



Over 99%  
of all species  
that have ever  
existed have  
gone extinct.

**What if this  
is our time?**

ILLUSTRATION:  
OLIVER BARRETT

Answers to Questions I've Been Asked - Mickey Fisher

**WHY I WROTE THIS:**

Over the past few years I've had requests from people asking if I had time to sit down for coffee so they could pick my brain about my experience creating and selling EXTANT. It's often difficult to make that happen in person so I decided to write down common pieces of advice I received or parts of my story that might help someone else. If you don't know my story...

The short version is: I went to college for Musical Theater at The University of Cincinnati's College Conservatory of Music. While I was there a lot of my professors told me that because I was a character actor it might be awhile before I was right for a lot of the roles I'd be playing, maybe it wouldn't even happen until my forties. So I decided to start writing roles for myself instead. By the time I finished school I wanted to be a writer as much as I wanted to be an actor, and over the next twenty years learned to write plays, movies and television. The day I turned forty years old I sold my first big script, a tv pilot for a new show called EXTANT. One of the Executive Producers was Steven Spielberg, it starred Oscar Winner Halle Berry, and got a straight to series order for thirteen episodes from CBS. I was made an Executive Producer as well and spent two years learning how to make television at the highest level. It was my first job in Hollywood.

A lot of people are going to tell you that it NEVER happens that way. But Goddamnit, it DID happen and to quote David Mamet from THE EDGE, "What one man (or woman) can do, another man (or woman) can do." So I'm passing along what I learned from my personal experience. I know it's not going to happen for everyone the same way and there will be plenty here that other people will disagree with. This is just one guy's overall experience from writing the pilot to selling it. It doesn't cover making the show. I'm offering it to you in the hope that some part of it may be useful. I won't make any assumptions about your experience/expertise, apologies if this seems like basic common sense or stuff you already know. I'll start with...

**HOW I WROTE THE SCRIPT:**

By the time I sat down to really write my first pilot, I realized that I knew very little about writing television. I'd been writing plays for almost twenty years and writing feature films for nearly that long. As much as I LOVED television I didn't know how to write it. So I spent a few months really looking at the structure and rhythm of my favorite shows. I took a number of episodes of FRIDAY NIGHT LIGHTS, BREAKING BAD and DOCTOR WHO and watched them with a remote in one hand and a notebook in the other. I made note of how many acts there were in each one, how many scenes were in an act, and the approximate length of each scene. I did this over and over again, with probably twenty episodes in all over three months.

After that, I wrote a pilot for a show called HOPEWELL that was kind of a practice pilot about a small midwestern town where strange supernatural things began to occur. At the time I was using CELT-X screenwriting software on my iPad and it had a template for a Bible, with sub-categories for Characters, Timelines, etc. I got into filling all of those things out, imagining the world and the longer arcs for the characters. That first one was just ok.

Then I followed one of the most important pieces of writing you can get: write the show or movie you would want to watch. Until then I'd been writing what I knew, keeping my stories small and contained, stuff I could shoot on my own for very little money in my hometown in Ohio. But I realized that the stuff I was writing is not the first thing I would go see if I was looking at a film

festival brochure or deciding what to see on a Friday night. I was a genre guy, have been my whole life. My earliest memory (other than my youngest sister being brought home from the hospital for the first time) is seeing STAR WARS. In fact, I'm listening to THE FORCE AWAKENS soundtrack as I write this. So what came out was a sci-fi thriller about what it means to be human, wrapped up in a story about a female astronaut who goes to space on a solo mission and comes back pregnant to her husband and android child.

I wrote the first draft of the pilot over a month and then did a lot of rewriting after. I was conscious about laying the pipelines for a serialized story and where these characters might go and conscious about the world the story took place in. A lot of the technology was grounded in stuff I was reading on Wired or finding on Reddit, stuff that's going to be available to everyone in the near future. I didn't realize it at the time but grounding it in reality was a big selling point.

After the pilot was finished, I did one of the most important things I could have ever done. On instinct, I wrote a 6 page or so SEASON/SERIES OVERVIEW DOCUMENT for myself, imagining where this story and these characters would go after the pilot. Only my girlfriend and a couple of friends knew anything about the script at this point, so this was strictly for myself, to help me understand more about what I was doing. I was basically taking what was in the Celt-X bible template but putting it in prose form, like a treatment. It wasn't until over a year later that I realized HOW IMPORTANT this step was. In the end, it would prove to be important not just as a presentation document but it also gave me a bedrock of information to mine in future meetings when people asked insightful questions about where it was all going. I hear some writers talk about having a full six or seven season arc planned out for the characters and that all sounds great, but in my experience, you don't need that much. You want to show you have an understanding and know WHY you made the choices that you did. It's ok to not have ALL the answers and you also want to leave room for collaboration.

Because I had fallen in love with these characters, I took it one step further: I wrote a second episode for myself, basically creating my own fan fiction for a show that didn't exist yet. Very few people know about it and we never used it other than mining it for a few ideas later, like Ethan getting into a public school and the problems that arose. But again, it gave me more ammunition for going into later meetings. I've heard writers ask about writing their whole season of scripts on spec and I even thought about that myself once. I can tell you now that going that far would have been a waste of time. Once you start working with other people there are all kinds of new ideas and notes about things that aren't working. For instance, I had originally intended the character eventually named Yasumoto to be a kind of "man who fell to Earth" character, an alien from a different species. If I'd written thirteen episodes based on that being an enormous part of the mythology, I would have had to go back to square one. And that's long before you get to issues with actors, production demands, audiences not responding to characters, etc. I don't think you need to write more than one. Two at the most.

