

PROPOSAL

THE MEDDLE OF THE MUDDLE: How many captains does it take to steer a story and whose course is it anyway?

According to numerous writers, including Philip Larkin, 'Every story has a beginning a muddle and an end.'

Current box-set television dramas and the complexities of puzzle and modular narratives in film and television keep mathematics, structure, twists, sleight-of-hand and 'red-herrings' at the forefront of storytelling. Multiple storylines need careful juggling; motifs and themes need to satisfy but not oversaturate. How much of this process is inherent in the writer? Conversely, how much is this the domain of the story producer and script editor? Do writers innately know how to divulge their stories or do they need the assistance of an objective eye? When do notes become too much or solo storytelling not enough?

How many captains does it take to create order from chaos and back again?

PRESENTATION PORTO 13/09/2019

SLIDE 1: THE MEDDLE OF THE MUDDLE

SLIDE 2: PHILIP LARKIN

I'm Marie Macneill, I lecture at the School of Film and Television at Falmouth University in Cornwall, UK. I also write and script edit.

SLIDE 3: – A MATTER OF PERCEPTION

I want you to turn to the person sitting next to you and tell them your name and if you're an arch or a ship.

SLIDE 4: PUZZLE – INTRO

Context: an extract from *Puzzle*.

SLIDE 5: PUZZLE EXTRACT

"Why do you do these stupid puzzles?"

"It's a way to control the chaos... life is messy... it doesn't make any sense...everything is random... when you complete a puzzle everything makes a perfect picture ... what other pursuit can give you that kind of perfection?"

How about the making and creating of moving image and sound to tell tales?

SLIDE 6: CAVE PAINTINGS

If we go back to cave dwellers, camp fire stories, fairy tales, myths and legends, and a splash Grimm, it's all about ordering chaos.

Or as James Bonnet states in *Stealing Fire from the Gods* -

“Story is the wisdom that can guide you to your true destiny - both temporal and spiritual. All of the great myths, legends and fairy tales have that power. If you understand their secrets, they can guide you to a full realisation of yourself.”

Knowing writers understand those secrets, and have the ability to pass those secrets on to their readers, their listeners, and their viewers. They are able to find the jigsaw pieces that create the whole picture: the right place for the right piece – in a structure that provides integrity to support experience and imagination.

The ability to demonstrate that it is worth getting up in the morning, worth hunting and gathering, defending your homestead, protecting your family. And... and this is the clincher... if you stay on the path you will come to no harm.

But if, as storytellers, they put the wrong piece in the wrong place, they lose authenticity, quickly followed by their audience, because they have not provided the comfort of ordering the chaos. So do they need help? In a collaborative medium, help is indeed at hand, a lot of people have opinions, even before the paper has cooled on the printer, and sometimes advice works brilliantly and sometimes it's a disaster.

I would like to lightly question the chaos and order involved in how writers might be encouraged or discouraged from telling their original story in the way they originally felt it should be told.

That is not to say that ultimately theirs is the right way. Or the clearest path forward.

And it must be something of a challenge to successfully dive into a world created by a storyteller, order it, and clarify it, without distressing the intention, characterisation, motif, theme, layers and puzzles crafted by the originator.

Something in our house that's known as knitting a scarf. You've got the wool, you've made a jumper, but the powers-that-be, who liked the wool and ordered a jumper have now decided a scarf would be better instead.

SLIDE 7: THE CARDSHARPS

On the other hand, how do storytellers juggle complex narratives, twists, sleight-of-hand, signposting and unexpected yet satisfying denouements? How do they keep an episode, a film or a whole series in their head without the guiding light of a script editor or producer?

In a brave new world of consumers, prosumers, fandom and binge and repeat watchers how much help do writers need to keep their narrative worlds plausible and believable?

How do they avoid howlers that draw attention to weak infrastructure and story holes. And character behaviour, that may compliment the storyline's trajectory, but is at tremendous odds with that character's, already established, traits?

In a recent article in Writers' Magazine, James McCreet talks about narrative focus and how if you lose the thread of the story, you then lose the reader.

The same can be applied here regarding the read of the script. If the story is not explained properly, the thread between the audience and the storyteller is lost. Something I call THE GOLDEN THREAD. This crucial thread is the relationship between the audience and the story. If some of the vital strands of that thread remain in the head of the writer, or are squandered by premature critical advice, the story will be lacking on the page and readers' engagement lost.

