

HOW TO TELL A STORY TO SAVE THE WORLD

Toby Litt

extinction
rebellion
WRITERS REBEL

CHAPTERS

1. HOW TO TELL A STORY
2. THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES by JOSEPH CAMPBELL
3. SCREENPLAY by SYD FIELD
4. THE WRITER'S JOURNEY by CHRISTOPHER VOGLER
5. STORY by ROBERT MCKEE
6. SAVE THE CAT! by BLAKE SNYDER
7. INTO THE WOODS by JOHN YORKE
8. WORLD WAR Z by MAX BROOKS and OTHERS
9. AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR by CHRISTOPHER MARKUS and
STEPHEN MCFEELY
10. THE THOUSAND FACES WITHOUT A HERO

HOW TO TELL A STORY

Normally, when people come along to a creative writing class, they are hoping to learn how to write better stories, not how to stop the planet being killed.

A couple of years ago, I was teaching a Guardian Masterclass on 'Storytelling Secrets'. Among those attending were three representatives of an international environmental activist network. They were young, casually stylish, energetic and exhausted. To save a few words, I'll call them the Greens.

When the time came to speak individually to the writers, the Greens asked if I could speak to the three of them together but for three times as long. 'Fine,' I said.

We met, and the Greens explained the reason they were attending - They felt their message about climate change was no longer getting across. They needed to change that message into a *story*, and a good story, a moving, powerful story, in order to grab people's attention. Specifically, they had a story about polar ice-melt.

I really wanted to help them. Environmental degradation horrifies and preoccupies me. That changes in the timing and nature of the seasons have happened within my short lifespan is appalling.

Where some of this thinking has lead me is into what might be call 'Storytelling's Dirty Secrets'. That's what the bulk of this book is about, and I'd already thought a small part of it through back then.

I tried to give the Greens a shorthand version of my reasoning.

The problem any environmental group faces is this: In order to create moving, powerful stories, they need to create sympathetic central characters. In order to change people's behaviour, they need Heroes and Heroines to act as role models.

But - and it's one of the biggest 'buts' I've ever laid down - but it seems to me that the most environmentally degrading force in existence is Heroism.

It seems to me that the ultimate cause of environmental degradation is that almost all of us, whatever we do and

whichever we do it, regard ourselves as sympathetic central characters.

Here is a trivial example. Another kind of butt.

Meet Paul

As he drives back from work, Paul enjoys a well-earned cigarette. When it's mostly gone, he winds the window a crack and flicks away the butt.

It doesn't matter where Paul's cigarette butt lands - on Streatham High Road or in a field of summer-dry corn in Sussex. The act may have different consequences, the cigarette could smoulder out in the gutter or start a forest fire that burns a town, but for Paul it's the same act.

Once the cigarette is out of the moving car, it is out of Paul's story. And the only reason - I would argue - that Paul has no problem with flicking away the butt is because it feels to him a Heroic act.

You hate Paul, don't you? You can see no defence for what he does with that butt. But Paul doesn't hate himself. He might feel guilty, but not for long. He has more important things to do.

If you stopped Paul to ask whether he was proud of what he'd done, he might admit that it was probably a bit out of order or he might tell you to fuck off and mind your own business. But, at the moment he performs it, the act is incidental to his Heroic onward journey. He may not even notice what he's doing. His chosen soundtrack plays. Paul is not stopped, not questioned. Paul's story, in which Paul is the sympathetic central character, flows onwards.

Paul is his own sympathetic central character because everything in the culture surrounding him is always telling him that he is a sympathetic central character. Every advert. Every story.

The only reason the world functions at all, Paul is told, is because of Heroes like you. Councils, companies, corporations, countries - all groups of people, however internally organized, need Heroes to lead them. Without a leader, any group will collapse into uselessness.

Heroes go on quests. The quests of Heroes are righteous. It is righteous of Paul to return from work. Paul's work pays for things Paul needs. Paul may have cute children. Paul's children need things. Paul's partner may also go to work. Paul's partner goes on quests.

Now, let's relocate Paul. He's no longer driving his car down the road. He's now in charge of a truck that's at the frontline of deforestation in Brazil. Once the trees have been felled, by other Pauls, our Paul drives the huge dead trunks away down dirt roads.

In this case, rainforest-Paul may not be so comfortably off as cigarette-Paul. He may have very little chance of employment other than for the logging company. However, when he justifies his actions to himself, it will be in terms of Heroism. Either he is Heroic enough, in providing for himself and his family; or he's not Heroic enough - not Heroic enough to refuse to take part in massive environmental destruction.

Let's put Paul somewhere else. The virus has arrived, and Paul - who lives in a big city - is deciding what to do. From what he's learned from all the stories he's consumed, now is the Hero's time to step up. It's possible that Paul will go straight out and panic buy pasta and toilet rolls. He'll do the tooling up montage. It's also possible (though I think less so, given his cigarette-chucking) that Paul will put notes through his neighbours' doors, and ask if he can do anything for them. What Paul is unlikely to do, in either case, is first of all join together with other people in order to respond to the crisis collectively. He will believe that

groups are an inefficient way to get things done. He's a lone wolf. He'll fly solo.

Solution

As I was speaking to the Greens, who weren't looking particularly happy, this is what I tried to say:

In order to get their message about polar ice-melt across to Paul they will need to speak to him in a language he finds sympathetic. They will need to avoid alienating or angering him. And so, they will try to tell him the most moving, powerful story they can. They will tell him the story of a different kind of Heroism. That it is Heroic not to flick your cigarette butt out of the window of your moving car as you return from work. It is Heroic to put it in the ashtray. Or more than this, that it is Heroic to give up smoking. Or even more than this, that it is Heroic to take the bus. Or even, that is Heroic to change your workplace, so you don't have to commute. Or even, that it is Heroic to change the kind of work you do and to change the kind of society you do it in.

What the Greens should do right now, but cannot, because it risks being so undermining, is say to each of us directly:

You are not a Hero. Your acts are not righteous. Neither are ours, individually. Our individual illusions of Heroic righteousness are catastrophic.

What they should say, but cannot, because it would alienate almost everyone, is what needs most of all to be said:

You are not a sympathetic central character because exactly what centre are we talking about? There are either seven billion equally important centres, in which case if they all behave like you we're screwed, or there are no centres, in which case we might just stand a chance.

Backstory

This book is an attempt to say what needs to be said.

I am writing it now because, more and more, I have come to see stories as the source of the problem.

As Climate Change has become Climate Crisis and then Climate Emergency, I have been unable to forget my exchange with the

Greens. It was, at the same time, the most I'd managed to say and entirely not up to the job.¹

On that day, I'd been employed to teach people to tell better stories. But on what basis was I doing that? My own experience was in there; and other things contributed, too. If I advised a student to cut this character or speed up this section, in order to make their whole story better, what kind of better was I guiding them towards?

Where do the ideas that dominate What Makes a Good Story come from?

The answer to this question was obvious: Hollywood.

The greatest investment that has ever gone into telling stories that satisfy the largest possible audience has taken place within a very small area, and has been conducted by a very small group of people. They have all been working, directly or indirectly, for the Hollywood studios. Their simple aim has been to create blockbuster movies, to repay the

¹ I wrote about it to promote an anthology of Climate Change-related short stories. The title was Beacons: Stories from our Not So Distant Future. It came out from Oneworld Publications in 2013, and was edited by Gregory Normington.

investors who have financed those movies. They have had other aims, some of them noble, but what the studios have paid these people for has been to entertain.

I'll give you three examples of where Hollywood storytelling has influenced all storytelling. These have become the truisms of script conferences and creative writing classes. You have no doubt already come across them:

- "Give me someone I can root for."
- "Get into the scene as late as you can, and get out as early as you can."
- "Show, don't tell."

By now these are lazy things to say, but they are not terrible pieces of advice. Bad stories have become mediocre because of them, and mediocre stories have become okay. But I doubt that in following them any good stories have become great, and I suspect that quite a few potentially great stories have become mediocre.

Who the hell are you?

You could ask why I'm the person to write this book? Although I've written half a dozen scripts, and have worked on drafting

and redrafting them with directors and producers, and have read and learned from the screenwriting gurus, I'm not a professional screenwriter.

But this, I think, is my advantage. I don't exclusively come out of that tradition of storytelling - although it was absolutely formative for me.

In the summer of 1978, I was ten years-old. For my birthday treat, my parents took me to the huge cinema at Marble Arch. There, in a huge and comfortable seat, like kids the world over, my world was rocked as the Imperial Star Destroyer rumbled over my head. Before Star Wars (as we called it), my friends and I had played 'war', afterwards we also played 'space'. We used branches for lightsabers. We formed a band called Space Band, partly based on the group in the Mos Eisley Cantina. Star Wars became our culture.

I loved the story it told, and I wanted more. There weren't any more films, yet - and the ones Hollywood chucked out (The Black Hole?) were terrible. So I was forced to read books. I read Asimov, Arthur C. Clarke, E.E. "Doc" Smith - anything with a spaceship or a robot on the cover.

I started to read other books as if they were science fiction. When I read Herman Hesse's The Glass Bead Game, the main character - Joseph Knecht - was essentially a trainee Jedi. Then I moved on from SF, partly through the books I had to study at school. And I came across lots of different stories told by dozens of different writers - some of which seemed to be written to be deliberately obscure, confusing, frustrating or weird. But they changed me, and I came to love them.

So, I am not a professional screen writer. I haven't made Hollywood movies. What I have done is written hundreds of stories in screenplay and other forms. I've written novels, short stories, flash fictions, opera libretti, comics, radio documentary scripts. I have won, and been long- and shortlisted for, national short story competitions. I have edited a Penguin Classic and an anthology with Ali Smith. And most of all, I have taught Creative Writing in universities and elsewhere for about fifteen years. I think about stories a lot. I think about what makes a good story, and how can I help other writers make their stories better.

Gurus

As I said, the most concentrated thinking on stories has taken place in Hollywood over the past hundred years².

There is now a canon of books - screenwriting manuals - that, often very prescriptively, lay down the rules for telling a story that will play globally. For telling a good story.

Let's be clear. I am not blaming screenwriters for the Climate Crisis or for coronavirus. Well, not entirely.

I'd like to tell the story of five screenwriting manuals and their authors, and how they invented, refined and reinforced the idea that only a Hero can save us now³ - because only a Hero can do anything worthwhile.

It may seem obvious to point out, but none of the five screenwriting gurus is a top level screenwriter - in terms of box office success, critical acclaim or influence on other screenwriters.

² You could also say that Bollywood, and the Advertising Industry, have done a great deal of thinking. However, I'm not familiar enough with either to write about them.

³ The German philosopher Heidegger famously suggested in a 1966 interview with Der Spiegel magazine that 'Only a God can save us now.' This was only published in 1976, after Heidegger's death. "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," Rudolf Augstein, Georg Wolff, Martin Heidegger, Der Spiegel, 31 May 1976, p 193-219.

Syd Field wrote three episodes of the TV series Men in Crisis (1964-5); Christopher Vogler, had an 'Additional Story Material' credit on The Lion King, a co-writing credit for Jester Till (2003), and most recently has a story credit for Abe (2019); Robert McKee, wrote one episode each of Mrs. Columbo, Double Dare, Spenser: For Hire and two of Abraham (1993); Blake Snyder, co-wrote Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot (starring Sylvester Stallone and Estelle Getty) (1992) and co-wrote Blank Check (1994); John Yorke wrote two episodes of Casualty and four episodes of Red Rock.

This is not in any way to undermine their authority as teachers. But that is firstly what they are; only secondly, or thirdly, are they high-level practitioners.

They are not George Lucas (the Star Wars Universe), James Cameron (Titanic, Avatar), John Hughes (Pretty in Pink), JJ Abrams (Armageddon, Lost, Star Wars: The Force Awakens), Ruth Praver Jhabvala (Howard's End, A Room with a View, The Remains of the Day), Leigh Brackett (The Big Sleep, Rio Bravo, The Long Goodbye). But, then, none of these moviemakers have written screenwriting manuals.

And it is five screenwriting manuals that have come to dominate our ideas of What a Good Story Is. And more importantly than this, they have explicitly come to dominate

our ideas of what stories we should tell ourselves about our lives and how to live them.

J' accuse

I am not accusing the great screenwriting gurus - Syd Field, Christopher Vogler, Robert McKee, Blake Snyder and John Yorke - of destroying our ecosystem.

I am not accusing the authors of The Writer's Journey and Save the Cat! of making us hugely vulnerable to pandemics.

I am accusing them of something much worse -

I am accusing them of creating the people who are capable of destroying the ecosystem, because those people have a really strong motivation to do so,...

and because they are facing powerful antagonists...

and because they are Heroes.

I am accusing them of creating the people who, in the face of coronavirus, are selfish, irresponsible, exploitative and completely incapable of seeing why they should be otherwise,...

because they have seen, again and again, that only the Hero is guaranteed to survive - only the Hero counts.

How did the screenwriting gurus achieve this?

They convinced generations of storytellers - in film and elsewhere - that there is only one story: the story of a strong Hero who goes on a perilous journey to save a sick and ineffective community.

In 1949, Joseph Campbell (a brilliant American academic) published The Hero with a Thousand Faces - a work of comparative mythology. Campbell wasn't telling anyone how to tell stories to save the world; he was telling everyone that all great stories were about saving the world - including their own great story - their own heroic story.

'The whole sense of the ubiquitous myth of the hero's passage,' he said, 'is that it shall serve as a general pattern for men and women, wherever they may stand along the scale.'

In the early seventies, George Lucas discovered Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces, and famously used the hero's journey - the monomyth - as a way to structure the first Star Wars films.

Because these films made such a vast amount of money, Hollywood executives wanted to know how George Lucas had done it, so they could do it, too.

Memorise

In the mid-eighties, Christopher Vogler - working as a story consultant at Disney - turned Joseph Campbell's 'Hero's Journey' into a seven-page memo.

Vogler reduced, distilled, purified and monetized Campbell's claim.

This seven-page memo made an epoch in Hollywood, and the world beyond: today, we live not just in an individualistic culture, but in a culture of Heroes. Of Superheroes. The monomyth is told and retold - in bestseller after bestseller, blockbuster after blockbuster.

What is so bad about this? Why is it so damaging? Why is it so potentially fatal to so many millions of people?

Consequences

There are two consequences of the monomyth:

Consequence One, by making everyone a Hero, you make everyone feel justified in consuming whatever they need in order to achieve their aims, to save their world.

Every trip to bulk buy toilet paper becomes a Hero's journey.

Even more importantly, the heads of governments and large corporations make decisions every day based on the assumption of their own Heroism. Because appearing to be Heroic was why they were elected in the first place.

Consequence Two, by elevating the Hero, you denigrate the community that bore and nurtured them.

Communities are seen (by definition, in their essence) as weak, indecisive and incapable of acting in their own defence. This belief is what the alt-right is founded upon. Communities dither, delay and disintegrate in the face of external threat. This belief is what petrochemical corporations rely upon.

