilemma: A choice between himself and another man and that poor man’s family. He chooses to sacrifice himself and save the other man, because at heart, Danny is far more selfless than selfish. His unconscious desire has always been to do the moral thing, the right thing, and his moral desire struggling against his immoral desire has been pulling him apart throughout the adventure until his subconscious desire finally triumphs.

Desire, however, conscious or subconscious, does not move through the story in a straight line, of course. Once the inciting incident has thrown the protagonist’s life out of balance, the major character desire for his object of desire comes to life. The protagonist pursues his object of desire, and to reach it, he struggles against the forces of antagonism—what he wants versus obstacle after obstacle that blocks his pursuit. Each action he takes, beat by beat, scene by scene, sequence by sequence, act by act, demands a new conscious desire of the moment, what he must do at that moment to match each new confrontation.

So it goes, turning point by turning point, as his story’s progressive events zigzag from positive charge to negative charge, ending at story climax. Out of this final event, the protagonist either gets his object of desire or fails to get it. The end.

That is desire in action: the pursuit of something that exists outside the conscious private self.

Next, let me define character need. A major character need is something that does not exist within a specific character. I define character need as a lacking inside of the self—a missing part, in fact, a critical but absent quality. In other words, the character has a hole in his humanity. The ideal human being would have this quality, but this particular character lacks it. Again, ideally, that emptiness should be filled, but it may stay vacuous throughout the character’s life, unless, as in so many wonderful stories, something comes along that gives the character a chance to fill the hole in his humanity, to complete his nature.

For example, a famous redemption plot, Sylvester Stallone’s classic tale of *Rocky*, 1976. At the beginning of the film, Rocky wallows in self-disgust. He calls himself a bum and a loser, and he is that, and worse in fact. One of his part-time jobs is breaking legs for a loan shark. So he hates himself for the life he leads. In other words, Rocky lacks a sense of self-worth. He lacks self-love. He has a gaping need for self-respect. There is a hole in Rocky’s heart where self-esteem should be, but he fills it instead with self-hate.

Now, he could spend his whole life in that state, but, by coinci-

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dence, he gets lucky, and he's given a chance to fight in the big time. He doesn't win his championship bout with Apollo Creed. Instead, he wins a victory of courage and tenacity for himself as he is standing on his feet after 15 rounds with the champ. This fills his need for self-respect. As Rocky puts it, he becomes somebody: a guy who went the distance with Apollo Creed.

Some other examples from popular classics: in the opening pages of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, young Edmund is an immature, obnoxious, spiteful kid who desperately needs to grow up and find maturity. Over the arc of the telling, he becomes King Edmund the Just, a kind, loving, mature king. The same need for maturity is found in young Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind* and in Huck Finn in *The Adventures of Huck Finn*.

When a story begins, only the author knows the character's need. In time, the author may or may not bring the reader audience in on the secret lacking inside the protagonist. In some rare tellings, the author may make the character aware of his need, but if so, the author will withhold this revelation to the very end of the telling. For, if the protagonist were to realize his need at the beginning of the story, his need would become his desire. When a need becomes known to the character, it's hard

for the character to ignore it. Very likely, it transforms into something the protagonist wants. As a result, the protagonist may chase this new desire in directions his author does not want to go.

Suppose, for example, early in *Rocky*, the protagonist stopped putting himself down and came to realize that his problem is that he lacks self-respect and, therefore, needs to do something that will give him self-respect. Not knowing what to do, let's say Rocky goes to his priest, who convinces him to devote his life to good work, to join a monastery, and become a monk. So Rocky becomes a saint. It could be a good story, but it wouldn't be the *Rocky* we know and love.

In *Middlesex*, that excellent novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, Cal, the protagonist, has an unconscious need for a true identity, and he has this need from the very beginning of his life. He was born as a hermaphrodite and then raised as a girl, but he never felt at home in that sexual identity. Eventually, he discovers that his genetic identity is male. At that moment, his subconscious need for an identity becomes his conscious desire—a desire he is still pursuing in the novel's last chapter. This is one of the hallmarks of a complex character: that his need is subconscious throughout most, if not all, of the telling.

During my research for my lectures

and my book, I traced the art of storytelling through all history and all cultures, East and West. While winding my way down the passages of the so-called Dark Ages (that millennium from 500 A.D. to 1500 A.D.), from the fall of the Roman Empire to the rise of the Renaissance, I searched through the writings of many medieval scholars, hoping to find insights that might illumine the storyteller's craft.

At first, I found nothing, and that era seemed not only dark, but void of any serious ideas. Indeed, after the Enlightenment of the 17th century, many historians thought that the phrase *medieval scholarship* was an oxymoron. But, eventually, the researchers of 20th-century medievalists, such as J.R.R. Tolkien of *The Lord of the Rings* fame, led to a critical discovery. What seemed like convoluted, mystical babblings during the Middle Ages were, in fact, scholarly discussions conducted in a kind of code.

The language of medieval thought was more metaphorical than factual, more poetic than scientific, and so it needed to be deciphered. Oh, by the way, no angelologists of the Middle Ages ever asked the question, "How many angels can dance on the point of a pin?"; 18th-century Protestant critics invented that silliness, and they did it in order to taunt and ridicule medieval Catholic thinking and the torturous ways that theologians, such as John

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Duns Scotus and Thomas Aquinas, debated mystical theories.

Nonetheless, it is true that when medieval minds wanted to discuss nonphysical realms, they would often use angels, demons, and other imaginaries to dramatize their ideas. For example, when medieval scholastics turned their thoughts toward what today we would call psychology, they sensed—as all fine minds have always sensed—the shallowness of life. Shallow in the sense that most of us live off the surface of our being. We rarely explore, let alone exhaust, our full capacities, our innate capacities. Not because we lack the wish to experience life in its extremes, but because human nature is by nature conservative.

The first law of life is the conservation of life. Never spend unnecessary energy, never take unnecessary risks. We are genetically compelled to act in the least and safest way. Consequently, human beings never burn energy unless they have to, never take risks unless they have to. They only do what they must. Of course, what constitutes “have to” and “must” is as idiosyncratic as there are people on this earth and as subjective as the six billion different dreams they dream every night. Nonetheless, because human nature is a child of Mother Nature, we conserve life and skim the surface of our being. We make sure that lit-

tle ever happens in life that would force us to plumb our depths, to live to our limits.

Realizing this truth, medieval scholars imagined a creature they called the *mind worm*. Then they propose this hypothetical: Suppose there was an all-powerful magical worm who could burrow into the mind of a human being and come to know everything in the man—his social persona, his personal persona, his secret self, even his secret unknown self, along with the totality of his life experiences. The worm would know everything down to the smallest detail of everything he ever said, or thought, or dreamed—everything ever done to him or done by him.

Once the mind worm understood the man in totality, it would then know precisely what the man lacked in his humanity and, therefore, what he needed for fulfillment. What’s more, suppose the mind worm had the power to make things happen in the world. The worm could then create the unique event that would set the man on a path of experiences that would cause him to explore himself to the very depth of his humanity, to experience everything he could possibly experience, to live to the limits of his powers, to face the limits of his weaknesses, to change—if he can possibly change—and finally exhaust his capacity for life before he dies.

As I read that, I thought, “The mind worm is a writer.” This is what a writer does. The writer first burrows into the mind of his character, comes to understand him completely, and then asks, “What would have to happen to this character to cause him to live a one-of-a-kind life that exhausts his birth-given potential?” What story could I give him that would force him to experience his humanity in absolute depth, breadth, and in directions that ordinary life would otherwise deny him? How can I throw him into a unique life that would ultimately and completely empty him out?

The writer finds the answer to these questions in the story’s inciting incident. To say it again in different words, the inciting incident is the event that upsets the balance of the character’s life and propels him into a story-long action that will force him to use and to use up his complete self so that by the end of the story, the reader audience comes to understand this character utterly. Nothing in him is left unused, unexperienced, unexpressed.

This is the ultimate achievement in the creation of a character: The emptying out of all the character’s qualities. This ambition takes us to the heart of the deep differences between event-driven and character-driven stories. In action/adventure, for example, we rarely, if

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ever, hide an unconscious need behind an action hero's conscious desire. James Bond, for example, lacks nothing and needs nothing; he is perfect and complete. The world is imperfect, and it is his job to fix it. Rather, we create character need in genres that demand characters with complex natures: love stories, psychological thrillers, social dramas, family dramas, coming-of-age stories, and the like.

Among the many differences between event-driven and character-driven stories are these three primary differences. First, an event-driven story defines the protagonist by what she wants—a desire she has for something outside of herself. A character-driven story defines the protagonist by what she lacks—an unconscious need that, if she should fulfill it, would complete her inner humanity.

Second, in a pure event-driven story, the hero/protagonist struggles to give the world what the world needs, which is expressed in values such as peace, justice, a brotherhood, survival and the like. In a pure character-driven story, the struggles of the protagonist to fill the hole in her humanity are expressed in values such as love, maturity, trust, hope, and the like—values that she lacks.

Most importantly, the third difference between event-driven and character-driven stories be-

gins with this understanding: The shape of all stories in all genres is determined by how its characters choose to act and react to what happens. As I've stated in lecture and in print many times, the events of the story are created out of the choices, actions, and reactions of its characters. The characters are the kinds of creatures who would choose to act and react to what happens in the way that they do. If the writer changes the events, she must change her characters. If the writer changes her characters, she must change the events to fit them. Event and character are just two sides of the same coin.

