You Don't Have to be Robert McKee to Tell a Great Story

April 29, 2019 by Emma

I was first introduced to Robert McKee by an ex-boyfriend who worked in Advertising. At the time he was coming up with fresh angles for commercials and had challenged himself to up his game. Everyone recommended that he read Story.

Fast forward a few years, and I found myself working at Disney's Club Penguin, a virtual world where almost nothing happened without an element of narrative design. I knew that storytelling was vital, and I knew I had a lot to learn about it.

I remembered that book, and I found myself a copy. It was brilliant, but it didn't quite stick. So I planned a trip to New York to attend a McKee Story Seminar with my friend Joseph.

What can Robert McKee teach you about storytelling?

Well, it turns out quite a lot. **In his Story Seminar, McKee teaches storytelling basics, universal story structure, genre, character design, dialogue, and writing techniques. He gives practical examples, often screening a movie such as *Casablanca*, and gives actionable advice to novelists, stage and screenwriters.**

What I like most about McKee is that his advice is thoughtful and practical. But do you have to BE McKee to write a great story? No, you just have to learn the craft and practice hard at it.

> ***"No matter our talent, we all know in the midnight of our souls that 90 percent of what we do is less than our best."***
>
> *Robert McKee*

McKee's belief that you need to create more material than you can possibly use, spurred me on to write over a thousand superhero haiku. But that's a story for another time…

Who is Robert McKee anyway?

Before we get too far, let's answer an important question. Who is this Robert McKee guy anyway, and what makes him such an authority on story?

McKee is an American lecturer and story consultant who started his early career in the theater before moving into the film industry. After winning several award-winning screenplays, he had a number of TV scripts produced for television including Quincy, M.E, and Kojak before going on to teaching. McKee's started his Story Seminar class when he joined the faculty at the University of Southern California, and he began lecturing to the public in 1984.

Since then, over 100,000 students have taken McKee's course around the world, attracting famous faces including Andrew Stanton, Peter Jackson, Steven Pressfield, and William Goldman. Many writers have taken the course more than once to ensure that they are applying storytelling principles in their current work.

Today, McKee has widened his lectures to include workshops on genre and storytelling for business and marketing. He also consults for film and television production companies as well as large corporations like Microsoft.

In the movie *Adaptation*, Brian Cox does a wonderful job of capturing McKee's robust performance. And performance is a key word. McKee has delivered this seminar over and over, with a delivery that is somewhere between a production of Shakespeare and a stand-up comedy show.

What are McKee's storytelling basics?

> ***"Story worth telling requires a fresh vision of life and a hidden truth."***
>
> *Robert McKee*

McKee's book is a great place to learn the basics of storytelling — structure, plot, conflict, and character.

STRUCTURE

Structure is a series of events from a character's life story that is composed in a strategic sequence to arouse specific emotions from the audience and to express a particular view of life.

PLOT

Plot is the writer's choice of events and their design in a passage of time. Event is at the core of every story. It contains conflict, emotions, and characters. Every scene needs to include an event. If nothing happens, it should be cut from the story. Each scene has a charge (negative or positive), and every new scene should differ from the last.

CONFLICT

"Nothing moves forward in a story except through conflict." McKee likens conflict to storytelling as sound to music. We need to have conflict, or we have no story.

There are three levels of conflict:

