CLAUDIA HUNTER JOHNSON

25TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

CRAFTING SHORT SCREENPLAYS THAT CONNECT

SIXTH EDITION

A **Focal Press** Book

ROUTLEDGE

Praise for the 6th edition:

"*Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect*, Sixth Edition, is an incredible, insightful guide to writing an effective, engaging short screenplay. Claudia Hunter Johnson takes the reader through the journey of crafting screenplays using connection as the path."

Dr. Valliere Richard Auzenne, *Florida State University College of Motion Picture Arts*

CRAFTING SHORT SCREENPLAYS THAT CONNECT

Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect, Sixth Edition, stands alone among screenwriting books by emphasizing that human connection, though often overlooked, is as essential to writing effective screenplays as conflict.

Award-winning writer and director Claudia Hunter Johnson teaches you the all-important basics of dramatic technique and guides you through the challenging craft of writing short screenplays with carefully focused exercises of increasing length and complexity. In completing these exercises and applying Johnson's techniques and insights to your own work, you will learn how to think more deeply about the screenwriter's purpose, craft effective patterns of human change, and strengthen your storytelling skills. This 25th Anniversary Edition features 11 short screenplays, including Academy Award winning Barry Jenkins' (*Moonlight, If Beale Street Could Talk*) luminous short film, *My Josephine* (now in the Criterion Collection), and an accompanying companion website that features the completed films and additional screenplay examples. The book has also been updated and expanded to include more excerpts from leading films and TV series as well as collaboration exercises and invaluable guidance about giving and receiving effective feedback.

This ground-breaking book will show you how to advance and deepen your screenwriting skills, increasing your ability to write richer, more resonant short screenplays that will connect with your audience. It remains an absolute must-have resource for students of screenwriting.

Claudia Hunter Johnson is the writer/director of the civil rights documentary feature, *The Other Side of Silence: The Untold Story of Ruby McCollum*, winner of the Gold Jury Prize at Seattle's Social Justice Film Festival and Best Florida Documentary at the Fort Lauderdale International Film Festival. Her memoir *Stifled Laughter*, now in its 2nd edition, was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize and won the inaugural P.E.N./*Newman's Own* First Amendment Award and the 2023 Best Books Award for Current Events. She's also the author of the memoir *Hurtling Toward Happiness: A Mother and Teenage Son's Road Trip From Blues to Bonding in a Really Small Car*. She has taught screenwriting at the FSU Film School and USC's School of Cinematic Arts.

CRAFTING SHORT SCREENPLAYS THAT CONNECT

SIXTH EDITION

Claudia Hunter Johnson

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For my grandchildren
Harper, Blake, Eliot, and Samantha
and my writing partner Matt Stevens,
the most creative people I know.

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Companion Website

Visit www.routledge.com/cw/johnson to view the ten short films of the screenplays featured in this book.

Preface to the Sixth/ Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition

When the First Edition of *Crafting Short Screenplays That Connect* was published in 2000, I never dreamed I'd be writing a Sixth/Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition a quarter of a century later. It's an honor to know that the book has reached so many screenwriters in the past 25 years.

The book began as a distillation of two-and-a-half decades of teaching screenwriting at the College of Motion Picture Arts at Florida State University and later in the Writing Division of USC's School of Cinematic Arts—with a unique approach born of an epiphany I had in 1994 that human connection is as essential as conflict to the lives we lead and the stories we tell, though it's been essentially overlooked in screenwriting books.

And since the first edition was published, to my delight, I've seen the role of connection increase in the stories we see on the big and small screen, often in successful films by my former screenwriting students like Barry Jenkins, who won the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Picture for his profoundly moving film about the healing power of human connection, *Moonlight*, a film that says it all about our abiding need for connection and the difference it makes in our lives. And I have included the luminous short film that Barry wrote in my screenwriting class at the FSU Film School, *My Josephine*—now in the Criterion Collection—in all six editions of this book.

Since I wrote the first edition, I've also seen the short film (30 minutes or less) rise in importance from a résumé piece intended to launch a filmmaker's career to an art form in its own right. And as interest and access to creating and viewing short films and episodes of series or limited series explodes worldwide on TV and the Web, the short film is becoming the central short narrative form of our time.

But during my early years of teaching at the FSU Film School I found three things sorely missing:

1. A nuts-and-bolts book about crafting short screenplays;
2. Access to the screenplays of short films so writers (and teachers and students) can see and learn from the choices and changes—good, bad, or ugly—that were made in production;
3. Any discussion in screenwriting books that there is more going on in good screenplays than conflict.

To liquidate this lack over the years I designed—often through trial and error—the practical, hands-on approach to crafting short screenplays that I'm offering here. And, to give you easy access to outstanding short films and their screenplays, you can access this book's companion website www.routledge.com/cw/johnson to see the award-winning films made from the screenplays published in Part IV of the book, except for the webisode, *Chillin' Out*, which, alas, is no longer available online (film may be forever, but far too often the Internet is ephemeral).

By craft I mean "the sum total of all means used to draw the audience into deep involvement, to hold that involvement, and ultimately to reward it with a moving and meaningful experience," as Robert McKee writes in *Story*.

In other words, to connect.

This book is dedicated to the proposition that connecting—to oneself and to others—is the source of great screenplays, regardless of length.

And craft, I'm convinced, can be taught, though I agree with playwright William Gibson's wry observation, "The rest is art and up to God." Craft must be taught to those who want to write effective short films, which require "deft characterization, a compressed narrative style, and something to say that is focused and fresh in voice," as Michael Rabiger reminds us in *Directing: Film Techniques and Aesthetics*. The shorter the film, in fact, the taller the order for craft.

"A good five-to-ten-minute film is actually more demanding to make than a passable thirty-minute one," Rabiger says.

Screenwriting is such a complex and difficult craft, I have found it most effective to break it into teachable, learnable pieces that you can tackle one at a time. This approach underlies the design of this book.

I believe in learning by doing, so you will write—and rewrite—five short screenplays of increasing length and complexity that focus on a different essential aspect of dramatic technique and the craft of screenwriting. Each screenplay will build on the skills and techniques you learned in the previous ones. Ideally, by the time you've written all five you will have grappled with most of the issues, small and large, in screenwriting.