This understanding, however, doesn't answer the question of who or what causes the story's major events to happen. The greatest difference between event-driven versus character-driven stories is determined by the primary source of causality. Who or what is most responsible for causing the story's critical turning points?

In an event- or plot-driven story, the major events, especially the first few act climaxes, are caused by forces outside of the protagonist's control. Criminals commit crime, dictators declare war, plagues sweep through the world, aliens invade Earth, the sun falls from the sky. In character-driven stories, the major events are caused by forces within the protagonist's control. He falls in love, he commits a

crime, he blows the whistle on his employer, he leaves home, he believes somebody's lie, he searches for the truth, etc.

Of course, the writer does not always have to choose between one of these two kinds of causality exclusively over the other. The reasons things happen in a story need not be pure. Events, both inside and outside of the character's control, can be mixed and balanced, even. A story can be as character-driven as it is event-driven, but generally the reason things happen tend to be more one than the other.

Stories of war, for example, often mix these two causalities. Nicholas Monsarrat's World War II novel *The Cruel Sea* is a wonderful example. Acts of war and the forces of Mother Nature, of course, are beyond the control of the ship's captain and crew. But how they choose to react and act in the face of hurricanes and enemy attacks is always in their hands.

Finally and critically, the writer of a character-driven story seeks to fill the need that she created in her character at the beginning and supply what the protagonist lacks over the course of the story—to take the character to the limits of human potential, even if the only way that that protagonist can reach those limits and complete herself as a human being is to suffer and perhaps to end in tragedy. ■

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Stay tuned next month, as Robert McKee continues his series on character creation.





# FILM REVIEW: STEPHEN CHOW'S JOURNEY TO THE WEST

## Part 2

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BY ROBERT MCKEE

*Robert McKee explains the ways Stephen Chow hits and misses the mark.*

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# FILM REVIEW

As technology and special effects have advanced so incredibly, anything—any image imaginable—can now be created. Therefore, when special effects are brilliant, they are a triumph for the imagination. Mr. Stephen Chow has created wonderful scenes, from the fish demon at the beginning to the pig demon through to the climax of a monkey king, with brilliantly imaginative imagery that is very well produced.

The hero's quest toward love and achieving a greater love, and not the lesser or romantic love, is very well portrayed until toward the end when Mr. Chow decided to stop dramatizing his meaning and explain it instead. The climax of the Buddhist's triumph over the monkey king was predictable, because we know that in the ethos of this film, or most of the world, we believe that good will triumph over evil. At the end of the film comes a rather tedious explanation that there is no such thing as a higher love and lesser love; that all love is love. Because it is both expected and explained, the ending of the film is anti-climactic; it is a disappointment. But, getting up to that ending was full of wonderful, highly imaginative sequences that made a wonderful argument for romantic love. The argument for romantic love is so well-done that even though a spiritual love wins, I feel that

our hero made a great mistake. It might have been more satisfying if our hero took the romantic love when it was offered.

It is difficult for me to believe the last 10% of the film's uplifting spiritual message will really move anyone to become better and be more spiritual. Because, first, Mr. Chow was having too much fun satirizing the theme of transcendent love. Second, when you are dealing with questions of spirituality mixed with magic, this is a fantasy world. The powers executed here are magical powers. The whole point of fantasy and magical powers is for fun—to imagine ourselves in that kind of wonderful, extreme, super powerful state. But we know it doesn't exist. So one has to use the fantasy genre to express something very realistic and concrete about the real world. I think you have an obligation. If you are going to create worlds that don't exist, the story still has to be rooted in something that is human and expresses a meaning that translates into reality.

So ultimately, the validity of this story was in question. It could be that Mr. Chow chose that kind of preachy, theme-heavy ending simply because he had to get an ending. He really didn't leave himself any room for an ending that could be a little more down-to-earth. At the end of

the film, the protagonist—handsome, pristine, and as unscathed as a human being can be—says, "I have suffered and that is how I learned." I looked at him and thought, "If you suffered, it certainly didn't leave any marks. I didn't believe in his realization of higher and lower love and that all love is of equal value.

*Journey to the West* is in the spirit of comedy genre. One of the great principles of comedy is that things don't really hurt. People can explode, people can have limbs torn off, and suffer all kinds of hideous torments on screen and the audience laughs and reacts "Yes, but it doesn't really hurt." It is cinematic and theatrical suffering. So when the protagonist of this film says, "... and I have suffered and learned this." I am sitting there thinking, "Not in this comedy—I am not moved."

Comedy tears the cover off of all things false and exposes the truth, and the truth is always both positive and negative. It is never simply one or the other. If it leans in any one direction, it leans overall toward the negative, because human nature is not the most generous of spirits. At best, it is a balance of good and evil. The comic mind knows this. So when comedy ends with this kind of rushed pure idealism, it strikes as false because the comic impulse itself is to de-

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stroy that kind of idealism and to discover the real causes and the real human nature underneath all of that.

*Kung Fu Hustle* is one of my favorite films of all time. I have seen it repeatedly. I laugh every time and thoroughly enjoy it. At the end of *Kung Fu Hustle*, the protagonist is, in some fashion, transcendent. But, he really earns his transcendence. There is a sense of fun in the climax that he grew and changed and that the filmmaker had his tongue in his cheek and we were having fun with that whole idea. But not so in *Journey to the West*. Here it got really earnest and preachy. The sense of the filmmaker having a wink in his eye saying, "All of this is to be taken with a grain of salt," was absent.

The best character in the film, without question, is the female protagonist, Miss Duan. She is great because she gets it. There are no transcendent values in her. She understands and wants the reality of love, so she sacrifices herself repeatedly for this. She is the only one with her feet on the ground, realistic and balanced. Comedy is an attack on that kind of empty idealism. She loved him even though he was a kind of a childish idealist. Ultimately, when she was gone out of his life and out of the story, the movie was over. ■



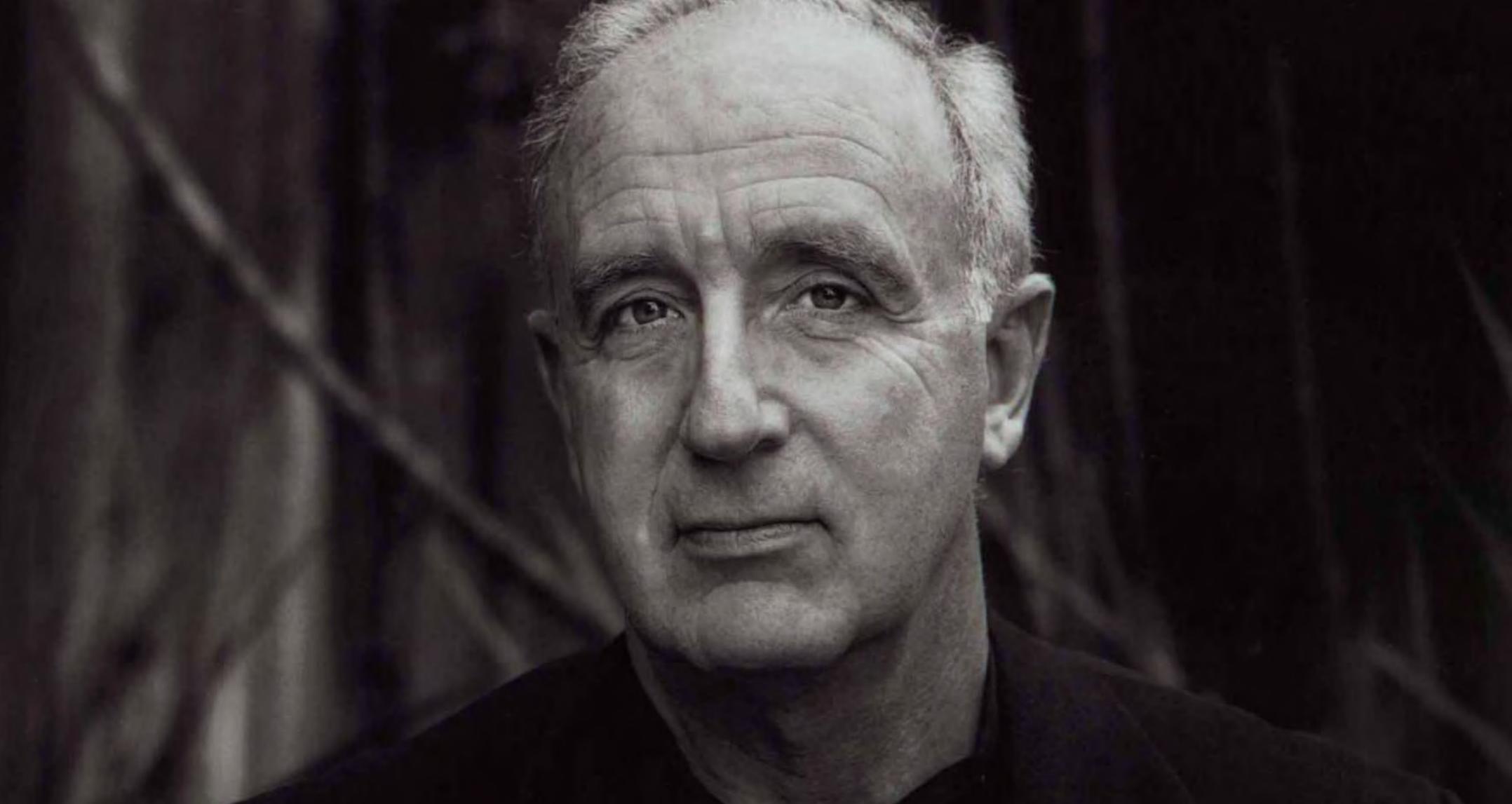
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# MCKEE INTERVIEWS STEVEN PRESSFIELD

## Part 3

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*In this final part of Robert McKee's interview with Steven Pressfield, we learn about the genesis of Pressfield's beliefs on war – its inevitability and virtues.*

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**Robert McKee:** There is a third-person choice, which is not to be omniscient.

