The New Scriptwriter’s Journal
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The New Scriptwriter’s Journal

by
Mary Charlotte Johnson
For Veronica and Jacqueline
Too dear for this earth
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As I embarked on the journey of revising this edition, I realized how much has changed since the first edition. This edition is not just an update; it's an open-ended exploration of what the future might hold for aspiring scriptwriters.

This may be the single most exciting time for scriptwriters to be exploring the field. With the advent of digital technology, the face of filmmaking is changing forever. What this means for you, the scriptwriter, is that you will have a more active role in scripting your own life. Right now, not in some distant future, you’re capable of scripting, shooting and editing your own work with a digital camera and desktop computer. As technology becomes more sophisticated, the process will be democratized to an even greater extent.

Does this mean you should abandon the craft? Certainly not. In fact, since there may be fewer systems filtering material in the future, it’s more relevant than ever that you learn the craft of scriptwriting. Problems should always be solved at the script stage. Fixing a work in post is not a desirable option. No matter which medium you use to tell a story, you need to learn to solve problems and formulate questions. As new technologies arrive, new questions, often complex questions, arise.

It will be your task to lead the thinking, push the limits, and help us remember what’s vital to us as humans. The storytelling of the future resides in you.

Today’s scriptwriting is a new enterprise, even for seasoned scriptwriters. Options are limitless. Boundaries are breaking down. Traditional script structures are being challenged. You may be writing for film, television, the Internet, games, virtual reality, or story worlds we’ve not yet imagined. Your future as a scriptwriter, as well as your journey, may well begin between these pages . . .
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Acknowledgments

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Shamefully, in the first edition, I neglected to mention a few people who’ve helped make my journey richer. Thanks and grins to Leslie Jordan and Lynn Anderson for being true sisters and vital life forces; Dorothy and Glenn Hershberger for embracing my daughter, Leah, and I when we were adrift; Maria Methven, for teaching me the true meaning of courage, tenacity and humor; Deb Berry for the goddess that she is; and the Haxan guys for including me as part of their extended family and reviving my faith (sometimes good guys do finish first). No doubt I’ve forgotten others. If you count yourselves among them, thanks in advance for forgiving me my flaws and loving me.

Lastly, thanks to Jim Gunshanan for remaining a constant surprise and for his love.
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PART I

The Creative Process
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There is an internal landscape, a geography of the soul; we search for its outlines all our lives.\textsuperscript{1}

—Josephine Hart

This is the scene. You’re in a crowded, noisy bookstore leafing through these pages. Or you’re in your home by the fireplace snuggling up to read this book. Undoubtedly, you’re asking yourself, “Why is every other page blank?” Good question.

The blank pages are designed to induce, provoke, tease, and challenge you to write. These journal pages provide space for scribbling, sketching, observing, recording, sensing, rambling, musing, gossiping, and dreaming. Jot down daydreams, night dreams, nightmares, fears, fantasies, memories—anything that moves you.

In a very real sense, you and I will share authorship of this book. By the time you’ve finished reading and writing, you’ll not only have the knowledge to tackle writing a script, you’ll also have a personal journal that will serve as a sourcebook of ideas for your scripts.

What’s that you’re thinking? Journals are a nuisance. You had to keep a journal in the fifth grade and you hated it. Besides, you don’t have time. There’s work, grad school, dishes, kids, the lawn needs to be mowed, the car needs a new carburetor, the dog needs a flea bath, the bills need to be paid.

Relax. No excuses are necessary. No one is going to check to see if you’re writing in your journal. You won’t be graded on its contents. You won’t lose your job if you don’t write in it. No one else needs to read your journal if you choose to write in it.

A journal is for you and you only. All of our lives we’ve been conditioned to produce for others—parents, teachers, clergy, bosses,
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colleagues, spouses, in-laws, children, friends, lovers. Our pleasure is often derived from pleasing others. Certainly pleasing others is a worthwhile goal, but sometimes it distracts us from our own needs. Sometimes it distracts us from ourselves.