Worse is when it reaches the screen and the threads are still missing. Audience need to live stories vicariously, on the edge of their seats, with their hearts pumping and their adrenalin singing. And they want to learn. To know. They don't actually want to be a murderer or a victim. But they do want to know how it feels to do or be done in. They want and need to understand the randomness of death, disease, accident, passion and true love. They don't want an implausible story line that takes them out of their complicity.

SLIDE 8: THE TRIBE

Many moons ago, when I was a novice writer for television

Ah The Tribe

with very few broadcast flying hours I was commissioned to write an original 6-part television series on the strength of a paper pitch.

SLIDE 9: OUTLAWS TALENT

The producer, Matthew Robinson, loved it, cleared it with the drama department in Cardiff, Wales and secured a greenlight from BBC UK network television. I wrote the Bible, outlined the episodes, and delivered the script for part one, which was enthusiastically 'signed off' by Matthew and Baz, the director, who had in the meantime been busy assembling a terrific cast. Thanks here to my script editor Sophie who had been supportive and brilliantly in tune with my ideas.

Then Matthew was called away to Asia. And didn't return. His place was filled by a younger producer. We had a meeting. In London. In a posh hotel. He had a fat cigar and an attitude. His opening gambit was "I have 124 notes for you." I shrank. What did he mean? The script had been signed-off, hadn't it? What notes? He then proceeded to take me through them. One after the other. Blow by blow. Bullet by bullet.

SLIDE 10: THE LANGHAM HOTEL

I didn't agree with them all and somewhere on the Langham Hotel battlefield I became confused and punch-drunk. I could no longer see my story and I felt – honestly – like a failure. When it was time to leave I left my hat on the chair and my confidence on the floor. To this day I feel hurt by that bombardment of too much information, and to this day I feel angry that he delivered his thoughts in such a didactic and swaggeringly unsympathetic way.

But in an attempt to be professional, and despite feeling angry and upset, I agreed to address his concerns. My agent backed my decision to make the necessary changes, feeling that, as a fairly new writer to television, it would be in my best interest long term and I would prove to be amenable, flexible and no prima donna.

At my next script meeting – with the new producer and a new script editor whom I hadn't met, but who had read the rewrites and was now asking me if I could beef up the dramatic situation of an important character to beyond what I considered to be the pale of her motivation. My script was now straying into cliché and soap opera and I was desperately trying to pull it back from the brink. But I was only the writer. Only the creator of the characters and this BBC producer was either trying to make a mark by bending my story into a different kind of story or trying to new-broom sweep me out of the commissioning door. And his script editor felt more like his Hench-woman than my constructively critical friend. My six-part series 'fell off the map'. Yes, I was paid, and Baz got a finder's fee, which was rather clever, but the series never got made.

If I look at this scenario with more experienced eyes I begin to understand what's at play here. And how I might have reacted differently if he had presented his concerns differently. Perhaps he genuinely wanted to make my script work but believed that the middle was muddled and needed clarification. Perhaps the themes, central message, character motivation was only clear to me and it lost something in its translation to the page. Perhaps it wasn't good enough and could have been better.

SLIDE 11: 124 NOTES

But by saying, "I have 124 notes for you," it gave him the wrong kind of power and made me nervous, defensive and unable to absorb any pearls of wisdom. Because he had completely crushed my confidence. And there's the rub. Writers put themselves out there and say, "Look at me, look at what I created," but there's another part of them that are a feared of criticism. And if that producer had said instead, "Hello, welcome, I've read the script. The main character is thought-provoking, visceral, honest (please supply your own adjectives here) and I am wondering if we might tweak this a little by escalating the drama, perhaps introduce a new problem in the middle?" Then I would have felt a part of the refit – and perhaps we would have ended up with a better drama or even a drama that was broadcast.

So how do we nurture student work? How do we oversee fresh talent? Writers new to television and film? How do we NOT crush creative endeavour? How do we objectively assess and become that constructively critical friend? Perhaps the industry has a little to learn around this.