Again, looking back, I lucked into doing this for myself even though no one was asking for it. Once the pilot script started getting me meetings, I was hit with tons of questions about where I thought the story was going. Because I had done all of this work, I had a ton of answers. I think that's a large part of why I got to stick around for as long as I did. I had a vision for what this could be and after living with it and doing this kind of work I was able to articulate it.

**AFTER THE SCRIPT WAS FINISHED:**

I finished the script in late spring of 2012. I believed it was the best thing I'd ever written, and when I read the pilots that were being sold around that time, I thought it could go toe to toe with most of them. My ability was finally matching my ambition and I was writing up to an industry standard. Then PROMETHEUS came out and it featured an immaculate conception with an astronaut in space and I thought, "That's it, any chance of selling this is dead. At least it will be a good sample and maybe help me get a job on staff somewhere." But I didn't know anyone who could really help make that happen so it went on a shelf.

Late fall 2012 I entered a feature contest sponsored by The Writer's Store in Burbank, called The Industry Insider Contest. Long story short, I was a finalist and spent a few months working with one of their mentors to write a feature comedy spec called THE MARGINAL WAY, based on a logline suggested by the awesome Susannah Grant. I treated the contest like it was a studio job, taking notes from my mentor Kay Tuxford and working like crazy to make it as good as it could be. This was around the time I started writing seven days a week. I worked on Christmas and New Year's Day, and a few months later it all paid off.

A few days before Christmas I lost a job that was half of my income. I knew I'd have to get another job after New Year's but I had another option: sell my Can-Am Spyder, which I'd won in another contest. It would be enough to fund a few months of being a full-time writer. So I did it and decided to invest some of the money to get my work out there.

I was living in Orange County at the time and knew less than a handful of people in Hollywood, so I looked for ways to get my scripts into the hands of people who could do something with them. I've been entering contests for years. I'd been a Project Greenlight 2 Semi-Finalist and a Nicholl Fellowship semi-finalist, so I was getting signs and signals here and there that I was at least in the game. One of the contests I'd been reading about on websites like Done Deal was The Tracking B Contest and they had a reputation for helping writers find representation. Their TV Pilot Contest deadline was just coming so I decided to take EXTANT off the shelf and give it a shot.

Spring of 2013, The Blacklist website was picking up steam and starting to open doors for writers from anywhere. This is when they were still only doing features. I paid to upload a few scripts and get reads, hoping to be included in their weekly email blast to agents, managers and producers. The three scripts were wildly different: one was a crime fiction drama, another was an epic animated Christmas adventure and eventually I also uploaded the comedy I wrote for the Industry Insider Contest. A few weeks later, I scored my first ever meeting with a manager who responded to the crime fiction story.

At that meeting, we talked about the script he liked, then he asked me what everyone else asked me. It's the question you will undoubtedly get as well. "What else do you have?" My answer was: "I've got this animated thing, a backstage comedy, a sci-fi spec pilot..." I could see the change in his face and knew the meeting had taken a turn. He said, "It sounds like you don't know who you are, yet." He offered to read the other material and see where he thought I might fit but after I sent those scripts to him I never heard back. I knew I'd made a crucial mistake. It looked like I was trying to be all things because in fact, I WAS trying to be all things. I was trying any and every avenue I could to break in. But once that meeting went downhill I

decided to answer that question a different way. From then on, when someone asked “What else do you have,” I answered with “A lot more of that thing you liked.”

A few weeks later, everything started to break open. On a Friday afternoon I got the call that I WON the Industry Insider Feature Contest. The prize was lunch with the awesome Susannah Grant and a meeting with a manager at a well known company. I was thrilled. Relentless dedication and my investment in myself was paying off. On the next Wednesday I got a call from The Tracking B TV Pilot Contest: I was one of their finalists and I should expect to start getting emails and calls from managers over the next few days. And I did.

The next day, Thursday, my girlfriend Julie and I spent the day at Universal Studios. In between rides I was getting emails and voice messages from managers looking to set up meetings for the following week. Later that afternoon, we took the tram tour and while it was rolling around the backlot I spotted the sign for Amblin Drive. I pointed it out to Julie, yelling “THAT’S WHERE STEVEN SPIELBERG IS!” I had no idea that just a few short weeks later I’d be headed to a meeting there.

Throughout this time, the Tracking B contest organizer was guiding me and helping me strategize, walking me through the surreal process. They couldn’t have been more helpful, generous and encouraging. On Saturday, I got a call from a manager named Brooklyn Weaver, from Energy Entertainment. I recognized his name right away. Back on the Project Greenlight message boards writers brought his name up as he was someone you could email a quick logline to and he would give you a prompt “send” or “pass”. Lately, I’d been reading about him in The Scoggins Report, and knew that at that particular time he was selling feature specs left and right. His assistant at the time, David Binns (now VP of Development) had read the script and I spent an hour talking to him while sitting on the roof of my parking garage so I wouldn’t lose a signal. We ended the conversation by agreeing to let him rep me and the script. He suggested a few quick tweaks, mostly to further highlight some important moments. This mostly amounted to bolding and underlining big beats that might easily be missed by assistants and creative execs burning through their tenth script of the day. It’s a lesson I still take to heart before every script goes out. That night, my script began showing up in the inboxes of people who would go on to change my life. From that day on, Brooklyn became a close creative partner. He’s the only manager I’ve worked with but I feel like the best of them are part military strategist, part dramaturge, part hype man, part psychologist. And lots more parts.