Your journal is an open invitation to rediscover yourself. Consider it a gift to yourself. The pages of your journal offer a place to be alone, to indulge your fantasies, to confess your fears, to discover secrets you’ve kept from yourself, to explore worlds within worlds.

If you’re reluctant to begin writing, don’t worry. This book is designed to encourage you. Periodically, you’ll be provided with specific writing prompts to stimulate your thinking and help you begin the process of writing. If you don’t need the prompts, ignore them. Remember, this is your journal.

Each writing prompt is designed to complement ideas as they are presented within the reading. Responding to writing prompts is a form of freewriting, or what Henriette Klauser calls “rapidwriting.” Rapidwriting is an uninhibited, fluid form of writing that lets “the words spill out without stopping to critique or correct or rearrange.” In her book *Writing on Both Sides of the Brain*, Klauser maintains that because the right and left hemispheres of the brain perform different functions, writers experience an inherent conflict. The right side of the brain wants to ramble and explore, while the left side of the brain wants to dominate and edit, even as a writer is thinking.

Klauser suggests that writers reconcile the hemispheres of the brain by learning to separate the act of writing from the act of editing during rapidwriting. You may find this a difficult challenge. If you’re one of those writers who constantly edits while you write, you’ll have to make a conscious effort to separate writing from editing.

If you’re a compulsive editor, you’ll probably appreciate this story from the book *Walking on Alligators*. As the author, Susan Shaughnessy, tells it:

A friend of mine used to joke that if she left a manuscript out on the desk at night, she feared the cleaning crew would not be able to resist the temptation to edit it. Then it really happened to her.

She came in to work and found some notes attached to a manuscript. In neat handwriting, the writer explained that she was an English student at a nearby university. She cleaned office buildings at night to work her way through school. She had become interested in the manuscript, left out in the center of the tidy desk, and wanted to make some suggestions.

Rapidwriting discourages the editor in you and encourages the writer in you. Though it may take extra effort at first, try rapidwriting when you respond to the prompts. The only rule is to write with abandon.
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Don’t worry about spelling or sloppiness or sentences—just write as fast as you can. Eventually, you’ll rapidwrite without thinking, and you may be surprised at what bubbles to the surface while you’re writing.

This first prompt should provoke you to think about yourself as a writer. When responding to prompts, always write honest responses and the first answers that come to mind. Don’t try to intellectualize. Write from your gut.

Rapidwrite a short story in which a writer attempts to murder his or her editor. What is the writer’s motivation for murder? Is the writer successful? If not, does the editor seek revenge? Be playful. Take chances. Be absurd. Think of all the soap opera characters who’ve been killed only to return again under mysterious circumstances. Loosen up those cerebral muscles and stretch.

Now, describe the process you undertook while writing. Was it hard to write a story? Describe yourself as a writer. Do you enjoy writing? If not, why not? Is there anything that you’d change about yourself as a writer if you could? Think about the way in which you write. Do you write with little restraint, rereading and cleaning up the text from time to time? If so, you’re probably a latent editor as well as a writer. Do you frequently stop, reread what you’ve written, and go back and rewrite as you’re writing? Do you have trouble getting on with your writing because you get stuck editing instead? If so, you’re probably a compulsive editor. Maybe you write without much care and see editing as an irritating task.Maybe you’re a rapidwriter all the time. If so, do you feel satisfied that your writing is in its most polished form when you’ve finished?

Asking you questions is a way for me to engage you in written dialogue. A form of “talking” to me through your writing, written dialogue is a kind of conversation between writers. In an ideal setting, we would write back and forth to one another. For our purposes here, I’ll share thoughts and open-ended questions that invite you to “converse” with me. If something you read evokes an emotion, “speak” to me about what you’re feeling. If something I suggest seems preposterous, “argue” with me. You’ll always win the argument because I won’t be able to “talk” back.