My purpose has always been—and still is—to elicit the richest, most resonant work from my students and readers—short screenplays that are, at once, unique and universal. The goal of this book is the same—to offer an experiential approach that will help you—or your students—craft short screenplays that connect. To that end, the book is divided into four parts:

Part I—Preparing to Write the Short Screenplay—explores essential preliminary issues: The importance of connecting to others; connecting to your unique material and vision; connecting to genre; connecting to your own creative process (whether you write solo or with a partner); and connecting to what screenplays are at their deepest level—patterns of significant human change—and to what they are on the surface level of screenplay format.

Part II—Aspects of the Craft—examines story and screenplay, character, structure, and dialogue.

Part III—Five (Not So) Easy Screenplays—guides you through crafting five short screenplays, each focused on a crucial aspect of dramatic technique:

The Discovery: A three-page screenplay focused on a character making a discovery that makes a difference to the character.

The Decision: A five-page screenplay focused on a character making a decision that makes a difference to the character.

The Boxing Match (creating conflict): A five-to-seven page screenplay focused on one character wanting what another character does not want to give.

The Improbable Connection (creating connection): A seven-page screenplay focused on creating a plausible, but not predictable, pattern of human connection.

The Long Short Screenplay: A ten- to 15-page screenplay focused on telling the best story you can for the screen, using the techniques you've learned in the first four screenplays.

Part IV—Eleven Screenplays That Make It Look Easy—offers, for your illumination and inspiration, the screenplays of the webisode *Chillin' Out* and ten award-winning undergraduate and graduate FSU thesis films you can screen on the companion website. This outstanding collection includes three Student Emmy Award winners for Best Comedy—*Tough Crowd*, *Kosher*, and *The Making of "Killer Kite"* (*Kite*'s script and film are available on the website)—two-time Student Emmy award winner *Underground*, and two Student Academy Award winners, *Slow Dancin' Down the Aisles of the Quickcheck* and *A Work in Progress* (the script and film are available on the website) by Wes Ball, now well known for *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials*, *Maze Runner: The Death Cure*, and *Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes*. I've also included the screamingly funny comedy-horror short film, *Killer Kart*, the most screened student film ever made at the FSU Film School.

I asked the screenwriters to select the version of the screenplay that they wanted published. None is transcribed from the screen like so many published screenplays you'll find. As Bob Gray said when he sent me the screenplay for *The Making of "Killer Kite"* (film and script available on the companion website), "I resisted the temptation to rewrite the script and make it fit the edited film. This is the shooting script from which the film was made. It is, I think, a better educational exercise to see how a project can change from the final script to the completed edit."

I agree. And you will have the opportunity to see and study the changes that were made on that arduous journey from script to screen by comparing these eleven screenplays to their finished films on the companion website for this fourth edition (www.routledge.com/cw/johnson). I strongly urge you to read the screenplays before screening the films and even before reading the rest of the book, as I will refer to them throughout.

In the brief introduction to each screenplay, I've let the writer describe how the screenplay evolved and how the script changed in production. Eleven writers—Brian Gutiérrez Aramayo, Akil Dupont (who co-wrote *Underground* with Ariya Wally), Iman Zawahry (who co-wrote *Tough Crowd* with Brian Sharpe), Aimée Barth (now Aimée Dirksen), Barry Jenkins, Wes Ball, Lani Sciandra, Thomas Jackson, James Feeney, and Yu Ying Chien (who co-wrote *The Great Wall of Vicky Lynn* with Lucas Omar)—directed their films, *Intercambios*, *Underground*, *Tough Crowd*, *Kosher*, *My Josephine*, *A Work in Progress*, *Cool Breeze and Buzz*, and *Slow Dancin' Down the Aisles of the Quickcheck*, *Killer Kart*, and *The Great Wall of Vicky Lynn*, respectively. Matt Stevens—who wrote the webisode *Chillin' Out* as well as the story for *The Making of "Killer Kite"*—directed *Kite*, but Bob Gray wrote the screenplay. And Rachel Witenstein wrote *Lena's Spaghetti*, but Joe Greco directed.

Some, like Matt Stevens, have written short-short-short films (30 seconds) for websites like Mattel's http://myscene.com and other new media, a burgeoning market for those skilled at writing short scripts. Others, like Barry Jenkins and Wes Ball, are writing wildly successful features, a testament to the often-overlooked truth that the short film—while an art form in its own right—is excellent preparation for writing long screenplays. The dramatic principles explored in this book are found in all good screenplays, long and short. And even if you're writing long screenplays, crafting short scripts will help you hone your skills.

Writing short screenplays that connect requires the craft and concentration of a medieval artist carving scenes in a walnut. And writing in a nutshell—in a nutshell—forces you to be more creative, resourceful. That is why I beg to differ with people who say that writing short scripts is as useful as lips on a chicken. It may well be the most rigorous and useful screenwriting training you'll get.

And writing short screenplays is the best way to see your work on the screen and have others see it. "Getting seen is the precursor to getting noticed," Michael Rabiger says, "and for actuarial reasons alone short films are always more likely to be shown in festivals than long ones." Feature-length screenplays, alas, are like sperm: There's a one-in-a-million chance they'll get made.

But perhaps most important, this book is the first to explore connection (and not just conflict) as a crucial part of good screenplays and the screenwriting process. Including human connection in the stories they tell has helped my students at the FSU Film School and USC's School of Cinematic Arts write richer, more resonant short screenplays that have become award-winning films screened and celebrated at festivals all over the world. In the spirit of their own screenplays, they have competed and they have connected. I hope, with this book, you will, too.

And may this book increase connection and decrease conflict in the world—for the benefit of all sentient beings.

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My astonishing family, Anne, Ross, Ethan, Caroline, Harper, Samantha, Blake, Eliot, and Ormond, for kicking so many of the ideas included in this book around the dinner table without your eyes glazing over. And for all the times we've watched movies and TV series together and the lively discussions that follow.

My fabulous writing partner, Matt Stevens, for all the laughs we've shared during our long, happy collaboration co-writing screenplays and books. Thanks for your brilliant suggestion about the best collaboration exercise to include in this edition and for letting me include your webisode, *Chillin' Out*, in the book and *The Making of "Killer Kite"* on the website.

Mark Ceryak and Barry Jenkins, partners at Pastel, for sending me the screenplays to Barry's three award-winning feature films, *Medicine for Melancholy*, *Moonlight*, and *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

Brenda Mills at the FSU Film School, for helping me corral the best short films from the FSU Film School and Meryl Warren for helping me corral the screenwriters I've included in this and previous editions.