### **BUILDING THE TEAM:**

I started having general meetings with some producers and other people Brooklyn had relationships with, including Jeff Frankel, now my lawyer. In the producers meetings, I started getting the big questions about where the series was going and what I had in the cupboard. By this point, as you know, I had answers to both of those questions. But I also took time to ask an important question of my own, a question I asked of everyone I met. Brooklyn, Jeff, people at the generals. I asked it of the awesome Susannah Grant during my grand prize lunch with her at The Ivy, where we sat two tables away from Gene Simmons. I asked it of another A-list screenwriter and his producer wife who were gracious and kind enough to take me to breakfast and share their story. That question was:

*“What’s the biggest piece of advice you have for someone in my position? I’m right at the goal line, how do I go the rest of the way without dropping the ball?”*

The two most common answers were: *"Trust your intuition,"* and *"Don't spread yourself thin and take on more than you can deliver."* I have relied on those two pieces of advice ever since and still think about them all the time.

This advice served me well throughout the process, starting with signing with an agency. I met with WME and it just felt like the right fit. I felt like they saw me as I saw myself. Look, I'll be honest. There was a part of me that was just happy to be in these rooms and no matter what I was a hundred times farther than I'd ever been. But when I stopped to take a breath and think about what I REALLY WANTED, and to question whether our visions for my career aligned, my intuition told me they were the right fit. It was a scary time and every second I felt like I was on the verge of making a mistake that would undo everything and put me back at square one. For months and months I waited for the other shoe to drop. But every day I tried to remember those two pieces of advice and occasionally remind myself that I'd be the world's biggest asshole if I waited twenty years for this ride and forgot to actually ENJOY IT. So...

I signed with WME and the next day we had our first team meeting via phone call where they suggested we send this to Steven Spielberg and Amblin Television. I tried to play it cool but inside I was SHITTING MYSELF. When we hung up the phone I sat and stared at a blank wall for fifteen minutes, trying to wrap my head around the fact that less than two weeks ago I knew almost nobody in Hollywood. Now there was a chance that the most successful filmmaker of all-time, one of the top four architects of my early imagination (including Lucas, Henson and Zemeckis) would be reading something that came out of my brain.

That moment reinforced something I've always believed: all it takes is one script. If you write the right thing, at the right time, it can open every door for you.

However...

There's also something that keeps me up at night every now and then, which is that if even one person in the chain hadn't responded to the script, then maybe none of this happens and I'm still a guy writing in a corner of Starbucks in Orange County.

Lucky for me, the good folks at Amblin Television dug the script and shortly afterward I found myself sitting in a building I'd passed within twenty yards of on the tram tour.

This meeting (and most general meetings) had a certain structure: They talked about their enjoyment of the script, then asked me where I came from, how I got to this point, etc. I got very good at telling my short, sweet, to the point origin story. Eventually someone asks about how I came up with the idea, what was the inspiration for it, etc. And then we got into the specifics of where I see it going and how. I approached these meetings as an opportunity for collaboration and often phrased things like, "This is certainly open to suggestion, but what I think would be interesting is if by the end of episode six, she wakes up and finds the baby has been taken from her. That would drive the story in a whole new direction: who took it? Why?" I knew WHY I'd made every decision and tried to articulate it as best I could.

When they offered suggestions, I followed the golden "Yes, and" rule of improv. In improv, when someone throws out an idea or a premise, you accept it and build on that idea, rather than negating or shooting it down. A crude example of what not to do is, Guy #1 says, "Sure is a

beautiful day to be out fishing,” and Guy #2 says, “We’re not fishing, Bob, we’re robbing a bank. And it’s nighttime. And it’s raining.” The “Yes, and” version is, Guy #1 says “Sure is a beautiful day to be out fishing,” and Improv Guy #2 says “Sure is. Too bad we forgot the bait.” When other people would bring up suggestions we would riff on the possibilities, or look for cool ways that might payoff in a dramatic beat or connect to the big themes.

By the end of the meeting I loved these guys. It felt like I’d known them forever. Just before I left they said, “We’re going to send this to Steven. We don’t do anything unless he’s passionate about it.” And a week later I got a call from my agents saying, “There’s a filmmaker named Steven Spielberg and he likes your script...” From that moment on and for the next two and a half years, Amblin became my producing partner.

Oh, and by the way - before all these meetings started I asked Brooklyn what I should wear. I’d read enough of the boards at Done Deal to know that writers don’t wear suits, but I wanted to make sure I didn’t underplay it either. His advice: “Jeans, button down shirt, Chuck Taylors or some other tennis shoes. You know what, just Google Kurtzman and Orci and you’ll get the idea.” So I Googled Kurtzman and Orci and sure enough - lots of pullover fleece and button down shirts. (Another pro-tip: because I was making the trip up from Orange County for all these meetings and typically starting with a trip to the Starbucks drive-through, I made it a habit to take a “backup shirt” on a hangar. Only needed it once, but thank God I had it.)