If we accept the monomyth, then the world can only be saved by a Hero.

And there is no Hero to save the world - not Trump, not Boris, not even Greta.

Consequences One and Two are deadly. They cause panic buying and profiteering. They cause overconsumption and fatalism, hedonism and depression.

As writers, as storytellers, we have to be more ambitious, more inventive and more responsible.

To start with, we have to go back and see how the monomyth overtook the world of storytelling, stage by stage.

And then we have to think bigger - beyond the ideology of individualism.

THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

The Hero With a Thousand Faces is not a screenwriting manual, nor a guide to creating a dynamic and visionary corporate structure; it is a wild book of comparative mythology.

Although more sober, Campbell's book has a similar world-confidence to Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* - which became very popular during the Age of Aquarius. Both men are very happy to generalize - to universalize - from the particular.

Graves' based his universe on a poetic moon-magic; Campbell on Freud and Jung. Alongside his accounts of myths from around the world - travelling through the Mayan Empire and First People of Australia to Christianity and Buddhism - Campbell places the dreams of 'ordinary people'. In these, he discovers the same archetypal stages on the Hero's Journey.

If you've read any recent screenwriting manual, these stages will be familiar to you. The classic example of their application is George Lucas's first Star Wars movie, Episode IV: A New Hope. But they're also there in almost every Hollywood movie made since 1990, and in many made before.

We're not going to begin with Star Wars. That's not the beginning of the story. In Blake Snyder's terms, it's the break into Act Two. For not once in his entire 400 page book does Campbell mention a movie. The Hero With a Thousand Faces is a book about myths and deep mind, not about getting bums on seats.

But the basis of all of that follows is Campbell's defining statement of the monomyth.

(It is worth pointing out that, when I went searching for serious academic writing either supporting or opposing Campbell, I found very little. No major anthropologist had bothered to write a critique of Campbell's theory, for the simple reason that almost no anthropologist took it seriously. When you spend your life examining the nuances of other cultures, you know that world-spanning generalisations are meaningless.)

Joseph Campbell mini-biog

Of all the six screenwriting gurus, Campbell was the most remarkable man, and lived the most remarkable life, and wrote the most remarkable books. The Hero With a Thousand Faces (1949) - which went on to have such an influence on Hollywood storytelling - may

not even be the most remarkable of them. In 1944, Campbell published A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake. This is a great work of literary understanding, and still the most useful starting point for would-be readers of James Joyce's recursive masterpiece. For those wanting to know more about Campbell, there is an official biography: Joseph Campbell: A Fire in the Mind by Stephen Larsen. He was born White Plains, New York in 1904. When he was seven years-old, his father took him and his brother to see Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. Campbell was delighted by the cowboys, but "became fascinated, seized, obsessed, by the figure of a naked American Indian with his ear to the ground, a bow and arrow in his hand, and a look of special knowledge in his eyes." Eventually, this led Campbell to his studies of the myths of the world.

Campbell, as himself, is a minor figure in the history of storytelling. The Hero With a Thousand Faces did not have a major influence on the kind of stories told in the 1950s and 1960s, the years that followed its publication. He was much less influential than Ernest Hemingway, Gabriel Garcia Marquez or even James Joyce.

It was as Lazarus, as a resurrected man, brought back to life by George Lucas and then by Christopher Vogler that Campbell became completely central.

The basis of all of that follows is Campbell's invention of the idea of a "monomyth":

Whether we listen with aloof amusement to the dream like mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo, or read with cultivated rapture thin translations from the sonnets of the mystic Lao-tse; now and again crack the hard nutshell of an argument of Aquinas, or catch suddenly the shining meaning of a bizarre Eskimo fairy tale: it will always be the one, shape-shifting yet marvellously constant story that we find...

As the opening paragraph of the Prologue ('The Monomyth') will already have shown you, Campbell writes densely, clunkily, with erudition, and from a position of assured cultural superiority. These amusing and bizarre natives may have come up with this stuff, but it's us Westerners who've really understood what it's about.

What gives Campbell his great confidence that the monomyth appears in all human cultures is psychoanalysis - which, in the 1940s, was the great new way of understanding the world.

Alongside his source myths, Campbell quotes the dreams of his fellow Americans. These, he asserts, take the exact same archetypal shapes.

Here is what Campbell calls 'The Adventure of the Hero':

The mythological hero, setting forth from his commonday hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds, to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark (brother-battle, dragon-battle; offering, charm), or be slain by the opponent and descend in death (dismemberment, crucifixion). Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mythological round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward. The triumph may be represented as the hero's sexual union with the goddess-mother of the world (sacred marriage), his recognition of the father-creator (father atonement), his own divinisation (apotheosis), or again - if the powers have remained unfriendly to him - his theft of the boon he came to gain (bride-theft, fire-theft);

intrinsically it is an expansion of consciousness and therewith of being (illumination, transfiguration, freedom). The final work is that of return. If the powers have blessed the hero, he now sets forth under their protection (emissary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, obstacle flight). At the return threshold the transcendental powers must remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread (return, resurrection). The boon that he brings restores the world (elixir).⁴

This is brilliant, skyscrapingly ambitious, seductive and - I am sure - entirely partial.

Campbell is like the character Casaubon in Middlemarch. He seeks the Key to All Mythologies, and finds it everywhere he looks. Because he believes he has the Master Key.

What is obvious here, from his summary of the adventure, is that Campbell emphasizes myths with single male heroes, and de-emphasizes myths with groups. The myths are those of going out into the wild and adventuring, not staying at home and defending or nurturing or organizing.

⁴ Campbell, p 212-213

Perhaps the most powerful critique of the Hero's Journey comes from a feminist perspective. In the simplest possible way, by insisting upon its uniqueness, Campbell's monomyth ensures that male stories are prioritised and female stories either sidelined or omitted entirely.

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford in The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image argue that a deliberate suppression of the original goddess myth has taken place over a long period of history.⁵ But it's in the last thirty years, monomyth has threatened to become monoculture.

An alternate approach to story, beginning from different mythic sources, always remains to be rediscovered by any storyteller who comes along. But it's certainly not front and centre in Hollywood. It's nothing like the commonplace idea of 'a good story' - even when that idea is being put forward by a female screenwriting guru.

Christopher Vogler officially sanctioned, and wrote a panting introduction, for Kim Hudson's The Virgin's Promise: Writing Stories of Feminine Creative, Spiritual and Sexual Awakening. However well intentioned, this has had negligible influence in the world of screenplay writing. That may be because the

⁵ The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image, 1991

approach seems more self-help even than Vogler's later editions.

I'm aware that I am writing from a limited English perspective. The situation may be different where you are, but Hollywood presents itself as global culture - even if there are cultures resistant to or uninfluenced by it.

Hollywoodisation

Campbell's book is an argument for religious pluralism (but quite disposed towards Buddhism) and against Christianity and sectarianism of any sort.

It is clear throughout The Hero with a Thousand Faces that the journey is a religious quest of self-transcendence, not a social quest of self-realization. Campbell writes about losing oneself, not finding oneself. He writes about disappearance into oneness, not kicking ass.

The individual, through prolonged psychological disciplines, gives up completely all attachments to his personal limitations, idiosyncrasies, hopes and fears, no longer resists the self-annihilation that is prerequisite

to rebirth in the realisation of truth, and so becomes ripe, at last, for the great at-one-ment.⁶

There are Hollywood movies that follow this template very closely. For example, Neo's becoming 'The One' towards the end of Matrix: Revolutions (2003). But there are many more in which the Hero, at the end of their journey, has only had their stubborn individuality reinforced. I'd suggest this ego-machismo is the ultimate message of the Die Hard movies, of the James Bond franchise, of John Wick. I may be a hard bastard, but I get the job done.

One notable feature of The Hero with a Thousand Faces, something that might be easily missed, is that it is not a writing manual of any sort. It is descriptive, not prescriptive. These are the myths and stories that have already been written, it says. You may try your hardest not to rewrite them, but you will fail. Knowing them better may help you understand them, and yourself, better. But there's no need for me to tell you how to write - you're human, whatever you write is going to be a human story. And there's only one human story.

⁶ Campbell, p 203.

SCREENPLAY:

THE FOUNDATIONS OF SCREENWRITING

SYD FIELD

1979

We're going back now - back to before the resurrection of the Hero. I hate to say it, but it is a more innocent age. It was an age when very few people knew very much about the business of film-making. And it was certainly an age when almost no-one would have expected to take life-advice from the person who wrote the lines for the actors on the TV.

It's easy to see why Screenplay was so influential - perhaps "formative" would be more accurate - in its time, and just as easy to see why it has been so completely superseded.

The screenwriting manuals that have followed seem to say a lot more, and say it more get-atably, often more schematically. (Field is, in retrospect, almost comically light on diagrams, and his diagrams are comically simple.)

Into the Woods contains the gist of Screenplay, but it doesn't capture the attitude. Field's approach to writing a film is relaxed, unneurotic; you're not going to come away from

Screenplay angsting over having missed this mythological beat or not having inserted this emotional hook in the viewer. Field's view of writing is one of sincere application to the basic craft, rather than wily manipulation of the available means.

I like Field. Not as much as I like Robert McKee - Field's a much more limited teacher than McKee - but I like him. He's an affable, slightly grouchy zen uncle-type - great uncle, now.

Field was a pioneer, an explorer of the territory, and shouldn't be sneered at by people who arrived in the landscape when it had paths and public conveniences. Even so, as a founding father, he had his limits. His eyesight was clear, but he was only interested in certain outstanding features. It's not that he got lost, or needed to be rescued, more that the map he brought back was fairly sketchy.

Syd Field Mini-biog

Syd Field was born in 1935, in Hollywood, California. He took a B.A. in English Literature at University of California, Berkeley, in 1960. It was at the suggestion of the director Jean Renoir (Grand Illusion, Le Regle du jour), that he entered film school, also at the University of California. Here,

he hung out with Jim Morrison and Ray Manzarek of The Doors. His early work in the film industry was for David Wolper Productions, the company later responsible for Roots, The Thorn Birds and Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory (1971). Field became, in his own words, a jack-of-all trades. He published *Screenplay* in 1979 - introducing the ideas of "three act structure" and "plot points".

If you were cynical, you might say that Field profited a great deal from of saying that stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. It shouldn't be ignored, though, that lots of wannabe screenwriters had and still have no idea what a screenplay looks like, what it should and shouldn't do. Field gave away that mystery of the craft. He let people see what the producers were arguing over when they were deciding whether or not to greenlight the project, what the actors had in their hands when they were learning their lines, and what the cinematographer and the gaffer were consulting while they were figuring out where to place the key light.

Syd Field's book covers basics, and does them very well. You just always feel - at every juncture - that there is more to be said.

Some of Field's virtues are negative. He's laid back rather than pushy; he's the Dude, not a Little Leowski Urban Achiever. Screenplay is pragmatic where Save the Cat! is dogmatic.

Screenplay observes:

When you are writing your screenplay, the plot points become signposts, holding the story together and moving it forward.⁷

Save the Cat! gives you a direct order:

Page 12 - Catalyst. Do it.⁸

And:

The B story begins on page 30.⁹

It's noticeable that Field isn't ideologically pushy, either. Screenplay wasn't written in Mao's China, but it's no a hymn

⁷ Screenplay, p 122. Which doesn't work at all, as a metaphor, because signposts hold nothing together, except themselves, and move nothing forward - only point the direction something else should move or be moved. Screenplay is a slackly written book.

⁸ Save the Cat!, p 77.

⁹ Save the Cat!, p 79.

to unfettered individualism - as are The Writer's Journey and Save the Cat!

Field gives practical advice about the writing life:

If you're a housewife and have a family, you may want to write when everyone's gone for the day, either midmorning or midafternoon.¹⁰

And collaboration:

If you're married and want to collaborate with your spouse, other factors are involved. When things get difficult, for example, you can't simply walk away from the collaboration. It's part of the marriage. If the marriage is in trouble, your collaboration will only magnify what's wrong with it.¹¹

He's wry:

Many of my married women students tell me their husbands threaten to leave them unless they stop writing; their children turn into "animals".¹²

¹⁰ Screenplay, p 169.

¹¹ Screenplay, p 238.

¹² Screenplay, p 170.

But, as far as pushing the viewer towards individualism, Field isn't a culprit. Field doesn't deal in Heroes and Heroines. In the whole book, the word "Hero" isn't used. Instead, Field writes about "main characters".

What does your main character want? What is his or her need?¹³

He writes declaratively:

Without conflict there is no drama. Without need, there is no character. Without character, there is no action. "Action is character." F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote in The Last Tycoon. What a person does is what he is, not what he says.¹⁴

However, Screenplay is still mostly about writing films with a single strong main character. Field doesn't really deal with ensemble pictures - or he dodges dealing with them. Even so, his examples are better than those of Vogler and Snyder:

What about Nashville? Is that an exception? Let's take a look. First, who's the main character of the film? Lily

¹³ Screenplay, p 11.

¹⁴ Screenplay, p 25.

Tomlin? Ronee Blakley? Ned Beatty? Keith Carradine?... Joan Tewkesbury... the screenwriter... realised the main character of the film - that is, who the movie is about - is the city of Nashville. It is the main character.¹⁵

Then he says:

There are several main characters in the film and they all move the action forward.¹⁶

He says the same of Network (1976).

The "network" is the main character. It feeds everything, like a system; the people are parts of the whole, replaceable parts, at that. Network continues on, indestructible; people come and go. Just like life.¹⁷

Although he doesn't require Heroes, Field does want main characters who make stuff happen. The world, at least in his cinematic version of it, moves forwards because of individual dilemmas and decisions.

¹⁵ Screenplay, p 122-3.

¹⁶ Screenplay, p 123.

¹⁷ Screenplay, p 124.

Many new of inexperienced writers have things happening to their characters, and they are always reacting to their situation, rather than acting in terms of dramatic need. The essence of character is action; your character must act, not react.¹⁸

Screenplay doesn't seem anything like a get rich quick manual. The sale is important, but it contains nothing about pitching. Field's engagement with money is more from the moviegoer's perspective:

After the lights fade, and the movie begins, how long does it take you to make a decision, either consciously or unconsciously, about whether the movie was worth the price of admission?¹⁹

Field includes some pages from one of his own screenplays, for an unmade film "The Run". It is sadly expository and uninspiring. I expect it encouraged some writers by being obviously out-doable.

Nearing the end of the book, I felt that Field had held it together. Although he hadn't written a manual for writing pluralistic stories, he hadn't ruled them out. He was handing

¹⁸ Screenplay, p 161.

¹⁹ Screenplay, p 71.

out the tools like a benign foreman. It was all going so well.
If not anticapitalist then not rabidly pro-.

And then, at the very end of the book, quite bizarrely, Field
quotes a poster produced by the McDonald's Corporation
entitled "Press On":

Nothing in the world can take the place
Of persistence.
Talent will not, nothing is more common
Than unsuccessful men with talent.
Genius will not; unrewarded genius
Is almost a proverb.
Education will not;
The world is full of educated derelicts.
Persistence and determination alone
Are omnipotence.²⁰

WTF?