Steven Pressfield: Yes.

**RM:** To see it over the shoulder of your point of view character, gives you that character's point

of view, but also gives you access to their thoughts and even their unconscious thoughts that they could not articulate.

SP: Right.

**RM:** That's the limited third person that pretends to be first per-

son. So, when you're in first person, which is your choice at the way you do it, and how much access to the mind does that give you and how much access do you want to the inner life?

SP: I'm not that interested in the inner life. I'm not like a Kafka type and

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I'm not really interested in the deep psychological stuff. I'm only interested in thematic elements of a story and how it will reflect. Then the inner life will apply to that.

**RM: When I come away from your novels, I have the impression that I have experienced a lot of inner life somehow.**

SP: Well, there is a lot in there, but it's not like an exhaustive, Freudian subterranean analysis of it. I really try to stay away from things like that, which is why I like history, because usually it's simpler. The past is simpler.

I think, Bob, that even if you're writing in the first person as a character, the reader is also knowing that there's still you, the author. There's still what the book is about above and beyond the character, so the character's voice is not the whole book, or it is not expressing the point of view of the book. You can be looking at the character from up here, too, which I think helps. That's something that you use, and that the writer uses.

**RM: Just to get back to battle scenes for a moment. One of the qualities that you experience in reading your action sequences is fear.**

SP: Yeah, that's very deliberate.

**RM: You experience how damn scary it all is, and how the char-**

**acters are acting despite their fear. However they act, whether they're cowardly or courageous, they are afraid no matter what's going on. How, how do you get us to sense that inner life.**

SP: Yes, with sort of the inner life common to anybody, though. You and I would both be scared in the same way.

**RM: Yeah, but there are scenes in your work, for example Alexander in the Afghan campaign—there are scenes where they're struggling just to move from one end of Afghanistan to another, and they're going through a kind of pass or whatever. The physical struggle—there are characters who are not afraid, and then there are characters who are afraid. There are characters who are full of energy, and there are characters who are plain exhausted.**

SP: Yes, they are different aspects of the theme.

**RM: You see all the variety of experience, and then when it gets into action, you're acutely aware of the fear involved. Is this something that we're reading into it? Is it that you describe the scene in such a way that the fear happens in the reader, and that they then know that this must be going on in the character as well? Because I don't recall you ever having a character say, "I'm afraid."**

SP: Well, I don't. I don't know about that either, but certainly there are plenty of characters that are terrified and tell you about it as they are relating the story. Particularly in the Afghan campaign, the character of Mathias and that opening sequence where they raid the village and he has to kill the one guy. He's just coming unpeeled.

**RM: Right, and he talks to the reader.**

SP: Yeah, and tells them that. I think that makes it real in a way because we all are scared.

**RM: I'm sure it does.**

SP: People have said to me, "Why do you always write about war? Is life all conflict?" But I think it is. And I think that's what appeals to me about it is that those stories, they are metaphors. Life is a battle every day to me.

**RM: If we're telling the story in the first person and the first person is talking to us, did he ever write this book down? Does the logic of how does his memoir, so to speak, get in print?**

SP: That's part of it, too, I think. I sort of like those memoirs. In fact, that's a lot of what I read. With a couple of the historical books that I've written, sort of the conceit of them is that they are documents that somebody found somewhere, and that they are

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what a guy wrote back then.

**RM: Yes, yes. That's as old as *Robinson Crusoe*.**

SP: I know, but that kind of works in a way, I think.

**RM: Do you know why? Do you know why this device first began?**

SP: No.

**RM: What you do—you write novels—300 or more years ago, that was thought to be photography. That was thought to be the lowest of the low, because real writing was epic poetry or history. It had to be factual. That somebody would write something as if it were history, and then it's fiction, was thought to be immoral.**

SP: Really? I didn't know that.

**RM: So, how did the writer get around with it? Defoe says at the beginning of *Robinson Crusoe*, "I found this manuscript washed up on a beach."**

SP: Yeah.

**RM: Well, here it is. I'm just giving it to you. All kinds of lies and conceits opened novels in those days to say, "Hey, this is history," and so that device continues.**

SP: Yeah. It's a very liberating device from a writer's point of view. It's like,

"Here, I found this. It's not mine, I just found it." Then, as a writer, you can really get into it.

**RM: Then the audience is happy to go along with it. Wonderful. Now, the person is one aspect of a point of view. The other is the physical point of view, where you put that person, what he sees, hears, and says and how he moves through space. You've got an outline, where something has to happen. Then you imagine it in its location, and then you've got your character. How do you work the physical point of view in a scene?**

SP: I'm not sure. I just kind of do it. I don't know if this is answering it, Bob, but as you have said in your classes, a lot of times there will be cops, or detectives will be protagonists, or lawyers, or they'll be the point of view because it's the nature of them to investigate. They have permission to go into your house and go through your stuff, and all that kind of thing.

So I think I will always, if I'm having a narrator, which I always do, I will try to make sure that he, as seamlessly as possible, can be in every scene. Like in *The Legend of Bagger Vance*, it was the little boy, Hardy, who was helping out Bagger Vance, the caddy. As a little boy, it was the perfect device because he can go into the locker room, he can go out on a golf course, and he goes home to

his mom and dad.

**RM: Yeah, whoever notices kids?**

SP: And nobody notices him. He's there and he sees everything, and people will confide in him. So it was no problem to negotiate him into a scene. I think when you're using a first-person narrator, it is important to find one that can seamlessly be in every scene.

**RM: Yes, but it isn't. This sounds to me part of what we call creative limitations.**

SP: Yeah.

**RM: If you could only see the scene from the child's point of view, from the foot soldier's point of view, or from Alexander's point of view because of that limitation, doesn't that force you to figure out strategies of physical point of view that you wouldn't have had if you were omniscient and could be anywhere you wanted?**

SP: Yes, it does. What's great about that, too, is that what is left out of the scene, the reader supplies, because the reader knows, "Well, this character is only seeing it through this one little stovepipe." But the reader is going, "Ah, well if I was standing over here, I would see it a different way, or I'd see it this way." And so the reader brings that to it. It's one other strength of first person, I think.

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**RM:** When you're working on a scene like that, do you take a 360° point of view so that you see it and then know what you're not saying?

SP: Yes, I do.

**RM:** Right, so you've imagined it from all points of view.

SP: Yeah, yeah.

**RM:** Then the third dimension of point of view, of course, is your author's point of view, which is what we have talked about so far. Your subject is so often war. And so when people ask you the question, "Why do you always write about war?" you just hit it because you think it's a metaphor for everything. Your book on Alexander is called *The Virtues of War*, and it seems to me that all of your books somehow are different aspects of the virtues of war, whether it changes politics or not.

SP: I think that's true, yeah.

**RM:** Right, but it is a cauldron for testing that...

SP: For the virtues of inner integrity.

**RM:** Right. So your point of view—except in the case of *Bagger Vance*—is that virtually everything is about the virtues of war.

SP: I guess so.

**RM:** Do you even see a golf game and Bagger Vance as a crucible for...

SP: I do. That was a war story, too, in my opinion.

**RM:** He was a veteran.

SP: He was a veteran and, you know, it came from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which was a battle war and Krishna—Bagger Vance—was a warrior god.

**RM:** Yeah, talk about the inspiration for that first book. You said that it was based on an Indian myth.

SP: There's a Vedic Hindu scripture, the *Bhagavad Gita*, which people maybe have read in their comparative religion classes. It's sort of the Hindu Bible. It's the book that Gandhi used to free India, and it's a great book about a troubled warrior named Arjuna (it's a very short book) who receives spiritual instruction from his charioteer, who happens to be Krishna, i.e., God in human form.

When I did *Bagger Vance*, instead of a troubled warrior getting advice from his charioteer, I made it a troubled golf champion getting advice from his caddie, and the caddie was God or was God in human form. I just stole that structure lock, stock, and barrel. It's a great structure, so

why not?

**RM:** It sure is.

SP: I'm a big believer in stealing anything you can. So that was the origin of that. I've always loved the *Bhagavad Gita*. I probably read it 12 times.

**RM:** But still, the leap from that myth to golf?

SP: It was pretty easy leap, really.

**RM:** Well, to you, but not to others, really. It wouldn't be an idea that would necessarily occur to anyone except somebody who has played the game and understands the caddie-player relationship.

SP: Let me go back to one thing we were just talking about.

**RM:** Sure.

SP: And that is the difference between the ostensible point of view, the narrator's point of view, the story he is telling you, and what the book is telling you—what the author and what the greater theme is talking about. Sometimes this comes back to instinct for me whereby you finish a book and you go, "Wow, I didn't realize it was about that." It just sort of took that form.

Like in *Killing Rommel*, my most recent book is a story of this British patrol that goes behind the lines

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in the North African desert, World War II, trying to kill Rommel, the head general of the African Corps. It's told from the point of view of a young British lieutenant who will turn out to be an editor and publisher—a very literate, literary guide.

The story seems to be a war story all the way through, and then in the end, there's an epilogue that's his funeral as an older man. He died in his 80s. In the end you see how these events in wartime changed him and made him fall in love with the novel and with the idea of sharing human experience. He had killed some people in this thing that he felt terrible about, and he felt that the war really impressed upon him the fact that the enemy was human beings just like we are. They could have been friends, so why were they trying to kill us? Why were we killing them? And so his afterlife was sort of a penance for that in a way.

