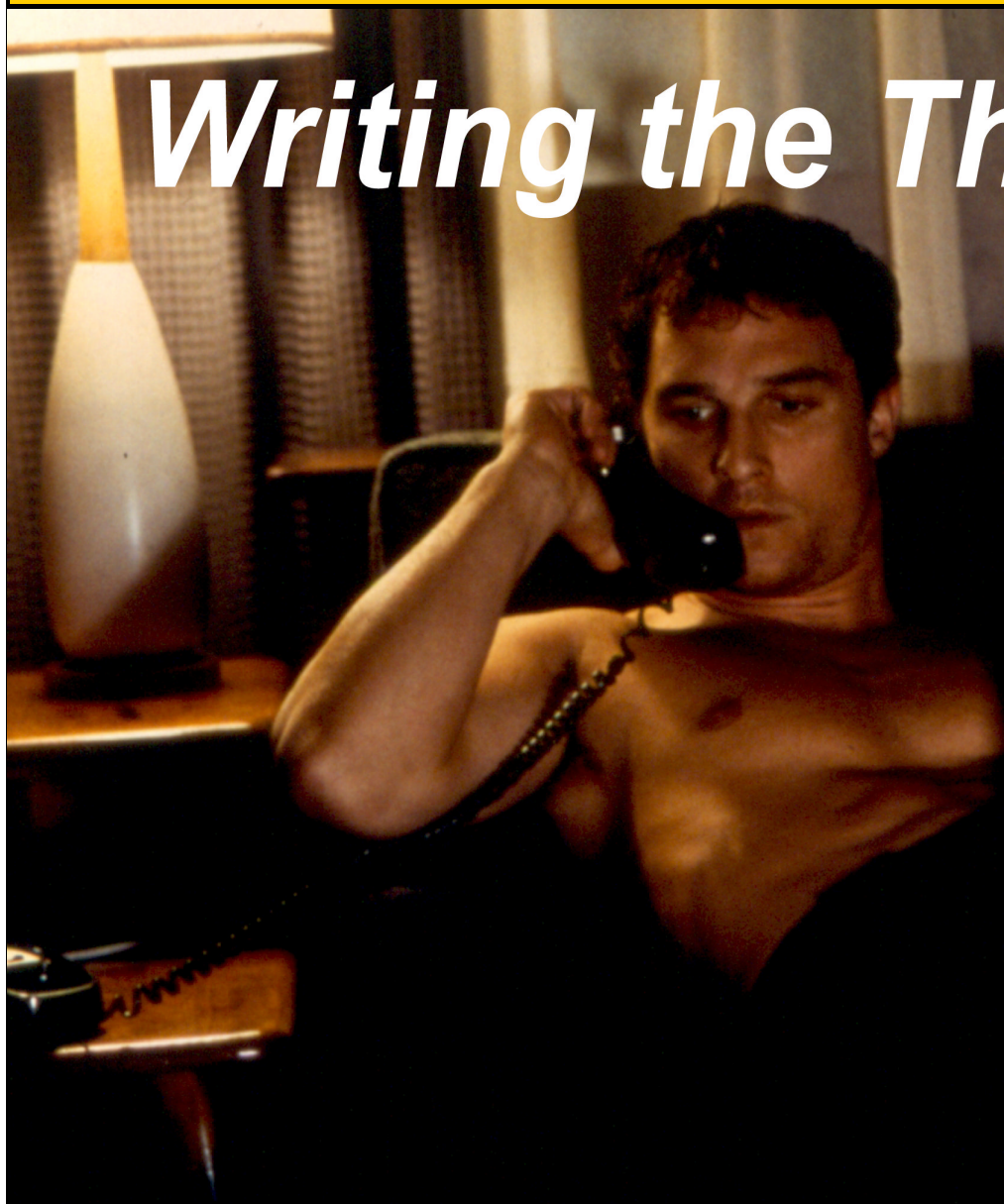


Screenwriters

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MONTHLY

Writing the Thriller



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Red Dragon: An Interview with Ted Tally, by Fred Topel

Ted Tally returns to the world of Hannibal Lecter with *Red Dragon*. He won an Oscar for adapting *Silence of the Lambs*, but opted out of *Hannibal*. *Red Dragon* was not simply a matter of translating the book to a screenplay though. Now that Hannibal Lecter is the marquee star, he had to beef up the role. The book only had two Lecter scenes. The film has several, plus an opening that details his capture by FBI Agent Will Graham (Edward Norton.)

Adaptation has been a big business for Tally. His three projects between the Hannibal Lecter films - *The Juror*, *Before and After* and *All the Pretty Horses* - were based on books, and his next projects, *Alexander the Great* and *Mucho Mojo* are also from books.

In person, Tally towers over most journalists, but relaxes with a welcoming demeanor. Inquiring about my work before proceeding to the interview, he appealed to a common bond between writers. A warning to those who have not yet seen *Red Dragon*, there are some mild spoilers in this interview as we discuss specifics of adapting *Red Dragon*.

Why didn't you adapt *Hannibal*? I didn't know how

to do that story as a movie. I didn't know how to make it work to my satisfaction. It was also a feeling that Jonathan [Demme] didn't want to do it, Ed Saxon, who produced *Silence*, didn't want to do it. Eventually, Jodie didn't want to do it and I felt like we should all work together or not do it. Ridley Scott asked me if I would do it and Dino [de Laurentiis] asked me if I would do it, but it became kind of a loyalty thing to Jonathan.

How did that change for *Red Dragon*? It still wasn't Jonathan It still wasn't Jonathan but it was a book that I'd always loved. Also, it had been longer. I didn't feel like it was going to be a direct comparison to *Silence of the Lambs* this time. We all felt like if we do *Hannibal*, we're going to be competing with ourselves and we probably can't win that competition. It's going to be a thankless feeling to work on this for two years and then have people say, "Well, it's not as good as *Silence of the Lambs*." This has more of a cushion around it to me. I just feel more comfortable with the book.