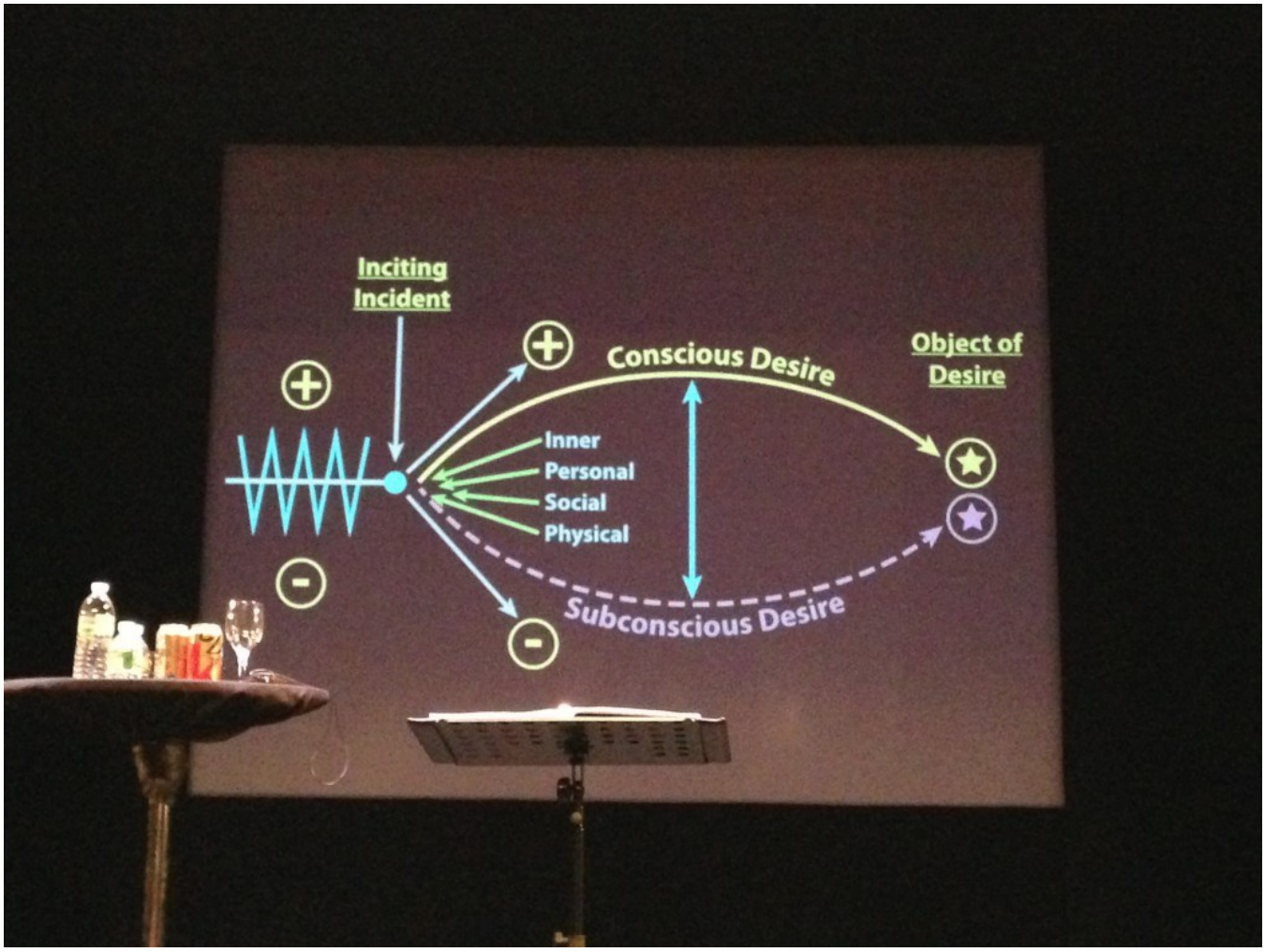
1. inner conflict

2. personal conflict
3. extra-personal conflict

McKee talks about conflict as “forces of antagonism.” An antagonistic force opposes the character either in a small or large, deliberate way.

CHARACTER

The biggest thing that’s stuck with me from the four-day seminar is the importance that McKee puts on character to tell a story. “You need a godlike knowledge of your character,” he tells us. Not just a godlike knowledge, but an ability to predict the future and have a clear vision of where the character is going. A character’s actions are what drives a story forward.



What can McKee teach us about universal story structure?

According to McKee, story structure is a series of events composed in a strategic sequence to arouse emotions and convey a specific meaning or controlling idea.

An event is a change. It must be meaningful, and it must have at least one value attached. A value is the quality at the heart of the experience, whether that be positive or negative. Those values are what sets our story stakes — they might be life v.s death, wealth v.s poverty, or beauty v.s ugliness. Whatever values our writer chooses, we will see

them again and again throughout the story.

Events put the character's world out of balance for better or for worse. The character does everything she can to bring that balance back again, launching her on a quest for an object of desire vs. forces of antagonism (inner, personal, or extra personal).