When the book is all done, what's written seems to be a war story, but it's really about a literary man. It's really about a man who was trying, through art, to ameliorate some of the pain of the world and to bring people together in a way. It's really sort of a peon to literature.

And I didn't know that until the whole thing was over.

**RM: Looking back on all of it, if I could suggest a grand theme, is would be that the virtue of war**

**forces men—human beings—to act under pressure to either become a better person or a worse person. That somehow there is a moral relationship between the choices that a person has to make in life and death, and their destiny as a human being. Is that right?**

SP: Yes. In fact, I think that you could even do a parallel to private eyes, as again, you've talked about, like a Philip Marlowe or somebody will have evolved a code of honor. Even though he is in these mean streets, he has evolved a kind of code of honor. That's what the author is really talking about, in a way.

I think, "What are the virtues of war?" For me, they are things like patience, a capacity to endure suffering, loyalty to friends, a love for the enemy, chivalry, integrity, trying to hold to a higher standard. I think that these are internal virtues that we all need. As writers, we need them to face the blank page every day. As artists, we need them. In relationships, we need them. And that's sort of my point of view of life. That just as Philip Marlowe and the mean streets have developed a sort of a code of honor, that that is in place of religion or what we might have, or you might not have anyone. I think a lot of my books have examined those virtues.

**RM: What would you say to an antiwar person with that point of view, who says, "Yes, yes, all that,**

**but you're glorifying what is an anathema."**

SP: I would say that they're not reading what I'm writing correctly, because it's not glorifying it. In fact, as you said, a lot of my story is showing how terrible war is. But war is a metaphor, in this case, for the internal conflicts. In fact, the *Bhagavad Gita* starts with two armies across from each other. It starts with chariots in India—chariots, elephants, and archers and all this kind of thing.

Arjuna, our hero, the warrior on one side, looks across at the other warriors and he recognizes people—uncles and cousins. Each one of those represents, in the interpretations of the *Gita*, certain vices. This one represents slothfulness, and this one represents greed, and this one represents cowardice, and they all have names, Indian names, Ayurvedic names that represent that. And so that is a perfect example of how war is actually a metaphor in the story.

**RM: Stepping back, though, you also have blogged and I know you're—as we all are—deeply concerned about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and about everything you've seen in history. Are you a fatalist? Do you think war is inevitable?**

SP: Absolutely. It seems to be part of the human condition. I don't know how anybody can see it any differently.

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**RM: So, you make a virtue out of what is inevitable anyway, and see it as a condition of life that we have to?**

SP: When we were cavemen, we still had to hunt, which was kind of the same thing, right? A band would go out facing predators and horrible freezing conditions.

**RM: It's worse than that. Remember that body they found in the Swiss mountainside. It's 5000 years old, and somebody shot him with an arrow.**

SP: Right.

**RM: There was a lot from hunting animals, I'm sure.**

SP: Conflict is a part of life, right? Like we just said, the coyote is coming up the driveway. It has teeth, fangs and it is out there to kill. The hawks that are cruising around here, that's just their nature. God made it this way.

**RM: Yes, and that is the way we all understand it. How do you gather the vocabulary, especially when you're writing period material? The names of things? Verbs and actions are pretty universal, but there might be terminologies for doing things that are unique to that period. How do you gather the vocabulary? Do you have a special file in your computer just for names of things?**

SP: Actually, I do. When I find the words that are right for certain things, or slang phrases, like I said, I have a file on slang and acronyms. I'm working on a story that's set in ancient Athens or ancient Sparta. So the voice to create, to make it believable, is found by reading works that are written by Oxford and Cambridge dons. The translations of Xenophon or Thucydides came from the early 20th century or the 19th century. So they're very formal and that's kind of the way Shakespeare and *Julius Caesar* spoke. These ancient characters speak in a flowery language, and so I try to create a hybrid of that and modern slang or whatever.

**RM: You do. You introduce the modernism.**

SP: To try to make it seem real.

**RM: As if it was their slang, as if it was their language.**

SP: Yeah. To me, that's my version of it. I've read translations of the *Iliad*, where they bring it so modern that it loses a lot of the reality for me.

**RM: The Bible, too, has been translated out of all, you know...**

SP: Yeah, I hate it when they do that.

**RM: Right. I'm a fallen Catholic, and I hated it when the Mass went from Latin to English. I think a lot of people did.**

SP: For *Killing Rommel*, which was World War II, I read a bunch of real memoirs from that time—in that era and in that place, in that same campaign. I would copy or mentally try to do my stuff just like they did it. I would write down any phrase that rang a bell. The more details you can layer in, in vocabulary and everything else, the more real it sounds.

**RM: Of course it does. As I have stressed many times, an author is somebody with knowledge, and one of the things they know is the names of things.**

SP: Yes.

**RM: Last subject. When you do your outline and it gets worked into the novel, how do you break the structure of the telling down? The basic structure is a chapter, but the chapter becomes a book or a part, and then within the chapter there are subchapters where you space in order to break a scene. When you're working, how do you know? Let's just start with the middle section, the middle thing, the chapter. How do you know when a chapter is over? How do you know? Do you end it on a clear turning point? What punctuates it?**

SP: That's another great question. For me it's about the negative space, it's about what you cut. They say that movies are just made of shots and cuts. So it's the space between

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the end of Chapter 4 and the start of Chapter 5. There can be a lot of great empty space in there that really tells you a lot. You don't even have to write the thing. I also break it into books. There might be four or five books in the course of a book, and that's really about where the cut is—where the curtain comes down and then the next act starts.

**RM: That book would be an act climax.**

SP: Yeah. What you've left out can really work great when you go from the end of one to the start of another. One of the greatest cuts ever, I think, was in the *Deer Hunter* where they went from this whole long thing about the Russian wedding in Western Pennsylvania, and then it cut to choppers coming down in Vietnam. That space contained all the training these guys went through, all of what happened to them, and you didn't miss it at all. It left you thinking, "Wow, that was a great cut." I try to do things like that.

**RM: Make a big leap like that and then, by implication, the reader has got to fill it all in. So if a book in your mind is the equivalent of an act, the chapter then would be a sequence.**

SP: Yes.

**RM: And the subchapter within it would be a scene.**

SP: A scene, although in a novel, of course, you might have 30 scenes strung together in paragraph, paragraph, paragraph.

**RM: Yes, because language can expand and contract.**

SP: Right, and also you go off on internal plots and stuff like that, so it isn't just like a movie where you have to have a scene.

**RM: But overall, would that be your sense of things? That if you've got a string of events in a scene, so called, are those really events, or are they exposition with a lot of action, or...?**

SP: I think they're thematically bound together. There may be three little scenes, one long scene, one monologue or something like that, but there is kind of this through line going to it. A lot of times, it will boomerang around and come back to where it started from. I always like to end chapters with a little bit of a twist—a little bit of something that gives you momentum and gives the reader momentum and propels them into the next chapter.

**RM: The common term is a hook.**

SP: Yeah.

**RM: You want to hook your chapters. Do you worry about hooks within the chapters?**

SP: No, I don't. Although there probably are hooks that I'm not even aware of. I hope there's momentum going paragraph after paragraph, but I don't think that usually within a chapter. I'm not really trying to turn the story in any way—I'll wait. I'll wait until the end of a chapter.

**RM: Well, I remember that when I read *Bagger Vance*. It seemed to me that every chapter was a sequence that had scenes that were spilling one into the other, but they weren't pausing to pay attention to the turning points within the scenes.**

SP: Yeah, I think so.