In one leap, we go from humble craftsperson to divine being -
simply by not losing heart between the seventh and eighth
drafts?

²⁰ Screenplay, p 256.

Even in his wildest moments of mythologizing, Vogler doesn't suggest the screenwriter will become a god.

But, as we'll see in the next chapter, Vogler has a pretty high idea of himself.

THE WRITER'S JOURNEY:
MYTHIC STRUCTURE FOR STORYTELLERS AND SCREENWRITERS

CHRISTOPHER VOGLER

1992

but also:

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO JOSEPH CAMPBELL'S
THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES

CHRISTOPHER VOGLER

1985

Re-enter the Hero.

The theme of the hero myth is universal, occurring in every culture, in every time...²¹

²¹ "A Practical Guide to Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces" by Christopher Vogler, pdf download, p 3.

In 1985, Vogler resurrected Campbell's The Hero With a Thousand Faces. He did this in a famous seven-page memo.

Vogler tells the story in a pdf he shared on his website:

It was written in the mid-1980s when I was working as a story consultant for Walt Disney Pictures, but I had discovered the work of mythologist Joseph Campbell a few years earlier while studying cinema at the University of Southern California. I was sure I saw Campbell's ideas being put to work in the first of the Star Wars movies and wrote a term paper for a class in which I attempted to identify the mythic patterns that made that film such a huge success. The research and writing for that paper inflamed my imagination and later, when I started working as a story analyst at Fox and other Hollywood studios, I showed the paper to a few colleagues, writers and executives to stimulate some discussion of Campbell's ideas which I found to be of unlimited value for creating mass entertainment. I was certainly making profitable use of them, applying them to every script and novel I considered in my job.

The language here is that of the mid-eighties - "unlimited value" and "profitable".

In 1992, Vogler expanded his memo into what is probably the single most influential screenwriting manual, The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters. Since then it has gone through three distinct editions, and has just been published in a fourth - the 25th Anniversary Edition. Each new iteration looked more authoritative, and chi-chi, and more like a guide to tarot reading, than its predecessor. Each has also made greater claims for itself as a work not just for writers but for everyone seeking meaning in their life.

The 2nd edition contains a Preface that walks back a number of claims made by the 1st edition. Here you can find Vogler's answers to some of the world's questions (and mine). He directly takes on the charges of 'Cultural Imperialism' and 'Gender Problems' (Sexism). But he does so in a spirit of deflect or assimilate.

However, it was the 1st edition, and the 7-page memo that birthed it, that were the most influential versions of the Hero's Journey - and they are unrepentant in their championing of individualism. (Rugged American optional.)

Here is where Syd Field's "main character" is replaced by "the Hero" capital H. Vogler doesn't write anything about ensemble pictures. The films Field chose - Nashville, Network - to talk

about collective stories don't appear in Vogler's world-view. The implication must be that these kind of movies are outliers - a minority interest. The closest he gets to dealing with non-Heroic movies is to talk about "Group-Oriented" Heroes.

They are part of a society at the beginning of the story, and their journey takes them to an unknown land far from home. When we first meet them, they are part of a clan, tribe, village, town, or family. Their story is one of separation from that group (Act One); lone adventure in the wilderness away from the group (Act Two); and usually, eventual reintegration with the group (Act Three).²²

The clear implication here is this - no separation, no story; no aloneness, no adventure.

Vogler is consistently helpful, and useful, but he is always pointing you down the same narrow track: the Hero's Journey.²³

Christopher Vogler mini-biog

²² The Writer's Journey, p 46.

²³ 'Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean, who is neither tarnished nor afraid.' Raymond Chandler.

A self-described 'farm boy from Missouri,' Vogler was born in 1949. He studied filmmaking at the University of Southern California School of Cinema-Television, the alma mater of George Lucas. It was here he encountered Campbell's Hero with a Thousand Faces. 'There it was - the answer to what I was looking for: the unwritten rules, the super-outline that all stories appear to be connected by.' Vogler turned this into his famous memo. Since then, he has worked for Disney studios, Fox 2000 pictures, and Warner Bros. He has a moustache and looks like a weather-beaten walrus.

As with most gurus, the biggest trouble is with the followers, not the guru themselves. Many movies since Vogler's seven-page memo have been a reduction of what was already a reduction.

Though Vogler is a sincere evangelist for Campbell's ideas, he seems more widely open. He wants to ask all the right questions:

Where do stories come from? How do they work? What do they tell us about ourselves? What do they mean? Why do we need them? How can we use them to improve the world?²⁴

He wants to help the wannabe writer - more than that, he wants to give them the means to self-help.

The Hero's Journey, I discovered, is more than just a description of the hidden patterns of mythology. It is a useful guide to life, especially the writer's life.²⁵

Vogler goes quite a long way with this. He doesn't always resist the urge to present The Hero's Journey as a panacea, a cure-all. He also has an imperial urge to assimilation. This is illustrated by an anecdote he tells in the Preface to the 2nd edition.

At the time Vogler's memo was becoming a force in Hollywood, "two articles appeared in the Los Angeles Herald-Observer". In these, an unnamed critic claimed the memo:

had deeply influenced and corrupted Hollywood storytellers. According to him, lazy, illiterate studio executives, eager to find a quick-bucks formula, had

²⁴ The Writer's Journey, p 3.

²⁵ The Writer's Journey, p 3.

seized upon the "Practical Guide" as a cure-all, and were busily stuffing it down the throats of writers...²⁶

Vogler's initial reaction was to be "flattered" but "devastated".

I had thought about challenging the critic to a duel (laptops at twenty paces) but now reconsidered. With a slight change in attitude I could turn his hostility to my benefit. I contacted the critic and invited him to talk over our differences...²⁷

Taking this into Campbell's Heroic language:

Instead of fighting my Threshold Guardian, I had absorbed him into my adventure.²⁸

Vogler never claims to take Campbell on his own terms. The Writer's Journey is a work of applied mythology; one in which mythological/psychological insights are put to practical use (to help make movie scripts better so they please more people so they earn more money). For there to be a wider moral behind

²⁶ The Writer's Guide, p 4.

²⁷ The Writer's Guide, p 4.

²⁸ The Writer's Guide, p 5.

this would be, for Vogler, ludicrous. But the moral is there anyway:

All must be assimilated.

There is one story, and the one story is the story of one man.

The clan, tribe, village, town, or family is in need of the cure²⁹ which the Hero goes off to seek. The tribe cannot cure itself, with its own means; the tribe cannot send off a scouting party, or travel en masse (as nomads would) in order to be healed. It is only the lone Hero who can succeed - according to Campbell, according to Vogler, according to Hollywood.

When this is put together with the basic Hollywood screenwriting advice to improve the scene by reinforcing the conflict³⁰, it is easy to see how the depiction of any group will tend to show them as dysfunctional. If there are more than three characters on-screen, two of them must disagree - often violently. If there six or seven, they must start

²⁹ Later on, we're going to be looking closely at World War Z, as both book and movie. One of the reasons I chose it is because the cure in it is literal. At the climax of the film, the Hero (Gerry Lane) Brad Pitt returns with the cure. It's a lump-in-throat moment.

³⁰ "Just as in every story a protagonist battles an antagonist in pursuit of a goal, so scenes replicate that structure... For drama to occur, a protagonist must be confronted with an equal and opposite desire. The goals of protagonist and antagonist in every scene are in direct conflict..." Into the Woods, p 91.

bickering and fighting while time runs down. If there are a hundred or two hundred, they are likely to be a panorama of sleepwalking drones, an applauding crowd, an army of obedient slaves or a rampaging mob. The Hero, meanwhile, detaches from them to sort things out. If he didn't detach, things wouldn't be sorted out.

It's not difficult to see how ideological this is. In a profitably individualistic age, we are given stories of individuals. Instead of "The meek shall inherit the earth" or "Workers of the World Unite" we are told "Just Do It" and "Because You're Worth It".

For Vogler, the Hero's Journey is secular. Where it inevitably tends is towards self-realisation not self-annihilation, not 'at-one-ment'. There is no mention of the void. The cure brought back to the ailing community is not a spiritual boon, but the solution to a social problem (even if that problem is so total as to become existential).

At the moment, with the Coronavirus, COVID-19, the world - collectively - is seeking a cure. There are Heroic individuals everywhere. They are not going off on individual journeys. Instead, they are working together to save as many lives as possible, to preserve the tribe, to manifest from their

collective knowledge (rather than just head off and steal) the
cure.

STORY:

SUBSTANCE, STRUCTURE, STYLE AND PRINCIPLES OF SCREENWRITING

ROBERT MCKEE

1997

Of all the screenwriting gurus, Robert McKee is the one I most respect. He constantly says, 'I can only lead you so far - if you want to become great, you'll have to go beyond what I can teach.'

Snyder suggests that if you only follow his diktats, you'll end up with a zinging and sellable script rather than (because so many others have followed his diktats) a script that any producer will have seen and been bored by a hundred times before. McKee emphasizes there's a lot more to it than what twist happens on what page. He knows that if you want to make good work, you're going to have to plunder your soul (even if you don't believe you've got a soul). He's Old Testament.

The quote from him that welcomes you to his website reads:

A culture cannot evolve without honest, powerful storytelling. When society repeatedly experiences glossy, hollowed-out, pseudo-stories, it degenerates. We need

true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society. If not, as Yeats warned, 'the centre cannot hold.'³¹

This is beneath the banner headline: **Write the Truth**. From this, you'd think he was the old guy at conference meetings at the Washington Post. And that's probably not a bad way to imagine him. Of all the gurus, McKee is the one who suggests that the easiest thing might be to give up - but that there's no shame in that.

Robert McKee mini-biog

Robert McKee was born in 1941 in Detroit, Michigan. He attended the University of Michigan, studying English Literature. All his youth, he was acting. After he graduated, he travelled to the National Theatre in England, where he studied Shakespeare at the Old Vic. After this he spent seven years as an actor on and off-Broadway. In 1979, he moved to Los Angeles and began working as a screenwriter. Here, he wrote spec scripts, eight of which were optioned but only one of which was made. He began offering his famous STORY Seminar class at

³¹ <https://mckeestory.com/>, last accessed 13 Mar 2020, 09:00

the School of Cinema-Television at the University of Southern California (USC) in 1983. As his website says, "Since 1984, more than 100,000 students have taken McKee's courses at various cities around the world." (Toby Litt is one of them.)

McKee is much less monomyth than Vogler or Yorke. He is prepared to examine all different kinds of story - and so he does discuss ensemble movies (Network, Nashville, Short Cuts), which he calls multiplot (or multiprotagonist). But his main division of films is into archplot, miniplot and antiplot.

Archplot would cover films written according to Screenplay and The Writer's Journey. Miniplot would cover a few of them, too, but is more art film. Examples of miniplot are Wild Strawberries, Paris, Texas and The Sacrifice. Antiplot - "predominantly European, and post-World War II" - would include Un Chien Andalou, Last Year at Marienbad, and A Zed & Two Noughts, but also Wayne's World.

McKee doesn't insist on Heroes and Heroism. He writes more often about "character" than the "main character":

The function of CHARACTER is to bring to the story the qualities of characterisation necessary to convincingly act out the choices. Put simply, a character must be

credible: young enough or old enough, strong or weak, worldly or naïve, educated or ignorant, generous or selfish, witty or dull, in the right proportions. Each must bring to the story the combination of qualities that allows an audience to believe that the character could and would do what he does.³²

He prefers to call his main characters protagonists, rather than Heroes. "Generally, the protagonist is a single character."³³ Consider how mild this sounds beside Vogler's eternal insistence on triumphant individuality. And McKee immediately follows up mildness with openness:

A story, however, could be driven by a duo, such as THELMA & LOUISE; a trio, THE WITCHES OF EASTWICK; more, THE SEVEN SAMURAI or THE DIRTY DOZEN. In THE BATTLESHIP POTESMOKIN an entire class of people, the proletariat, create a massive Plural-Protagonist.³⁴

Isn't this all we need? Isn't this fair enough? In some ways. It leaves the door open for plural stories, but doesn't exactly encourage them. It doesn't see any reason why a story

³² Story, p 106.

³³ Story, p 136.

³⁴ Story, p 136.

that de-emphasised individualism might be the better one for us to tell.

Story came out in 1998. Since then, the next two of our gurus - Snyder and Yorke - went straight back to insisting on Heroism and nothing but Heroism.

McKee can sound prescriptive, even dismissive, but it's about generalities rather than specifics.

..the phrase "character-driven story" is redundant. All stories are "character-driven." Event design and character design mirror each other. Character cannot be expressed in depth except through the design of story.³⁵

(As an aside, I think McKee is the best writer of the five gurus, plus Campbell. There's a bit of Emerson in him, and of Eliot and Auden, too. Sometimes he can outwasp Gore Vidal. His sentences are chunky as a welterweight; one with a good right hook. McKee has heft. He's never feelgood. Where Vogler would give you a back rub and Snyder a pep talk, McKee would hand you a single malt.)

³⁵ Story, p 107.

McKee makes it obvious that his sympathy lies with archplot rather than antiplot. The universe he wants to see on screen has coherence and meaning. He admires those who insist on nihilism or randomness, but he thinks they're either charlatans or try-hards. There's no bigger picture for McKee - not a theological one. He's secular, and a lot less dreamcatcher-in-the-breeze than the recent editions of Vogler. There's no shame in giving up, he suggests, but there's also no shame in writing a decent, honest cop drama.

In Story, McKee's not supplying assembly instructions for a kit. You're expected to carve your script out of raw matter, not screw it together with an Allen key. He is most concerned with structure and design, but that doesn't mean he is unambitious. He does love an absolute. Here's a run of alls:

Your character, indeed all characters, in the pursuit of any desire, at any moment in the story, will always take the minimum, conservative action from his point of view. All human beings always do. Humanity is fundamentally conservative, as indeed is all of nature. No organism ever expends more energy than necessary, risks anything it doesn't have to, or takes any action unless it must. Why should it?³⁶

³⁶ Story, p 143.

This is wrong. For a start, it completely misses out camp, mischief, carnival, obsession. It also misses out altruism, self-sacrifice, political commitment and insanity. Look at RuPaul or James Joyce or Margaret Thatcher or Nelson Mandela and tell me again that 'No organism ever expends more energy than necessary'. Humans are often excessive.

What McKee is pushing for here is to force the writer to construct a drama in which the protagonist doesn't blithely go out looking for an adventure - circumstances must force them into extreme and therefore Heroic action.

Where the other gurus bring in Heroism the front door, McKee brings it in the back. But his conservative view of humanity en masse is ultimately defeatist. Although he's happy to see them acting together in old black and white movies, he's got little sympathy for the proletariat. And he's got no sympathy for idealists.

McKee's attitude is a glamorised form of defeatism. And what he points out, through this, is that Hollywood undervalues tragedy. Tragedy is the great genre for both following and undermining the Hero's journey (comedy and satire can do this, too).