In a typical film, there are around 40 to 60 events or scenes, as they're more typically known. In a play, there are less than 40, and in a novel, there are usually more than 60. Those scenes all have a change in value, either negative or positive that differs from the scenes that come before or after it.

Within each scene is a story beat — a character's action or reaction. Story beats add up to shape the turning of the scene. Or to put it another way, it's those actions and reactions that shift the scene's value either positively or negatively.

Beats build scenes, and scenes build sequences. The end of a sequence will have a more significant change with greater impact than the scene that comes before it. Those sequences form an act — a series of scenes that end in a climax. All stories should build to an action where the audience can imagine no other.

What can McKee teach us about genre?

According to McKee, every writer is a genre writer. If the writer doesn't know what genre he or she is writing in, the audience almost certainly does, and they have expectations around them.

Genres come with different conventions:

- roles (e.g., cop and criminal)
- settings (e.g., Transylvania for vampire story)
- events (e.g., when lovers meet)
- values (such as love and hate)
- climaxes

In certain genres, those conventions are flexible. In others, they are more rigid. You wouldn't, for example, expect a romantic comedy to end with a tragic death.

Each genre also comes with several subgenres (for example, crime has 14 subgenres including psychological thriller). Genre plays a part not just in the telling of the story, but also in its marketing. We position the audience to the story, so they know what to expect from it from the title onwards.

To anticipate an audience's expectations, it's up to the writer to become an authority on his or her chosen genre and educate herself to understand its tropes and its cliches. As conventions constantly change, that education should be continuous. Give yourself permission to watch a lot of Netflix, spend a lot of time reading scripts, or digging into pop culture wiki, TV Tropes.

> ***"Do research. Feed your talent. Research not only wins the war on cliche, it's the key to victory over fear and its cousin, depression."***
>
> *Robert McKee*

Creative limitations are often how great works of art are born. Take Picasso's choice to paint in blue, or Dr. Seuss's decision to only use 50 words in Green Eggs and Ham. McKee says it will force your imagination to rise to the occasion. With a mastery of genre, we can give the audience what they expect, but if we're lucky, more than they imagine.

Like society, genres do change over time. McKee uses the example of the Western.*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*, *Blazing Saddles*, and *Dances with Wolves* are three very different examples that are all part of the same family. To push the genre, you can combine genres in a way that hasn't been done, or take your genre into its next stage of evolution. It "just" requires mastery of the genre and a little imagination.

What can McKee teach us about character?

“A human being, is the choices he makes under pressure,” says McKee. “How they act in order to pursue what they desire is who they are.”

The main character of a story doesn’t need to be sympathetic (likable), but they should be empathetic (like me), so the audience can effectively put themselves in his or her shoes and imagine making similar choices under the circumstances.

Your protagonist doesn't have to be human, but he or she does need to have a desire and the ability to take action. Most characters have a conscious and a subconscious desire, and these things always contradict each other. For example, we know that Darth Vader desires extreme power, but maybe on a subconscious level, he just wants a relationship with his son. (And let's face it, only George Lucas could give us a definitive answer on that).

The protagonist of a story must have a goal. More than that, they should have the qualities to convince the audience that they are capable of achieving whatever it is they want, and they need a chance of getting it. The greater the value they put on that desire, the greater the risk they will make to get it.

That's not to say that your hero want to take a considerable risk to get to their goal. On the contrary, your hero will start with the minimum action from his or her point of view. That's being human. If we can spend as little energy as we can on doing something, then we will.

In a story we see a character taking an action that he expects will provoke a useful reaction from the world, but instead, we see the world around the character react unexpectedly. McKee calls this unexpected reaction "the forces of antagonism.

What can McKee teach us about dialogue?

Dialogue, McKee insists, is all action and reaction. It is not a conversation; a real conversation would be boring to

watch on stage or screen. It is not a monologue either. There *is* no monologue in real life. Dialogue responds to a need and has a purpose. Underlying every line of dialogue is a character's desire, intent and a move to action.