And thanks to the Film School for the privilege of including these award-winning FSU films on the companion website, www.routledge.com/cw/johnson.

Farrar, Straus and Giroux for granting permission to quote from Seamus Heaney's poem "Station Island."

And last but never least, the gifted screenwriters featured in this new edition—Matt Stevens, James Feeney, Yu Ying Chien and Omar Lucas, Brian Gutiérrez Aramayo, Ariya Wally and Akil Dupont, Brian Sharpe and Iman K. Zawahry, Aimée Barth (now Dirksen), Barry Jenkins, Rachel Witenstein, Lani Sciandra, Thomas Wade Jackson—for allowing me to share your creative insights and your screenplays and short films with the world.

It's an honor to honor your wonderful work.

Introduction

The Power and Importance of Human Connection

For years I gently browbeat my students. "Dig deeper," I said. "The best stories are about the human heart."

I wasn't quite sure what I meant. I knew I didn't mean that old Hollywood saw—*throw in some love interest!* I meant something closer to Samson Raphaelson's remark about Shakespeare in *The Human Nature of Playwriting*, "[He] is not a realistic writer but he is overwhelmingly real because he reports the hearts of human beings."

I was teaching dramatic technique—first playwriting in the English Department at Florida State, then screenwriting when the Film School began—rounding up the usual suspects, conflict, crisis, and climax—but I had this nagging sensation that these overlooked something important in stories. I couldn't figure out what it was, so I hoped, if sufficiently coaxed, my students could.

What We Talk About When We Talk About Drama

Derived from the Greek *dran*—"to do"—drama means someone strives. Will meets obstacles, and this creates conflict. For 200 years, perhaps more, we have talked about dramatic stories this way. George Bernard Shaw defined drama as "the conflict between man's will and his environment." Across the channel, Ferdinand Brunetière said it was "the will of man in conflict." And so it has gone, like a roll call, each person casting a vote for drama's conventional wisdom.

"Since the early nineteenth century the 'conflict theory' of drama has dominated dramatic criticism and, to a considerable degree, the practice of playwrights," Eric Bentley says in *Concepts in Dramatic Theory*. "It is a central assumption of most twentieth-century dramatic theory." In film, where the budgets (and insecurities) run wilder, and the flops are more catastrophic, the rule of the game is more rigid.

"The basis of all drama is conflict," Syd Field says in almost every one of his books. "Without conflict there is no action; without action there is no character; without character there is no story. And without story there is no screenplay."

Most screenwriting books—about long or short screenplays—essentially say the same thing, though in *Screenwriting Tricks of the Trade*, William Froug is the most emphatic: "Without conflict, you might as well pack it in—you are in the wrong field of endeavor. Without conflict, your reader will fall asleep and you will never have to think about having an audience. The ball-game is over."

Conflict has shaped the way that we think about drama and the way that we think to shape it. In *Writing Great Screenplays for Film and TV*, Dona Cooper offers a new improved metaphor for the screenplay—a roller coaster. It's a rollicking image, more energetic and imaginative than most I have found in screenwriting books, but the author's graphic depiction—action that rises and rises and rises then falls—is merely a remake of a nineteenth-century model, Freitag's Pyramid (conflict, crisis, and resolution), which keeps cropping up in all kinds of books about writing, including former editions of Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction*. But Janet—a colleague—was increasingly uncomfortable, too, with this conflict-bound way of seeing the story.

Other writers, most of them women, were also uneasy. But Ursula K. Le Guin came closest to articulating what I was feeling:

> People are cross-grained, aggressive, and full of trouble, the storytellers tell us; people fight themselves and one another, and their stories are full of their struggles. But to say that that is the story is to use one aspect of existence, conflict, to subsume all other aspects, many of which it does not include and does not comprehend.
>
> *Romeo and Juliet* is the story of the conflict between two families, and its plot involves the conflict of two individuals within those families. Is that all it involves? Isn't *Romeo and Juliet* about something else, and isn't it the something else that makes the otherwise trivial tale of a feud into a tragedy?[1]

Conflict was not incorrect, it was *incomplete*. It didn't get to the heart of the matter, to that level of story that engages most deeply. It was half the story, but I couldn't figure out what the other half was.

Ruby & Me

In January 1994, in the shower, I saw it—the other half of the story. I don't know what it is about showers and baths that's conducive to insight, but the fact is well documented: Einstein reportedly claimed his greatest ideas occurred in the shower, and everyone knows about Archimedes. I'm a Pisces so I like to think it's the water, but it's more than likely the break from our

work. "These insights tend to come suddenly and, characteristically, not when sitting at a desk working," Fritjof Capra writes in the *Tao of Physics*, "but when relaxing, in the bath, during a walk in the woods, on the beach."

I'd taken a break from researching my documentary film about the most famous murder in Florida, the trial of Ruby McCollum, an African American woman in my small town of Live Oak convicted of shooting and killing the town's Great White Hope, Senator-elect LeRoy Adams, her doctor and alleged lover. When she fired the gun—if she, in fact, did it—her life also came to an end: Every major connection was severed; her husband died the next day of heart failure; and she was separated from her children, other family, and friends for more than 20 years.

Immersed in Ruby's story, I couldn't figure out why it engaged me so deeply. She and I had nothing in common except for our gender and the small North Florida town where we lived. The surface events of her story were the stuff of soap opera—wealth, corruption, infidelity, murder—and this had no connection to my quiet life. There was something deeper at work. Then, in the shower, in an unforgettable flash of insight, I saw that it was connection itself. Underlying the conflict of Ruby's story, underlying the events of her life and mine—underlying any good story, fictitious or true—is a deeper pattern of change, a pattern of connection and disconnection. The conflict and surface events are like waves, but underneath is an emotional tide—the ebb and flow of human connection. It's just as essential to story as conflict but it has been essentially overlooked.

I'm no Einstein and I didn't run naked trailing bathwater into the street, but I did shout, "Eureka, I've found it!" I did. For the first time, I saw drama *whole*. Here was its deepest humanity, structure, and emotional rhythm, the "something else" Le Guin knew was missing.

Everything seemed to fall into place. I understood the emotional power of plays in a way that I hadn't before: What keeps *Romeo and Juliet* from being an "otherwise trivial tale of a feud" is the underlying pattern of connection and disconnection, not just between the two star-crossed lovers, but between them and those others who make up their web of connections—nurse, parents, Mercutio, Tybalt, Friar Lawrence, the Prince; what keeps *Death of a Salesman* from being a trivial tale of a failed businessman is Willy's tragic pattern of connection and disconnection with others, especially Biff.