SLIDE 12: JANE JOHNSON

I asked Jane Johnson, a successful novelist and recent winner of an Alfie given to her by George RR Martin last month in Dublin. What are your expectations from an editor? What advice, help, inspiration, observation, comfort or support do you value most? She replied:

"Book editors are there to help the author maintain consistency, pacing, integrity of structure: not to impose their, or anyone's else's view on a text but to enable the writer to deliver the very best version of their own vision possible..."

Gosh, that sounds so different from my Langham Hotel experience.

She continued...

"I am the person who is supposed to hold their works in my head if they write in series – and each time they deliver a new volume I will reread the entire

series in order to do just that. If any of them ever has a problem, I am there to listen and try to help solve it; I'm the one who softens blows and celebrates good news with them."

I am writing a novel in the hope Jane becomes my editor!

SLIDE 13: VICTIM

As discussed in Jill Neame's paper, *Collaboration and control in the development of Janet Green's screenplay Victim*, in 1961 Green wrote *Victim* for producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden. They had worked together before and this was the first film to openly depict homosexuality.

Green explains that changes suggested by Relph will not work because the logic of the story and the characters would neither be believable nor accurate...

Hum, this sounds familiar!

"Green's frustration with the development process increases with each draft ... Even though Green is often upset and annoyed by Relph and Dearden's comments, she is still very aware that they are a development team and the writer, producer and director have a common aim in mind – which is to produce the best possible film."

SLIDE 14: GRAHAM MITCHELL

More recently, and in television rather than film, Graham Mitchell a writer of seven years standing on the BBC's *Silent Witness* told me:

If it's an authored piece it is generated by you as a format: something like *Years and Years* - that's Russell Davies', but something like *Silent Witness* where each two episode story is to some extent authored, all the writers come up with the material for those two episodes, but the actual overall ownership is not the writers.

You own your two bits, but the overall ownership belongs to the Exec Producer. If a writer's piece differs significantly from the Exec Producer's view then he has seniority – that's where the frustration comes from - they get to say yes or no.

If the concept you come up with is severely damaged by the intervention of the senior person then you're immediately into a repair situation before you've even begun the process, as you are constantly trying to rewrite it, and the process is, you're constantly trying to repair an idea that was one thing and is now something else. It's neither one thing nor the other.

Sometimes it's better, if an Executive Producer completely disagrees with a vision for something, to say let's start again - We're not going to agree on this. But because of my seniority on the programme and the length of time I'd been doing it, we got to a place where perhaps that decision would have been taken, but it was too late in the process to replace it with something else. So we then end up with a muddle."

Jane again,

“Writing as a novelist is a very personal and largely private exercise – which is why most of us choose this form of expression over the complex and often frustrating teamwork and consensus creativity of tv/film.”

I cheekily asked Graham if he had ever been fired.

“Yes, but it’s never dressed up as that. Sometimes I have to admit though, and this is interesting for younger writers, you need ego, you need to believe in your ideas to do this job. But too much ego and you shoot yourself in the foot. So finding the right balance. I’ve been fired for being difficult and I’ve been fired for not being very good ... Sally Wainwright was fired for not being very good on Emmerdale and told to go back to driving a bus. I was fired once for my own show. That wasn’t great.

Sally Wainwright – I wonder what happened to her?

SLIDE 15: SALLY WAINWRIGHT

Oh that Sally Wainwright!

My experience of the TV series that never was, was the equivalent of being fired by the BBC, and like Graham, it wasn’t dressed up as that.

So are writers left to their own devices to ‘show don’t tell’, create empathy and sympathy, induce catharsis and vicarious engagement, until it suits other collaborators to meddle? Or are other collaborators crucial to making the creative endeavour coherent and maintaining THE GOLDEN THREAD between the audience or reader and the story placed in front of them?

Script Editor Yvonne Grace has the final word:

“A good, expert, fantastic script editor will be able to give you script notes (some large, some small, some irritating, some illuminating) without you the writer, ever feeling exposed, or unsure, or feeling that your work is being ridiculed, overly criticised or downright changed too much.”

SLIDE 16 – PERCEPTION

Seeing a ship or an arch first is a matter of perception: your brain creating order from chaos. Thank you for listening.

SLIDE 17: CREDITS

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JANE JOHNSON interview with Marie Macneill August 2019

GRAHAM MITCHELL interview with Marie Macneill June 2019

THE TRIBE – Cloud 9

PUZZLE - Big Beach Films