> ***"Dialogue concentrates meaning; conversation dilutes it."***
>
> *Robert McKee*

Screen dialog needs to be intelligent, witty, and above all, clear. An advocate for 'show don't tell.' McKee urges writers to learn to be economical and say more with less. Good actors can work with very little, but a scene needs to be written so that if the actors add nothing to it, it will stand up well.

Perhaps his best advice on writing dialogue is to not write dialogue. Instead, aim to create as much visual expression as possible *instead* of writing. If you write speech after speech, you'll see diminishing returns from it. That is, some of your best writing will be buried. Keeping dialogue lean will ensure that the audience wants to hear it.

McKee distinguishes three levels of dialogue:

- **what is said** (what the character conveys to others)
- **the unsaid** (a character's inner thoughts)
- **what is unsayable** (what the character subconsciously desires)

A good writer can master the art of subtext, communicating what is unsaid in what is said.

Speeches must be short to capture the audience's attention. 50% of listening to a speech is lip reading. When we disembody an actor's face to listen to voice over, or to focus on another character, we lose the subtext of what is being said.

Having trouble with your dialogue? Go back to your story. "Dialogue problems are story problems," says McKee in Writer's Quarterly Vol 1, No 1. And we currently have an epidemic of bad dialogue writing. "The majority of dialogue published or performed is serviceable at best and instantly forgotten."

Once your story is polished, McKee believes that you'll write better dialogue than the majority that's out there already.

What can McKee teach us about writing a screenplay?

McKee would tell you that writing can't be taught. He believes that taste is a gene and that only educated people can be good writers. Arguably, his advice creates better writers of all of us.

Bad writers, says McKee, cling to six favorite scenes and try to rewrite to keep them. Writers with careers are those

who demonstrate a command of the story art form.

McKee writes on a yellow legal pad and expects writers to spend the first four months on three sheets of paper — one sheet per act. The outline requires one sentence that defines the turning point for the character at that moment.

> ***"If you don't write it out, you won't get it out. Keep destroying it."***
>
> *Robert McKee*

McKee expects 1,000 words a day, and a lot of research into characters, the world around them, their relationships, the words in their vocabulary, etc.

Once you have your outline, go to your friends and pitch it. It's not a story until 7 out of 10 people say "wow." If that doesn't happen, think about how to hook them, how to hold their interest. Do you get the right reaction at the ending?

The next stage isn't a screenplay, it's a treatment. Write out your story in the present tense, moment by moment without dialogue. This is all prose and subtext. You don't really know your story until you can write it out. Write vividly, urges McKee. Eliminate generic nouns and use interesting descriptions. "He waltzes across the room" is infinitely better than "He starts to move slowly across the room."

> ***"Reduce, polish, revise."***
>
> *Robert McKee*

Once you've written your treatment (and that might be 200-300 pages), write the screenplay. Here, you're reducing it down, and you're adding dialogue. Again, things you thought would work might not. Polish it for image systems, rhythm, etc., working from the inside out until you have something you're really proud of.