**RM: The chapter was solid.**

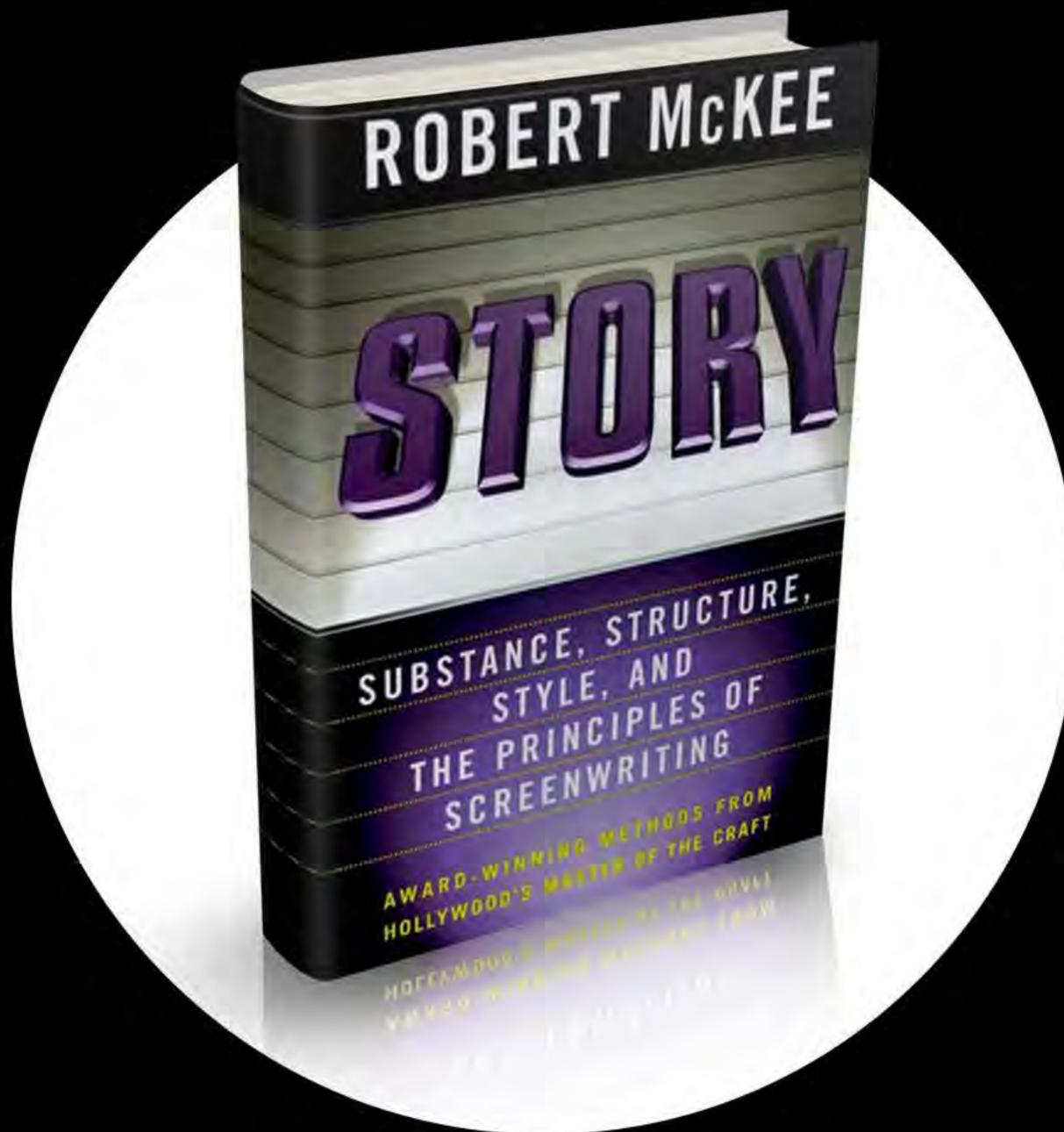
SP: Let me think about that until we talk about it.

**RM: It was the solitude, and every one of those chapters was just a standalone kind of thing. There are other novelists who break chapters into subchapters, and those units are really standalone.**

SP: Yeah, that's true. Like scenes, yeah.

**RM: Yeah, but with language, you can compress so much and leap from one thing to the other. Great, that's all my questions.**

SP: I have nothing left to say, Bob. ■



## Robert McKee's 'STORY'

Writing for the screen is quirky business. A writer must labor meticulously over his or her prose, yet very little of that prose is ever heard by filmgoers. The few words that do reach the audience, in the form of the characters' dialogue, are, according to Robert McKee, best left to last in the writing process. As Alfred Hitchcock once remarked, 'When the screenplay has been written and the dialogue has been added, we're ready to shoot.'

In *Story*, McKee puts into book form what he has been teaching screenwriters for years in his seminar on story structure, which is considered by many to be a prerequisite to the film business.

The long list of film and television projects that McKee's students have written, directed, or produced includes *A Beautiful Mind*, *Law & Order*, *Desperate Housewives*, *The Lovely Bones*, *Million Dollar Baby*, *LOST*, *House of Cards*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *CSI*, and many, many more.

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# ROBERT MCKEE INTERVIEWS COMEDIC LEGEND DREW CAREY

## Part 1

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*Robert McKee and Drew Carey discuss what makes a good joke, the structure of a joke, and some of Mr. Carey's comedic challenges.*

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# MCKEE INTERVIEWS DREW CAREY

**RM: One of the great principles of comedy I would love to talk about is, if I ever write a book on comedy, it's going to be called *Comedy: The Angry Art*.**

DC: Yeah.

**RM: The root of comedy is anger. To get started, I'm wondering, what pisses you off?**

DC: You know, I'm having a problem with that lately, because I'm so satisfied with my life. I was writing my theory. If you notice, once comedians get to be rich and get their own shows, people say, "Oh, they lost their edge," or, "They're not as funny as they used to be." That's because they quit waiting in line at the grocery store, they get chauffeured places, and they're not sweating the rent.

All of a sudden, everything is okay. All of the best jokes, all the best routines, are always the little guy against something big. It's the small against the big. It's the control against the uncontrollable, and it doesn't have to be an institution. It could be an institution, it could be traffic, weather, God—something that controls you that you can't do anything about that you just want to yell at. So I'm pretty satisfied with my life lately.

**RM: That's really disappointing to hear.**

DC: I had a United flight on Wednesday night—a redeye. You've taken redeye flights yourself, right?

**RM: Yes, I have.**

DC: It leaves LA at 11:00 and gets into DC at 6:00 in the morning or something like that. You figure everybody's going to snooze on the plane. So they got the lights up, they got the TVs on, they do full service—full food service. I couldn't sleep a wink. If I get up and complain—I'm on this first-class and United wouldn't let me sleep—I'd sound like a putz.

To combat that, as often as I can, I buy my own groceries, pump my own gas, and do all that stuff as much as I can just so I don't lose touch, because otherwise, I will. My kid bums me out. My fiancée has a four-year-old. I love him, for the record, because I know he's going to see this one day. I love him like crazy, he's the greatest thing, but he is like the worst roommate I ever had in my life. There's nothing a four-year-old brings to the table that's good, besides he's fun at a party and he hugs me and he says he loves me and then that makes up for everything. But I have this thing in my face right now, you can barely see it because it's covered up by makeup.

**RM: Yeah, it's a bruise.**

DC: Yeah, he slammed the car lid

on my face—the trunk lid on my face while I was packing the car to go to the airport.

**RM: So one of the things we can be angry about and hate are kids?**

DC: Yeah. In my act, I go on about the government. I have a bit in my act about Brad Pitt, because he's so good-looking and perfect. You know, stuff like that.

**RM: Let me give you, for example, institutions. Five institutions: government, religion, the military, corporations, Hollywood.**

DC: Yeah, you can easily rail against all of those things.

**RM: What would you pick if you had to? If you were on a desert island and you had to do stand-up to a palm tree, who would you attack?**

DC: Well, if it was a desert island with a palm tree, then religion.

**RM: Religion?**

DC: Yeah, because you can't see it. If it was just me on a desert island with a buddy, I would be like, "Why would God do this? What kind of God is this?" I used to have a bit in my act about the Pope. As he travels and does parades, he has bulletproof glass on the Pope Mobile.

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Of all the people that are guaranteed to go to heaven, why is the Pope worried about taking a bullet? What does he know that we don't know? Why does he get the special protection? He's the Pope, right? He's clear. He should be walking down the street with his shirt off with no armor. We're the ones that need the bulletproof glass until we make a good decision in our lives, but he's got all this bulletproof glass.

There's a lot of stuff that about religion that bugs me. On a desert island, I would take religion. If we were in a city somewhere, in an apartment, I could go against the local government.

**RM: Suppose I asked you to work, like you were airing a sitcom, and we wanted to go after a certain kind of personality. Not an institution, but an individual. Here's a choice: rich people, rednecks, arrogant people, dimwitted stupid people, and wannabe intellectuals.**

DC: Oh, you got me in there, that's good. Way to define Drew. Well, rich people would be kind of easy. But rich people aren't always bad. It would have to be rich and arrogant. You would have to give them another trait. Some rich people do a lot of good.

**RM: Did you always think that rich people...?**

DC: My whole life, I've always hated rich people. Now that I'm rich...

**RM: You see the other side of it.**

DC: Yeah. I still think, "What are you complaining about?" When I hear rich people complain about something, I think, "What? Shut up." Every once in a while, I think, "Oh, that jerk that does blah blah," and I realize I do the same thing all the time. That jerk with the big car, and I drive a Lexus. But my day-to-day car is a Mini Cooper, because it's easier to park in LA. The big car just drives me crazy.

**RM: But you're still driving yourself, as you said.**

DC: Yeah, of course. The traffic in this town sucks, but the Mini Cooper makes it more bearable because you can swing in and out easier, and if somebody scratches it, it's no big deal.

If somebody cuts me off, I think, "Who do you think you are with your big car? You think you're better than me because I have a Mini Cooper?" I go right back to being in Cleveland again with my crappy car when somebody would cut me off. It's great.

**RM: Arrogance is good. The redneck would have to be redneck and stupid. If it's just a redneck who is simple and has good values and likes NASCAR, then it**

**really has to be jokes like you're against the other and it's exclusionary, which you can do. My friend Greg Proops makes fun of NASCAR people all the time. It's great. But to get the bigger audience, it's better if it's something that bugs everybody.**

**That brings me to this point here. The key to comedy, or the key to a comic character, is what I call a blind obsession.**

DC: Yeah.

**RM: They're driven toward something, but they just don't see it in themselves.**

DC: Yeah.

**RM: What you're saying is that if you're going to nail one of these personality traits, it's got to be combined with something that is obsessive and...**

DC: Yeah, like with the NASCAR fan, if that's all they care about and they're just spilling beer on you, saying, "Get out of my way; I can't see my wife today because I'm watching this sport." You can do the same thing with football fans or any sport guy that just ignores his family for the sport, and is really obnoxious about it.

**RM: When you were doing *The Drew Carey Show* for nine years, did your character have a blind**

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## obsession?

DC: Yeah, mine was I had a strong sense of duty, and so it was always up to me to save things because nobody else would.