Why was it important to set up things and lead into *Silence of the Lambs* with certain charac-

(Continued on page 5)

Frailty: An Interview with Brent Hanley, by Chris Wehner

Frailty, starring Matthew McConaughey and directed by Bill Paxton, is one of the better movies of 2002. Brent Hanley wrote an edgy and intelligent thriller script that neatly blends genres producing an effective and dramatic narrative.

The story centers on a family and a terrible secret they managed to keep for many years. A serial killer who calls himself "God's Hands" has terrorized a small town in present day Texas. Fenton Meiks (Matthew McConaughey) approaches the lead FBI investigator on the case, claiming he knows the identity of the killer. When the FBI agent scoffs at him, Fenton calmly reveals that the killer is his younger brother Adam.

From this point the story is told in flashback with Fenton providing the narrative of his childhood. He and his brother at first appear to have grown up in a normal single parent family, raised by their widowed father. But one day everything changed when they are awoken late at night by their frightened father who tells the boys that he was just visited by an angel and given a holy mission to destroy evil "demons." He tells the boys that on the outside these demons are normal looking people, but on the

inside they are pure evil. After recanting his vision to the boys he enlists them to help destroy the demons.

Fenton refuses to participate in the killings while his younger and impressionable brother obeys. Needing more evidence, the FBI agent follows Fenton to the family's rose garden where the bodies are buried, only to learn that neither good nor evil is what it seems.

Brent, be honest, did God tell you to write *Frailty*? Absolutely [laughs], that's funny because people have asked me at press junkets about the story, "Where did it come from?" I'd just deadpan "It's one-hundred percent autobiographical." And they wouldn't laugh, they just looked at me. I'd continue to mess with them and say, "Man that happened to me." And they would be like "Holy shit."

I understand you were discovered by simply dropping your script into Matthew McConaughey's production companies' mailbox? I lived right next to Warner Bros. where he had an overall deal

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Book Review: *Writing the Thriller*, by Neill D. Hicks

Reviewed by Mike Smith

If Neill D. Hicks doesn't watch out he might just become the next Syd Field or Linda Seger. As the author of now three excellent screenwriting books (*Screenwriting 101*, *Writing the Action-Adventure*), Mr. Hicks is quickly establishing a name for himself as a "screenwriting guru," though I'm certain the association with the term would make him cringe. He's more than a guru, as a working professional screenwriter with real credits he is a practitioner.

His new book, *Writing the Thriller: The Terror Within*, is an excellent instructional and theoretical take on genre screenwriting. Much like his *Writing the Action-Adventure*, he approaches the subject intuitively by first giving the writer a lay of the land of the Thriller. What are the "Expectations of genre?" Most importantly, what elements make up the genre? It's perhaps even better to approach it from the standpoint of what isn't a Thriller. The author starts off by giving the genre some context and then provides instruction and advice about how to write an effective Thriller.

Right away Hicks tells us, "The Thriller screenwriter's primary objective is to create fear in the audience — not the dazed fear of a Horror film, or even the anxious trepidation of self-discovery that occurs in the Personal Quest genre, but a sensation of edgy vigilance that should nudge the audience as they exit the theater to the outside world."

As with any movie story, it's important to maintain the "Narrative Trajectory." The three-act structure holds the narrative together, and according to Mr. Hicks, it goes something like this (from page 32 of the book):

Attraction

The audience is not so much interested in the character as in the character's predicament. In the beginning, the audience really wants to know what this story is about. How is the main character going to get out of this mess?

Anticipation

The conflict between the main character and the antagonist increases so that the audience expects more and more interesting things to happen. Tension builds because the actions taken by the characters do not produce the expected results, and therefore the characters must make new decisions that will have new unknown results. It is the pressure of the unknown that creates suspense for the audience.

Satisfaction

Because the antagonist is stronger than the main charac-

ter, the hero must overcome internal fears as well as external obstacles. Only through character growth is the audience's anticipation satisfied by a complete story that, unlike the chaos of normal life, makes sense out of capricious reality.

Writing a good thriller is more than just suspense and conflict, it's also about well-developed characters.

The book is made up of nine chapters ranging from "The Expectations of Genre" to "The Cosmos of Credibility" where the author discusses "hyper-reality" and how the screenwriter must establish enough credibility within the story in order for the audience to suspend their disbelief.

My favorite chapter was "The Quintessential Thriller," chapter nine, where the author elaborates on the "Classic Thriller" and breaks down Ernest Lehman's screenplay for Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*. (Read an excerpt of this chapter on page 8.)

All in all an excellent book I highly recommend for any screenwriter interested in writing better stories, and obviously for the Thriller writer who needs instruction on the dynamics and make-up of the genre.

Writing the Thriller: The Terror Within

By Neill D. Hicks

Michael Wiese Productions, 2002

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ters? Well, because Chilton is in the book and the audience loves to hate Anthony Heald, who's a great character and a wonderful actor. And I just couldn't resist. I just thought it's fun for me to walk back down that corridor again with Anthony Heald weedle in and try to get credit for publishing articles about Lecter. It's a reprise of things in *Silence of the Lambs* that I thought the audience would enjoy reprising. [And some of it] was just for my own fun.

What did you think of *Manhunter*? I think *Manhunter*'s a pretty good movie, but it leaves out so much of the book that I didn't think it was a sacred cow that was the last word on this book. And Thom Harris was very disappointed in that movie and wanted to see his book with his title done right from his point of view.