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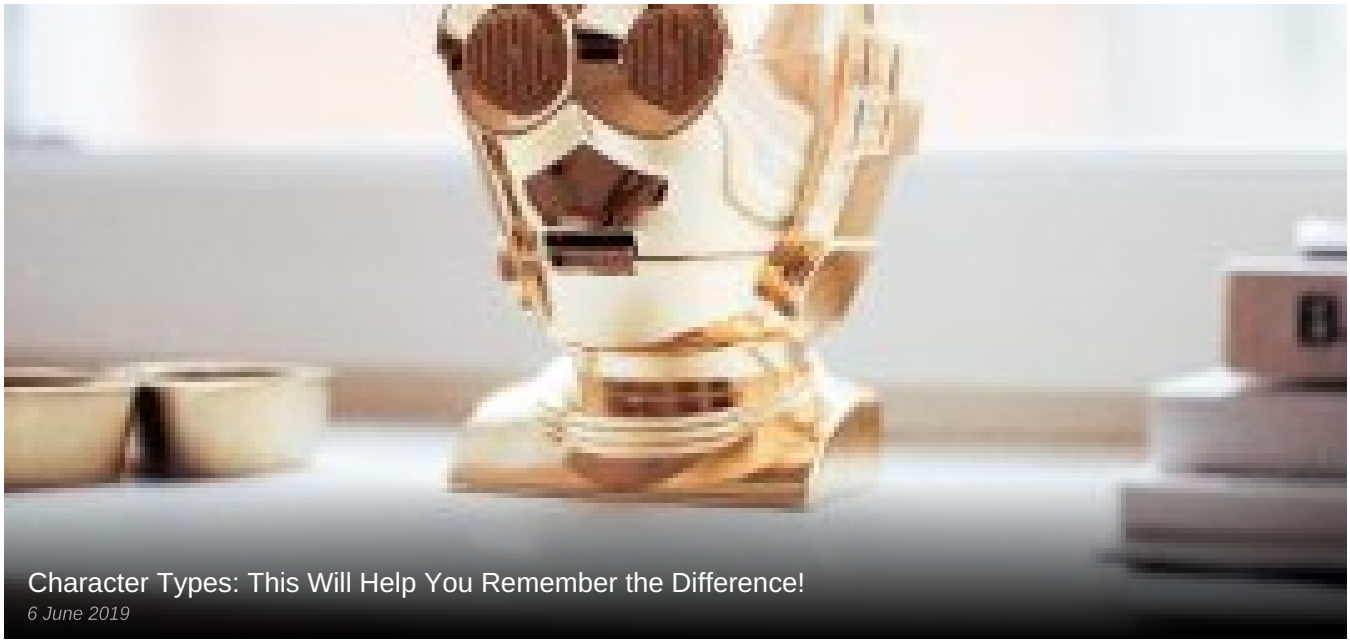

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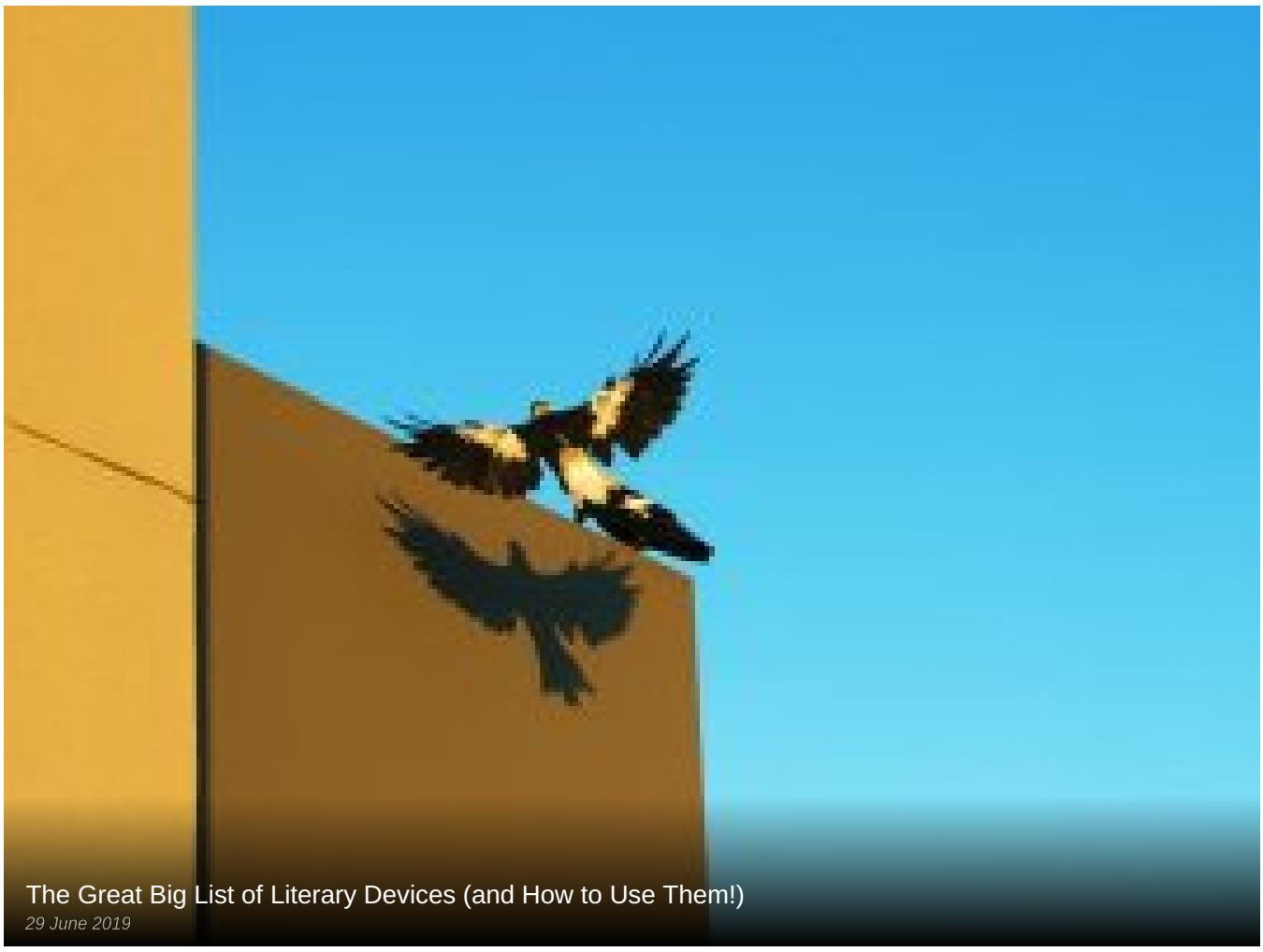