I saw tragedy and comedy in a new light—comedy ends in connection, tragedy in disconnection. "The tragic side of tragedy," to borrow Aristotle's phrase, is more than the hero's fall from position and power. "Those who have had the misfortune to do or undergo fearful things," are, in the end, disconnected. We may pity the fallen because we fear falling, but we fear it less, perhaps, than we fear disconnection. Even death, the ultimate disconnection, is less fearsome for some than life without connection.

"Ha! banishment," Romeo cries. "Be merciful, say 'death,'/For exile hath more terror in his look,/Much more, than death. Do not say 'banishment.'"

Connection is human sustenance, the substance of story. Its gain and loss provide the emotional power, as Aristotle implies in *Poetics*:

> Let us determine, then, which kinds of happening are felt by the spectator to be fearful, and which pitiable. Now such acts are necessarily the work of persons who are near and dear (close blood kin) to one another, or enemies, or neither. But when an enemy attacks an enemy there is nothing pathetic about either the intention or the deed, except in the actual pain suffered by the victim; nor when the act is done by "neutrals"; but when the tragic acts come within the limits of close blood relationship, as when brother kills or intends to kill brother or do something else of that kind to him, or son to father or mother to son or son to mother—those are the situations one should look for.[2]

I understood, too, that connection and disconnection provided the emotional power of the films I had seen, even the best of the hardboiled genres. *The Fugitive*—warmed-over TV show that it is—engages more deeply than most films in its genre because of the grudging but growing connection between the fugitive Kimble and Federal Marshal Gerard, the deeper emotional journey from Gerard's "I don't care" (a line Tommy Lee Jones rehearsed for days) to his closing line, "I care. Don't tell anyone." This improbable connection is the heart of the story, its pattern of meaning. It fills the emotional void created by Kimble's wife's brutal murder. In story as in life, human nature abhors an emotional vacuum.

I went to see Janet. She said, "This is big—the other half of Aristotle." She pulled books from her shelves that touched on connection—Lewis Hyde's *The Gift* and Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women* and Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice*. She opened Hyde's book and showed me a passage from Pablo Neruda, a memory about a connection he made when he was a child, an exchange of small gifts—a pine cone and a faded toy sheep—with a boy about his own age, a stranger he did not see again:

> That exchange brought home to me for the first time a precious idea: that all humanity is somehow together. This is the great lesson I learned in my childhood, in the backyard of a lonely house. Maybe it was nothing but a game two boys played who didn't know each other and wanted to pass to the other some good things of life. Yet maybe this small and mysterious exchange of gifts remained inside me also, deep and indestructible, giving my poetry light.[3]

This, I think, is the heart of it all: There are moments of change in our lives and stories that are not comprehended by conflict. These moments of change are connections, human exchanges, however fleeting or small—a faded sheep for a pine cone—or, as Stephen Jay Gould says in "Counters and Cable

Cars," "people taking care of each other in small ways of enduring significance." Large or small, they are like gifts—they create ties between us.

Janet asked if she could mention my insight in her new edition of *Writing Fiction*:

> I'm indebted to dramatist Claudia Johnson for this further—and, it seems to me, crucial—insight about [Le Guin's] "something else": whereas the hierarchical or "vertical" nature of narrative, the power struggle, has long been acknowledged, there also appears in all narrative a "horizontal" pattern of connection and disconnection between characters which is the main source of its emotional effect. In discussing human behavior, psychologists speak in terms of "tower" and "network" patterns, the need to climb and the need for community, the need to win out over others and the need to belong to others; and these two drives also drive fiction.[4]

As a writer who has worked in four genres—plays, fiction, screenplays, and, most recently, memoir—I suspect these two drives drive most stories (I'll leave it to others to explore the exceptions). In *Metaphors of Interrelatedness: Toward a Systems Theory of Psychology*, Linda Olds acknowledges our "vertical strivings for power, achievement, knowledge, and accomplishment," but she adds:

> We no longer inhabit a universe capable of being represented vertically alone; the embeddedness of us all in an intricately interrelating dance of energy and spacetime, of connection and change, has become the inescapable heritage of our time. We must reach out for horizontal metaphors which speak the language of embrace and interconnection, rather than striving and rising above.[5]

The film *Red* does this with its powerful opening image of telephone cables carrying the young model's call at breathtaking speeds across land, under water, and across land again. One of the most compelling films that I've seen, it is a story told with almost no conflict, a film, finally, about connection itself. But *Lost in Translation* was the most superb example I'd seen of how moving and successful a screenplay/film about human connection can be.

Still, most stories have both. Rooted in the same Latin prefix (*con*—together), conflict (from the Latin *confligere*—to clash or strike together) and connection (from the Latin *connectere*—to bind or tie together) are complementary forces. The physicist Niels Bohr introduced the concept of "complementarity," but as Capra points out in *The Tao of Physics*, it goes back 2,500 years:

> The Chinese sages represented this complementarity of opposites by the archetypal poles of *yin* and *yang* and saw

> their dynamic interplay as the essence of all natural phenomena and all human situations.[6]

Connection and conflict are also dynamic and interrelated. They are woven together like strands of deoxyribonucleic acid, the double helix of drama.

A Model of Wholeness

Like the newly pregnant woman who never noticed pregnant women before but now sees them wherever she goes, I noticed connection wherever I looked.

I saw its ebb and flow in the novels I read. Anne Tyler's *Ladder of Years* is a series of emotional movements of connecting and disconnecting and reconnecting as Delia drifts from her family, builds a new life, and returns to her own.

I saw connection and disconnection in films that I screened, even the wild-assed rides in *Pulp Fiction*—"Vincent Vega and Marsellus Wallace's Wife," "The Gold Watch," and "The Bonnie Situation." For all the vintage Tarantino violence and conflict, marvelous connections occur in each of the stories.

In *Apollo 13*, I noticed how painstakingly the story establishes Jim Lovell's web of connections—wife, children, colleagues—and how these become the real stake in the film, as important as survival itself, the reason survival matters to him at all.