## RM: So the blindly nice?

DC: I guess so. Bruce Helford, the guy I created the show with, talked to executives and he'd explain my character. He'd say I was a happy sack. I took this course once. This guy, Sam Chistin, said—it's a really good requirement, I recommend it for any actor—your essences are things about you that only apply to you. He gives you these phrases to describe yourself, and one of the phrases that describes me was, "Gee, whitewashing the fence with those guys was really fun." No matter how many people took advantage of me, I didn't mind, and I said, "Well, I'll just go get them tomorrow." You could have a lot of fun with a character like that, and that's really kind of what I want.

## RM: Yes, and then you surrounded yourself with some zanies in that sitcom—you could point out their obsessions.

DC: Yeah, Mimi's thing was just hating me so much. She didn't care what it took to get rid of me. The Mimi character was a big grudge-holder. Somebody who can't let go of her grudge, or can't forget a slight, that's a really good

comic flaw to give someone. Then you can do all of these comedy of manners things. You just give them anything. For example, somebody takes their parking space or somebody bumps into them or serves them the wrong thing at a restaurant; they go ballistic and can't control themselves.

You would put them in a situation—this is all off the top of my head, so it's not necessarily the best idea—like in a job interview or an important lunch where the big job is at stake and the mortgage and the family. The waiter brings the wrong thing or calls him "bub" instead of "sir," and you watch them lose control and go off. Those are really great because the whole audience sees it coming and everybody is like, "Oh, wait for this." You need a lot of tension and content.

Tension is very important in comedy. That's why dirty jokes and when comics go to the edge, people say, "I can't believe he's talking about this." They get really tense. And then if you hit it just right, you can pop the balloon and it gets a big laugh.

## RM: Yes, this is the next subject, of course: setups and punches. The setup, then, is actually hot stuff.

DC: Tension.

## RM: It has to be tension.

DC: Yeah—tension, tension, tension.

## RM: The kind of taboo subjects for...

DC: Well, it doesn't even have to be taboo, but that's why taboo jokes work, but you can't go over the line. Freud wrote a really great book about this comedy. I forget what it was called, but I read it when I was in college. One of the things he talked about was that in order for comedy to take place, everybody has to have a spirit of play. You talk about it in your course, your comedy course, with the idea of nobody getting really hurt.

## RM: That's right.

DC: If somebody gets hurt, then it violates the spirit of play.

## RM: Yeah.

DC: That's why guys come out in funny suits sometimes and everything is a joke. When people go into a comedy club, they know they're going to laugh. Even the colors and stuff they use in comedy movies are brighter colors, usually. Even the way they're shot lets everybody know that this is not serious. So there's not a lot of depth of field, and shots and stuff like that.

With the taboo subjects, you can take them right until the spirit of play is ruined. People that are really

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good that can go right to that point, get the tension built up really big, as long as you're not hurting anybody, and then you can let it go.

I did a benefit once that was for some kind of thing. There was a bunch of handicapped people in the crowd. There must've been 20 dudes in wheelchairs, a bunch of blind people. Half the crowd must've been handicapped. Nobody was saying a thing, like they weren't handicapped. I got up on stage and said, "You know what's a bitch? Like the one day you really need a handicap spot."

**RM: Did they get it?**

DC: I don't know, they laughed really hard. But you know, somebody has got to say something.

**RM: Right, there's an elephant in the room.**

DC: Yeah, you've got to talk about the elephant in the room.

**RM: When you're building a joke, where do you put the most creative effort—into the setup, into creating a situation? You just did a great joke in a room full of handicapped people and everybody is ignoring it. So you've already got our energy right now.**

DC: Yeah, I'm just...

**RM: Having set that up...**

DC: The tension is, "Isn't it a bitch, the one time you need a handicapped space?" First of all, you can't believe people are saying that. It's all in one thing, so if you need to break it down, the tension is that I'm talking about it. If you see somebody handicapped, the thing is you just don't mention it. The polite thing is to not say a thing.

I have a friend named Kip Addotta. He doesn't do stand-up anymore, but he was funny. He said, "I think that when you see a handicap person, you should walk right up to them and say, 'What the fuck happened to you?' You know, totally don't ignore it."

**RM: Well, I've always thought that those handicap parking places should be at the farthest end of the parking lot possible, because what these people need is exercise.**

DC: Yeah, right?

**RM: You're right up at the door. I mean, that's ridiculous. They need to walk, you know.**

DC: The fact that you're talking about it is the tension part.

**RM: When you've got a great setup, like an audience full of handicapped people and nobody is talking, don't you think you could punch that 15 differ-**

**ent ways?**

DC: Yeah, I could've ruined that tons of ways.

**RM: No, no, not ruined it. Don't you think that's such a hot setup that once you've got that, you could do a whole routine?**

DC: Yeah, you could act it out. There's ways to do the joke. For stand-up, you can tell the joke, act out the joke. I could've told it and then done a thing, "Excuse me, I can't get a parking spot." Whatever, I can't think of a thing right now, but you could definitely act. There's a lot of comics that have that rhythm—they tell the joke and then they act it out. Or they just act it out, and some guys just tell it and you have the vision in your head.

When I told that joke, I had a vision in my head of 10 handicapped guys with cars looking for that one space but having to walk because the other handicapped guy got it before they did. Argue about if you are more handicapped than I am. Argue over who is the most handicapped and who deserves the space more. There's ways you can go to get it going.

**RM: I'm suggesting that the real creative act is the setup.**

DC: Yeah. The toughest part about writing the joke, is coming up with

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subjects. That's the hardest part. If you're going to be a professional comedy writer, that's the toughest thing. I have a writing exercise that I tell people about if they're doing stand-up: Try to write 10 jokes a day to try to get one good joke, because that was my percentage—one out of 10. I'd think of 10 things, but only one was even kind of funny. So I just write 10 jokes and try to get one funny joke a day, five days a week. One funny joke a day, five days a week. It's tough to do. You get about 45 minutes a year out of it that way for stand-up.

The tough part is coming up with subjects, because my rule was they had to be clean enough to do on network TV, like a talk show, such as *The Tonight Show* or *Letterman*. They couldn't be topical, so I didn't allow myself to do topical jokes. I could write topical jokes and dirty jokes, but I couldn't include them in my 10. I had to come up with 10 things that weren't topical—I couldn't talk about the Oscars, I couldn't do a joke about the sports game. I couldn't do a joke about what Obama just said. I could, but I don't count them in my 10, and that's really hard.

## RM: Finding universal human...

DC: You run out of things. Like, you know, the wife, the husband, sex. Then you get dirty; you can't do the sex things. You want to, but you've got to keep it clean enough to do

on TV. Half my time is spent going through *Yellow Pages* for different jobs, going through thesauruses, dictionaries—any kind of collections of books. I spent a lot of time just poring through those things. I had computer programs that would help, and that would help make word associations for me so I wouldn't do the same old stuff. In the 60s and 70s, for a while everybody was doing airplane jokes; everybody had an airplane bit.

## RM: Yeah.

DC: Even *Cosby* had an airplane bit, but his was really funny.

## RM: The little kid on the airplane.

DC: Yeah, "Hope the plane don't crash."

## RM: It seems to me that a lot of people who are struggling to write comedy do it the other way around. They've actually got what they think is a punchline, but they have no setup for it and they go looking for setups to match their punch. That will drive you crazy.

DC: You can't do anything with that. How are you going to have a punchline unless you know what you're throwing a punchline about?

## RM: Exactly.

DC: All this stuff about giving a character a flaw and a blind ambition and all that stuff—it makes it so much easier if you just lay that groundwork. Then you're building your house on brick, and the wolf will never blow it down.

## RM: And yet, in the great eight-year television series, *Whose Line Is it Anyway?* the structure there was they sort of had to create the setup.

DC: I was just watching it the other night. It just happened to be on TV and I watched the whole episode. We did a show called *Newscasters*, and Colin or somebody would be the anchor, and he would give himself a funny name but he didn't have to do a character, and then everybody else had to do a character. We would assign them the character.

They didn't know what they had to do, but the producers would think it up. For example, Wayne Brady is a really good dancer, so we made him a background dancer in a rap video. "You're a female background dancer in a rap video," and he was doing the sports. We know he's going to go crazy, and as soon as we said it, the audience is laughing because they know something good is going to come out of it.

All that Wayne has to do, then, is that acting thing where you have to let go of fear. The fear is the worst

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thing an actor can have. Once you let go of any kind of fear, or fear of judgment or anything like that, then you can do anything. So Wayne got up there and he just went crazy. He came over by my desk and danced. He grabbed one of the other performers and hugged them and danced all over them. It was just fantastic, and all you have to do is go for it 100%.

You have to have the basic thing down there. We have a good profession for them to be, we have a good situation, and then the rest of it was just him going for it. So that's the punch. He did all the punchlines, but we provided the groundwork. That's the secret of *Whose Line*: we provided the groundwork for everybody in a really good way, and then all they had to do was go for it.

**RM: I have watched hundreds of hours of *Whose Line is it Anyway?* All those guys—Wayne, Ryan Stiles—it seems to me that it's more than just letting themselves go.**

DC: Right, there is more to it.

**RM: They get into a great situation—that's the setup. Then they've got to find variations on that theme somehow. I watch these guys and I think, "Where does this come from?"**

DC: A lot of it is list-making. If

you're writing comedies, a lot of it is list-making.

**RM: What does that mean—list-making?**

DC: Okay, I'm going to do a bit about, let's say, rich rednecks. So you have the Beverly Hillbillies kind of rich rednecks. So you make a list: what kind of car would a rich redneck drive? You know, types of cars they would buy. They would have a Daewoo with spinners. Just give me a Daewoo with spinners—if you see that, then you can make 10 jokes about that.