How did you approach Will Graham's monologues? That's hard, and some of Edward Norton's best work in this movie is when he's thinking out loud. It's a very hard thing for an actor to do. I've had actors refuse to speak dialogue unless there was another actor there. They're so afraid of looking silly. But he handled it very gracefully and it's very convincing. You obviously can't do as much as the internal monologue as the book. The greatest luxury that novelists have over screenwriters is the ability to write thoughts.

How did you develop the opening scene? It was suggested in *Silence of the Lambs* that Lecter killed this flutist to improve the sound of the orchestra. Actually, the flutist was a patient of his in that book. It was referred to again in *Hannibal*. So, I just thought if we start with a concert and with Tony Hopkins as this pained audience member, it will have some scale and some drama. I like the idea of starting with an audience watching an audience, and the music at the beginning of the movie. It has some size and some style, some coloring and I liked that. And I thought it's nice to start on a slightly comic note and it was a natural progression to go from that to the suggestion that he served parts of that flutist to members of the symphony board. I think that's also in *Silence of the Lambs*.

So, I thought, if we've gone that far, we've got to get Will Graham into this. The original backstory that's in *Red Dragon* is that Will Graham first interviewed Lecter because a patient of Lecter's had disappeared, I think a college student, not the flutist. So, he's just interviewing Lecter because that's one of the follow-ups. Some little thing that happens in that interview arouses some little degree of suspicion on Graham's part. He can't even put his finger on it. So, he comes back for a second interview with Lecter, and in that second interview he sees some medical text, or a drawing that suggests one of the victims and he becomes suspicious of Lecter. Lecter knows he's suspi-

cious of him and attacks him. That's the backstory as it is in the book. I thought it would be more interesting and richer if it wasn't their first acquaintance, if they actually knew each other. It would be helpful for later parts of the story if Lecter is aware of Graham's wife and son, for instance, and if he really knows him pretty well. It will help their interplay throughout the movie. Then I thought ah, well, what if Lecter's playing one of his mind games here? What if Lecter's pretending to help the investigation of a killer who is in fact himself? That seems like something Lecter would do. What better ways to make fools out of the police than to appear to be helping them search for himself? That just struck me as Lecter's perverse wit and that was the origin of that scene.

How did you develop the exercise scene? I was writing the script before there was a director, but I thought if I was directing this movie, I would certainly want to have a chance to get out of that corridor and away from that cell. Jonathan Demme was brilliant in finding ways to keep that fresh, but there's only so much you can do with that static situation. So, I thought if I were a director, I'd like to get him out of that cell. It gives him a chance to move, use his body. The way I originally wrote the scene was in an outdoor exercise yard, like a big dog run with an electrified fence and that's where they let Lecter exercise. Brett [Ratner], after looking at some locations, thought it was too hard to control the lighting and it wouldn't feel as claustrophobic as every scene with Lecter should always feel. Could it happen

indoors? I said I guess he could be in some sort of gymnasium or something. And production designer Kristi Zea said, "I have a great idea." She's a genius. We worked it out between the three of us that he'd be tethered, but when you first see him you wouldn't know that he's been tethered so you can have this very scary moment where he appears to be approaching Will Graham as a free man and it's a scary little thrilling moment. It's great to see them have a scene with no bars and no plexi in between them. It's a whole different electricity in that scene, and it gave Dante Spinotti and everybody a chance to really show their stuff with the lighting and the whole look of that scene. I'm very pleased with how that scene came out and it's not a scene that's in the book.

Why was it five years from *Silence* to your next movie? Well, I wrote a couple scripts that were not produced for various reasons and I wrote a script that looked like it was going to get made and then didn't, which was *All the Pretty Horses*. I don't know, things just happen. Bad choices, bad luck. My career has been very odd that way. I either have nothing going on or I have two or three movies going on at once. I can't control the timing of

(Continued on page 7)



Anthony Hopkins and Edward Norton in *Red Dragon*. Photo: Glen Wilson. (C) 2002 Universal Pictures

Full Page (B/ W)

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Cost:

\$550

them. I keep writing them, but sometimes they sit there for eight years before they get made.

How involved were you with *The Juror* and *Before and After*? I was very much involved in *Before and After*. I was dismissed from *The Juror* just as they were starting to shoot. Demi Moore and I had issues with each other and I had no involvement whatever in the making of that movie.

What was your version of *The Juror* like? It was pretty close to what you saw. I think it would have been a better movie if the two women had switched parts, if Anne Heche had been the main character and Demi Moore had been her tough, feisty friend.

A few years later, you could have cast that. Exactly. I think that would have been a better movie. But, I liked Alec Baldwin. I thought his performance was very good. James Gandolfini was great. Some people told me it's their favorite movie of mine which is a little odd to me.

I was always surprised people were so hard on *Before and After*. They were hard on that. I've had a lot of movies that took it on the chin and I'm never quite sure why. I can understand *Before and After* was very upsetting material. Nobody ever thought that was going to be a box office bonanza. But I'm sometimes surprised by how disrespectfully some of these movies are received, as if we've set out to make some piece of shit, as if we didn't have intelligent, worthwhile intentions. We're not making some bozo frat comedy. If you make a movie like *Before and After*, obviously you're trying to make a serious worthwhile adult drama. Yet, sometimes you can be brutally received. There's a lot of incivility in criticism which I don't really understand.

Was that film close to your vision? Yes. I wish it had been a little longer. We kept cutting it back and making it shorter and shorter and shorter and I think maybe some of the subtext was lost in there a little bit. Some of the family texture, we kept tinkering with it because the [test] scores were not good and Barbet [Schroeder] kept trying to make it shorter and shorter. But the same thing happened with *All the Pretty Horses*. I think some texture is lost. Sometimes the movie wants to be two hours and 20 minutes, but it's very hard for a studio to accept that unless it's obviously more commercial material.