Like E. M. Forster's once cryptic epigram, "Only connect," this made a new kind of sense. Eight months after my insight, on tour with my memoir *Stifled Laughter*, I heard a lecture by Betty Friedan. It was an interesting update of Abraham Maslow, who ranked connection (belonging) just below survival in his well-known hierarchy of needs. Friedan cited research that shows connection is no less a need. "Connectedness," as she calls it in *The Fountain of Age*, "has a direct effect on mortality." Epidemiological studies across the country show that men and women without significant human connection are twice as likely to die. Widowers, disconnected from their central and often their only significant connection, are "40 percent more likely to die in the first six months after their spouse's death than other men their age."

That women live longer than men is well known. The conventional wisdom says that men die younger because of too much striving and competition, but Friedan and others show it is also caused by too little connection. Studies on the male midlife crisis have linked men's psychological pain to the realization that they have (like dramatic theorists) neglected connection. This lack of "closeness, relatedness, and intimacy," Friedan says, contributes directly to men's shorter lives. To survive, men and women alike must have "purpose and intimacy," what Tolstoy called "work and love," goals to strive for and what Friedan bluntly calls "the life-and-death importance of connectedness."

I connect, therefore I am.

We cannot live by conflict alone; neither can a good screenplay. The best screenwriters understand this intuitively, but the rest of us will be better screenwriters if we think about both halves of the story—conflict and connection—when we think about the stories we're telling. In this way, we'll "facilitate new ways of seeing" the story and work with "a model of wholeness," to borrow two phrases from Linda Olds. Most important, we'll open the aperture wider, to use a film metaphor, and give our stories more light.

PART I

PREPARING TO WRITE THE SHORT SCREENPLAY

ONE

Connecting to Purpose

Only Connect

A screenwriter's purpose is to connect.

"Only connect," E. M. Forster tells us in *Howard's End*. He meant it as a rule to live by. I see it as a rule to *write* by. The best screenplays—long or short—are written by those who know how to connect—to themselves (their unique vision, material, process), to what drama is, and, most important, to others.

In his beautiful review of *Roma* on rogerebert.com, Brian Tallerico reminds us that the late Roger Ebert "considered the role of great cinema" to be "an empathy machine."[1] As Ebert said when he was awarded a star on Hollywood's Walk of Fame in 2005 for his extraordinary career as a film critic:

> Movies are the most powerful empathy machine in all the arts. When I go to a great movie I can live somebody else's life for a while. I can walk in somebody else's shoes. I can see what it feels like to be a member of a different gender, a different race, a different economic class, to live at a different time, to have a different belief. This is a liberalizing influence on me. It gives me a broader mind. It helps me to join my family of men and women on this planet. It helps me to identify with them, so I'm not just stuck being myself, day after day. The great movies enlarge us, they civilize us, they make us more decent people.[2]

So your overriding purpose as a screenwriter should be to create short or long screenplays that create empathy—identification, understanding, compassion—in the hearts of your audience.

"You must never forget the umbilical cord is to real life, real people," Oliver Stone says in Linda Seger and Edward Jay Whetmore's *From Script to Screen*.

"I think of the medium as a people-to-people medium," Frank Capra says in Eric Sherman's *Directing the Film*, "not cameraman-to-people, not directors-to-people, not writers-to-people, but people-to-people."

"You know," Jean Renoir agrees, "if art doesn't take us as collaborators, art is dull. We must be in communion, the artist and the public. Without the collaboration of the public, to me, we have nothing."[3]

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Like Edward Zwick (*Glory*, *Legends of the Fall*, *The Last Samurai*, *Defiance*), they make their films with their audience in mind.

> The way to make a movie is to understand that you're speaking to one person at a time, in the dark. You're telling them a story, gauging their reaction, watching in your mind's eye as they lean forward, making it as personal a telling as you possibly can.[4]

Only connect. Write it down on a Post-it® note or a three-by-five card and stick it on your computer, desk, forehead. This deceptively simple advice is the heart of the art of writing good screenplays.

It is also the impulse to write. "When talented people write well," Robert McKee says in *Story*, "it is generally for this reason: They're moved by a desire to touch the audience."

Thomas Jackson described this desire when I asked how he came up with *Slow Dancin' Down the Aisles of the Quickcheck*:

> I was driving back [from Bainbridge, Georgia, to Tallahassee] and I was thinking about a character, a grocery store manager who had a crush on his head cashier. You know, when I worked in this grocery store I had crushes on all the cashiers, you know, in some way or another, because I was very shy and I didn't speak to them so I always had crushes on them. But I was thinking about this guy and I was thinking that, because I'm a songwriter, too, what if he played ... I could just see this guy playing this woman a song, and it's not something that he normally does, and it's like he's pouring his heart out and it's just so un-him. And I'm describing this into a little tape recorder I keep with me all the time, and I got choked up. You can hear me get choked up on the tape because I'm getting emotional about this. And I say on the tape, I said, "Man, if I can just make people have that feeling, I'd feel like I did something." I thought, *If I can get people to feel that way, I would feel like I did something*.

You may have a different purpose in mind. If you're anything like the ambitious students I teach, you may well want to write the script for that short film that will open Hollywood's doors. And that can certainly happen, but it won't happen unless your screenplay connects. Connecting with others is what you must do to succeed as a screenwriter, and it will also be your greatest success.

Ask any dramatist—playwright or screenwriter. They'll describe the sheer wonder—and joy—of seeing an audience connecting to a story they've written. People lurching with laughter (in the right places) or staring rapt at the screen because they're so moved by the story they're seeing. And the

worst times are those when an audience doesn't connect. Groans. Sighs of impatience or boredom. Bad laughs.

Years ago, during the intermission of one of my plays, I overheard two young men in the lobby discussing a dog. I like dog stories, so I sidled over to listen. The "dog," I found out, was my play. That's what is so terrifying about writing plays or screenplays: Failure is so damn *public*.

Okay, you've been warned.

But even an evening of *My Play as a Dog* cannot cancel the incomparable pleasures I've had connecting to others, seeing—to my everlasting joy and amazement—an audience stand up and *cheer* for a short play I wrote, *Propinquity*, which Actors Theatre of Louisville produced five different times. And, yes, that play opened doors—terrific reviews ("offers hope and humanity," *The Irish Times* said—my personal fav), my first agent, and publication—but I promise you that nothing—*nothing*—equalled the sense of achievement I felt when that play connected to others. When I keep that in mind, I'm a much better writer. Maybe that's why Fritz Lang says:

> I asked myself—why is the first work of a writer or a screenwriter, or of a playwright almost always a success? Because he still belongs to an audience. The more he goes away from the audience, the more he loses contact, and what I tried to do my whole life long was I tried not to lose contact with the audience.