Written dialogue is a natural extension of what Lev Vygotsky calls inner speech, a form of “talking” to yourself manifest in verbal thought. In his book *Thought and Language*, Vygotsky maintains that, at an early age, language begins as a dialogue with the self.4 Think about your “self” as a child. Did you talk to your “self” or to imaginary playmates? Maybe those imaginary playmates that you conversed with helped you make meaning of the
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world. As a child, you may have had the solitude during playtime to listen to your inner speech. Oftentimes as an adult, your responsibilities may distract you enough that you forget to listen to your inner speech.

Writing creates a unique opportunity for you to listen to your inner speech, to reacquaint you with your self, for it is through the process of composing thoughts that the self becomes fully realized. Since writing is a metacognitive act, you necessarily think about thinking as you compose; that is, you try to understand and reflect upon your own thought processes. As the poet John Ashbery reflects, “I write to find out what I’m thinking.”

Writing forces thought forth. During the process of writing, your inner speech resounds through your written words, taking you on the first step to the interior landscape of the self.

This landscape, this inner world, is where the self resides. Have you been to this inner world? Do you know how to find it? Can you imagine it? In *Writing for Your Life*, Deena Metzger describes this mysterious territory. See if you recognize the place.

It is the world of worlds. It is infinite. To enter it is to come to know something of it and to learn of the boundlessness of the self. To go within, therefore, is never diminishment. To stay adamantly without is always a limitation, for the self, the inner world, the imagination, all open out into everything that has ever existed or can ever or may exist. . . . Like any unexplored territory, it will, each time, turn out to be both strange and familiar. And we go into it, each time, as if we have never been there before and also as if we are coming home.

**THE JOURNEY**

For you, the scriptwriter, your task is not to discover what formula will create the best product; your task is to forage through the interior landscape of the self to discover a story worth telling. As you search for that story, you may discover a quiet truth—the journey is where the self is actualized.

The center of this actualization resides within your imagination. What is the imagination? Kris Kringle, portrayed by Edmund Gwenn, answers that question in the original version of the film *Miracle on 34th Street*.

To me, the imagination is a place all by itself. A separate country. Now, you’ve heard of the French nation, the British nation—well, this is the imagination. It’s a wonderful place. How would you like to be able to make snowballs in the summertime, eh? Or drive a great big bus right down Fifth Avenue? How would you like to have a ship all to yourself that makes daily trips to China? Australia? How would you like to be the Statue of Liberty in the morning and in the afternoon fly south with a flock of
geese? Very simple. But it takes practice. Now, the first thing you’ve got to learn is how to pretend.7

As adults we sometimes find it difficult to remember how to pretend, yet imaginative thinking is vital to the discovery of the self. In The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven, fiction writer, poet, and screenwriter Sherman Alexie (Smoke Signals, Indian Killer) articulates how necessary the imagination is to both the discovery as well as the sustenance of the self.

Imagination is the politics of dreams; imagination turns every word into a bottle rocket . . . Imagine an escape. Imagine that your own shadow on the wall is a perfect door. Imagine a song stronger than penicillin. Imagine a drum which wraps itself around your heart. Imagine a story that puts wood in the fireplace.8

Now stop reading for a moment and try writing again. Borrowing from Alexie’s passage, “imagine that your own shadow on the wall is a perfect door.” Try walking through that door. Where does it take you? Describe the world you imagine. Who do you encounter in this world? Do you want to remain in this world or return to the world from which you came? Is it easy for you to imagine other worlds? Do you often fantasize or daydream?

Fantasies and daydreams represent far more than capricious longings. By projecting yourself into other worlds, you’re shaping who you’re becoming. Imagination becomes a significant contributor to the constantly shifting essence of your existence. As Edward Murray, author of Imaginative Thinking and Human Existence, elaborates:

Seen from this perspective the imagination moves from the periphery of existence to the center of actuality. It is human thought now setting the stage for the creation of actuality, for the birth of being, for the realization of possibilities, for the construction of life and transformation of one’s existence.9

If you accept this view, writing is not only a way of knowing, it is a way of becoming a fully realized human being.