What's *Mucho Mojo*? *Mucho Mojo* is from a book by Joe Lansdale, a Texas writer who is very prolific. He writes mysteries, comedies, comic books. He wrote a series of books, I guess his most popular characters, are two guys, a black guy and a white guy, Leonard Pine and Hap Collins who live in East Texas, not the part of Texas that you normally see in movies. It's the sort of steamy, swampy, eastern shore of Texas, more like Louisiana. In an imaginary county and imaginary town that he's set there, they're good old boys except one's black and one's white. The black guy's gay and the white guy's not, but they've been best friends since high school. They're blue

collar and they're sort of raunchy, rude, profane guys who are great fun as characters. The dialogue is hilarious. They just keep getting in the way of trouble and they keep getting involved in having to solve crimes, but they're not detectives. They work in the rose fields of Texas as migrant workers, but they're great characters. It's the first book in that series and my favorite one. I wrote the adaptation for New Line, it went into turnaround and it's at Studio Canal now. David Goyer is going to direct that.

Will he do that before or after *Darksiders*? I don't know. It was originally going to start shooting in November. It's been pushed back to maybe January at this point. I don't know what's going on with that project.

Any casting ideas? Don Cheadle agreed to play one of the parts but now with production pushed back, I don't know whether we'll lose Don or not.

On *Alexander the Great*, how closely does Baz Luhrmann work with you? We haven't really worked together yet. We've met and talked on the phone, but it's been so far more general. We haven't gotten down to nuts and bolts of the revisions yet.

What has he asked for told you? I think he's going to want more scenes of Alexander's childhood, but we haven't really gotten down to the details yet. He's agreed to do the movie and the studio greenlit it, but there's still script work to be done.

Could you have done *Alexander* if there weren't books, and you just had to use history? Yes, I could have although it would have taken a year or two of research. I did the research anyway, but I had the template of this trilogy of novels to work from. *Alexander* is a story where there's enough there that I probably could have done that as an original. In a way, doing a historical subject is an adaptation. You've got the plot and the characters. *

Fred Topel is an experienced entertainment correspondent with a degree in Cinema and Photography from Ithaca College. He currently writes and has written for online news outlets and magazines such as *Herald Tribune Online*, *Daily Radar*, *eUniverse*, *Cinefantastique* and *The Hollywood Reporter* since graduating in May 1999.

and I just walked over there and dropped my screenplay and in the mailbox.

I had worked as an intern at Scott Free, Ridley and Tony Scott's company, and one of my jobs was to open the mail to gauge its priority because sometimes things would be sent via regular mail that were not unsolicited. So I knew that the mail would at least be opened. Knowing this I wrote a really impassioned letter. It somehow worked. Matthew's company is pretty small and the guy who opened up the letter read it right away.

Have you always wanted to be a screenwriter? Well here's the thing: I didn't come out to Hollywood to be a writer. I came to be a writer-director. I just didn't have any money to make a real movie. And if things work out I hope to direct *He Dreams Awake* this February. We have Wes Bentley (*American Beauty*) attached. It's not a done deal yet because it's hard to get a little movie like this made. I'm really dying to get into the director's chair and if this doesn't move forward I might direct a short, but I don't know. Especially after *Frailty*, which was such a great learning experience, I'm very eager to direct.

How did the success of *Frailty* move your career forward? I've written two specs in the last two years. A drama I wrote, *Texas Pretty*, I really want to direct. It's a very personal project that I fell in love with while writing

it. I took my first writing assignment while *Frailty* was in production, *Holes*, which is directed by Andrew Davis [*A Perfect Murder*, *The Fugitive*] from a novel by Louis Sachar who wrote an early draft of the script. That went into production when *Frailty* was released. My draft helped to get the project financed and greenlighted, and then they brought Louis in to polish it a little bit. I did another job called *Karma* for John Woo who is producing. I just turned that in and they are in the process of trying to get it set-up and a director attached.

It sounds like you've really got the ball rolling. Yeah for sure. I was able to buy a house here in Austin, which was always a life long dream. My wife, who helped to support me for years, was finally able to quit her job and we're looking to have children. So things are good.

Struggling screenwriters need hear stories like yours. I've been asked about that a lot where I've told my story, though I'm not sure how much help it really is. I don't want to encourage writers to just send their script out in the mail to anyone. The advice I give is "Don't be afraid to try anything," because you never know. Stranger things will happen. Believe in yourself because a good script will sell. I believe that. Believe in your work and don't be afraid to let people see it. It's incredibly hard to make it, and I know that. I used to think when I got to Hollywood that I needed an agent, and yet I did all that

The Quintessential Thriller, By Neill D. Hicks

No movie genre exists in its purest form any more than a novel, painting, dance, or symphony. The hypothetical, conjectural, and paradigmatic models we construct can never take into account all the variables inherent in the real world of creation. When a screenwriter's fingers hover over the keyboard, it is not with visions of speculative theories tracing a frame work on the screen.

Nevertheless, if it is possible to express the Thriller Narrative Trajectory at its simplest, the classic story would be:

A relatively innocent character normally avoids commitment and dissociates from conflict in life is abruptly caught in the snare of a menacing conspiracy.

The character is completely bewildered and wants nothing more than to return the normalcy of everyday life, but a powerful antagonist is committed to killing the main character in order to achieve a goal that threatens not only the protagonist, but the community at large.

The protagonist, spurred by uncontrollable panic, runs to escape the antagonist, yet soon discovers that not only is escape impossible, but that there is no help forthcoming from supposed friends or trusted institutions.

Instead, the protagonist must act alone by acquiring the strength of self-sufficiency and out-maneuvering the antagonist in a battle of wits until, in the final confrontation, the protagonist defeats the menace by attacking the antagonist's vulnerability and expos-

ing the evil.

Having changed from an avoider of conflict, to a self-sufficient person, the protagonist now must face the larger world with a keenly sharpened vigilance.