Tragedy can demonstrate the appalling wounds an individual who sees themselves as Heroic can inflict upon the body politic. Implicit in the backgrounds of Macbeth or King Lear, envisaged offstage, are populations who suffer from being neglected, exploited and finally sent to war - because of the self-obsessed actions of their Kings. In both, the actions of the protagonist are so destructive as to seem to undermine the environment itself. Macbeth causes a whole ecosystem, Birnam Wood, to be uprooted and put to use as an army's camouflage. Shakespeare doesn't just say 'some trees', he expresses it as if part of the map has got up and walked - like the Ents in Lord of the Rings.

King Lear, in a commonsense view, doesn't cause the storm, but Shakespeare shows him directing it as if he were Zeus or, again anachronistically, as if he were William Furtwängler conducting the Berlin Philharmonic in some cosmic-cataclysmic symphony.

The microcosm becomes the macrocosm, and a single fucked-up head becomes a whole fucked-up universe.

SAVE THE CAT!

THE LAST BOOK ON SCREENWRITING YOU'LL EVER NEED

BLAKE SNYDER

2005

I don't know if Syd Field and Blake Snyder ever got together, to talk about screenplays. Somehow, I doubt they would have got on. Where Field is laid back, Snyder is hysterically bullying.

Of all five screenwriting manuals, his reads most like a get rich quick scheme. According to the cover, it's "The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need". And doesn't that "Last" mean, close your mind, give up the search - follow no God but me?

Do you have a choice in this matter?

No, you do not!³⁷

³⁷ Save the Cat!, p 72.

Sometimes, reading Screenplay, it's as if Field had a timetravel glimpse of Save the Cat!, and is wryly taking it down:

I've noticed many people have a tendency to make a rule for everything.³⁸

And even more on point:

You can't make a screenplay following numbers as you do a drugstore painting.³⁹

As we've already seen, Snyder is very big on numbers. Why?

..when I finally read and digested Field's opus Screenplay, I knew I had found something completely career saving.

Oh! Three acts! Imagine that?

And yet, it was not enough. Like a swimmer in a vast ocean, there was a lot of open water between those two Act Breaks.

³⁸ Screenplay, p 132.

³⁹ Screenplay, p 132.

Viki King filled in a lot more of that open water for me in a book with the unlikely "Get Rich Quick" title of How to Write a Movie in 21 Days. And yet, even with midpoints and B stories, there was still way too much room to screw up.⁴⁰

This is revealing. Snyder believes you can "screw up" a screenplay, rather than just write a bad one. What he means by this - and every line of Save the Cat! Demonstrates it - is that there's right way to put together a script. Unlike McKee, he is giving you the assembly instructions. In which case, it's hardly going to be a surprise if you end up building the same BILLY Bookcase as everyone else.

I'd say that Snyder's own screen writing career demonstrates this. He puts together solid, uninspiring product. My edition boasts that he "continues to write screenplays, making his 13th sale in 2006". Snyder sells his scripts, but he doesn't get movies made - and the biggest movie that was made was Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot. If you'd be happy with this kind of tantalising career, always almost, then Save the Cat! may be the book for you. I'm sure Blake Snyder's horse had better dental work than I do.

⁴⁰ Save the Cat!, p69.

Blake Snyder Mini-biog

The biog of Blake Snyder on IMDb was put up by 'Save the Cat! Enterprises'. And so it says that he was 'Named "Hollywood's most successful spec screenwriter,' when, in fact, Hollywoodlitsales.com only named him as 'one of Hollywood's most successful spec screenwriters'. But, hey, not much difference, is there? With this level of finessing, it's hard to know what else that's online to take seriously. As far as I can tell, Snyder was born into the screen trade. His father, Kenneth C.T. Snyder was a TV producer for Roger Ramjet, Hot Wheels and other children's shows. Here's a Hollywood anecdote, 'At the age of eight, Snyder was hired by his father as a voice talent for an animated special starring Sterling Holloway. Snyder continued doing children's voices... until his voice changed and he was fired by his producer father.' He took a B.A. in English at Georgetown University. In 1987, he went full time as a screenwriter. His first spec sale, for half a million dollars, was Stop! Or My Mom Will Shoot. That was a mere two years later.

Save the Cat! refers to heroes, lower case h. Snyder's definition is negative. It's not that there's a tribe-saving quest that has to be undertaken, thereby creating a hero; it's that a screenwriter should avoid making their hero inactive - because that will make their script worse.

What lays there like lox on a plate? Who can't be bothered to get up out of his chair and go answer the door?⁴¹ Why, the inactive hero, of course. And since the very definition of a hero is to be proactive, the inactive kind must not be a very good thing. Heroes seek, strive, and reach for the stars; they don't wait for the phone to ring. So, if your hero is inactive, tell him to get off the dime!⁴²

Where Snyder is most different to Vogler is that he begins by looking to the actors - by which he means the stars - who will be available to play those parts. In a sub-section entitled, 'CASTING FOR THE ROLE OF YOUR HERO' he talks about the attitude a writer should adopt when creating a hero. He advises against writing a movie as a bespoke star vehicle (unless you've already got the commission). Instead, as he goes on to say -

⁴¹ Well, I'd say that would be McKee's organism never taking any action unless it must.

⁴² Save the Cat!, p 187.

..if you always remember to write for the archetype, and not the star, the casting will take care of itself.⁴³

However, certain stars exist because they conform to certain archetypes:

..throughout cinema history.. many of the big stars play one part really well. Think about Marilyn Monroe, Clark Gable, Cary Grant. Now think about Jim Carrey, Russell Crowe, Julia Roberts, and Sandra Bullock. It's not because these are not good actors who can't do more than one type of role, only that what makes movies work to a large degree is our need to be shown certain archetypes onscreen.⁴⁴

To cap his argument, Snyder goes back to Campbell:

It's the Jungian archetypes these actors represent that we're interested in seeing... You don't have to be Joseph Campbell to see that no matter who's hot in Casting Call, the archetypes never change.⁴⁵

⁴³ Save the Cat!, p 58.

⁴⁴ Save the Cat!, p 57.

⁴⁵ Save the Cat!, p 58-59.

Much of the time, Snyder is happy to delegate the reasons for stuff to other people and to concentrate on "Structure, Structure, Structure." And so his observations about ensemble movies, and his examples, will be familiar to you from Story.

Your way into a biography has to pay attention to the same rules as any story: It has to be, first and foremost, about a guy who... we can root for.

Or at least understand.⁴⁶

Ensemble pieces can offer the same dilemma for the screenwriter... Who is this about, you keep asking, this piece with 12 characters, all with equal screen time?

One of the masters of the ensemble, Robert Altman, specializes in this. Nashville, Welcome to L.A., and Shortcuts offer crisscrossing character sketches with no central lead. But Altman would argue differently. The city of Nashville became the "star" of Nashville... Granted these are not classic hero's tales, but Altman found his way in and stuck to it. And by creating a new kind of hero to root for, he was true to the moral he wanted to tell.

⁴⁶ This is taking McKee's distinction between a sympathetic and an empathetic hero. Story, p 141.

Altman, Altman, Altman. Snyder completely forgets what Field scrupulously records⁴⁷ - that the screenplay of Nashville was solely by Joan Tewksbury. If anyone created "a new kind of hero to root for" it was her. It was the screenwriter, not the director. And this in a screenwriting manual!

Altman's heroic centrality is overlaid throughout. On Welcome to L.A., Altman was neither writer nor director, he was producer. On Short Cuts (not Shortcuts) Altman was director but only co-writer, with Frank Barhydt. Could it be possible that the Altman movie was the work of other people more than Altman?

It's no accident all five of these manuals were written by men - manly, no-bullshit men. Their aesthetic of screenwriting is profoundly macho. They expect, they demand, that the writing process itself be agonizing. They love horror stories of overwork and self-cutting.

..it took seven - count 'em seven - drafts to get it right.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ On Screenplay, page 122-123.

⁴⁸ Save the Cat!, p 155.

David Mamet would be one of their heroes, and behind him, Ernest Hemingway and John Steinbeck. They're unlikely have postcards above their desks of Virginia Woolf and Muriel Spark. Perhaps it's stereotyping, but it seems collectivism and ensemble work would be much more likely from five female screenwriting gurus.

Female gurus are harder to find - and this may be because female writers are (for many reasons) less likely to be taken as authority figures.

Some recent screenwriting manuals by women include Pilar Alessandra's The Coffee Break Screenwriter, Linda Aronson's The 21st Century Screenplay, Jill Chamberlain's The Nutshell Technique, Getting it Write by Lee Zahavi Jessup and Inside Story by Dara Marks. None of these, I would argue, offer a fundamentally different approach to screenwriting from a female perspective.

The closest to guru status is Linda Seger. Her Making a Good Script Great (Silman-James Press, 3rd edition, 2010) is regularly listed as one of the 'classics'.

More to the point, in 1990 Maureen Murdoch published a kind of answer song to Vogler's The Writer's Journey with The Heroine's Journey. A more theoretical takedown of the guys

comes in Judith Halberstam's The Queer Art of Failure, which focuses on the less-than-heroic trajectories traced in children's movies like A Bug's Life and Bee Movie.

Joan Tewksbury was born in Redlands, California, in 1936. Apart from Nashville, she also wrote Thieves Like Us for Robert Altman to take all the credit for. She is the author of Ebba and the Green Dresses of Olivia Gomez in a Time of Conflict and War. Since 1979, she has directed around nine TV dramas and series.

This isn't to say that the macho guys agree. Of course not. There's massive conflict between them (when they're not nicking one another's ideas).

INTO THE WOODS: HOW STORIES WORK AND WHY WE TELL THEM

known in the U.S. as

INTO THE WOODS: A FIVE ACT JOURNEY INTO STORY

JOHN YORKE

2014

If only you want to read a single screenwriting manual, to suck the blood out of all the others, this is the one. That's Into the Woods' pitch, just as Save the Cat!'s was 'The Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need'.

Into the Woods is a synoptic work - a brilliant gathering of what's gone before. With recapitulations, and diagrams, the reader is given the gist of Field, Vogler, Snyder, McKee and many others.

The best way to get an idea of this condensation is to look at the table on page 256. Here, Yorke crams together all the three-, five- and eight-act structures he can find. It is an

amazingly useful and powerfully reductive piece of work - as is the whole book.

Because he is the most recent of the gurus, Yorke is able to look back in anger but also with the desire to plunder. He critiques Vogler and Campbell:

When I started to explore structural theory more seriously, I went back to it again. It is flawed and simplistic.. Part of the reason I was so quick to dismiss it was because, like [Gustav] Freytag, it suggested the biggest point of drama, the supreme ordeal, was in the middle of the film - implying a backward journey in which the forces of antagonism didn't build. Equally, I couldn't understand how there could be two different screenwriting paradigms. Surely there only be one or none at all?⁴⁹

(The other paradigm is the five-act structure - which Yorke has traced, in an earlier chapter, through the Latin playwright Terence, Shakespeare and the German novelist Gustav Freytag.)

⁴⁹ Into the Woods, p 54-55.

Two simple actions were, however, able to unlock the conundrum. The first was to attempt to fit both paradigms together - to give Vogler's work an act structure... The second was to... feed in a character flaw.⁵⁰

This is Yorke's main idea about heroes:

..the elixir, the elusive treasure that the hero or homeland needs, is exactly the same element the protagonist needs to overcome their flaw.⁵¹

Yorke's heroes are more divided than Snyder's. They always need to learn something about themselves.

Fully realized characters have a façade. It's constructed of elements the character believes to be beneficial but, as we discover, will actually destroy them... Conversely, the traits a character may believe to be a weakness, if indeed they are conscious of them, become the elements that offer redemption.⁵²

⁵⁰ Into the Woods, p 56.

⁵¹ Into the Woods, p 57.

⁵² Into the Woods, p 136. Again, it's worth looking ahead to World War Z, in which what Brad Pitt's character realises is exactly this - the virus's greatest strength is its' greatest weakness. And that weakness is that it spares the already-weak. If a vaccine can be developed that makes the human appear to have a fatal disease, the zombie will spare them.

Yorke's world-view is not religious, it's scientific - pop science. He's big on chaos theory and fractals. Which means he sees five act structures in every scene and every exchange.⁵³ And his psychology is pop psych. We're all on a journey, we're all incomplete, we're all learning and improving. Clearly, he is more comfortable with Freud than Jung. And he's quite happy to give Vogler's further out speculations on storytelling a spanking.

His work is frustrating however, partly because Vogler himself makes no attempt to dig deeper than noting its resemblance to the 'monomyth'; partly because his own elucidations are often confused and partly because there's no real attempt (apart from some quasi-mystic mumbo jumbo) to understand why.⁵⁴

Not that Into the Woods doesn't make its own claims, some just as grandiose as Vogler, or Campbell. The subtitle of the book is 'How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them'. In answering to why, Yorke can also be just as patronizing as the next guru.

⁵³ If he'd been born a generation earlier, fractals would have been holograms - every part containing the whole.

⁵⁴ We've neatly come full circle. As you'll remember, in the very first sentence of The Hero With a Thousand Faces, Campbell sideswipes the 'mumbo jumbo of some red-eyed witch doctor of the Congo'. The Hero With a Thousand Faces, p 13.

For all its flaws existentialism pinpointed an essential truth: in a godless universe, the abject horror of meaningless existence is too much for any individual to bear.⁵⁵

Oh those dumb existentialists! Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger. How little they knew compared to us.

Once upon a time God was the story we told to make sense of our terror in the light of existence. Storytelling has that same fundamentally religious function - it fuses the disparate, gives us shape, and in doing so instils in us quiet.⁵⁶

Again, we see the screenwriter put into the place of God. It's another apotheosis.

John Yorke mini-biog

John Yorke is the only non-American among the screenwriting gurus. He was born in Stepney, London, in 1962. He went to Newcastle University, and joined the BBC in 1986. Here, he worked as a studio manager and then a producer on BBC Radio 5. After he moved

⁵⁵ Into the Wood, p 210.

⁵⁶ Into the Wood, p 230.

to television, in 1994, he was soon working on the BBC's top soap opera, EastEnders. He rose to the position of executive producer and guided the programme during one of its most successful periods. In 2003, he became Head of Drama at Channel 4 - commissioning Shameless, Sex Traffic and Omagh. He returned to the BBC in 2005, as Controller of BBC Drama Series. He worked again on EastEnders, but also Casualty, Holby City and Doctors. He was Commissioning Editor/Executive Producer on Life on Mars, Robin Hood and Bodies. These are among the most successful TV shows in the UK.

Where Field quotes a McDonald's Corporation poster at the end of Screenplay, Yorke also saves his ideological unveiling to the end:

Stories that do last, then, are the ultimate result of the free market... A free market keeps both things we know to be true, and things we want to believe, alive.⁵⁷

He couldn't hold it in any longer. He had to come right out and say it. Competition is king, greed is good - for stories, for protagonists in stories.