It might be important to note here that at this point I hadn’t signed any contracts with anyone. Even though we used the terminology of “signing” with an agent or manager, it was strictly a verbal commitment. Same with Amblin. There was no talk of money yet and even though I was definitely curious to know when and what I might get paid for the script I didn’t ask. I just had faith that it WOULD happen at some point. (I’ll get into more of the “when” in a bit.) That’s not to say this is how it always goes down. The process of “signing” is different from rep to rep and person to person. The way it happened with me was only one version. For instance, sometimes a rep will “hip-pocket” a writer, which in and of itself can mean different things in different situations. It usually means you’re not a full, official client but they’ll keep you in their “hip-pocket” and if the right situation arises or they come across a contact looking for someone or something like your script, they’ll submit it for you. Or if you have something to submit and ask them they might be willing to do so on your behalf. In any case, whether it’s a handshake and a verbal agreement or on paper, do your due diligence and make sure you’re protecting yourself. Even though I didn’t ask about the money I asked a lot of other questions. But you also want to be careful not to flood interested parties with emails and calls to the point that you scare them away. Be courteous with their time. Trust me, it’s hard to play it cool when you’ve waited years for this kind of thing to happen but it does get easier.

The next step was finding a Showrunner. For anyone who doesn’t know what that is, they’re the person (or persons) in charge of running the day to day creative operations of a television show. Like piloting a 747 or performing brain surgery, it’s not an entry level job. For someone like me who had never even worked as a P.A., clearly I was not going to be handed the keys to tens of millions of dollars of shareholder money. I knew I was going to be partnered with someone who would be in charge, so I decided two things right away: 1.) I was going to be as open and collaborative as possible. Whoever it was, if they were going to eat, sleep and breathe this show, so it had to be as much theirs as it was mine. And 2.) I would treat this experience as primarily a learning experience, soaking up as much as I could from then.

I was heartened to learn recently that it's basically the same advice the WGA gives in its one-day workshop for new creators who have just sold a show. Basically they tell you (I've heard) that this first show isn't really your show. Your show is the next one. For this first one, your job is to help the Showrunner keep his/her job and be as helpful as possible in general. I got very lucky in that I felt this instinctually and followed through. Again, I was just thrilled to be there.

WME was smart about setting me up to meet with people who they thought would be good mentors throughout the process. The folks at Amblin guided the meetings, and it felt a little like an arranged marriage with Amblin being the parents chaperoning the first date. Ideally the prospective Showrunner has fallen in love (or at least is intrigued) by the script and comes in with a unique take and maybe even a few ideas. I treated it the same way I did with Amblin, as an opportunity to play and open up a collaborative dialogue. It was actually FUN to do that because until then these characters and this world had only existed in my brain. I liken it to having the Darth Vader's plastic head case filled with Kenner STAR WARS figures and suddenly having another friend in the sand box to share them with.

It's also a good time to point out that the first round of people I met with were all WME clients. They represent Amblin Television as well, so they were packaging all of these elements in anticipation of taking it to market. There are a lot of reasons for packaging, but obviously the agency doing the packaging makes more money. I had no problem with that for two reasons: 1.) If you sell your show as part of an agency package you don't pay a commission, and 2.) Along with Brooklyn they were guiding me through every early step of this process. They were essentially my first producing partners, building this from the ground up.

Greg Walker had worked on THE X-FILES, SMALLVILLE, WITHOUT A TRACE and a bunch of other shows and he'd recently created and ran VEGAS for CBS. We clicked right away, connecting over the big themes of the show. We had different faith experiences but similar beliefs and temperament and as we talked I felt myself just kind of relaxing for the first time in weeks. By the time the meeting was over I'm sure we all felt he was the right choice - again, trusting the gut. At some point mid-June, Greg was on board and it was time to take the season/series overview document I had written and build on it to create our pitch, with the goal of taking the show to market in early August.

### **WINDING UP FOR THE PITCH:**

For two months Greg and I kicked the overview document back and forth - I'd do a rewrite and he'd sit with me and give me notes as we brainstormed. A lot of the notes were about honing in on the central emotional story of the main characters and the family as a unit. We separated out the mythology from the family so it would be easy to track both things and came up with a few specific beats and scenes to dramatize, things we could dig into in the pitch.

This part of the process was a HUGE lesson for me. Before this, all of my concept and pitch documents were very dry. They were essentially a "this happens, then this happens, then this happens," kind of delivery. Greg's direction was really about getting into HOW these characters feel about these events and how those emotions drive the story in new directions. I realized this had been a huge problem of mine.

Shortly before I started working with Greg, because of interest in the pilot script, I had an opportunity to pitch an original sci-fi thriller to Warner Brothers and also pitch an angle on a



writing assignment for a movie star's prod co. Looking back, I realize that I FAILED miserably in those pitches because I neglected to dig into the emotional state of the characters. I was too preoccupied with concepts, too pleased with myself for clever details and plot twists. I'd neglected the most important part of all: who are these people really and what is their simple emotional journey? Not because I didn't care about that stuff. I just assumed everyone would know that would be in the script! This is one of the most important things I learned from Greg and it affected everything I write these days, even in script. I'm always writing from a character POV - what they see, how they feel, what they're thinking - except for the rare times I need to jump out and let the reader learn something the character can't yet.