The obvious danger in compacting the essence of the Thriller genre into such a statement is that it appears to be formula. This Classic Thriller story is no recipe, however, but a condensation of all the essential elements that make the Thriller genre what it is.

Although there may be no single Thriller film that precisely fits the prototype, Ernest Lehman's screenplay for *North by Northwest* is about as faultless an example of any genre possible. In fact, it can be argued that *North by Northwest* is possibly the most perfect structured screen story of any genre.

The actual genesis of the film is intriguing because, like many of Alfred Hitchcock's works, it began as nothing more substantial than a single-scene mental image from the director: "You know, I've always wanted to do a chase across the faces of Mount Rushmore." While Hitchcock receives ample praise as a unique director of the Thriller form, such a modest beginning for *North by Northwest* bears out the genius of Ernest Lehman as a screenwriter. Yet even a cursory glance at Leh-

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without one. But then of course I did need an agent once I optioned my script. Agents are incredibly hard to get. Even after I optioned my first script to McConaughey agents wouldn't look at me. They asked to see my other scripts, which I didn't have any. I didn't have a second script. Which is really solid advice: have more than one script when you go to Hollywood. You don't move forward without a second script. I had my first script optioned and it didn't really matter. They all wanted to see what else I had. So the main piece of advice is to just keep at it, and if you have talent it will work out. There's good people in Hollywood, there really are. They want to find good screenwriters. They're looking for talent, no matter where you are from. No one is in this business to destroy good work or make shitty movies; at least not on purpose [laughs]. If you really work hard and put everything you have into your script, it will sell.

I know some writers who are struggling, but I believe it will work out for them because I know they're good writers. I've even helped a few of them and passed their scripts on to good producers I know and things worked out.

I understand You combined two story ideas to come up with the narrative for *Frailty*.

I started off writing a script called *The Ambulance Story*, which was supposed to be my first script. It was a working title I would probably never have used. But the ambulance factored into it a lot more in my early drafts of *Frailty*. It's almost completely gone now. The idea was much more noir at first and showed McConaughey's character hijacking the ambulance at the beginning. In the shooting script there was a front story which was actually shot by Bill but not used as it felt like the story was meandering a bit, which was the point actually. But it just didn't work. Once I saw an early cut I thought it bogged the film down too, so I was completely in agreement. We needed to get to the father and the two boys faster, which is the story. The intent of the original opening is reminiscent of *Psycho*, which also kind of meandered. At first you're not sure what the movie is, it comes off as more of a film noir for the first thirty minutes or so and then suddenly becomes *Psycho*. I wanted to completely throw the audience off as to what kind of a movie this was and where it was going. I wanted to spring it on them like in *Psycho*.

There were pretty obvious film noir elements in the story, especially visually and Paxton's direction. That was my intention, it was there in the script. Paxton and Butler (the Cinematographer) both brilliantly pulled that out and it came across really well in the film.

It is a horror-thriller story and at the same time a family drama. But I think it was more of a film noir in the script than on film because of the first act with Fenton hijacking the ambulance. Originally it all took place in the ambulance. There wasn't an FBI guy. He's telling all this to an ambulance driver. But at the time I was writing *The Ambulance Story* I didn't have all the backstory I came up with in *Frailty*. At one point the backstory was going to be based on some influences I had from this novel, *Bastard Out of Carolina*, by Dorthy Allison, which is about child abuse. That's kind of where I was headed at first, but realized very quickly that this was breezy noir material and I couldn't tackle that heavy of a subject. I didn't know how to make it work within the story and make it relevant to child abuse. It was too big of a topic really.



Matthew McConaughey in *Frailty*. © 2002 Lions Gate Films

The original idea had the father as kind of a monster character, someone really sick and evil. Which I'm glad I never went with. The script stalled out originally when I was writing it and what killed it was a screenwriting class I took in college. Big mistake, the teacher was horrible. We had to feed him five to ten pages per week and every Friday we'd meet with him to go over the pages. Well, that completely killed it. I could not finish it and what I learned was that I shouldn't let anyone read something until I've finished it. Some people say that's not good and that I'm writing in a vacuum. I can't digest other people's feedback until I feel I've finished that first draft completely. It's not going to do me any good to talk to someone before then.

One of the things I really liked about *Frailty* was the genre mixing you did.

I'm a huge fan of mixing genres. I think that's how you reinvent genres. By mixing them you give them elements they're not suppose to have. A horror-thriller movie like this isn't suppose to have a family drama going on. There aren't a lot of movies like that. Everything I've done so far has been mixing genres to some degree. That's something that is very much a part of who I am as a writer. And besides I love all the different genres of film.

Your original script was even darker than the movie. The only main difference between the script and the film is that there is a little more in the script, which there's always going to be. Like I said earlier, the Ambulance front story is almost completely gone. Another difference is the placement of the demon imagery when he touches them. In the movie it doesn't happen until towards the end. Plus the actual demon imagery was rewritten several times. I was even rewriting that on the set. Bill and the producers, everyone, couldn't really get a handle

on that aspect of the story. I had always wanted to do in a small way what was done in *Natural Born Killers*. The flash imagery they used was pretty cool. I always imagined the demon imagery as being carnal. There's no real onscreen violence in the movie, it's implied. In the script it was all off screen as well except in those moments of the demon imagery—which was the carnage. But from the beginning the producers were against it. I always had this visual tag for the demons where they would have blood all over their faces and were screaming or laughing. You would have to ask Bill, but I think he was more comfortable with keeping it all off screen. And I was cool with that, I think it works the way they have it. My only thing was showing the demons as these killing machines that kill without remorse or reason. I also had more blood in the script that Bill took out. I'm a big fan of blood in cinema if it's done artistically.

It sounds like you had a really good experience with the movie. It was a dream come true. It was the film school I never got.