⁵⁷ Into the Woods, p 227.

(What do we do if the antagonist, the baddie, turns out to be us ourselves? People aren't to be blamed for multiplying, for accepting better healthcare. But they are to be blamed for squandering their resources, and oppressing those who make the stuff they use.)

At one point, in the chapter on why we tell stories, Yorke gives what might be seen as an ecological explanation:

If it is indeed possible for stories to carry in their DNA a blueprint for survival then it's possible to see the roadmap of change as a template for that wider purpose. Societies survive by adaptation, rejecting orthodoxy and embracing change - in exactly the same pattern reflected by the archetype. Why shouldn't storytelling be a codification of this process, one in which, through empathy, individuals are invited to take part?⁵⁸

But this reads more like Social Darwinism - quite literally Social Darwinism - than a vision of a sustainable transitional economy.

⁵⁸ Into the Woods, p 203.

If our will to following the same selfish narrative patterns is so essentially part of us, we are fucked. The fuel needed in order to maintain this dynamism is beyond the resources of our single planet.

If the hero needs to pursue their goals by all means necessary, that means continuing to chuck the cigarette butt out the car window (to look cool) or cutting down the rainforest (to feed your kids).

THE ZOMBIES

MAX BROOKS

WORLD WAR Z: AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE ZOMBIE WAR

2006

There have been successful attempts to write novels of successful collective endeavour - and they haven't necessarily been published by small anarchist presses.

World War Z (published in the U.S. by Crown, a subsidiary of Penguin Random House, in 2006) is a novel without a Hero. It is written in the form of a large number of testimonies. In fact, it's written in the form Jean Stein and George Plimpton invented for their book American Journey: The Times of Robert Kennedy (1970). That is, it's a narrative oral history; a number of globally scattered interviews that cover the outbreak, spread, devastation and defeat of a zombie apocalypse⁵⁹. Scientists perform important individual roles, or make breakthroughs in understanding, but it is science itself that saves the world. As well as many acts of individual

⁵⁹ In the Acknowledgments, Max Brooks thanks Studs Terkel, famous as one of the great interviewers of the twentieth century, and General Sir John Hackett, author of The Third World War: August 1985, a speculative account of a future war written in the form of conventional narrative history, but also including episodic short story sections. World War Z, p 343.

bravery and self-sacrifice. The book is exciting. The body count is very high - into the billions. To keep the reader interested, with no-one to root for except humanity itself, is a great formal achievement.

Max Brooks Mini-Biog

Max Brooks was born in New York, New York, in 1972. He's the son of the Hollywood actress Anne Bancroft (Mrs Robinson in The Graduate) and the writer, director, comic legend Mel Brooks (The Producers, Robin Hood: Men in Tights). In interview Brooks has described how he grew up terrified by death threats to his mother (after she kissed the black actor Sydney Poitier on-camera during the 1964 Academy Awards - because he'd just won Best Actor Oscar for Lilies of the Field), and her vivid descriptions of how he might be abducted by strange men. He was also affected by a teenage viewing of an Italian zombie movie (almost certainly Cannibal Holocaust) incorporating footage of real cannibalism. These formative experiences came out when he began writing The Zombie Survival Guide (2003). He's joked that he had "two god-given talents at that point: OCD and unemployment." Brooks is a very funny guy.

I've chosen to write about World War Z for several reasons. First, it's a story about saving the world from a pandemic. Second, it is a perfect example of what happens when you impose Heroism upon an anti-Heroic narrative⁶⁰.

To get World War Z the movie, take World War Z the book and process it through four of the generations of screenwriting manual: Screenplay, The Writer's Journey, Story and Save the Cat!

In other words, by looking closely at World War Z we can see the development of Hollywood storytelling in miniature and sped up. A good book is turned into what, culturally, we now believe is a good story - and, in doing so, diversity is forced to become monomyth.

Only a Hero can save us now.

WORLD WAR Z

2013

⁶⁰ I mean this in terms of structure. I don't mean that there are no examples of individual heroism in Max Brooks' book - there are many. What I mean is that, structurally, the global ambition of World War Z the book requires it to be a decentred narrative.

World War Z was optioned by Paramount Pictures for Plan B Entertainment, Brad Pitt's company, because Brad liked the book so much. When a novel is acquired for Hollywood, it ceases to be a moving story of humans struggling against overwhelming odds, it becomes 'a property' (as in hot). Work needs to begin, and fast. However, in the time between acquisition and release, World War Z went through "one of the more famously troubled development periods in recent years, going from years in development hell to a production that culminated with the film's original third act being completely re-written and re-shot"⁶¹.

The job of writing the screenplay was initially given to J. Michael Straczynski (creator of Babylon 5, and the Clint Eastwood movie Changeling). His first⁶² and second⁶³ drafts are still downloadable - although that may not be the case for long.

Straczynski's script was taken as a screen story (he got a credit for this) and then completely rewritten by Matthew

⁶¹ "World War Z 2 Writer Offers Script Development Update", by Stephen Silver, <https://screenrant.com/world-war-z-2-sequel-writer-script/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 11:51

⁶² <http://web.archive.org/web/20121020013552/http://www.zombiefiend.com/forum/topics/world-war-z-original>, last accessed 24 Mar 2020, 10:33

⁶³ [http://www.mzp-tv.co.uk/movie_scripts/Sci-fi%20and%20Fantasy/World%20War%20Z%20\(J.%20Michael%20Straczynski%20-%202nd%20Draft\).pdf](http://www.mzp-tv.co.uk/movie_scripts/Sci-fi%20and%20Fantasy/World%20War%20Z%20(J.%20Michael%20Straczynski%20-%202nd%20Draft).pdf), last accessed 24 Mar 2020, 10:34

Michael Carnahan (The Kingdom, Lions for Lambs, State of Play), and then - after principal photography was completed and a rough cut of the film was viewable - added to by Drew Goddard (Cloverfield, Buffy, Angel, Alias, Lost, The Cabin in the Woods) after a hard read Damen Lindelhof (Cowboys and Aliens, Prometheus, Star Trek into Darkness). Christopher McQuarrie (The Usual Suspects, Jack Reacher) also did some uncredited rewriting, very late on⁶⁴. The director throughout was Marc Forster (Finding Neverland, Quantum of Solace, Machine Gun Preacher).

With some detective work, you can put together the story of how World War Z went from book to movie. And the first two versions of the script do exactly that: turn a series of interviews into a detective story. In Save the Cat terms, it's a 'Whydunit':

Like Citizen Kane, a classic Whydunit, the story is about seeking the innermost chamber of the human heart and discovering something unexpected, something dark and often unattractive, and the answer to the question: Why?⁶⁵

⁶⁴ "World War Z' Helmer Marc Forster Reflects On Watching His Zombie Movie Get Fed Through The Gossip Woodchipper", by Mike Fleming Jnr, <https://deadline.com/2013/06/world-war-z-helmer-marc-forster-reflects-on-watching-his-zombie-movie-get-fed-through-the-gossip-woodchipper-526701/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 12:27.

⁶⁵ Save the Cat! p 36.

In a 2013 interview with ScreenSlam, J. Michael Straczynski explained (with a little exaggeration) exactly what he did in his first draft:

In the original book, there is no narrator, there is no main character - there's a series of interviews conducted by a faceless person with government leaders, ordinary people, military folks. And I thought, "Okay, the most logical approach to the story is to create that character who did those interviews, and give us a point of view within the United Nations, which makes sense [to allow him], to be able to go around the world to investigate this. And give him a family, and give him - you know - kids. And let us take this huge event, because people have a hard time understanding huge big worldwide planetary events - but a family in jeopardy, they can understand. You take this big story, and you make it small, and see it writ small, on one small family. Because you can identify with that."⁶⁶

If you do a little digging in the novel, there is a narrator, and the nature of his after-the-fact investigation into "The

⁶⁶ "World War Z: J. Michael Straczynski Interview - Co-Screen Story & Co-Screenplay", June 24 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wy3Ny4SgIL4>, last accessed 24 March 2020, 10:59.

Zombie War" is clear. That's all already there in the Introduction. But it's true that he's faceless and nameless.

Everything else Straczynski says is very accurate, but also very telling. He's a Syd Field school screenwriter. He's created a "main character", not a Hero. At points, the underplaying is almost comic. When we meet the Brad Pitt character (Gerry Lane) on page 5 of the script, he is described as 'aloof, distant, bureaucratic'. All well within Pitt's range as an actor, but not within his usual archetype, which would be 'cool, self-assured, maverick'.

What is Gerry Lane's quest? It's laid out for him by Robert McEnroe, senior to him within the UN. What they want from Gerry is simply to file a report.

Well, more of a systems analysis, really. Where the system worked, where it didn't, how and in what ways the various organizational infrastructures failed to respond

-

(This speech reminds me of Harrison Ford's response to some of George Lucas's less elegant dialogue in Star Wars: "George!

You can type this shit, but you sure can't say it! Move your mouth when you're typing!"⁶⁷)

By the end of his journey, Gerry has become Heroic - filing his report despite death threats from the military - but to begin with, when he receives the Call to Action, he is (as far as we can see) a very ordinary guy.

The comparison to Citizen Kane is very apt. That film, too, unfolds (like the book of World War Z) as a series of interviews. In Straczynski's Second Draft, I counted thirteen of them. This is a lot fewer than the roughly forty-five of the novel, but it's still inert as a dramatic form. I think this is because what Straczynski wanted to write was a downbeat 1970s conspiracy theory movie - a kind of All the President's Zombies. Haunting the background of his world-view is the Vietnam War, and the lessons the United States should have learned about cutting your losses and having an exit strategy.

One thing that did come through, from Straczynski's Second Draft to the finished movie, was an opening scene in which a major American city goes all to shit, because of zombies. Here

⁶⁷ "What Really Happened When Harrison Ford Gave George Lucas Crap On Set," Sean O'Connell, <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/1702860/what-really-happened-when-harrison-ford-gave-george-lucas-crap-on-set>, last accessed 7 April 2020, 9:32.

there's Heroism, but it's not initially Gerry's. As the American forces get their arses chomped, we're told that each shot should be "designed to look and feel Heroic, emphasizing the bravery and skill of the soldiers in battle"⁶⁸.

The basic form of the Second Draft is to globe-hop from interview to interview, having each start with pure exposition ("Let me tell you how it was...") that then dissolves to a flashback.

This is in no way the Hero's Journey. As a star vehicle, what are its obvious flaws?

Brad Pitt is a johnny-come-lately. Whatever personal bravery he shows in researching and delivering his report, it's still just a stack of paper with some words on it. And, worst of all, he can't save the world. The most he can do, in traumatic flashback, is save his family - whatever the cost. Spoiler in the footnote.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ J. Michael Straczynski, *Second Draft*, p 3.

⁶⁹ How he does this in the end is to feed his ill, otherwise-dying daughter with human flesh - turning her into a cannibal and traumatizing her for life, because she thinks she's no different to the zombies. And we only learn this at the very end of the movie. Here we find the kind of moral ambiguity that a character actor might be okay with. A Dustin Hoffman or a Philip Seymour Hoffman. But not a straight-down-the-middle Hollywood star. Do you want people looking up at you, the next movie they see, thinking, 'That guy cooked up a human hand for supper?'

To my eyes, Straczynski's two scripts are an intelligent, sometimes brilliant but ultimately flawed attempt to adapt Max Brook's novel. They have some great scenes along with some horribly clunky exposition.

In the First Draft, the global history of the Zombie War takes precedence. Gerry uncovers a tale of political corruption, military ineptitude and human (particularly American) venality. Each country copes with the zombie threat differently: China by ruthlessly covering it up, then heartlessly obliterating it with a nuclear bomb; Israel by wisely anticipating it and building a wall; America by blithely ignoring it, marketizing it and ultimately by importing a ready-made solution. The moral is given to U.S. General Casey, who had to watch his troops destroyed by zombies at the Battle of Yonkers. He says to Gerry:

I know you're never going to use this in your report, but you want to know what I think happened? What I think really happened?

(beat)

I think god took a little time off... Then one day, he decided to check in on us... I think he looked down at the world of infinite possibilities he'd created and saw that we'd burned down the garden of Eden and turned every inch of arable land into strip malls. I think he saw his

creations had become a people who would sell each other out for ten dollars and a better parking spot. He saw bomb blasts and body counts, anthrax in the mail, wars for profit, billion dollar CEO golden parachutes and everybody out for himself, screw the other guy. He saw us feeding on each other. And He said, "Let me show you what that really looks like. Let me show you what that looks like... to me." And he did.

By the Second Draft, there's clearly been a demand for more action sequences. This time we open with what was the doomed Battle of Yonkers, now Philly. Gerry is on-site to witness this, and escape with his family. The script's structure is the same - we follow three lines: Gerry's present-day detective work, the global story of the Zombie War told to Gerry in flashbacks, and Gerry and his family's own survival story. This time, General Casey has a different moral, less parable, more pop psych:

The problem was magical thinking. The politicians, the brass, they saw what was coming and refused to believe it. We told them their strategies wouldn't work and they refused to accept it. The facts don't matter. Global warming. Katrina. AIDs. Evolution. You've got people deciding something's not a threat because they don't believe in it, because it's inconvenient, because it's

against policy. That's magical thinking. And when you enter the realm of magical thinking, anything can happen.

(beat, softly)

Including zombies⁷⁰.

Straczynski's scripts take World War Z as far as Syd Field's 1979-vintage screenplay wisdom can take it. When Michael Carnahan came on board, he was from a younger generation - not hung up on Vietnam, Watergate or slow 1970s Whydunits. What he brought most of all was The Writer's Journey.

Without doubt one of the first things Carnahan decided was that we didn't need a mere "main character", we needed a Hero - and that Hero must definitely be a non-bureaucratic version of Brad Pitt. He understood, as Straczynski didn't, why World War Z had been optioned: as a star vehicle for Brad⁷¹. If he didn't put a Hero at the centre of the action⁷², the script

⁷⁰ Given President Trump's magical thinking in response to COVID-19, I think Straczynski can lay claim to some fairly high-grade prophecy, here.

⁷¹ The classic account of the star vehicle, and how it distorts a script, comes in William Goldman's Adventures in the Screen Trade: A Personal View of Hollywood. He tells a great anecdote about The Great Santini, starring Robert Duvall.

⁷² As the director Marc Forster said in a valedictory interview with Deadline, after the film became a hit, "what I love most about this movie is watching Brad's character turn from everyday man into the reluctant hero". "World War Z' Helmer Marc Forster Reflects On Watching His Zombie Movie Get Fed Through The Gossip Woodchipper", by Mike Fleming Jnr, <https://deadline.com/2013/06/world-war-z-helmer-marc-forster-reflects-on-watching-his-zombie-movie-get-fed-through-the-gossip-woodchipper-526701/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 12:27.

wouldn't get made and it wouldn't stand much of a chance of being a success.