In order to consciously move toward becoming, you must be able to enter the imaginative realm. This task requires energy, intellect, hope, tenacity, and great courage, since the terrain is often terrifying. There are no road maps, no road signs, no familiar markers to ease you along the path. You must enter at your own risk.
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The Inner Journey

The risk involves facing truths about yourself that you may wish to avoid. Once you’ve entered, you may not be able to turn back. In Eleanor Coppola’s documentary, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker’s Apocalypse*, she describes the journey that her then-husband Francis experienced as he directed and wrote (co-authored with John Milius) *Apocalypse Now*, based on the novel by Joseph Conrad.

The film Francis is making is a metaphor for a journey into self. He has made that journey and is still making it. It’s scary to watch someone you love go into the center of himself and confront his fears—fear of failure, fear of death, fear of going insane. You have to fail a little, die a little, go insane a little, to come out the other side.10

Even an artist of Francis Ford Coppola’s esteem experiences grave doubts during the journey inward. Self-doubt can paralyze you. It’s natural to be afraid of failure—no one wants to fail. But unless you’re willing to plunge deep into the center of yourself, you will never have the satisfaction of having faced your fears and gone beyond them.

Can you avoid facing those truths and still tell a good story? Perhaps, but you’ll be cheating yourself. The value of the inner journey lies in the experience. For whether the story is ultimately a success or a failure, the experience is invaluable. Time is never wasted on a journey well traveled, never wasted on becoming.

To become you must enter the imaginative realm. To enter that world you must pass through chaos. In order to claim our imaginative powers, Ann E. Berthoff suggests in *The Making of Meaning* that we order chaos.11 This ordering of chaos is a complex, highly individualistic process. In subsequent chapters you’ll learn strategies that will help you find a path through the labyrinth that is the mind. There are no formulaic methods for ordering chaos, no equations for shaping stories. You must find your own way through the interior landscape of the self. Sometimes it’s a journey of utter joy, sometimes a journey of dark confusion. Always it’s a journey of necessity.

How would you describe your “self”? If you could script your life, what journey would you imagine for yourself? If you were in the editing room watching a film about your life, what would you edit? What fragments of film would find their way to the cutting room floor? What new scenes would you shoot for the sequel?
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7. George Seaton, Miracle on 34th Street (based on an original story by Valentine Davis), 20th Century Fox, 1947.


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3 Creative Problem Solving


5. George Hickenlooper, Reel Conversations: Candid Interviews with Film’s Foremost Directors and Critics, Carol Publishing Group, New York, 1991, p. 304.

4 Bold Beginnings


12. Epel, p. 221.


5 Becoming a Professional


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6 Shaping Stories


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7 Creating Characters


20. Caroline Thompson, Edward Scissorhands, 20th Century Fox, 1990. This page intentionally left blank
8 Crafting Dialogue


7. Joel Coen and Ethan Coen, Blood Simple, St. Martin’s Press, New York, 1988, pp. 6-9. (In the book, the script is not in script format. For the purposes of consistency, I’ve maintained script format.)


9 Adaptation


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10 The Abuses of Enchantment


10. Kryzysztof Zanussi, quoted from an informal lecture with the students of the University of Central Florida’s film division in Orlando, Florida on September 28, 1991.


12. Peter Biskind, “Mind Rot,” Premiere, August 1992, p. 51. Biskind went on to say, “Movies have an enormous impact. They are not ‘just entertainment,’ and the people who make them have an opportunity—even a responsibility—to have a positive effect on American culture.” I find that an especially significant commentary from Premiere, a publication reflecting the popular rather than the elite culture.

14. Faludi, p. 117.


11 A Personal POV