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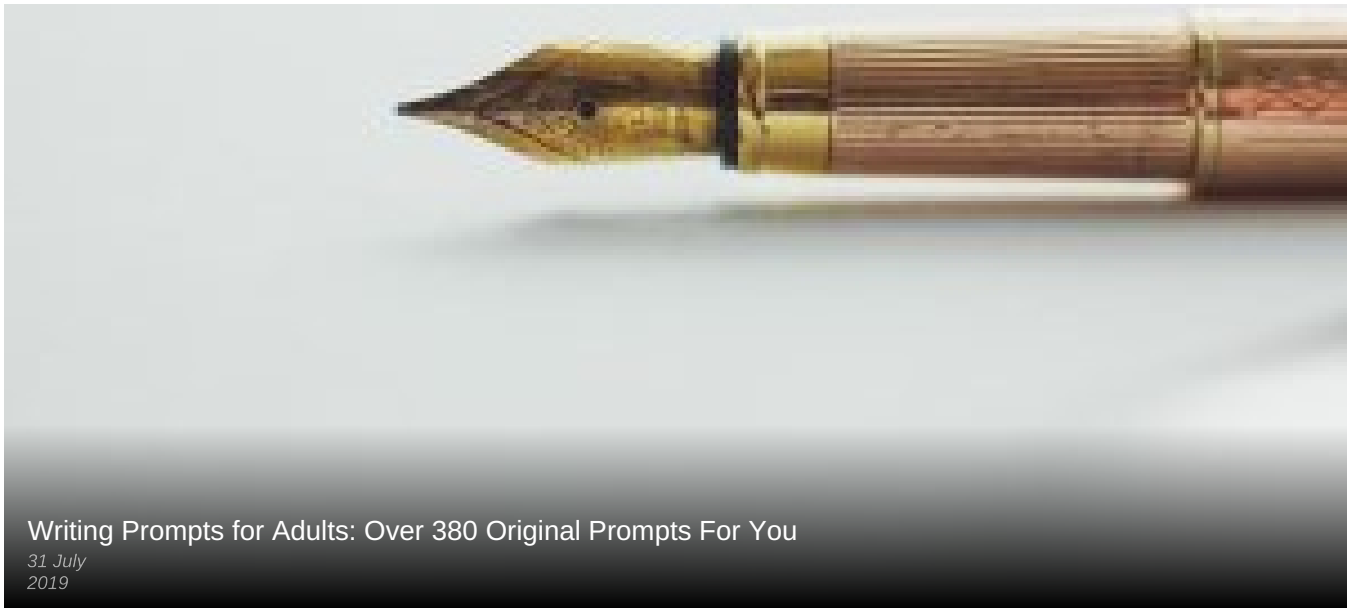

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Emma

September 9, 2019 at 5:02 pm |

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Totally! The trouble is, the better you get the harder it is — and perhaps that's why we've not see McKee's novel yet.

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