Did they bring in other writers at any point? Nope, just me. Oh, except when they brought Carrie Fisher in every once in awhile. [Laughs] That was an on-going joke on set. When I would come up they would sometimes tease me saying, "You just missed Carrie."

Well that doesn't happen a lot, the original writer being the only one. It's very rare, and it's sad that my experience is not the norm. To me if you write the film from nothing, then you are an author of the picture. Not necessarily *the* author, but an author. The director comes in and tells the story visually. But at the same time I wrote the script from nothing and I did write it visually—the way you're suppose to see it. So I do consider myself the author of the picture, just as much as Bill, or even the producers and cinematographer. I consider all of us the author of the picture. I didn't just write a screenplay, I wrote a film. I heard both Bill, and David Kirshner, say many times that there was a film there in the script. They could see it. It's a shame that more writers do not have the experience I did.

One more thing, I'm a big fan of writer-directors. They are the true author of a film. It's their baby.

The structure of *Frailty* is non-linear, a little fragmented. Was that how you always intended it? When *The Ambulance Story* fell apart I wrote *He Dreams Awake*. But I still needed a second script. I pulled that script out and looked it over. I also had another idea at the time. A kind of killer's killer thing where someone is killing serial killers, which I'm glad I didn't do as I've seen twenty of them since then. It's a good pulpy idea though, but I'm glad I didn't do it. When I started writing *Frailty* the structure just fell into place. It was all very organic.

What are some film noir influences for you? The biggest, and my all-time favorite, is *Out of the Past* with Robert Mitchum. *He Dreams Awake* was very much a

homage to that movie. Mitchum is one of my all-time favorite actors. *Double Indemnity* is another one that influenced me. *The Killing* is very good, as is *Criss Cross*. *The Killers*, another Burt Lancaster film I really dig. I'm a big fan of Lancaster's work as well. There's also one called *Kiss the Blood off My Hand* which is pretty cool. *Shadow of a Doubt* is another one.

It sounds like you're not just a fan but a student of film noir, and cinema. I always said if I didn't become a writer or filmmaker, I'd probably have done the professor thing. I love that part of it. I love watching and reading about films. I'm a huge film buff. *

(Continued from page 8)

man's screenplay will reveal that it is written in a style that would be completely out of place today. It contains large, unbroken blocks of text that are nearly word-for-word descriptive of the action on the screen.

Today's screenplays tend to be written in less literal, although equally expressive descriptions. Ernest Lehman, though, like William Goldman, came to screenwriting from the profession of fiction writing, and he was working hand-in-glove with Hitchcock, so much of his writing arose from detailed discussions with the director.

This is an excerpt from Neil D. Hick's book, *Writing the Thriller: The Terror Within*, pp-135-136. Michael Wiese Productions., 2002.

Writing the Thriller with Hitchcock: An interview with John Michael Hayes, by Chris Wehner

Rear Window is considered to be Hitchcock's most "cinematic" picture. At times it had to communicate a lot to the audience without a word ever being spoken. Which isn't surprising as Hitchcock started directing in 1922 during the silent era making six or seven silent films. By 1954, the year *Rear Window* was released, he had clearly mastered the art of directing. But before he could unleash his visual brilliance there had to be a great script from which to allow such a great movie to be made.

Think of the drawbacks to the story. First, the protagonist is bound to a wheelchair and is most of the time a reactive participant who is essentially isolated. Second, the antagonist doesn't say more than a dozen words (at least that we hear), and isn't confrontational with the protagonist until the very end. Hitchcock often said that, "the better the villain, the better the picture." The obstacles placed in the protagonist's way were rooted in circumstance and happenstance—nothing placed by the antagonist. Thirdly, the entire movie takes place in an apartment and what is seen from the apartment. What might at first be seen as limitations, were most likely viewed as cinematic possibilities and challenges that Hitchcock could not refuse.

John Michael Hayes' screenplay was based on Cornell Woolrich's original 1942 short story *It Had to Be Murder*. He was assigned to write the script after one meeting with Hitchcock.

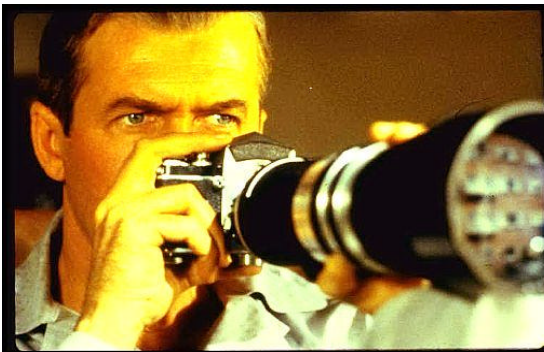
The short story lacked several important details which were added to the screenplay. Hitchcock didn't sign on to direct the picture until after reading a thirteen page treatment by playwright Joshua Logan. Logan's work laid the foundation from which Hayes wrote his treatment. The short story did not have a strong female character, or love interest, and Logan keenly injected that into the narrative. But for the most part, it stuck closely to the source material. Logan's treatment opens with New York City and Jefferies, who's immobilized in his apartment from a broken leg in a cast. Logan created Trink, a love interest for Jefferies, who is later renamed Lisa by Hayes. Also in Logan's treatment, Jefferies is a sports writer, which is later changed to a photographer by Hayes. As in the final movie Logan's treatment has Jefferies's love interest go into the killer's apartment (Thorwald) where she is discovered. The killer later comes after Jefferies when he is alone. But before he can kill Jefferies he is himself killed. Which of course was changed by Hayes.

Logan's treatment clearly laid the foundation for Hayes to

build on, but it had several problems and lacked numerous elements that Hitchcock and Hayes would add to strengthen the story. Including story elements, richer characters, more conflict, and better visuals.