Greg and I sent an updated version to Amblin and Steven and they gave us some really important direction as well. They pushed us even more to find the balance between the family story and the science-fiction, between character and genre. They were all hands on in the best way, helping guide us toward a document that would serve as the foundation for our pitch.

### **DELIVERING THE PITCH:**

By late July we were ready to take out the pitch. WME worked the phones (I assume) and set up meetings at nine different places over a week or so: NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox, FX, SyFy, HBO, Showtime and Netflix. Sometimes we did two and once we did three in one day.

A lot of people ask if their spec pilot script should be in a format specifically tailored to each network. We didn't do that. I originally wrote it with act breaks and that's how we sent it out, even to the cable, premium and streaming folks. The assumption was that we would always conform it to the right format for whoever bought it. So I haven't worried about that since then. With the pilot I just finished I wrote it how I felt best served the soul of the story.

We had a phone meeting with Amblin before the first meeting to loosely structure the pitch. The agent would kick it off, then hand it over to Amblin who would talk about how it came to them and what they (and Steven) were excited about, then they would hand it over to Greg. Greg would start the pitch and I was there to take the ball every now and then and run with it, pitching specific scenes or ideas I was excited about. Eventually there was a certain rhythm to the whole thing and by the end we were like an old vaudeville duo.

The first pitch was at NBC and I was as nervous as I've ever been. It was a room FULL of people, like a small army on each side of the conference table. The one thing that made it a easier was knowing that I was there was because people liked the script. But I still had that pit in my stomach... until about sixty seconds into Greg's pitch. All of a sudden I realized that not only is he a phenomenal pitcher and it was easy to see why someone WOULD trust him with tens of millions of dollars of shareholder money, I also realized that it wasn't as mysterious as I thought. (\*although learning to pitch seems to be a long-term process and I'm still not there)

Here are some really smart things Greg did that I will always take with me:

- 1.) In his intro, he took what some people might have perceived as a weakness in the concept, the fact that there were TWO BIG SCI-FI BUY-INS, not just one, and made it a strength. He said that what he loved about the script was that it took two big science-fiction concepts and made it personal and grounded by rooting it in a family. That was its strength. The hope was that this would allay any fear people might have and hold off the instinct to pull it apart.

2.) He started with the big themes and how he personally connected to them. This was essentially a story about what it means to be a human and what this show was positing is that what makes us human is our connection to each other. We're going to explore that in this story about a mother reconnecting with her husband and child on her return from space. We talked about how programming AI paralleled the experience of being a parent. From there he went to our main character and spent a good amount of time talking about where she is emotionally and psychologically at the beginning of the series, giving context, then hitting them with the first big turn in our story, which led us into the plot. We gave a general idea of what the end of the season would look like, which is that her unborn child and her Humanich (android) child were two speeding trains on a collision course that would decide the future of Earth, with her caught in the middle, and that by investing humanity into our AI, we might just save ourselves.

3.) As far as future seasons go, we pitched the idea that this wasn't meant to be a closed ended mystery - it's designed to evolve as the world changes, as the alien presence spreads on Earth and this AI gets more and more powerful. We could tell stories in this world for a long time.

After we pitched there was always a question and answer session and what I learned from this is that you can tell right away the kind of show the buyer really wants to make from the questions they ask. You can see what they are interested in and focused on. One place was really interested in the husband and wife and wanted to dig into the conflict in that relationship. Another was interested in the very heady concepts about how we were evolving as a species. Another was interested in how someone juggles being an astronaut with a secret pregnancy and still keeping up appearances as a mother. Rather than try and conform the pitch to each place, we explored each version by playing the same sort of "what if" game. It was surprising to me that there were a number of versions of this show that I would have watched. Each would have looked and felt very different.

### **POST PITCH:**

We got offers from (I think) six of the nine places. A number of those were straight to series, including CBS. At the time of our pitch, Amblin and CBS were having a huge success on their partnership with UNDER THE DOME and Greg had worked with them for a long time as well. I think all of those were factors in the final decision. In my very first meeting with WME I told them I thought there was a big general audience for this show. Maybe not LOST big but big, and that this could be a cable style show for broadcast. It didn't need the cable toolbox - there wasn't any nudity, no graphic violence or gore. I felt like not only could it play on a broadcast network but that there might also be a NEED for something like it. When we got a straight to series order I got my chance to find out.

A couple of days later we had a team call with Steven Spielberg, Amblin and Greg, confirming that we were going with CBS. While we were waiting for Steven to jump on the line I just started giggling. When the guys asked what was going on I said, "I have to tell you guys something crazy... this is my birthday... I'm turning 40." When Steven hopped on they told him and he wished me happy birthday and remarked that it was quite a way to usher in a new decade. The news hit later that day and we were off and running.

Back to the payment thing, in case anybody was wondering how it might work for them. It was late October before I got my first installment for the pilot script. Luckily I had the money from my

motorcycle sale to live on in the meantime because this whole process was like two full-time jobs. (Side note: I've since bought another.)