And so, in Save the Cat! terms, Carnahan changed the genre of the movie from Whydunit to Dude with a Problem -

..this genre has two very simple working parts: a dude, meaning an average guy or gal just like ourselves. And a problem: something that this average guy must dig deep inside himself to conquer.⁷³

By the time he finished, Carnahan roughly put in place what is now the bulk of the first two acts of the film - up until Gerry gets on the last flight out of Israel⁷⁴. He kept Straczynski's invented family at the centre of the story, not even changing the kids' names. He also kept the character of Jurgen Warmbrunn⁷⁵, the Israeli Mossad agent, who is the one man in ten who must disagree with the consensus.

⁷³ Save the Cat! p 31-2. I'm tempted to say that the movie is also The Golden Fleece genre. "A hero goes 'on the road' in search of one thing and winds up discovering something else - himself." However, Gerry Lane doesn't seem to need to discover all that much, except that he's more heroic than he previously thought. Some of the flaws of the movie may be that it flip-flops between Dude with a Problem and The Golden Fleece.

⁷⁴ One of the versions of this script is available online, without attribution or date, at <https://indiegroundfilms.iles.wordpress.com/2014/01/world-war-z.pdf>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 11:40.

⁷⁵ But spelled 'Warmbrumm'.

Apart from this, apart from completely retooling the story, Carnahan's main work was in supersizing the unheroic Gerry of Straczynski's scripts.

Brad Pitt is no longer a johnny-come-lately. He is on the spot, close to the epicentre, when the zombies first overrun an American City (Philadelphia)⁷⁶. After an opening sequence in which he demonstrates quick thinking and great defensive driving to rescue his family, he is brought on board the USS Harry Truman by the military and then volunteers to go with Dr. Fassbach investigate the outbreak of the zombie plague - not retrospectively, after the battle is lost, but right at the crucial point when the situation has become life or undeath. In other words, this much more macho version of Gerry has a shot at saving the world. The personal bravery he shows in researching this won't just end in a stack of paper with some words on it - it will result in discovering a way to preserve his tribe, which is the whole human race.

Gerry has been Voglerized and his genre has been Snydered.

But it took another three writers, Damen Lindelhof, Drew Goddard and Christopher McQuarrie, to bring the movie home.

⁷⁶ When asked 'How close were you?' (i.e., to the beginning of the outbreak), Gerry says, "Face to face." And at the Climax of the film, Gerry is even more face to face with the enemy - as the zombie's teeth chatter within biting distance, but he fails to perceive Gerry

After initial screenings, the producers, or perhaps Brad himself, clearly didn't go for the overblown third act. How this originally ran was detailed by the website denofgeek:

In that version, Pitt's character, Gerry, spends a great deal of time in Moscow, eventually becoming a ruthless zombie killing expert. It's there that he discovers that the zombies are vulnerable to the cold, but when he finally gets to relay this message back to his wife, it turns out that she's effectively had to trade herself for the safety of their children. She's now with Matthew Fox's soldier, who originally had rescued them at the start of the film... Gerry then starts a huge journey back across the world to try to save his wife - and that's where the original version of the film was going to end.⁷⁷

Seven weeks of reshoots in Budapest were scheduled, after Damon Lindelhof did a hard read on the script and found it lacking, although it was left to Drew Goddard to do the actual writing⁷⁸. Lindelhof understood that the third act was basically a battle sequence that, by the law of escalation, could only justify its place by being bigger, busier and

⁷⁷ "Did Damon Lindelof save the World War Z movie?", <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/did-damon-lindelof-save-the-world-war-z-movie/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 11:16.

⁷⁸ "Uh-Oh: 'World War Z' Going In for Seven Weeks of Reshoots?", <https://www.slashfilm.com/uhoh-world-war-z-weeks-reshoots/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 11:07.

louder than the previous battle sequence. However, it wasn't dramatically necessary. He had received and understood Robert McKee's key message:

If I could send a telegram to the film producers of the world, it would be these three words: "Meaning Produces Emotion". Not money; not sex; not special effects; not movie stars; not lush photography⁷⁹.

He also heeded McKee's main structural advice:

A revered Hollywood axiom warns: "Movies are about their last twenty minutes." In other words, for a film to have a chance in the world, the last act and its climax must be the most satisfying experience of all. For no matter what the first ninety minutes have achieved, if the final movement fails, the film will die over its opening weekend⁸⁰.

The director Marc Forster later gave his analysis:

⁷⁹ Story, p 309.

⁸⁰ Story, p 107.

..after Jerusalem, you are so exhausted that to have added another big battle would have been repetitive, and it would have left you feeling exhausted⁸¹.

And so, strictly according to the Book of McKee, what the script needed was a meaningful Crisis and then a Climax⁸².

In Lindelhof and Goddard's World War Z, the Crisis comes when the possible cure (or, as Gerry puts it, "camouflage") is located in Vault 139, a refrigeration room located in B-Wing, the half of the World Health Organisation research facility overrun by zombies. (Gerry and a brave female Israeli soldier, Seren, have ended up here after his plane crashes in rural Wales.) To reach Vault 139, Gerry and his allies will have to go through the zombies, all 80 of them. Goddamit:

The Crisis Decision must be a deliberately static moment⁸³.

It is.

⁸¹ <https://deadline.com/2013/06/world-war-z-helmer-marc-forster-reflects-on-watching-his-zombie-movie-get-fed-through-the-gossip-woodchipper-526701/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 12:27.

⁸² "Did Damon Lindelof save the World War Z movie?", <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/did-damon-lindelof-save-the-world-war-z-movie/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 11:13.

⁸³ Story, p 308.

We freeze this moment because the rhythm of the last movement depends on it. An emotional momentum has built to this point, but the Crisis dams its flow. As the protagonist goes through this decision, the audience leans in, wondering: "What's he going to do? What's he going to do?" Tension builds and builds, then as the protagonist makes a choice of action, that compressed energy explodes into the Climax⁸⁴.

At the Crisis, what Gerry decides is - he's prepared to Heroically risk his own life going through the zombie maze to reach the cure - because that's the only way to Save the World, and so save his family.⁸⁵

Cue a suspense sequence very different to the rest of the movie in mood, style and just about everything else.

What's still needed is a McKee-type Climax:

The Climax of the last act is your great imaginative leap. Without it, you have no story. Until you have it,

⁸⁴ Story, p 308.

⁸⁵ At 01:34:00, we cut from Gerry's face, looking at screens full of the zombies that stand between him and the Cave, to an exterior shot of the W.H.O. Facility. It is during this very quiet offscreen moment (perhaps the most subtle edit in the movie) that Gerry's choice is made. When we cut back to him, Seren is helping him suit up by taping insulating foam to his forearm - as low rent armour against zombie bites. Gerry knows what he has to do.

your characters wait like suffering patients praying for a cure.⁸⁶

Exactly, and not accidentally.

In Aristotle's words, an ending must be both "inevitable and unexpected". Inevitable in the sense that as the Inciting Incident occurs, everything and anything seems possible, but at Climax, as the audience looks back through the telling, it should seem that the path the telling took was the only path. Given the characters and their world as we've come to understand it, the Climax was inevitable and satisfying. But at the same time it must be unexpected, happening in a way the audience could not have anticipated.

Repeatedly, throughout the movie, we have seen isolated characters ignored by the onrush of zombies. While everyone else is mauled, these weaklings - the chronic alcoholic, the soldier with something seriously wrong with his leg, the Arab boy with leukemia, the feeble old Jewish man - are spared. The fact they are already condemned to death means that the undead don't see them as prey - they don't perceive them at all.

⁸⁶ Story, p 309.

This is the classic McKee reversal of values. As Gerry puts it, remembering his mentor, Dr. Fassbach:

I believe these things have a weakness, and that weakness is weakness - our weakness.

Our weakness becomes our strength.

In order to stage this final sequence, Lindelhof reached not for McKee but for Snyder. The movie switches genre again, from Dude with a Problem to Monster in the House.

The director Marc Forster is explicit about this:

..the moment I'd heard the studio was willing to move forward with a more quiet haunted house ending which we pitched them, I was so relieved and happy.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ <https://deadline.com/2013/06/world-war-z-helmer-marc-forster-reflects-on-watching-his-zombie-movie-get-fed-through-the-gossip-woodchipper-526701/>, last accessed 26 March 2020, 12:27.

WORLD WAR Z as THE HERO'S JOURNEY according to VOGLER

VOGLER	WORLD WAR Z	TIME
Ordinary World	Gerry making pancakes for wife Karin and daughters Rachel and Constance; and then playing twenty questions in their car	00:03:28-00:05:41 ⁸⁸
The Call to Adventure	U.N. Under-Secretary Thierry Umotoni calls Gerry to tell him 'This is not for old time's sake - I need you.' (To save the world.)	00:13:40
Refusal of the Call	Naval Commander Mullenaro tells Gerry 'We'll send you in with the team. Help Dr. Fassbach find whatever it is he needs.' Gerry says, 'No. Captain, I'm not your guy... I can't help you. I can't leave my family.' Mullenaro says, 'You want to help your family, you figure out how we stop this.'	00:32:08
Meeting with the Mentor	On the flight to Korea Dr. Fassbach tells Gerry. 'Now the hard part... is seeing the crumbs for the clues they are. Sometimes the thing you thought was the most brutal aspect of the virus, turns out to be the chink in its armour.'	00:36:55
The Crossing of the First Threshold	Gerry and Dr. Fassbach get off the military air transporter in Korea	00:39:41
Tests, Allies, Enemies	Gerry's travels to South Korea, China, Israel, and eventually Wales	00:40:08-01:35:14
Approach to the Inmost Cave	Gerry, along with two allies (Israeli soldier Segen and a W.H.O. Doctor) enters the half of the research facility overrun by somnolent zombies	01:35:14
Ordeal	Trapped inside a glass-windowed refrigeration room, with a zombie just outside, Gerry injects himself with a	01:48:10

⁸⁸ All timings are for the Extended Action Cut also known as the Unrated Version, as opposed to the Theatrical Version.

	potentially fatal virus to test his theory (hinted at by the mentor Dr. Fassbach) that zombies don't attack those who are already dying. Then he waits to see what effect the virus has on him, and on the zombie's reaction to him.	
Reward (Seizing the Sword)	Gerry presses the button to open the door of the refrigeration room containing the virus samples, and the zombie lurking outside doesn't rush in to attack him and seemingly can't see him. The W.H.O. Doctors watching on security video know the meaning of this: Gerry has discovered an invisibility potion. The world is saved.	01:50:06
The Road Back	Gerry walks in triumph back to safety, through dozens of onrushing zombies - after stopping for a cold drink.	01:50:48
Resurrection	Gerry is injected with an antidote to the virus he risked putting in his system, in order to save the world.	01:52:08
Return with the Elixir	In voiceover, over shots of him being reunited with Karin and his daughters, Gerry speaks of the chance his discovery has given to the world. And intercut news reports tell us that "The World Health Organisation has created a vaccine that works as a kind of camouflage, making people who receive it invisible to the infected."	01:53:45

All the rewrites worked - at least in terms of box-office.

As a novel, World War Z had been a success. It sold over a million copies. But it didn't make anything like as much money as the film. For the movie, the budget was \$190,000,000. The Cumulative Worldwide Gross was \$540,007,876 (as of 15 Oct 2013). At the time, what was trailed as Brad Pitt's folly⁸⁹ turned into the biggest non-sequel movie since Avatar. A follow-up was planned, and put into pre-production, but seems to have finally failed. The franchise is dead, but there's no reason it can't rise again as undead.

We've now seen what happens when the wisdom of the screenwriting gurus (what makes a good story) is applied to the basic, resistant material of World War Z.

The conclusion seems obvious.

What the book does, the film undoes. What the book says, the movie unsays. In fact, the movie has an opposite meaning to the book. We're saving our own lives, says the book. A Hero - I'm holding out for a Hero, says the film.

⁸⁹ His Waterworld, as Max Brooks joked at San Diego Comic-Con 2013 - referencing Kevin Costner's folly.

Not only that, the Hero of the film is male, white, Western, heterosexual, married, able-bodied, affluent, liberal, sensitive, good teeth and great hair. He could take more care of his skin, but meh.

By complete contrast, the many characters in the polyvocal book are spread over almost the entire world. Here are just five of their names and locations: Jurgen Warmbrunn, Tel Aviv, Israel; Hyungchol Choi, The Demilitarized Zone: South Korea; T. Sean Collins, Bridgetown, Barbados; Ajay Shah, Alang, India; Nury Televaldi, Lhasa, Tibet.

The novel is about a scattered cast of diverse people pursuing roughly the same goal - finding a way to preserve human life on planet earth.

The film is about a lone Hero pursuing his own goal - finding a way to save his nuclear family.

For mainstream genre fiction, World War Z is well-written, radical and successful. It's pretty close to a masterpiece. For mainstream Hollywood action movie, World War Z is fairly standard issue. It goes big on horror tropes but lacks any sense of humour. It isn't The Bourne Identity; it isn't Mad Max: Fury Road.

WORLD WAR Z BOOK AND MOVIE DIFFERENCES

	BOOK	MOVIE
Acceleration	Ten years	Several days
	Slow zombies who can't run or climb	Fast zombies who can sprint and climb
	Several minutes infection time	8-12 second infection time
	Narration is retrospective, after the battle is won	Narration (voiceover) is only retrospective at the end
Centralization	The narrator doesn't play any part in the action	The narrator is central to almost all the action
	No Hero, in fact and only a nameless and faceless central character - therefore the fightback against the pandemic is a communal, global effort	Brad Pitt, a white, male, cisnormal, physically aggressive, weapon-employing, character-arcing Hero
	A story of global survival, leaving a completely ravaged world	A tale of family survival, completely intact, in fact augmented, leaving a severely damaged world
	Goes to around forty-five places	Goes to six places: NYC, boat, Korea, Israel, Wales, Nova Scotia
Deradicalisation	Societal corruption is anatomized, i.e., the armed forces are corrupt and/or incompetent; capitalists profiteer from the outbreak	The authorities and military (especially the navy) are brave and brilliantly efficient and entirely uncorrupt; there's no sense of a business world, and how it reacts
Meaning	The book is 'about' the difference in approach to a similar problem taken by various countries and cultures, these being occasionally stereotypical (as seen from an American point of view)	Like most blockbusters, the movie is ultimately 'about' reconstituting (or constituting anew) the nuclear family - mom, dad, plus kid or kids.
	A tale of human venality	A tale of human courage

I doubt Max Brooks has ever been able to express his true feelings about what was done to his story⁹⁰. I've only had one property optioned by Hollywood (the novel Corpsing), but my contract included several clauses that essentially committed me to never ever dissing anything to do with the movie, however trash it turned out to be. On pain of losing all revenue perpetually.

Bizarrely, I also promised not to smoke on the premises of the film company.

According to Wikipedia, 'In a 2012 interview, [Max] Brooks stated the film now had nothing in common with the novel other than the title.'⁹¹ The video is unavailable.