But even Fritz Lang—for all his magnificent films such as *Metropolis*, *M*, *The Big Heat*—wasn't always successful.

Why? Because connecting to others is one of the hardest things that we do. As Bruno Bettelheim observed in his book *Surviving*, human beings are like porcupines trying to stay warm on a cold winter night: We want to be close to one another for warmth, but we don't want to be too close for comfort. We're distinct—and we're not. We want to remain distinct, unique—and we don't.

Imagine a screening room full of strangers waiting to see the short film you've written—young, old, male, female, different ages, professions—a bag boy, a film buff, a dentist who's had a bad day, an attorney who's just realized she hates practicing law. Put yourself in their place; this shouldn't be hard; you've been an audience member longer than you've been a writer. Like you and everyone else on this planet, they're preoccupied. Yet, somehow, the story you've written must engage—catch and hold—their attention. If it doesn't, they'll think, "So what? Why are you telling me this? Wasting my time? What the hell does this have to do with my life?" They'll daydream or rattle cellophane wrappers or get up and walk out.

"The first business of the playwright is to keep the audience from walking out," William Gibson says in *Shakespeare's Game*. This goes for screenwriters, too.

Luckily, audiences *want* to connect, though this desire may be unconscious, buried. "It is true that America is a high-tech, speed-driven, 'Gimme-the-fax/facts-and-get-on-with-it' society," Marylou Awiakta says in *Selu*.

"Few can escape this dynamic. But it's also true that most of us, deep down, yearn for relationship, connection, and meaning."

Good stories satisfy this deep yearning. Once upon a time we shared stories around a fire—sometimes we still do—but now we usually share them in movie theaters, and the flickering light on our faces comes from the images up on the screen. The stories we see may take place in a galaxy far far away or in a rough neighborhood in Miami or a posh boys' prep school in New England or a world populated by Barbies, but stories like *Star Wars*, *Moonlight*, *The Holdovers*, and *Barbie* (to name just a few) not only entertain us, they make us more human. They show us in fresh and wonderful ways that we're not the only fools on the planet struggling with this godawful difficult business of being alive. They "induce a moment of grace, a communion," Lewis Hyde says in *The Gift*, "a period during which we too know the hidden coherence of our being and feel the fullness of our lives."

As audience members, we spend a good deal of time and money in this culture to feel that sense of communion, to be fully engaged, to feel so tied to a story we're carried away.

"I want to be transported by the screenplay," actor Peter Strauss says in *From Script to Screen*, "to go to the movie, to be in the dark and have magic happen."

I think it helps us as writers—I know it helps me—to think of a screenplay as a magic carpet ride, to ask these questions: "How does my story lift an audience off the ground? Take them on a journey? Return them to their seats?" And, perhaps most important, "How does the ride make them *feel?"*

"I look for passion, aliveness, hatred, rage, fear, pain, joy, bigness," Strauss continues. "I want to feel big, I want to be angry big, feel sad big."

Look at the language he's using: *I want to feel big. I want to be angry big, feel sad big*. He isn't content to see characters having emotions—*he wants to feel those emotions himself*.

Paddy Chayefsky (*Marty*, *The Hospital*) put it bluntly, "Drama is concerned only with emotion." And, in interview after interview, even Tarantino insists that a story must work on an emotional level. "A play"—or, in this case, a screenplay—"is the shortest distance from emotions to emotions," George Pierce Baker says in *Dramatic Technique*.

The stories we tell must create shared emotions, those golden threads that connect the audience to the characters up on the screen. Or on paper.

When Alan Arkin came to Tallahassee to direct a short film, I asked what he looked for in a screenplay. "I just want a good story," he said. "I want to be moved."

I just want a good story.

"You can't involve them with gimmicks, with sunsets, with hand-held cameras, zoom shots, or anything else," Frank Capra says in *Directing the Film*. "They couldn't care less about those things. But you can give them something to worry about, some person they can worry about, and care about, and you've got them, you've got them involved."

Involved. Engaged. Connected.

At the 59th Annual Academy Awards in 1987, accepting the Thalberg Award for his contributions to the industry, Steven Spielberg admitted he was more culpable than any other director for the popular practice of supplanting story with the camera and special effects. He pledged to inculcate in the next generation a greater interest in writing and to develop that interest himself.

It was this realization, this rededication to story, that led Spielberg back to that same stage to receive an Oscar for a film that connected to audiences worldwide with its wrenching disconnections and one of history's most improbable connections—Oskar Schindler caring for those on his list.

The Screenplay Paradox

Joan Didion once said that the reason we write resides in the very vowel sounds of the phrase "Why I Write": *I, I, I*.

It has also been said that the reason audiences go to see what we've written can be summed up in the phrase: *Tell me about me*.

It's a miracle that shared emotions happen at all. Still, it's true: We go to *The Full Monty* to see a story about unemployed steelworkers who save relationships and self-respect with a strip-show. We also go because, on some level, we want to see our own life, but we don't want to *see* our own life up there on the screen because we've seen it already, and that would be boring. We want to see our own life—and we don't.

Porcupines!

This seemingly contradictory statement is nonetheless true: A paradox. The Screenplay Paradox, I like to call it, though it's true for all stories. So the screenwriter's job—the great sleight of hand—is to create a story that satisfies both.

NOT ABOUT ME

ABOUT ME

The burning question is *how*?

There's no formula, gimmick. If there were, Disney would probably own the rights to it. And the answer doesn't lie in cheap hooks, manipulation, second guessing, or pandering to what an audience likes.

Because nobody knows.

"Nobody knows anything," William Goldman says about Hollywood.

"By God," John Huston says in *Directing the Film*, "I don't know what my best friend or wife or son or daughter would like. I only know what I like, and I hope that there are enough like me to feel the way I do about it."

Why some stories connect and others do not is, ultimately, a mystery, but we move closer to the solution when we think about what stories that *do* connect have in common.

Years ago, presenting the Academy Award for the best film in a foreign language, Jeremy Irons said, "Though our language may be different, our desires, our needs, are the same."

If we substitute the word "lives" for "language," I think we move closer to understanding why some stories connect: *Though our lives may be different, our desires, our needs are the same*.