So that is a big overview of how everything happened and some of what I learned along the way. At some point soon I may write another that covers the next two years of making the show, but for now I'll leave you with links to some resources I found helpful along the way. I'm also going to post my original overview document so you can see what that looked like. Not a day has gone by since that I haven't felt like the luckiest person in town, even when things were at their hardest. It was never lost on me that this was a rare opportunity. After two seasons the ride ended and I had to buy another ticket (write another pilot) and get back in line to wait for the next chance to get on. Hopefully I'm getting closer every day.

Best of luck to you!

#### SCREENWRITING WEBSITES I LOVE:

GO INTO THE STORY is a blog run by Scott Myers and it's full of information for tv and film writers. There's more information and inspiration than you could digest in five years. I follow Scott on Twitter and visit once or twice a week still to learn something new.

<http://gointothestory.blcklst.com/>

There's a ton of great information and announcements for opportunities on the DONE DEAL PRO BOARDS. It's the first place I found out about Tracking B, The Blacklist and The Industry Insider Contest.

<http://messageboard.donedealpro.com/boards/>

DREW'S SCRIPT-O-RAMA has lots of scripts available to read for inspiration/research:

<http://www.script-o-rama.com/>

#### CONTESTS / OPPORTUNITIES I LOVE:

TRACKING B was the contest that finally helped me break in. They have a feature and a television pilot contest and a reputation for helping winners get repped. They were enormously smart and helpful as I was navigating my way through those early rapids.

<http://www.trackingb.com/>

THE BLACKLIST website allows any tv or film writer the chance to get their material into the right hands, no matter where you live. Franklin Leonard is one of the most stand-up, awesome guys I've met in this town. I dreamed about a sight like this for years and now it's here.

<https://blcklst.com/>

The Writer's Store in Burbank is a one-stop shop for writers, filled with all the books, scripts and software you'll ever need. And they run a really fun contest, which may give YOU the

opportunity to have lunch with someone like the awesome Susannah Grant. Kay, my mentor through the process, has become a friend and she's a stellar writer herself.

<https://www.writersstore.com/>

#### SCREENWRITING/TV WRITING/CREATOR PODCASTS I LISTEN TO EVERY DAY:

Nerdist Writer's Panel

WTF with Marc Maron

Scriptnotes with John August and Craig Mazin

The Treatment with Elvis Mitchell

Blacklist Table Reads (check out my episode THE WINTER KING, co-written with Brian Depetris and starring Jason Ritter, Haley Joel Osment, Mae Whitman and more.)

The Q&A with Jeff Goldsmith

Nerdist

Bafta Screenwriters Lecture Series

The Writers Guild Foundation

#### ORIGINAL OVERVIEW DOCUMENT

Ok, here's my crude, original overview document I made for myself before anyone else was involved. This is like showing ugly baby pictures and clearly, a lot changed *and for good reason*. I included it here so you could see what I did to help me along the way.

ENERGY/Brooklyn Weaver

DRAFT/041913

#### EXTANT - Series Overview

by Mickey Fisher

*(def: still in existence, surviving)*

#### The Show:

At its core, Extant is an hour long sci-fi/drama about an extraordinary family that changes the course of human history. On a greater level, it's about how human beings in the not too distant future adapt to the arrival of alien races and the emergence of powerful, lifelike artificial intelligence. It's an emotionally compelling, highly suspenseful, character driven story that takes place in a grounded sci-fi reality not far removed from our own.

Most popular science fiction franchises take place in an age when human beings live side by side with alien races, or lifelike robots. Star Wars, Star Trek, Battlestar Galactica and Asimov's Rules of Robotics all take place in this kind of age.

***Extant is the origin story of that age.***

Who Is It For:

Adults and teens who love smart, sophisticated, exciting genre movies and tv. Fans of shows like Lost, Battlestar Galactica, and The X-Files.

Season 1 Brief Overview:

Astronaut MOLLY WATTS returns home from a yearlong solo mission aboard a space station and discovers that somehow, miraculously, she became pregnant while she was up there. Meanwhile, her inventor husband JOHN is on the verge of a major breakthrough with his greatest creation, their ten-year-old android son, ETHAN.

These two seemingly unrelated events put this extraordinary family at the epicenter of changes that will alter the course of human history forever, including the arrival of two alien races, the birth of a human/alien hybrid and the rise of "Humanichs", a powerful line of lifelike androids.

Molly's boss at the privatized International Space Exploration Administration (The ISEA) and the primary investor in John's work is KINJI MATSUMO, a mysterious, multi-billionaire tech genius. Matsumo uses the ISEA and a network of intelligence officers for his own purposes, which may or may not be laying the groundwork for the arrival of an alien race, and The Watts family is central to his aims.

The World:

Extant begins approximately 50 years into our own future. The world's governments have relinquished full control of their space programs to a privatized agency called The International Space Exploration Administration, which is funded by a collective of global companies. The primary source of this funding is MATSUMO CORP, and its CEO, Kinji Matsumo, is also the head of the ISEA.

Kinji Matsumo was a wunderkind tech inventor who was thirteen years old when he created VERDISIGN, the "vertically integrated" software and technology that allows people to manage their entire lives via one simple system. Because of its easy use and low cost, Verdisign is ubiquitous the world over, with nearly every human being on Earth relying on it for everything from driving their cars, cooking their meals, answering their phones, communication and entertainment.

