Profiles

How a Script Doctor Found His Own Voice

For decades, Scott Frank earned up to three hundred thousand dollars a week rewriting other people's screenplays—from "Saving Private Ryan" to "The Ring." Finally, he decided to stop playing ventriloquist.

By Patrick Radden Keefe

Frank has been hired to touch up nearly sixty Hollywood scripts, perhaps more than any other contemporary screenwriter. "I even rewrote a movie called 'Paycheck,' " he joked.Photograph by Greg Miller for The New Yorker

When Scott Frank was a child, his father, Barry, bought a small Cessna airplane, and on weekends the two of them would fly. This was the mid-nineteen-seventies, in Los Gatos, California. Barry was a Pan Am pilot, and he believed that in some lines of work, as Scott later put it, "fear is your friend." Upon reaching an altitude of two miles, Barry would say, "Scott, if I had a heart attack right now and you had to land the plane, where would you land?" Scott would scan the horizon for a break in the trees, his heart pounding to the rhythm of the ticking clock Barry had imposed: *The plane is going down*. Scott was a sensitive child with a vigorous imagination, and these impromptu exercises in flight instruction were slightly traumatic. He

never learned how to fly a plane himself. Instead, he became one of Hollywood's most prolific and successful screenwriters.

Frank tends to obsess about the beginning of any story: how can he introduce a character with a few deft strokes so that the audience is immediately invested in what happens to her? He has devoted entire months just to cracking an opening scene. But he also excels at endings. In the mid-nineties, he was adapting "Out of Sight," a novel by Elmore Leonard. The book culminates in a mansion outside Detroit; the federal marshal Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez, in the film) shoots the escaped bank robber she loves, Jack Foley (George Clooney), in the leg, then arrests him. But the movie version couldn't end with Clooney returning to prison and Lopez just going home. Frank needed a tiny dose of hope: nothing cheesy, but something in keeping with Leonard's playfully sardonic tone. So he invented a coda. Clooney is shackled in the back of a prison van, with Lopez sitting up front. She can at least escort him back to the penitentiary in Florida. Then a new piece is suddenly added to the chessboard. Another inmate, played by Samuel L. Jackson, joins them for the ride. His name is Hejira.

> F*oley*: *Hejira*? What kinda name is that?
> H*ejira*: The Hejira was the flight of Mohammed from Mecca in 622.
> F*oley:* The flight?
> H*ejira*: The brothers in Leavenworth gave me the name.
> F*oley*: You were at Leavenworth, huh?
> H*ejira*: For a time.
> F*oley*: Meaning?
> H*ejira*: Meaning time came, I left.
> F*oley*: You busted out?
> H*ejira*: I prefer to call it an exodus from an undesirable place.
> F*oley* (*interested now*): And how long was it before they caught up with you?
> H*ejira*: That time?
> F*oley*: There were others.
> H*ejira*: Yeah. That was the ninth.
> F*oley* (*really interested*): The *ninth*?

Hejira mentions that he was supposed to leave for Florida the previous night, but for some reason "the lady marshal" wanted him to ride with Foley. A

shot of Lopez, her face giving nothing away. “Maybe she thought we’d have a lot to talk about,” Clooney murmurs. “Long ride to Florida.” And the credits roll. The scene lasts just two minutes. Frank can stick a landing.

Screenwriting looks as if it should be easy, but it isn’t. In 1925, Herman Mankiewicz (“Citizen Kane”) sent a telegram to his friend Ben Hecht, the playwright, trying to lure him from New York to Los Angeles. “*millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots*,” he wrote, adding, “*don’t let this get around*.” Countless books and seminars and podcasts offer advice to aspiring screenwriters, as if any idiot *could* do it. Yet the form is notoriously confounding. It’s one thing to write a movie; it’s another to get it made, and another altogether for it to be any good. And, as Frank points out, the bad ones are “just as hard to write as the good ones.” A formatted screenplay page equates to about a minute of screen time, so each scene needs the abbreviated clarity of a haiku. Screenplays “are this unique, weird thing,” Frank says—more disciplined than playwriting, and with a much faster tempo. The tools of the novelist are mostly off-limits: no extensive character description, no metaphors. Frank has written fiction, and finds it easier. Scripts, he says, are “more of an exact science.”

You can’t make a Hollywood movie without a script, yet a screenwriter, unlike a novelist or a poet, must eventually hand off his precious creation to a whole team of people, and the first thing they want to do is change it. Even at the highest levels, the job can make you feel stunted and contingent. The novelist and screenwriter John Gregory Dunne once observed that just wanting to be a screenwriter is like just wanting to be a co-pilot; Frank is partial to that analogy, and not merely because of the aviation angle. Though he fiercely believes that screenwriting is an art form, he acknowledges that, in the world of streamers and big studios in which he operates, screenplays aren’t so much written as built. Why would writers subject themselves to such a humbling vocation? There’s the money, certainly, but the movies also possess a magnetic allure. An untold number of great novels have gone unwritten while their authors foundered in Hollywood. At the height of his literary powers, F. Scott Fitzgerald took time out to ride a desk at M-G-M, writing lacklustre scripts that never made it into production. Billy Wilder joked that Fitzgerald was like “a great sculptor who is hired to do a plumbing job.”