Brooks is not entirely correct. The character of Jurgen Warmbrunn, the Mossad agent who masterminds the defence of Israel, makes it through from book to movie - and is there in every version of the script I've read. This suggests to me that there was something in what he said that the producers, and perhaps Brad Pitt himself, believed was key to the movie. This is doubly true because whilst almost all the rest of the

⁹⁰ There's video of him giving a full answer at San Diego Comic-Con 2013. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WXFdO3DwRLY>, last accessed 28 March 2020, 10:48. He's very positive about the movie here, during the period just after the release.

⁹¹ Wikipedia entry on World War Z, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_War_Z, last accessed 7 April 2020, 10:41.

dialogue in the movie is different, a few lines of Warmbrunn's dialogue make it all the way through - although the movie version is more a paraphrase:

Book:

In October of 1973, when the Arab sneak attack almost drove us into the Mediterranean, we had all the intelligence in front of us, all the warning signs, and we had simply "dropped the ball"... Well, after almost allowing the Arabs to finish what Hitler started, we realized that not only was that mirror image necessary, but it must forever be our national policy. From 1973 onward, if nine intelligence analysts came to the same conclusion, it was the duty of the tenth to agree. No matter how unlikely or far-fetched a possibility might be, one must always dig deeper⁹².

Movie:

Jurgen Warbrunn:

In the '30s, Jews refused to believe
they could be sent
to concentration camps.

⁹² World War Z, p 34.

In '72, we refused to fathom
we'd be massacred in the Olympics.

In the month before October 1973,
we saw Arab troop movements,
and we unanimously agreed
they didn't pose a threat.

Well, a month later, the Arab attack
almost drove us into the sea.

So we decided to make a change.

Lane:

A change?

Jurgen Warbrunn: The Tenth Man.

If nine of us
look at the same information
and arrive at the exact same conclusion,
it's the duty of the tenth man
to disagree.

No matter how improbable it may seem,
the tenth man has to start digging
on the assumption
that the other nine are wrong.

This, put plainly, is an argument against groupthink. It says
that, in order to survive, humans must force themselves to
disagree even when unanimity has already been achieved.

Within the world of screenwriting, the outlier is always going to be right. Imagine trying to write a movie in which your Hero disagreed with nine ordinary men, and was proven to be completely wrong? How would that be anything like a good story? Reverse the situation and you have Twelve Angry Men or To Kill a Mockingbird or Erin Brockovitch.

As I said in the beginning, one of the consequences of The Hero's Journey is that the community is always portrayed as incapable of saving itself. Groups are de facto weak, fractured, dithering and doomed. What they need is leadership. What they require is a Hero to save them.

Within the movie of World War Z, we see this anti-communal ideology dramatized a number of times. The first group shown trying to decide on the right action is on board the USS Harry Truman. It's a bunch of scientists arguing about the cause of the outbreak. Only when the brilliant virologist Dr. Fassbach stands up and takes over (by invoking Spanish flu) does the discussion get anywhere. Fassbach is their tenth man. But ffs, as soon as he finishes speaking, they go back to their confusion. They can't even agree to call them zombies - although everyone in the theater is going 'Duh, it's a *zombie* movie, guys.'

We are invited to contrast this total inability to act together, efficiently and satisfyingly, with the beat that immediately follows - when Naval Commander Mullenaro comes on deck. Everyone in the command centre snaps to attention in a beautifully choreographed wave. A moment before, they'd been attending to scattered and frantic tasks; before the 'At ease', there's a short period of suspension - during it, nothing is achieved but the fact that this 'group' has shown it can unify at the moment authority presents itself is of great significance. As the Commander then says:

Take a look around here, Mr Lane. Each and every one of these people are [sic] here because they serve a purpose. There's no room here for non-essential personnel.

Are there any moments at all in the film when a group collectively self-organises in a successful way? Yes, but it's shown to be disastrous.

In Israel, by the Salvation Gate, those Arabs and Jews recently arrived in the wall-protected safe space of Jerusalem celebrate by singing together. A Muslim girl takes the microphone and solos through a feedback-y loudspeaker system. It's a joyous moment of cross-religious harmony - of genuine human community. And, of course, within the values of the movie, it's transcendently stupid (as Heroic Gerry is first to

realise) because loud noise attracts zombies. Outside the towering walls, in another moment of successful collective self-organisation, the zombies start to form 'Zombie Pyramids', clambering over one another in order to swarm upwards towards their prey.

Groups, by being leaderless, do dumb shit and bring about their own doom; Jerusalem falls.

Throughout the film, Gerry the Hero is seen as being almost unflinchingly in the right. There's only one moment where he's forced to backtrack, morally.

Towards the beginning of the third act, after he's arrived at the research facility in Wales, Gerry is in tense conversation with a group of characters all known only as 'W.H.O. Doctor'. (That one of the W.H.O Doctors (Peter Capaldi) was announced as the new 'Doctor Who' six weeks after the release of the movie is, I guess, an unintentional but delightful irony.)

It has become clear that Gerry's family have been taken off the safety of the naval ship and put in a refugee camp.

Trying to be sympathetic, the W.H.O. Doctor (this one played by Pierfrancesco Favino) says, 'I understand how you feel.'

There's a little sparring, back and forth, and then Gerry asks, 'Do you have a family?'

'No,' says the W.H.O. Doctor.

Gerry tersely says, 'No? Then you couldn't possibly understand, could you?'

Calmly, the W.H.O. Doctor comes back with, 'I lost my son and wife in Rome. Rather, I lost my son to - something that had once been my wife. Oh, we have all lost someone, Mr Lane. In your case there is hope, at least.'

Gerry's solitary quest to save his family is first completely undermined, as selfish, ('we have all lost') and then completely reinstated, as worthy ('there is hope').

Gerry looks down, looks weary. He acknowledges he was wrong. 'I'm sorry,' he says.

It is only by an effort of imagination - imagining Gerry off-screen, before the first moments we see of him, that we can connect him to the human community, and make him seem anything other than independent of it.

Gerry is tied to his family - the woman he has married and the children he has had with her. However, he is completely disconnected from his or her parents and grandparents. The viewer can only assume, because of his apparent lack of concern, that they are either already dead, or they live in urban conurbations that Gerry knows will rapidly fall to the zombies - and so are as good as dead.

In order to exist as an independent Hero, Lane needs to be seen as without any kind of origin or support system - without anything that would hint at his dependency. It seems bizarre to have to state that Lane may have become self-reliant, but that he only exists as a result of multiple interdependences with multiple other, non-Heroic people.

Even if he never met the father who helped conceive him, Gerry had a mother, who carried him for nine months - deciding not to have an abortion, and taking enough care of herself to complete a successful pregnancy. And even if Gerry was taken into care a day or two after being born, the jobs of nurturing that are associated with a mother (breast- and bottlefeeding, nappy changing, bathing, comforting) were done to a minimum by nurses or carers. Someone taught Gerry to talk, to write, to do mathematics; later on, someone taught him cookery, basic field medicine, how to drive and how to fly a plane. As he was growing up, Gerry lived in buildings that others had built,

walked on sidewalks others put down, he drove on tarmac others laid. These sidewalks and highways were paid for by taxes, taken from all those who contributed to the public purse. Every mouthful of food that kept Gerry alive was planted, grown, harvested or raised, and slaughtered or synthesized and packaged by others.

In other words, there is no such thing as a lone Hero. The boy raised by wolves depended on the wolves. Without our complex interdependence, we would all be dead. The COVID-19 pandemic has made this unavoidably obvious.

The same goes for ideas. A man's very idea of lone Heroism, un beholden to weaker others, is one he has learned from other men. The ideology of rugged individualism has a rich collective heritage.

But to bring any of this onscreen would be to undermine Lane's centrality. The movie begins by showing him cooking pancakes for his daughters' breakfast. It would be a completely different movie were it to start with Lane sitting at the table, waiting for either his wife or his daughters to cook pancakes for him. Although this scene establishes Lane as a new man, or house husband, and therefore conventionally feminized, it also, from the start, shows him as a provider of life's basics, not a recipient.

To find a movie (two movies) that shows a successful collective effort to save the world, we have to look elsewhere.

THE AVENGERS

AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR

2018

and

AVENGERS: ENDGAME

2019

Unlikely as it may seem, the two recent Avengers films give signs of possible hope. (I'm going to refer to them as The Snap films, after Thanos's fingersnap that kills exactly half of all existing beings.)

But do I really need to summarize what happens in these films? - surely you've seen them already? They are among the highest grossing movies of all time (Endgame at number 1 and Infinity War at number 5, as far as I can tell).

More importantly, they are the culmination (though not the conclusion) of the Marvel Cinematic Universe films - which began with Iron Man in 2008, and so far number 23.

These interconnecting movies are based on the "crossovers" that comics have been doing since the 1960s. The idea is, if you can get a Batman fan to buy a Superman comic, by putting Batman in it - you can sell more comics.

I was involved, belatedly, in the writing of one crossover when I worked on Free Country: A Tale of the Children's Crusade for Vertigo Comics (part of DC) in 2014. This was a stitching together of various plotlines that (between 1993 and 1994) had appeared in Children's Crusade, Black Orchid Annual, Animal Man Annual, Doom Patrol Annual, Arcana Annual and (most exciting for me) Swamp Thing Annual. Neil Gaiman had written the bookending Children's Crusade sections - which were the strongest part, and the reason for the reissue. I wrote about fifty new pages to bring everything together. It's now part of the Neil Gaiman corpus, and a far-off addendum to the Sandman series (because it includes the Dead Boy Detectives, plus a brief cameo by Death).

What is important about the Snap movies is that the overall story has become so extended, so distended, that it has - by default - turned into that of a community rather than of an individual Hero.

Also, almost every Hero within the Snap movies is - at some point - saved by another Hero; and if they weren't saved, they wouldn't have been able to make their later contribution.

Let's take just one example. If the Guardians of the Galaxy hadn't saved Thor from the vacuum of space in Act I of Infinity War, he couldn't possibly have arrived in Wakanda to save just about everyone (Hulk, Captain America, Black Panther, Falcon, Black Widow, Okoye and others) from the space dogs in Act III.

Just as all of us everyday humans owe our continued existence to other everyday humans, so each Superhero owes their continued existence to other Superheroes.

And this is only within the compass of Infinity War; within the whole of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, each Superhero has been saved from non-existence (or brought back from it) multiple times by multiple other Superheroes.

The only Hero not saved by another Hero during the course of Infinity War is Gamora. This is because Gamora is killed by her adoptive father Thanos (in exchange for the Soul Stone). If another Superhero had been around at that point, say Doctor Strange, for an epic battle with Thanos, a stand-off and an interdimensional escape, then Gamora wouldn't have died.

(Because Superheroes rarely die, there are usually battles,
stand-offs and escapes.)

WHO SAVES WHO IN AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR

SUPERHERO	SAVED BY
HULK/BRUCE BANNER	HEIMDALL, IRON MAN, THOR
IRON MAN/TONY STARK	SPIDER-MAN, WONG, SPIDER-MAN AGAIN, DOCTOR STRANGE
DOCTOR STRANGE	SPIDER-MAN, IRON MAN, CLOAK OF LEVITATION, SPIDER-MAN AGAIN
SPIDER-MAN	IRON MAN
THOR	THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY (STAR-LORD & GOMORA & DRAX THE DESTROYER & MANTIS & ROCKET RACCOON & GROOT)
VISION	SCARLET WITCH, THE AVENGERS (CAPTAIN AMERICA & FALCON & BLACK WIDOW), BRUCE BANNER, CAPTAIN AMERICA AGAIN
SCARLET WITCH	THE AVENGERS (CAPTAIN AMERICA & FALCON & BLACK WIDOW), BLACK WIDOW & OKOYE
CAPTAIN AMERICA	FALCON, THOR, VISION
BLACK WIDOW	FALCON, SCARLET WITCH, SCARLET WITCH AGAIN
DRAX	MANTIS, SPIDER-MAN
NEBULA	GARMORA
BLACK PANTHER	THOR
FALCON	THOR
MANTIS	SPIDER-MAN, SPIDER-MAN AGAIN
OKOYE	SCARLET WITCH
STAR-LORD	SPIDER-MAN
GAMORA	-
CLOAK OF LEVITATION	-

The Marvel Cinematic Universe may have started as a series of films about individual Heroes on individual journeys. But in the end, it has become so big, so interconnected, that it has turned into a story about a diverse community coming together to make good, quick decisions, to show restraint, and ultimately to save itself⁹³.

⁹³ Given the complexity of the multiple stories involved, and the number of screen hours it takes to tell them, The Marvel Cinematic Universe has become something like a very big television series. For various reasons, I've decided not to cover TV. This is mainly because I think that although screenwriting gurus have a huge influence on writing for TV, their

This 'mature' moral isn't so far from Karl Marx's slogan:

From each according to their ability, to each according to their needs⁹⁴.

Within any individual film leading up to the Snap films, any individual Superhero can be seen as following the Hero's Journey. But, with the whole thing brought together, they can only be viewed as part of a much larger, a universal story in which they are, at most, one of many main characters.

It is Thanos himself, not the protagonist but the antagonist, who is granted the Hero's Journey narrative within Avengers: Infinity War. The writers mentioned this in an interview with BuzzFeed News.

"This is the hero's journey for Thanos," said Stephen McFeely. "By the end of the hero's journey, our main

influence is most obvious on the big screen. And it's from movies, rather than novelistically complex TV series on HBO and Netflix, that most people derive their idea of what it is to be a success, to be a worthwhile person. I think there's a basic difference between TV and cinema. Cinema is about the deep glamour of life; TV is about the essential crapness of the world. Where each goes wrong is when they try to cross over and do the other's job.

⁹⁴ Critique of the Gotha Program, 1875.

character, our protagonist – at least, in this case – gets what he wants⁹⁵.”

They elaborated even further elsewhere:

“No, the idea was to reinforce that this was a kind of reverse hero’s journey and we wanted to tag that it’s not a cliffhanger,” [McFeely] said. “Everything ended, and in fact it ended really well for the guy who was driving the story [Thanos].”

[Christopher] Markus agreed. He said that Thanos is the hero of his story. And he wins. “The hero won, and he got to retire to his shack – just like every cop who’s one week away from retirement [in a movie] and usually gets killed,” he said. “Thanos made it all the way. He got his little fishing post⁹⁶.”

To say that the Hero gets what he wants in the Campbell Hero’s journey is a bit dumb. Campbell’s point is exactly that the

⁹⁵ “Your Burning Questions About “Avengers: Infinity War,” Answered, by Adam B. Vary, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adambvary/avengers-infinity-war-ending-explained-spoilers#.vr4qw8V8E> last accessed 17 February 2020, 11:00.

⁹⁶ <https://www.deseret.com/entertainment/2019/8/11/20803493/avengers-endgame-writers-reveal-something-that-may-change-how-you-watch-infinity-war>, last accessed 17 February 2020, 11:05.

Hero, in their apotheosis, no longer has an integral self to want anything.