Hayes constructed a convincing narrative with richly drawn characters and keenly raised the emotion and drama by injecting well placed conflict. Hayes knew that everything hinged on Jefferies' character. He had to build a sympathetic protagonist the audience would absolutely love spending time with in order for the movie to work. He fleshed out Jefferies' background, his relationship with Lisa, and his own internal conflict and emotional resolve. The result is a classic Thriller.

Tell me about your first meeting with Hitchcock.



Jimmy Stewart in *Rear Window*. © Universal Studios

I was given a copy of the Woolrich story by my agent, and was told to meet with Hitchcock later that week for dinner at the Beverly Hills Hotel. My job was simple; Read the Woolrich piece, and be prepared to discuss it in great detail and length. It was not unlike preparing for the most important book report of one's life.

The meeting itself was a near fiasco. It felt much more like a personal test of endurance than anything resembling a story conference. Hitchcock arrived late, and, with time to sit and worry over his arrival, I had a couple of drinks, which I wasn't entirely used to. Upon his arrival, we had a feast for the ages, along with copious amounts of alcohol.

Pled by the liquor, I rambled on for much too long about Hitchcock's prior films. And I wasn't entirely complimentary. Hitchcock appeared to listen, but once the meal itself was finished he abruptly left. And we had never even spoken about *Rear Window* at all.

Later, after returning home, my wife asked how the meeting went. I told her we'd better start packing our bags, as I felt quite strongly that my opportunity with Hitchcock had vanished along with any future career I had envisioned in the industry.

Amazingly, upon reporting for work on Monday, I was told that Hitchcock immensely enjoyed our dinner and that I was to be hired immediately.

Typically, when you started working on a story in outline or treatment form, did you start with

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characterizations, plot, situations, structure, or what? In crafting any story, you need to go into it holding dearly a clear understanding of where it is you want to end up. If you delve into a script with no clear concept of how you want it to end, you'll flounder while looking for ways out of the problems you've brought upon your own script. In other words, any lack of direction in regards to your ending directly affects the entire script itself. You'll spend days trying to re-vamp problems you've created by not having a clear direction from the get-go.

In *Rear Window* there isn't your typical strong villain and the protagonist is bound to a wheel chair, how difficult was it to maintain a level of tension and suspense? Having non-typical characters was of no real hindrance to the establishment of tension and suspense. In reality, there was a lot to work with. With a non-typical villain, you had the built-in opportunity to engage the characters in a, "It couldn't be him. Could it? He's just a regular fellow" form of banter, just as much as having the protagonist limited in his physical actions helped the suspense of, "How in the world is he going to defend himself, if need be?" Writers sometimes habitually overdo it in how their characters move, act, and depict themselves. Grand flourish in a villain works for Bond movies, I suppose, but, in the world you and I live in, true villains don't act as such. At least not on any level you or I may have experienced. There's a form of everyday villainy that is largely forgotten now in cinema. And that's what audiences can align best with—what it is they see and know in everyday life.

You really fleshed out Cornell Woolrich's short story adding the love story and fully developing Jefferies' character, among other things, which were not in the book. Was this your idea or Hitchcock's? The idea of adding the Fremont character was mine, and it was based upon my wife, Mel, who was in fact a high fashion model herself. The love interest is a requirement, or at least it was at the time and place in which the story was crafted. My opinion was, and still is, that we all fall very hard in love sooner or later, and can clearly relate to the concept of peril brought upon those that we strongly care about. As well as the simple fact that having a headstrong, yet imperiled, female character could add a great bounty to the story. As for Jefferies, it was necessary simply due to the relative brevity of the original work. That much was clearly visible by all from the beginning of the project.

While you were writing the treatment and script for *Rear Window* how involved was Hitchcock? Early on he was still working on *Dial M for Murder*. One of the greatest assets of working with Hitchcock was that he essentially left you, the writer, alone to do your work. Once I completed the work expected of me, Hitchcock and I would then literally pore over the material almost shot by shot. That was primarily his biggest involvement at that stage of development—after I had completed the first expectations of my task. Unlike a lot of other directors and producers, he didn't bother you constantly for pages in order to summarily reject them.

What were the best and worst things about working with Hitchcock? The best part of working with Hitchcock was the autonomy to do the job you were hired to do without interference, as I've mentioned above. The worst part was his distinct stinginess in being able to offer credit where credit was due. It was of paramount importance for him to be seen as a one-man show, but that just simply wasn't the truth, at least not in my experience.

Looking back on how the two of you parted ways, what do you suppose it was? What "it" was is exceptionally simple: He wasn't for a moment willing to allow anyone to believe he couldn't do it all on his own. I believe in application of credit where credit is due—if you've earned it, you need to be respected, regarded, and properly credited for it. At times in our work together, Hitchcock wasn't willing to allow that.

If you could only chose one, which film of yours best represents you as a screenwriter? Any writer's career is a work in progress. You're always trying to best yourself, and are almost always convinced that what your boldest and newest advancement as a writer is naturally becomes your best work. It would be of exceptional difficulty to select one film of mine over another. In my opinion, and in hindsight, they all have their own strengths and weaknesses. What I've always tried to do—what I've always wanted to do—is to tell big stories about small people. To best answer your question, I believe that my original script for *Iron Will* was something that perhaps came closest to that ideal. Unfortunately, while the film wasn't by any means bad, it certainly became what I've previously called "Disneyized", and, not surprisingly, wasn't the best film it could have been. However, I'm quite proud of that original script.

What was the last movie you saw? And was it any good? I don't watch too many films outside of Academy consideration time, so the most recent would have to be when my son, Corey, last visited. At his behest, we watched a double feature of *Bottle Rocket* and *Rushmore*, both by essentially the same talent group, if I recall correctly. I certainly enjoyed both, although *Rushmore* showed a greater maturation of the filmmakers involved.