**RM: Sure.**

DC: It's a pimp with one bitch, you know. You just make a list of things that rich people do—things that rednecks do.

**RM: Yes, but how can Ryan or Wayne or those guys do that from one minute to the next? Are those lists already in a file cabinet in their head?**

DC: Yeah, they are. They are searching their RAM and searching their hard drive as fast as they can to come up with stuff. Then, if you look at them on *Whose Line*, when you give them the suggestion like, "Okay, you're going to be a background dancer in a rap video," and then I go to tell Ryan what he's going to be. Ryan was going to be an awkward adoles-

cent that was practicing making out with a girl.

Brad Sherwood had to do his bit, then Wayne Brady had to do his bit, and then Colin. So Ryan had all these minutes—he had like a minute and a half to think, "What would an awkward teenager do when he was practicing making out?" He did this move, and my arms aren't long enough, but he reached around and did that. He went to kiss two cameras. He had like four or five faces, and that's really all the bit was is he had to think of like three faces to make, three make out faces and three cameras to go to, and then turn around and change his voice.

So really quickly in his head, he only had to come up with like five things. It's pretty easy when you've been doing improv for so long. You just get trained to come up with things when you do improv a lot. The key to improv is called yes/and.

**RM: Called yes/and?**

DC: Yes/and. Somebody tells you something, and you agree. Whatever it is they tell you, that's the reality, and then the "and" is what you add to it. So if we're just meeting and there are no suggestions from the audience, I say, "Good morning, Doctor." You're a doctor. You can't say, "I'm not a doctor, I'm the salesman." Now we're

# MCKEE INTERVIEWS DREW CAREY

both screwed, because no matter what I say, you're going to say, "Yes, Doctor." And you say, "Hello, Nurse." Now I'm a nurse. You could add to it and go, "You look lovely in your dress today." Now I'm a female nurse.

Okay, now the audience has to let you pimp me a little bit. The audience has a laugh because now I have to change and act female, and I have to agree with everything you say. "Well, let's get the operation going." So now we're going to operate. That doctor can do a lot of things. They can do lunch, but now I say we're going to operate. This is how you make the list. If we're going to do an operation, there's scalpels and things. You've seen doctor movies, so you start to do things in your head and just move around stage making lists in your head. "I'm going to arrange my scalpels, I'm going to wash my hands, I'm putting my mask on," so that's the list.

But it's only three or four things you've got to think of, so it's easy. You're not making a big list. To do a stand-up routine, you might make a list of 20 things and really pore through some research, depending on the subject. You need three or four things just to get to the next line because while you're doing your action—putting your mask on—you're thinking of the next "and." You've agreed that you're going to operate, and now

you're thinking of the next "and." "Boy, I wish I hadn't been drinking." Now I have a drunk doctor on my hands and I have to think of what a nurse would be doing, and how to deal with the drunk doctor. As long as you keep adding to it, then you keep the scene going.

**RM: Amazing, but it seems to me inside all of that, of course, you're building jokes.**

DC: Yeah.

**RM: So you've got to be concerned about a number of things, and certainly the timing.**

DC: Right.

**RM: How do you build a situation to a point where the audience's attention is peaking, and then where do you get a punch to explode all of that tension?**

DC: In improv, you're not really looking for punchlines, per se. The "ands" are really the punchlines back and forth and the actions. You'll find yourself in funny situations. This little yes/and formula really works some magic sometimes, because, you'll be thinking of an "and" to put in there and you'll add something ridiculous. That's where it really is—you're looking for a comic exaggeration or a minimization or something like that.

There are also improv games that

use word puns. It's all the things they use in comedy writing, but in improv, a lot of it is exaggeration and making it bigger than it needs to be or more dangerous than it needs to be.

**RM: But I'm just thinking that in the midst of...**

DC: I didn't answer the question.

**RM: No, no. In the midst of an improv, there has got to be a sense that we've gone too long without a laugh.**

DC: Oh, yeah. Right, a lot of time.

**RM: So then what?**

DC: Well, then you start sweating and maybe somebody from the back will come and help you out. We were doing a show and there was two doctors—that's what they ended up being. They said, "Let's operate on this guy," and I ran up to be the guy they were operating on. I walked in, and I said, "Sorry I'm late." There was actually a lull, and you just reminded me. It was like a month ago, so there was little lull there, so I just walked in and I said, "Sorry I'm late." I lay down on a stool, and I got a big laugh because it was like, "Okay, well, time to get operating." And then they realize there's no body there. So that's the way you add things.

**RM: There's an expression in**

# MCKEE INTERVIEWS DREW CAREY

**stand-up that if you get them to laugh then you killed, but if not then you died.**

DC: Yeah, yeah. It's death and dying.

**RM: There's a lot of death and dying in comedy.**

DC: "That was a knockout." It's always violent words they use.

**RM: Yes. But that sensation of dying—it is a physical thing, isn't it?**

DC: Yeah. I don't know if you ever told a joke—you guys who've ever been on a date or been with a group of people you just met, and you go, "Oh, I have a joke." And then you tell your joke and everybody just stares at you, or they don't laugh that much, or somebody like the waiter comes by and interrupts before you can get the joke out and then ruins it. Do that for an hour. See how happy you are by the end of it.

**RM: That's a nightmare.**

DC: You would rather die. That's the thing in doing a comedy—you're only allowed to have one outcome. With any other kind of movie, such as a mystery, a drama, or any kind of regular movie, people are allowed to feel excited and then sad and then hopeful and relieved and then surprised.

They're allowed to do all these things and you have a success.

If you're doing a comedy or a stand-up and you don't get a laugh, then you fail. They can be surprised, they can be hopeful, they can be wondering what's going to happen next, but if they're not laughing, then it's failure, failure, failure. You're only allowed to get a laugh to be successful. That's the one thing about comedy that's hard for me and hard for people to grasp. I don't buy it when people say, "Oh, that was a funny movie." And I go, "Really?" They say, "Yeah, it had that one or two funny parts." And I say, "Yeah, so what?" I go to a movie to laugh.

**RM: My standard of a great comedy movie is how many times I laugh so hard that, no sound comes out.**

DC: Yeah.

**RM: You know, that convulsion where you...**

DC: Yeah.

**RM: Six of those, and this is a great film.**

DC: I like it when everybody's laughing so much that I can't hear the movie—when I miss dialogue because everybody's laughing so hard. That's funny. ■



# MCKEE INTERVIEWS DREW CAREY



Drew Carey is one of the most successful television comedians and game show hosts of the past 20 years. Drew was born and raised in Cleveland, Ohio. At an early age, however, his father passed away and his mother was compelled to work long hours outside of the home. Drew found solace in cartoons and comedy albums.

As a teenager, he enrolled in Kent State University, but crises in his personal life got him expelled twice. Finally, dropping out of college, he found new direction and discipline upon joining the Marine Corps. His six-year military stint gave him new confidence and focus.

Upon leaving the service, a close friend of Drew's, who worked at a radio station, asked him to write a few jokes to use on the air. From there, Drew honed his wit and channeled his enormous energy into comedy, doing stand-up and working as an emcee at the Cleveland Comedy Club.

Drew's career-defining moment came in 1991 when an appearance on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson changed his life forever. After the set, Drew was called over to the couch to sit next to the great Johnny Carson, the ultimate coup for any young comedian.

A series of HBO specials and television appearances soon fol-

lowed, and then, in 1995, Drew joined forces with writer/producer Bruce Helford to create *The Drew Carey Show*. Drew's loyalty to his hometown and everyman persona endeared him to audiences as *The Drew Carey Show* became one of the most popular sitcoms on television, running for over nine years and 200 episodes.

In 1997, Drew published his autobiography, *Dirty Jokes and Beer: Stories of the Unrefined*. In 1998, Drew began hosting the improvisational game show, *Whose Line Is it Anyway?* The show ran for eight years, winning an Emmy with four more nominations.

In February 2003, Drew received the highest of honors: a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame. In 2004 and 2005, Drew developed and starred in a whole new form of television improvisation, *Drew Carey's Green Screen Show* on the WB network.

In 2007, he was selected to host the CBS nighttime game show, *Power of 10*. Just as that series was coming to an end, Bob Barker, the famous host of the long-running game show *The Price is Right*, retired. When CBS offered Drew the job, at first he declined. But then, on *The David Letterman Show*, he announced that he was taking over.

**MCKEE  
INTERVIEWS  
DREW CAREY**



See the next issue of *STORY Magazine* for Part 2 of our special interview with Drew Carey.



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# HOW HOLLYWOOD REALLY WORKS

**Producers: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly**

---

BY ED SAXON

*In this month's exploration of the inner workings of Hollywood, Ed Saxon explains how producers think.*

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# HOW HOLLYWOOD REALLY WORKS

Let's talk about producers. There are certainly some bad producers and some great producers. Generally, by and large, the people who are in production are pursuing it as a passion. There's a tremendous amount of competition to be in the movie business. There is no prerequisite for being a producer. Producers are usually smart people who could make more money doing something else, but they have a passion for motion pictures, just like writers, just like directors.

Most of the players in the movie business are passionate players—they are people who want to pay for the material they have. They may not have a lot of money to pay, but they don't want to steal people's material just out of self-interest. Stealing someone's work, especially someone who is just starting out and you could probably buy their work for not a lot of money, is idiotic because you're better off paying a little bit when you have the money and not having a lawsuit later. You don't want to encumber your project with complications, and most producers succeed because they have an innate sense of fairness.