However, the writers did what they did - for whatever reason they did it. And they seem to know it. That, I think, is what they mean by 'mature' in the next bit of the BuzzFeed interview:

"Put it this way," [Stephen McFeely] said. "I think [Infinity War] is a fairly mature movie for a blockbuster. It's got a lot of fun in it, obviously, but boy, it gets very mature. The second one is also mature⁹⁷."

I would decode this as meaning: A mature message is that you, the viewer, should not model yourself on the lone Heroes of the previous movies. You should grow up and realise that without a collective response to a collective threat, you're doomed.

Even if that means you have to put up with the all-round world-class dickery of Captain America.

⁹⁷ <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/adambvary/avengers-infinity-war-ending-explained-spoilers#.vr4qw8V8E>, last accessed 17 February 2020, 11:00.

THE THOUSAND FACES WITHOUT A HERO

The Past

Is it possible any longer to tell a good story that isn't the monomyth?

I think there's a clue in Robert McKee's stern welcome to his website:

We need true satires and tragedies, dramas and comedies that shine a clean light into the dingy corners of the human psyche and society.⁹⁸

McKee is suggesting a return from Blake Snyder's typology of film types to something more like the Greek genres. These, however, weren't vaguely 'dramas'. They were Satyr Plays (not satires as we would recognise them), Tragedies and Comedies.

All of these, I think, could be good stories that didn't just reinforce a Heroic ideology. They all exist in different relations to it.

⁹⁸ <https://mckeestory.com/>, last accessed 13 Mar 2020, 09:00

The Satyr Play upends the values of the Heroic narrative. Fat, horny creatures play out the same scenes as, say, Odysseus. But they do so for not for virtuous but for venal purposes. They are motivated by thirst and lust rather than a quest for justice.

In a Tragedy, the consequences of Heroism pursued without thought for the collective good are dramatized. Almost always the Tragic Hero brings devastation to the community and land that has nurtured and elevated them.

Within Greek Tragedies, it is always left to the chorus (a form of collective expression that we have lost) to point the moral. This tends to be something like:

Envy not the very great
or you'll meet their awful fate

Humility is the ultimate lesson. Here is the final chorus of Sophocles' "Antigone":

Wisdom is by far the greatest part of joy,
and reverence toward the gods must be safeguarded.
The mighty words of the proud are paid in full
with mighty blows of fate, and at long last

those blows will teach us wisdom⁹⁹.

And here is the end of Sophocles' "Oedipus the King":

People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus.
He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance,
he rose to power, a man beyond all power.
Who could behold his greatness without envy?
Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him.
Now as we keep our watch and wait the final day,
count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last¹⁰⁰.

This, as you'd expect, is an even more 'mature' message than Avengers.

But it's annoying, in books like this, to read a conclusion that is backwards-looking. It's also embarrassing to see conclusions that vest their hopes in something modish. Nothing ages worse than prophecy.

I've been present for one of the American writer Robert Coover's presentations on hyperfiction, or computer writing. What he showed the audience, on a small big screen, looked

⁹⁹ 'Antigone', translated by Robert Fagles, in Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, Penguin Classics, 1984, p 128.

¹⁰⁰ Sophocles, The Three Theban Plays, Penguin Classics, 1984, p 251.

like an embarrassing early iteration of DOOM, when - in five minutes - he could have logged on to his laptop and played World of Warcraft. He was looking in the wrong place, and the audience had already moved on.

I won't repeat his error. It would be easy, but pointless, to say, "I think it's possible to discern more networked genres emerging." I am not the person to know how technology will inhibit or allow different kinds of good story.

The challenge we face is, to make the stories we tell - using any means - as emotionally satisfying to the viewer or reader as The Hero's Journey is.

The audience isn't (unless they're Australian) going to take to parables of Tall Poppy Syndrome, or to being incessantly reminded (as the Japanese say) that, "The nail that sticks out gets hammered down."

An individual human face (particularly a beautiful one suffering great emotion) makes more impact better on the big screen than a crowd of thousands in which no individual can be picked out. Almost no film has followed the doings of a vast crowd, although some have depended on their implied presence throughout. (The Lord of the Rings trilogy, for example.)

The Future

It would be hypocritical of me to present myself as a Hero, come back with a cure for the sick community of writers. There's no monoanswer to the monomyth.

But you might rightly ask where can you see my ideas in my writing?

Well, in a novel called Patience. In Patience, I have tried to write a story that is a good story but a completely different kind of good story to The Hero's Journey. How it undermines the singleness of the Hero is by making it very clear, at the Crisis and Climax of the book, that whatever is achieved is done so not by one person but by three. The main character, and also narrator, is called Elliott. He is thirteen years-old, has cerebral palsy, and is only able to move the fingers on one hand. Elliott lives in a Catholic Children's Home. But he wants to go outside. He wants freedom. In order to achieve this, he has to team up with two other children - Lise, a long-term inmate, and Jim, a new arrival. Their escape can only take place by each using the other as a kind of prosthesis.

I am not offering Patience as a single solution, just as the best I've managed to do so far. Instead, I am going to pluralize.

Here are seven different suggestions about how we can collectively tell a story to save the world.

1. **Political action.** You're not going to change your thinking about storytelling without changing yourself. And taking part in collective action, whether successful or not, is the best way to undermine your ideas of individual Heroism. There are many people in many organisations working for climate justice. You should find what is closest to you. For writers, there is Writers Rebel, part of Extinction Rebellion. That, as well as the Green Party, is the organisation I have joined. Don't just change the story of stories, change the story of the world. Seek out the writer Jay Griffith's defence statement, from her trial in January 2020. It will get you.

2. **Action on the self.** One of the reasons writers are able to continue re-telling the monomyth is that they are convinced, on some deep level, of the priority of individualism - of their own individuality. A way to subvert this is through practices that undermine the sense of definite individual self. Christianity only

reinforces this form of selfishness, with its message of resurrection in the individual flesh, and individual salvation of the unique soul. Buddhism and other religions that dissolve the sense of selfhood, through zazen or other forms of meditation, are a better answer. Ironically, this is where Campbell's Hero's Journey ended up - with at-one-ment.

3. **Action as a moviegoer.** An easy criticism of anti-Heroic arguments would be that asking Hollywood blockbusters to do without Heroism is like asking amusement park rides to do without acceleration. As providers of guaranteed fun, these movies are going to mash the obvious buttons - and mash them hard. But that doesn't mean everyone has to turn out to watch and - in between yawns - gasp. Nothing will change storytelling in Hollywood like some big flops. It was Star Wars that supercharged the Hero's Journey. Box Office will dictate what's made in future. A movie like Parasite could start to nudge things.

4. **Watch like a loser.** One of the most telling critiques of Heroism I know is Malcolm Bull's Anti-Nietzsche. He attempts to undermine the seductiveness of Nietzsche's arguments (which back up a lot of neoliberal and alt-right thinking) by suggesting we 'read as a loser'. This can easily carry over into watching movies as a loser. Rather than thinking how great it is that the Hero wins the day, think about the massive collateral damage

they've inflicted. Greek Choruses watch as losers. Watch critically, and think about how you could tell a better story.

5. **Don't be lazy.** The lazy way to make a scene work is to increase the conflict - to default to escalation. This is corrosive of any sense of humans just being able to get on with stuff, in couples, groups and communities. There's enough external conflict, enough challenges to think through, without always showing bickering, disagreement, argument and violence. At points, for realism, this might be necessary. But don't be lazy. All you're doing is ratifying despair.

6. **Don't be evil.** The simplest way to success is to do something someone else is already doing, but to do it cheaper. With movies, the equivalent is to give the viewer more of the same stuff within the same period of time. More action, more volume, more violence. Very few beginning screenwriters, who doubt their own talent, aim for more laughs, more depth or more truth. If you play the existing game, rather than attempt to change it, you're more likely to win by the existing rules. If you write a script that flatters rich people who live in L.A. and drive big cars, your script will stand more chance of being made than if it suggests the movie industry is a corrupting influence on American society, and that big cars must go. Laziness means taking the first solution

offered by your screenwriting guru of choice. Evil means trying to play the market whilst being cynical about the public's morality and intelligence.

7. **Write without gurus.** This book has been about screenplay gurus, and their influence on the idea of what is a good story. But there are many forms of story that are fairly immune to the gurus' influence. The contemporary short story would be one example. New approaches to cinema can emerge from these different forms. In fact, I would say that the formal tendency of cinema isn't towards strong narratives but towards strong images, viewed in succession. These successions have become extremely conservative. From your own storytelling background, make something radical.

Now tell me your suggestions.

Conclusion

This book has attempted to go back and see how the monomyth colonized the world of storytelling.

Now, writers and storytellers of all sorts have to think bigger - beyond the ideology of individualism.

I believe these necessary stories, these bigger stories, are already being told - even by those writers brought up devotedly following the screenwriting gurus¹⁰¹.

There is no one story, there are a thousand stories - and they are all interconnected. We see this every day.

I'd like you to ask yourself a few questions relating to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. There have already been numerous Hollywood takes on this story¹⁰². It's commonplace to say it feels as if we're living in a dystopia. Thousands of people are sitting at home watching Contagion (2011), after seeing Kate Winslet doing her video on the importance of hand-washing.

Stop for a few seconds. Think of what's happening at the moment. Think of how massive and significant it feels. Think of how socially nuanced it is - and how profoundly political. Think of the difference.

¹⁰¹ Among other, more recent movies, Rogue One stands out as a clear attempt to show a different kind of heroism. The mainstream reaction to it revealed a dawning realisation that the closest thing we have to 'the Empire' is the U.S.A. If so, who does that make the 'Rebel Alliance'?

¹⁰² "Exposure therapy: why we're obsessed with watching virus movies", Charles Bramesco, Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2020/mar/16/coronavirus-movies-why-are-we-obsessed-contagion-films>, last accessed 6 April 2020, 11:53.

My question is this: Will the way the pandemic is spreading and being coped with be truly or adequately told by another Hollywood movie that feeds it through the Hero's Journey? Will giving a pretty face, or eight or nine faces, to some spurious war-metaphoric "fightback" against the "onslaught" do anything other than utterly falsify what is a collective global response - a response that involves countless individual actions of restraint, generosity, creativity and love?

Aren't the most 'Heroic' responses to the pandemic exactly the most dangerous, wrongheaded and selfish? From panic buying and hoarding to Donald Trump's particularly American brand of magical thinking, from billionaires who could make a vast financial difference self-isolating on private islands to egotistical individuals¹⁰³ thinking social distancing is for everyone but them. And aren't the most genuinely brave but also helpful and practical responses those of anonymous cleaners, drivers, carers and a thousand others who are doing the work of keeping people safe and alive?

In this situation, just as before, there is no Hero with a Thousand Faces, instead there are a Thousand Faces without a Hero - there are a Million Faces - there are Seven and a Half Billion Faces - without a Hero.

¹⁰³ Or as twitter had it, whilst trending their stupidity, #selfishpricks.

And that is what will save us.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

MANUALS

Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Abacus, 1975

Syd Field, Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting, Dell Trade Paperback, 1994

Robert McKee, Story: Substance, Structure, Style, and the Principles of Storytelling, Methuen, 1998

Blake Snyder, Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting That You'll Ever Need, Michael Wiese Productions, 2005

Christopher Vogler, The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters, First Edition, Michael Wiese Productions, 1992

Christopher Vogler, The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Storytellers and Screenwriters, Second Revised and Expanded Edition, Pan, 1999

John Yorke, Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them, Penguin Books, 2015

ALTERNATIVE MANUALS

Pilar Alessandra, The Coffee Break Screenwriter: Writing Your Script Ten Minutes at a Time, Michael Wiese Productions, 2011

Linda Aronson, The 21st Century Screenplay: A Comprehensive Guide to Writing Tomorrow's Films, Allen & Unwin, 2010

Jill Chamberlain, The Nutshell Technique, University of Texas Press, 2016

Kim Hudson, The Virgin's Promise: Writing Stories of Feminine Creative, Spiritual and Sexual Awakening, Michael Wiese Productions, 2010

Lee Zahavi Jessup, Getting it Write: An Insider's Guide to a Screenwriting Career, Michael Wiese Productions, 2014

Dara Marks, Inside Story: The Power of the Transformational Arc: The Secret to Crafting Extraordinary Screenplays, Three Mountain Press, 2017

John Truby, The Anatomy of Story: 22 Steps to Becoming a Master Storyteller, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008

EXAMPLE

Max Brooks, World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War, 2006, Crown Publishing Group

IDEAS

Anne Baring and Jules Cashford, The Myth of the Goddess: Evolution of an Image, Arkana, 1991

Malcolm Bull, Anti-Nietzsche, Verso, 2011

Robert Ellwood, The Politics of Myth (Suny Series, Issues in the Study of Religion): A Study of C. G. Jung, Mircea Eliade, and Joseph Campbell, State University of New York Press, 1999

Mark Fisher, Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?, Zero Books, 2009

Judith Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure, Duke University Press, 2011

Will Harris, Mixed-Race Superman: Keanu, Obama, and the Multiracial Experience, 2018

Amitav Ghosh, The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable, University of Chicago Press, 2016

Jay Griffiths, Wild: An Elemental Journey, Hamish Hamilton, 2006

Grant Morrison, Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero, Vintage, 2012

Maureen Murdoch, The Heroine's Journey, Shambhala, 1990

Steven Poole, Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames, Fourth Estate, 2001

Christian Salmon, Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind,
Verso, 2017

Various, This is Not a Drill: An Extinction Rebellion
Handbook, Penguin Random House UK, 2019

Alan Weisman, The World Without Us, Picador, 2007

MOVIES

Charles Fleming, High Concept: Don Simpson and the Hollywood
Culture of Excess, Doubleday, 1998

FILMOGRAPHY

AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR (US/2018)

Written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely

AVENGERS: ENDGAME (US/2019)

Written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely

CITIZEN KANE (US/1941)

Written by Herman J. Mankiewicz and Orson Welles

HIDDEN FIGURES (US/2016)

Written by Allison Schroeder and Theodore Melfi

Based on the book by Margot Lee Shetterly

THE MATRIX (US/1999), THE MATRIX RELOADED (US/2003), THE
MATRIX REVOLUTIONS (US/2003)

Written by Lilly Wachowski and Lana Wachowski (as The
Wachowski Brothers)

WORLD WAR Z (US/2013)

Written by Matthew Michael Carnahan and Drew Goddard and Damon
Lindelof and J. Michael Straczynski

Based on the novel by Max Brooks

ONLINE

Nick Admussen, "Six Proposals for the Reform of Literature in the Age of Climate Change,"

<http://criticalflame.org/six-proposals-for-the-reform-of-literature-in-the-age-of-climate-change/>

Dark Mountain, <https://dark-mountain.net/>

Extinction Rebellion, <https://rebellion.earth/>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank all the members of Writers Rebel, present and past - Monique Roffey, James Miller, Jessica Townsend, Chloe Aridgis, Cath Drake, Sharon Eckman.

I'd also like to thank Daragh Carville, Polly Nash,

And most of all, I'd like to thank my students.

WORDS: 22,000

Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