It's your iPhone/iPad/Facebook/doorbell/trash compactor/general doctor checkup/and more, all in one. It's your life on a cloud.

It's where we are inevitably headed.

The tech that exists in Extant is a logical extension of what we use now. There won't be "ray guns", but there will be drones and nanotechnology. Tablets are everywhere. And,

although every family won't own one, there may be personal, aerial transport vehicles...or put more simply, flying cars.

### Setting:

The primary setting of Season 1 is a coastal city on the Atlantic side of Florida, near the base of the ISEA. Since it's also the home of Matsumo Corp, this city is also ground zero for technological innovation. Much of the action occurs in the public and private spaces of ISEA and Matsumo Corp, and in the Watts family home, as well as locations around the city.

A secondary setting is the Seraph Space Station, a small, orbiting workspace for experiments and exploration, manned by a solo astronaut.

### Season 1 Story:

The major storylines in Season 1 are concerned with three overall issues: 1.) Who or what is growing in Molly's womb, and what does that mean for earth? 2.) Can humans give our own creations a "soul", or free will rather than subjugating them to our control? And, 3.) How does this family hold itself together when internal and external forces threaten to destroy it?

Molly's unborn child is the primary focus of the overarching conspiracy that includes Matsumo and members of the ISEA. Molly's former colleague and the astronaut who manned the Seraph Station before her, HARMON COULTER, was believed to have committed suicide shortly after his return. In reality, he went into hiding to investigate and uncover a conspiracy that he believes could ultimately lead to an alien invasion orchestrated by the ISEA leader Kinji Matsumo. When Molly returns, he is convinced that the secret she's carrying in her womb has made her a Trojan Horse for the beginning of the end of the human race.

This storyline gives the series most of its action and suspense. As Molly becomes embroiled in the conspiracy, it puts her and her family at risk, and she is forced to make choices that will impact not only them, but the whole world as well. As the season progresses, the consequences of her actions will possibly be that there are two alien species on Earth, and one of them has very bad intentions, and the birth of her human/alien hybrid will be the first of its kind in the universe.

Ethan's development and John's efforts to ensure that he is given free will becomes, ultimately, a battle between "good" and "evil". The question is, do we as humans have a supernatural element that we call a soul? Or, is our soul just the culmination of all of our experiences, our choices and their consequences? If the latter is the case, then it's not unreasonable to think that you could approximate that in an artificial life form.

This storyline explores greater themes of life and death, religion, faith, and how parents relate to and imprint upon their children. It is, ultimately, a battle for a child's soul. The

ultimate consequences of John's efforts and Ethan's actions by the end of the first season will be the forced implementation of something resembling "Asimov's Rules of Robotics." The complications that arise from that are ethical, legal and personal as some parents of Humanichs will follow these new laws and others will not.

The family storyline gives the series its emotional core. It is the force exerting a gravitational pull, bringing everything back to the center of these individuals. This is not a broken family. They're not anti-heroes. John and Molly love each other and want to do right by each other. John genuinely loves Ethan and wants Molly to accept him as her son. Ethan tries to learn how to love the way other children learn. So, it hurts when they have to keep secrets from each other, or when they make sacrifices for the good of the family.

*Even though the series deals with big genre elements like aliens and artificial intelligence, it is all grounded in the story of the family.*

### The Characters:

By and large, the characters that populate Extant are extraordinary individuals. They're the brightest and the best in their fields, which means they're incredibly intelligent but doesn't necessarily mean that they are emotionally well adjusted, good people, or that they make the best choices. They make mistakes and those mistakes have consequences, sometimes tragic.

### MOLLY WATTS

(female, mid to late 30's)

In a sea of television anti-heroes, Molly is a genuinely good person trying to do not only the best thing but the right thing for her family. She's highly intelligent, dedicated, tough, but still possessing a good deal of warmth. Most of the time, Molly is the smartest person in the room. Part of the joy of the series will be seeing her backed into impossible corners and the surprising ways she gets out of them.

Over the course of the first season, she'll be primarily concerned with the question of what is growing inside of her, and what it will mean for the family. Because it is part of her, she'll grow connected to it and it will keep her distant from Ethan. Her distance from Ethan will be the reason he acts out, bigger and bigger, until his acting out leads to tragedy. Her unborn child may be taken from her, leading her on a search to recover it later in the season, and the psychological ramifications of that event.

### JOHN WATTS

(male, mid to late 30's)

Molly's inventor husband. Her intellectual equal, but maybe a little more evolved emotionally. Creative, idealistic, and thoughtful.

John has created a "son" with his own two hands. He is that son's advocate in the world, striving to make him as normal a child as he can possibly be. The more normal Ethan is, the more like a real father and son they are, and the more John's life's work is validated. But, when Ethan's actions cause a tragedy, John's work is deemed a failure. By the end of the season, he'll be called on to do the unthinkable to his greatest creation.

#### ETHAN WATTS

(male, 10)

Their android son. He's not an ordinary android, he's incredibly lifelike. If you didn't access the panel with his power core, you might never know the difference between him and a real boy. He's inquisitive, insightful and very observant. A sponge. But, because he was created, he's behind the curve of knowing right from wrong like other kids who started from birth.