Or, as Brian Sharpe explained so eloquently when I asked him about co-writing *Tough Crowd*,

> The idea connected with me because even though I'm a Catholic male, I found many of the struggles of a Muslim female protagonist to be comparable to ones from my own life. Although Jihad in *Tough Crowd* and I are totally different on the outside, we share the same sort of aspirations and goals on the inside. I think that is the key to connecting with an audience: As long as we can relate to a character's internal struggle or care about their inner development, it does not matter who they are on the outside, where they come from, or what their beliefs are.

Though our lives may be different, our desires, our needs are the same.

$$\frac{\text{DIFFERENT LIVES}}{\text{SAME DESIRES}}$$

I'm not black or gay, and I've never been bullied or had to fight for survival like Chiron in *Moonlight*, but I connected deeply to his story. So did millions of others—bag boys, film buffs, dentists, attorneys—because under the surface particulars of the story, beneath its unique universe in Miami lie the deeper, universal human patterns of striving, failing, and striving again, as well as connecting, disconnecting, and reconnecting.

$$\frac{\text{NOT ABOUT ME}}{\text{ABOUT ME}} = \frac{\text{UNIQUE}}{\text{UNIVERSAL}}$$

We strive—some say compete—and we connect. We need to win and we need to belong. That's the human matrix—a vertical pattern of striving and a horizontal pattern of connecting. And these human patterns—recreated in unique ways—are the source of a story's shared emotions.

Art, Shakespeare tells us in *Hamlet*, holds a mirror up to nature. Human nature. And somehow, through the mysterious alchemy of art and the emotional power of beautifully crafted empathy machines, we look at Hamlet and Han Solo and Cleo and Chiron and Hushpuppy and Chris—and we see ourselves.

TWO

Connecting to Self

There's a depressing rumor going around that there's nothing new under the sun. Every story's been told. When you go to the movies it's easy to see how this rumor got started. Few films are fresh. Most are warmed-over versions of what we saw last year. We wander out of the theater convinced that everything *has* been done. So how, my students ask, can their screenplays be unique?

The answer, I say, is ...

Le Menu

Le *what?*

Le Menu. A cross-section of their concerns. Self-analysis lite, so to speak, like those low-cal frozen dinners. (I jokingly called it *Le Menu* one day in class. The name stuck.)

I ask them to take out a pencil or pen and a clean sheet of paper and divide it into ten columns labeled *What I Love*, *What I Hate*, *What I Fear*, *What I Believe*, *What I Value*, *What I Want*, *What I Know About*, *People Who Made a Difference in My Life*, *Discoveries That Made a Difference in My Life*, and *Decisions That Made a Difference in My Life*.

When they're finished making the menu, the top row looks something like this:

Le Menu

What I Love	What I Hate	What I Fear	What I Believe	What I Value	What I Want	What I Know About	People Who Made a Difference in My Life	Discoveries That Made a Difference in My Life	Decisions That Made a Difference in My Life

Next, I ask them to fill in each column with their top five answers. Ten, if time allows. (If an answer is private, I ask them to flag it so I don't shoot my mouth off about it in class.) A few roll their eyes, and I have to assure them it's not some pop-psychology gimmick. I'm not trying to find out who's crazy. "In a way, we're all crazy," one of my favorite Buddhist writers, Joko Beck, says, and I'm content to leave it at that.

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The exercise may *seem* a bit crazy—"touchy feely," as we said in the sixties—but there is method in my madness. I've been giving this matter a great deal of thought since the literary manager of Actors Theatre of Louisville said to me a few years ago, "American dramatists lack passion and perception!" He was referring to playwrights, but the same could be said of screenwriters.

It isn't due to a lack of education or brilliance or vitamin K. It's due to our lack of awareness. We're all passionate and perceptive about certain things—we just have to figure out what they are.

"In order to create art works of any worth, each artist must have something to say, some values, some attitudes, some store of experience—a vision," my former playwriting teacher, the late and greatly missed Sam Smiley, said in *Playwriting: The Structure of Action*. Each artist must "identify those attitudes before they will ever energize a work of value."

That's what *Le Menu* is all about—identifying those attitudes, values, and experiences that will energize our work as screenwriters, creating a menu of what we know and care deeply about. It's one of the most important things we can do as screenwriters, because our unique material and vision is the source of unique screenplays.

So take a moment or an hour or a half-day to fill out a chart of your own. Work in pencil, if possible; you will probably be erasing a lot; this is a harder task than it may seem at first. Doodle first on scrap paper if you prefer, then, when you're ready, fill in each column. You don't need to rank order your answers (but do if it makes you happy); just fill in the top five or ten.

And keep your answers small and specific. Hating phenomena like global warming is too general, or, as Mark Twain said about glacial epochs, "they are vague, vague." Hating nuclear war is too sweeping; these are *short* screenplays we're talking about. It's hard to tell *Dr. Strangelove* in 15 minutes. Or seven. Or three.

But if hating nuclear war keeps turning up on your own menu, take a moment to figure out why. Shake it down. See what *specific* connections you have to this passionate feeling. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers. The point is to get down on paper what makes you tick. So dig deeper. Annihilation aside, why do you hate nuclear war? How does this hatred resonate with your own life?

This shaking-down process can be rich and revealing. Digging deeper usually is. Annihilation aside, I hate nuclear war because when I was a child in the fifties and early sixties, my South Texas elementary teachers made me and my elementary school colleagues crawl under our flimsy school desks and sit there hunched over, hugging our knees, as if that would do any good if Khrushchev (or later Castro) dropped the Big One.

This drill was supposed to make us feel safe, but it unleashed an unexpected emotional fallout among American schoolchildren—stark terror—not that we were going to die, but that we were going to die *apart from our parents*. Talk about *bomb scare*. I sat crouched under my desk plotting the fastest route home (through the cotton field next to my school). My future husband was in high school in a Connecticut prep school, a thousand-plus

miles from his parents in Florida, plotting how to steal a Jeep and drive back roads all the way home so he could be with them before they all went *kablooey*. Ask any Boomer. It's a Christmas miracle we're normal at all.

I think you see the point. It's hard to create a short screenplay from hating something as sweeping and vague as nuclear war, but you can begin to see possibilities in a terrified tomboy crouched under her South Texas school desk plotting shortcuts through cotton fields, or a high-school preppie in Connecticut plotting to rip off a Jeep.