*

A special thanks to Corey Hayes for helping to arrange my interview with his father. For more on John Michael Hayes experiences writing with Hitchcock, see Steven DeRosa's book *Writing With Hitchcock*.

The Modern Thriller: All Style, No Substance, by Chris Wehner

"Today's films are more than ever artifacts of light. Cars chase one another mindlessly along irrelevant freeways. Violence seems rooted in a notion about what ought to happen next on the screen to help images move rather than in any human situation anterior to those images. In fact, the human situation has been eliminated not through any intentional philosophic design but because those who have spent too much time with the cameras and machines seldom have much apprehension of that living world without whose presence there is no art."

—Gore Vidal, 1995

What separates the Thriller from other genres is the continual building and sustaining of tension and suspense. But in the ever-present desire to get "to the point" or "back to the action" as quickly as possible, the current trend among Thriller movies is to create what can best be described as a "video game reality." Characters and plots are thinly developed with no or little arc. Stories are products of "high concepts" or "hooks" with little or no germination.

Wanting a professional opinion, I spoke with screenwriter Scott Frank (*Minority Report*, *Out of Sight*) and he had this to say about "high concepts" and "hooks" in modern screenwriting: "Passion is what's lacking from movies and their scripts; voice and point of view. I've never thought about a hook in my eighteen years of doing this. I have thought about what makes a story I love. I have thought about trying the best I can to tell a great story. I've thought a lot about developing an original voice. I've thought about engaging people on a gut level from the first page, getting them to care about the people I create or realize.

The problem with screenwriting (and movies) today is that people do not look at them as art—What a sad thing; what lost potential. That's why everything is now PG-13 and aimed at the same audience week after week. We don't need more writers who can come up with great 'hooks.' We don't need more development execs who won't read scripts without them."

The nature of the Thriller hasn't changed, but the expectations of genre have. We've dumbed down movies, especially Action-Adventures and Thrillers, to the point where the volume could be turned off and you really wouldn't miss all that much. Hollywood has created a vicious cycle of lowered expectations of quality and raised expectations of profits. Creating art while doing business has never been a good way to go, but that's what we're stuck with.

So, regardless, what makes a good Thriller story?

I think a good Thriller must do four things: 1) engage the audience immediately (usually by asking the question "whodunit?" and therefore creating suspicion;) 2) place the protagonist in harms way; 3) raise the emotional

stakes (suspense and tension); 4) and in the end pay it all off. All of these are best achieved with well-developed characters and a strong narrative thrust. When a Thriller takes the short cut and forgets about the characters the results are a story without a strong enough spine to carry the action.

A recent example of a modern Thriller without substance is David Koepp's script *The Panic Room*, directed by David Fincher (*Se7en*). A story that is clearly driven by its "hook" and as a result fails to be a completely satisfying Thriller.

Koepp's original February 23, 2000 draft opened with a simple message "This film is short. This film is fast." So this is where we are today with the modern Thriller, blitzkrieg screenwriting. Are we as an audience really that short on attention that we can't have a little thought process going on? As if "Slam" cuts and "Hard" cuts weren't enough, we now have screenwriters giving in and writing down to the level of airhead MTV music video turned feature film directors.

We barely get to know the main characters, let alone the protagonist, Meg, played by Jodi Foster. But that doesn't matter, or does it? Thrillers today are striving for less and less character development and in its place the filmmakers are inducing more fear and attempting to create more terror. For the first forty-five minutes of *The Panic Room* it has you on the edge of your seat, but then the tension is released. There's nothing else to carry the narrative other than a fast and furious pace.

I truly believe the filmmakers assumed that if they got a name actor (Jodi Foster or there original choice Nicole Kidman) to play the lead it wouldn't matter. We like Jodi, we care about Jodi, and that will be enough to engage the moviegoer. Instead of engaging the audience with good characters and good screenwriting, Koepp and the director fall back on movie stars and decoys. The mom is divorced, the dad has shackled up with a young little thing, and the daughter feels abandon. I bet that took all of five minutes to think up. On top of that, the bad guys in the movie are about as cliché as can be imagined. The story was also bogged down by the ominous presence of the confined panic room; not too mention Fincher's annoying camera tricks and effects. (We have cameras going through walls, keyholes, and ceilings in an effort to disguise all of the problems with this listless story.) There's a reason why the story moves so fast. After the allure wore off I found myself questioning the whole absurdity of such a thing. Like a match, it's a story that comes to life quickly, burning brightly early on, but then flickers out.

Placing the protagonist in harms way is not enough. The writer must create a character we can relate to and understand, thus creating an emotional bond between audience and the story. When it's someone you care about the tension and suspense is heightened. In *Rear Window*,

which is also a very confined story, you get to know a lot about Jefferies and Lisa before they are placed in harms way. The engaging period is longer, but in the end it pays off when the writer is trying to bring the suspense to a crescendo. The characters interact and reveal themselves to us with an intimacy that is missing in today's movies. The tension builds slowly and peaks at the resolution creating a deliciously consuming story. Mixing genres effectively, it's also a mystery and a horror movie, and of course has that Hitchcockian flare and brilliance.

You couldn't make *Rear Window* today, sad but true, as there isn't an executive at a major studio who would tolerate such a crafty and subtle building of tension. They want it faster, harder, and right in your face. Like the porn industry, they want their cum shot.

The modern Thriller is at a crossroads. The constant desire by writers and filmmakers to get back to the action faster, and to place the audience inside the action with bigger special effects has resulted in stagnate genre screenwriting. Too often the best parts of today's movies are the ones created by a technician sitting at a computer. Not a writer sitting at a desk. *

Chris Wehner is the founder and editor of ScreenwritersUtopia.com; and is currently serving as Vice President of Development for MoviePartners, Inc. He is also the author of *Screenwriting on the Internet*, and the upcoming *Screenwriting in Review: 2000 - 2002*.

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