Over the course of the first season, Ethan will struggle with good and bad and right and wrong, just like every child. He'll be subjected to outside influence from other kids at school, and adults who may not have his best interest at heart. But, his primary conflict is with his mother, Molly. The more she pulls away from him, the more he desires contact. The further she is drawn away into her own problems, the more desperate he is to connect with her. This leads to Ethan acting out in ways that put himself and others at risk, and ultimately lead to tragedy. The tragedy leads to an enforced set of protocols for Ethan and all further Humanichs, subjugating them to humans.

#### KINJI MATSUMO

(male, Japanese. Mid to late 40's)

Multi-billionaire, genius tech inventor. CEO of Matsumo Corp and the head of the ISEA. With the help of his aides and intelligence officers, he's the guy moving the pawns around the board for his own, mysterious goals.

Matsumo is like "The Man Who Fell to Earth", ultimately revealed to be an alien life form who has been hiding out on our planet for some time and quietly amassing wealth and power to further his own interests and self-preservation. We won't know until very late in the season if he's on humanity's side or not, and by then it may be too late, anyway.

#### HARMON COULTER

(male, African-American, 40's)

The Seraph Astronaut who went up before Molly. He had his own unexplainable episode while in orbit. When he returned to Earth, his superiors questioned his mental health and it was believed (incorrectly) that he committed suicide. Since then, he's been hiding out and on the run, pulling together threads of a conspiracy that he believes will ultimately end in an alien invasion.

Molly is torn between believing his story and the possibility that he might be mentally ill, even dangerous. She knows he's telling the truth about what happened to him on the



Seraph Station, but she can't be sure about anything else. Harmon is desperate for her to help him uncover this conspiracy, and when she does ally herself with him, his erratic behavior puts her family at risk. Ultimately, if Molly isn't willing to follow his plan regarding her baby, he will have no problem taking matters into his own hands.

#### SAM

(female, 30's)

Molly's best friend, closest confidant, and doctor for the ISEA. Sam has also been romantically involved with the agency's Deputy Director Kern. Her personal relationships with both put her at the center of the larger mysteries between them, and compromise her professional integrity.

#### DIRECTOR SPARKS and DEPUTY DIRECTOR KERN

(male, 30's to 40's)

ISEA directors, and agents of the secret directives issued by Matsumo. Director Sparks is Matsumo's right hand man, and privy to much of his secret knowledge. Deputy Director Kern is new on the job and therefore not given the same clearance. But, as a bright, enterprising young man in the agency, he's always on the lookout to climb the ladder. This ambition could either be a help or a threat to Molly.

#### BRYNN

(female, 12)

A human child, she becomes Ethan's best friend and romantic interest when he begins attending school. Smart, kind to him but a bit manipulative. A bad influence.

#### The Future:

At the end of Season 1, the two main storylines will converge as Molly finally takes custody of the human/alien hybrid child she was carrying and Ethan secretly manages to stay exempt of the control protocols for the Humanichs.

In Season 2 and beyond, we'll explore the dynamic of these two very different siblings, and how their relationships with each other and their parents impact the world at large. We'll learn who was behind Molly's miracle birth and what their intentions are on Earth. And we'll keep exploring how, in the face of these fundamental changes and threats to our existence, we as humans continue to survive. THE END

Without giving away everything in the revised version, here's the first page after working with Greg and Amblin/Steven:

# EXTANT

## *overview*

EXTANT is the story of an extraordinary family at the epicenter of events that alter the course of human history, and their struggle to survive as a unit when those changes threaten to tear them apart. On a larger level, it's about how the human race survives the rise of powerful artificial intelligence and the arrival of extra-terrestrial life.

Each episode will strike a balance between a family drama grounded in everyday, relatable situations (but featuring our extraordinary family) and a sci-fi event series rich with the mythology, twists and tentpole thrills normally associated with the genre.

### THE FAMILY

THE WATTS family is the new nuclear family, living a few decades into our own future. The world they inhabit is a logical evolution of the one we live in now, advanced technologically, but grounded in a familiar reality.

The parents, MOLLY and JOHN, are leading scientists in their respective fields, brilliant and accomplished. She's an astronaut, part of an experimental biology program, rotating yearlong solo shifts aboard a space station. John is an inventor and pioneer in artificial intelligence and lifelike synthetics.

They're the ideal match, loving and committed to each other and passionate about their careers, but an inability to conceive a child has left a void at the center of their relationship. To fill that void, John turned to his life's work, using artificial intelligence and innovations in lifelike synthetics to create for them a child, a ten-year-old android son, ETHAN. For awhile, they wanted (and were able) to have it all. They were happy.

Then Molly went into space.

In her final weeks aboard the Seraph Station, she was impregnated by something not human, and carried the resulting lifeform back to Earth in her womb.

In the pilot, she returns home.

That's the moment everything changes.

Throughout the series, we'll see The Watts family tried and tested by internal and external forces brought about by the secret Molly carries in her womb. We'll see how the challenges they face from the outside world ripple and resonate in the home. Likewise, we'll see how those core family relationships become a source of strength (and sometimes weakness) in surviving those external challenges.

05.25.2016

Mickey Fisher



Less than a year later, this billboard with the luminous Halle Berry started popping up.