The best short screenplays are deeply felt and highly specific.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not talking memoir. I'm not saying you have to write autobiographical screenplays. You may, of course—most of the 11 screenplays included in this book have autobiographical elements—but that's not the point. The point is to have a point of authentic connection to the screenplays you write. The best short screenplays I've seen over the years have sprung from a person or image or scene or belief, from *something* in the story that has deep resonance for the writer.

"The idea for *My Josephine* came from an image in my head of two people's feet dangling over a table," Barry Jenkins told me. "I saw them working the night shift at a twenty-four-hour Laundromat, young and intimate."

Why did this image resonate with him? It took him 15 months—and many drafts—to find out.

He wrote the first draft shortly after 9/11 and decided to make the characters Arab-American, a difficult process for him, but one that led him to his central point of connection to his characters and story:

> I am not Muslim, nor Arab-American, so it was quite a stretch for me to attempt to draft characters that were truthful. To get a new perspective on it, I took the few specific assessments I'd made about what it must be like to be Arab-American, closed my eyes, and pictured the characters living in a society where the ideal American experience is advertised as a thin physique, Caucasian, English-speaking, carefree, consumerist one. If you're not, at the very least, Caucasian and English-speaking, it can be very frustrating to live in a society where the preceding image is thrown at you every thirty seconds in print, radio, film, and television. And if you're Arab-American in post-9/11 America, it's downright daunting. This is where the pursuit of love gained importance in the script. Once I solidified my opinion of what living in America as an Arab-American was like, I immediately decided that to circumvent the harshness of that reality, the character of Aadid would devote himself to the pursuit of happiness in the love of his coworker Adela. In this way I managed to transplant all my past longings for the love and affection of women who seemed (chose) not to requite my advances but remained so close.

Barry wasn't aware of an even deeper level of connection to his spare, moving story of two Arab-American Laundromat coworkers until the film was screened in Los Angeles, and a black filmmaking friend of his wrote: *I like the film mainly because, while it does not have anything to do specifically with African Americans, it does touch on issues of ethnicity and language/linguistic inequality within a community as depicted and portrayed through Barry's eyes/experiences as an African American.*

"While I hadn't consciously opted to include these things," Barry said, "I couldn't help but see myself reflected in them once it was pointed out to me."

Thomas Jackson used to have crushes on all the cashiers; his main character, Earl, sprang from that root emotion. But the connection for him, too, goes even deeper. In *Slow Dancin'*, Earl finally finds the courage to tell Maybelline that he loves her, and courage is a subject close to home for the writer:

> I like to explore courage in ordinary people, extraordinary courage in ordinary people. They're just ordinary people and what they're wanting to do is not like some grandiose thing, but it's just like the moment of courage, taking that step, leaving home. I am these characters in the sense that, you know, I'm still in Bainbridge. I'm afraid to take that step out, and so that's why it's interesting to me because these are characters that are afraid, just like I am, but they actually take that little leap of faith that it takes to make the move.

And Wes Ball also looked to himself when he created the character of Melissa in *A Work in Progress*:

> I really just took bits and pieces of myself. I was always sketching when I was a kid, and I was never really good at sports. I was often left on the sidelines to watch my friends play during recess. And I was always fascinated with a friend's tire swing in her backyard, so I put it in to kind of symbolize my innocent childhood growing up in a really small country town.

I've learned the hard way that the *best* idea in the world can be hell to write if it doesn't resonate with you on some level. *Le Menu* is a very good place to look for ideas that do. It's your secret weapon, a menu of the passions and perceptions that make you—and your screenplays—unique. So finish the menu (though you're never really finished because your answers will change and evolve as you do), and for heaven's sake, don't throw it away. When I teach, I always keep a copy of my students' menus on file.

Inevitably, some of them tell me they don't have an idea. Or they'll try to write an idea that doesn't have real resonance for them. More times than not, the idea doesn't work out. The student comes to me in a panic. One student, Lani Sciandra, worked on such an idea for her thesis script, but it blew up in her face halfway through the semester. She came to my office,

dazed and confused. Ready to throw in the towel. I asked her what she wanted to write about. She didn't know. So we did menu stuff (the idea for the menu was beginning to take shape in my mind). I asked her what kinds of things gnawed on her bones, as Faulkner once put it.

She said, "Like what?"

"Oh, like shame, envy, hate, love."

She talked about her relationship with her father. It was troubled. He was rarely around.

"Well," I said, "what about that?"

Lani left my office to think about this. A few weeks later she returned with a screenplay titled *Cool Breeze and Buzz*—a deceptively simple story of a young girl, Paula (a.k.a. Cool Breeze), who is living on a river with her Aunt Barbara when her father, Buzz, drives back into her life in a red Cadillac he won playing poker and invites his daughter to go live in Las Vegas with him.

Lani was living on the Wakulla River south of Tallahassee at the time, and the story sprang from that "magical kingdom—hermetically sealed from forces unnatural to itself," she told me:

> An image echoed in my mind—from the river—gliding downstream with the current—a discovery—a secret revealed—drawing from the part of me that had the most resonance—it had to do with identity and responsibility—my mother, who raised me, was the obvious choice—but as I played off the title it transformed into something less immediate, transparent—a fantasy of the absent father, the true figure in the shadow—I liked the idea of contrasting elements—the image of a man like Buzz in his red Cadillac crashing in on this pristine microcosm—and the dynamics this creates when posed with the question, "to go or not to go?"—where do you really belong?—what is home?

Cool Breeze and Buzz may be a simple story on the surface, but like the river that inspired it, there are deeper currents, and they have a profound connection to Lani. As a result, the story is so deeply felt and so rich in detail, emotional honesty, and humanity that it has won more awards than most other undergraduate films produced at the Florida State Film School—first prize at film festivals across the United States and numerous recognitions abroad. And, for the same reason, *Killer Kart*, *The Great Wall of Vicky Lynn*, *Intercambios*, *Underground*, *Tough Crowd*, *Kosher*, *My Josephine*, *A Work in Progress*, *Lena's Spaghetti*, *The Making of "Killer Kite,"* and *Slow Dancin'* have won numerous awards, too.

Ultimately, an authentic connection to the screenplays you write will be more important than any gimmick, sunset, handheld camera, or zoom shot in the film that you or someone else makes. Michael Rabiger puts it this way:

> Setting out to develop a style or an artistic identity, as students often feel they must do in fine art schools, leads to