One of the things I had to learn as a producer starting out was to pay crew members about the same amount. Someone might need a job more and work for less, but eventually they'll realize that they're getting less than the guy

who is doing essentially the same thing, and you're going to have a problem.

So producers have a pretty decent sense of what's fair and not fair. They want to keep their projects unencumbered, so the idea that they will steal your ideas isn't so realistic, especially when you're working with people who have a track record in the business.

The movie industry is a very small business. That's a problem when you're trying to break into it. However, once you're in it, the business tends to operate a lot on trust and most of the people tend to be ethical. If a producer seems to be acting shifty and is not giving you straight answers, it's a good idea to write your questions down. An email puts your question on record. If you're still not getting an answer, you can send another email and say, "This was unanswered and I need an answer."

I also find that writing down questions, even if you don't send them, tends to help you crystallize your thoughts in terms of what you really want to know. Especially for writers, I generally encourage writing down how you want your project and how you want to communicate with the producer. At least then you know what you're hoping for.

I encourage you to try seeing the

producer's point of view. We producers have multiple projects at any given time. You want to be your own best producer, which means being a squeaky wheel and pushing the producer, but you also want to listen to what the producer's problems are in order to offer some help. It may be that he needs you to do some free writing, and it may mean that you need to do a casting list. It could be any number of things, but remember: the producer's problems are your problems because the producer is trying to get your movie made in the best way possible.

Those are a few things to think about when working with producers.

## WHAT PRODUCERS LOOK FOR

I am a feature film producer, so what am I looking for? First and foremost, when I read a script, I'm looking for something I can get made. Talent follows material, so I'm looking for something that talent is going to want to follow.

An idea that is either fresh enough or carefully and thoughtfully executed—one that will cause a director to want to dive into—will be able to secure the needed financing. When I see a fresh idea, I look to see what the comparable movies in the marketplace are that have done reasonably well. Can I point to any past successes in this

# HOW HOLLYWOOD REALLY WORKS

genre? Does this feel like it's fresh enough or original enough or true enough so that it works?

I don't want a total knockoff or a derivative of something. If I'm looking for a comedy, I don't want to read a script about four guys who lose their friend and wake up in Atlantic City with a hangover, because that's too much like *The Hangover*. I want something that's fresh enough, but also feels like it's current enough in terms of the story. It's going to feel like you are pushing a big rock up a hill if you get a big-- budget Western, since nobody is making big-- budget Westerns right now.

I want something I can get made—a script that allows me to imagine four or five actors playing the lead. This is what producers are looking for. They are looking for material that can get made, either because it's distinctive enough to get the attention of financiers or it's familiar enough and true enough.

I'm always looking for a professional presentation. Most things are submitted electronically these days within Hollywood, so if I get a script that has a spiral binding, I think, "Well, this person is not working in Hollywood." My experience is that people who are coming from radically outside the system are much less likely to deliver something that's professional because they don't have the basic

etiquette or understanding of how things work.

I'm also looking for scripts that don't have any misspellings and are professionally formatted. I look for character introductions to feel like real character introductions. If a celebrity is supposed to play that character, I would like to see some description of why that character is worth playing, even as he is introduced. I would like to see things that are not all dialogue or all scene description, because that's how professional writers tend to write. Of course, there are exceptions.

What I am looking for may not be what others are looking for. There are producers who are looking for slightly more derivative material, who make action movies with B-- level stars. There are producers who are looking for big temple things, so they're looking specifically at what the provenance is, or whether they can control a piece of intellectual property, which you may or may not have. There are people who are looking for all kinds of different things.

One of the things I am definitely looking for is something that pulls me in with its first ten pages. If I'm reading a script from a writer who doesn't have any produced credits, I'm going to make a decision pretty early about how good that writing is.

Finally, what I'm looking for is truth. I'm looking for something that grabs me—something that is compelling and true. Bob McKee says, "Write the truth." He's right. ■

# HOW HOLLYWOOD REALLY WORKS



Stay tuned next month, as Ed Saxon continues to share his insider knowledge of Hollywood.





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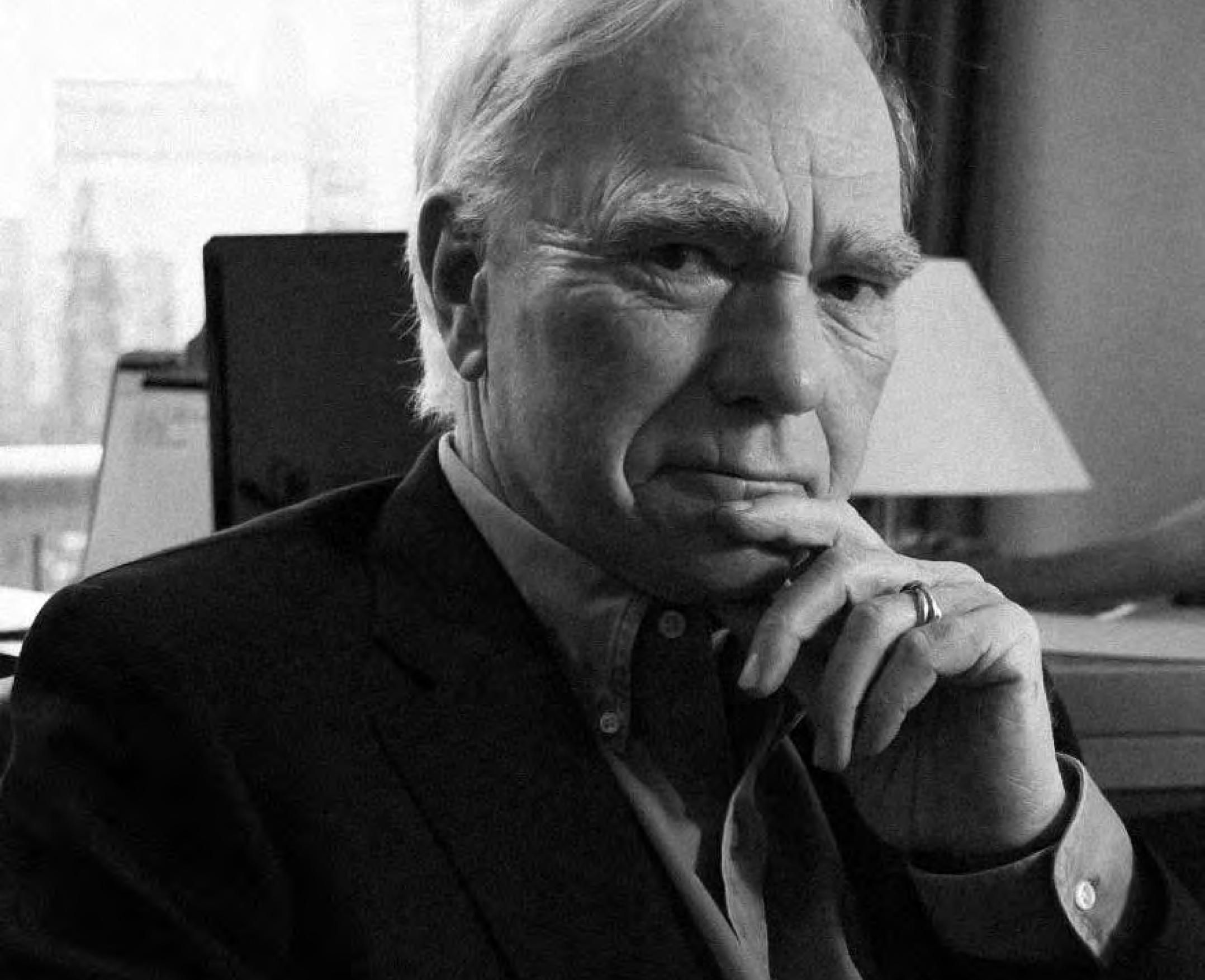
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# ASK MCKEE

**Should I try to sell my thriller screenplay with a treatment?**

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*In this edition of Ask McKee, we learn why unknown writers should try to sell a whole screenplay, not just a treatment.*

---

# ASK MCKEE

I would never try to sell the treatment. Instead, just tell the story as vividly and succinctly as you possibly can, because there's nothing you can say about a story that's going to make them want to buy it. You can't make promises. You can't say, "This is a story; it's going to be wonderful because it's got this and it's got that." You can't sell that to people because they've heard it all.

But what sells it is the story.

Why did one producer or another buy something? Was it a short treatment? Well, who gives a damn? It doesn't matter. Whatever happened in another case is irrelevant to us. We can't pray for miracles. We just tell the story in a clear way. In this day and age, I would never give a treatment to anybody for sale.

If you want to write the screenplay then write a screenplay. If you're an unknown writer and you sell a story from a treatment, they're going to get somebody else to write it. It's not going to be you, because you've never had a credit.

So, if you write a treatment that's good enough to capture somebody's interest, they're going to hire another writer. It won't be the unknown commodity.

But, if you say, "I've got this screenplay." They will give it to a reader, who will read it and reduce it down to two paragraphs, two pages, or

whatever. Let them do that because, first of all, treatments are not only very difficult to write, but it's difficult to capture the story with one. Second, you want to write the screenplay, so you have to prove to them that you can write.

If you give somebody a treatment and they like your story, and then if they raise \$30 million to make the film, they're going to hire a \$1 million writer to write it.

If you're going to write a thriller, it's a good idea to write a novel. Get it published. Hopefully it becomes a great success as a novel, and then get film producers to option the novel. As a condition of optioning the novel, you say, "And I must write the screenplay, at least the first draft." At that point, when they want your novel, then you have the power to say what you want. ■

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