

SCREENWRITER'S COMPASS

Character As True North

GUY GALLO



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CHARACTER AS TRUE
NORTH

Guy Gallo



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To Jeannine, without whose love and collaboration this book would not have been written.

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CONTENTS

| | | |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------|------|
| PREFACE | | xi |
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS | | xiii |
| Chapter 1 | FIRST THINGS | 1 |
| | Screenwriter's Compass | 1 |
| | Big Deal—You're Writing a Screenplay | 4 |
| | Gear Up | 6 |
| | Screenwriting Is Writing | 7 |
| | Craftsmanship | 10 |
| Chapter 2 | GROUNDWORK | 13 |
| | Reading Theory | 13 |
| | Upsetting Aristotle | 17 |
| | Putting Aristotle to Work | 26 |
| | Character-Driven versus Plot-Driven | 29 |
| | Fable and Construct | 31 |
| | Turning Theory to Task | 38 |

| | | |
|-----------|------------------------------|-----|
| Chapter 3 | GETTING READY | 41 |
| | Master Shot Screenplay | 41 |
| | Reading Screenplays | 43 |
| | Composition Creates Story | 44 |
| | On Outlines | 45 |
| | On Character Histories | 47 |
| | On Treatments | 49 |
| | On Adaptation | 50 |
| Chapter 4 | FIRST DRAFT | 57 |
| | The Blank Page | 57 |
| | Scene and Action Description | 63 |
| | Being God | 81 |
| | Hearing Voices | 91 |
| | Empathy | 99 |
| | Thinking of Structure | 106 |
| | Breaking a Block | 112 |
| Chapter 5 | REVISION | 117 |
| | First Reader | 117 |
| | Looking Again for Logic | 119 |
| | Questions | 120 |
| | Challenges and Pitfalls | 127 |
| | On Expectation | 138 |
| Chapter 6 | FINISHING | 145 |
| | Wrighting a Screenplay | 145 |
| | Screenplay Format | 146 |

| | | |
|-----------|------------------------|-----|
| | Proofreading | 173 |
| | Submission | 183 |
| Chapter 7 | GETTING READY AGAIN | 187 |
| | Passion and Purpose | 187 |
| | Happy Accident | 188 |
| | Intuition and Analysis | 188 |
| | Lessons | 189 |
| INDEX | | 191 |

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PREFACE

I was twenty-seven and fresh out of graduate school. He was seventy-four and a film legend. I had just come in second in a student screenwriting competition. He had been nominated for an Oscar fourteen times and won twice. And there I was, sweating in Mexico, sitting at a cowhide-covered table, talking about my screenplay for *Under the Volcano*. I was full of myself. After all, there had been dozens of failed attempts by well-known writers to adapt this difficult novel into a film. And I had done it. It was *my* screenplay John Huston was preparing to shoot.

He was reading some pages I had just finished revising. A scene he thought wasn't right. Wasn't working. He stopped reading. Leaned back in his creaking basket of a chair, spindly arm arching over his head, like a bewildered and bearded Orangutan.

"It's fine, Guy," he intoned in a deep basso. "It's fine."

I started to puff up. Huston continued.

"But it's only writing."

I've spent much of the next two decades deepening my understanding of Huston's seemingly glib dismissal of an arrogant punk writer. After fourteen or so screenplays and twenty-odd years teaching film writing, I think I've got it figured. And then some.

What follows is not for the faint of heart. But since you're interested in writing a screenplay, you aren't. Or shouldn't be.

Screenwriter's Compass: Character as True North is addressed both to the motivated beginner and the seasoned professional. It can stand as an introduction to the craft of screenwriting. It can be read as a reminder—and deepening—of concepts you already know. Some of the ideas are, I think, new. Accepted ideas are challenged

or rephrased. Everything is presented with an eye to helping you approach and fill the blank page.

There are two organizing ideas: that composition is an act of exploration and discovery, and that our best guide through the imagination's terrain is character. Everything else harkens back to these two propositions.

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I am grateful to the many students who have passed through my seminars at Columbia University and Barnard College. They helped me learn what you are about to read. Thank you to Katharine Cluverius—agent, editor, and friend—for consistent and needed support. To Jerry Boak and Robert Brink for astute readings. To Nicholas Proferes for introducing me to Focal Press. To Annette Insdorf, whose kind graces were instrumental to my career, both as screenwriter and teacher. And to my beloved wife and in-house editor, Jeannine Dominy.

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FIRST THINGS

SCREENWRITER'S COMPASS

There's a Steven Wright joke that goes like this:

I once tried to commit suicide by jumping off a building... I changed my mind at the last minute, so I just flipped over and landed on my feet. Two little kittens nearby saw what happened and one turned to the other and said, "See, that's how it's done."

Many screenwriting guides are like that. They look at existing films and point: "See, that's how it's done." They provide an after-the-fact analysis of what worked in a specific case. Examples are drawn from released films, or (often) from a special form of screenplay called a continuity—a record of what was done during the making of the film. Strangely, these models for making screenplays aren't screenplays at all.

Looking at a finished film to learn about writing a screenplay is a little like touring a completed building to learn about architecture.

Even if examples are taken from actual screenplays, it must be remembered that models are of limited utility. They demonstrate only how a specific problem was solved by one writer in a given context.

Creation is not modeling. It is invention. Certainly we are influenced by those writers and directors we admire, or those who stand out as successful. However, our use of their models, our homage (or plagiarism) should be subtle and subconscious. Not studied.

Creation is not modeling. It is invention.

As interesting and edifying as it might be to read how other writers have solved various storytelling problems, it doesn't help fill your blank page. It doesn't give you the tools required to make a unique text, from your unique voice, anchored in your present.

Every story is unique. Telling a story, in any form, takes the writer into uncharted territory, with specific problems, specific virtues and pitfalls. Any analysis of a finished film, interesting as it may be, will be specific to *that* film. The idea embedded in the title of this book is that we approach the unknown landscape of each storytelling fresh, mystified by the ever-changing terrain. A screenwriting book can provide a set of tools to orient ourselves during the journey, to help chart both where we are headed and where we have been. That's the driving idea behind *Screenwriter's Compass*. The book's subtitle—*Character as True North*—does not mean to simply imply priority, or that what follows will examine solely how character functions in screenwriting. Rather, I want to emphasize that virtually every aspect of screenwriting requires that one eye be kept on the characters. You need to know where True North lies even when you are travelling in some other direction.

My emphasis will be entirely from the writer to the work. From the point of view of the blank page. *Screenwriter's Compass* focuses on the screenplay as a text that needs to seduce and interest. This is not a book on filmmaking. It is a book on writing, on how to tell your story in film terms that are easily read, easily comprehended.

I will not pepper you with explicated models to follow. I will not presume to tell you what kinds of stories to write. I will not tell you what structures to employ.

I do not believe in formulas. I do not believe any book can provide a set of rules to follow. Don't get me wrong. There are generally accepted guidelines regarding dramatic structure. There are many useful concepts to know and use when composing a screenplay. But the application of these ideas must be adjusted and adapted to the particular story being told. They must be treated as guidelines, not rigid rules. Applied too strictly, and too early, general formulas can get in the way at just that point when the writer needs the most flexibility. At the start.

There is no key, no secret. The best we can hope for is a compass. A tool to orient the writer in a chaos of possibility. A set of manageable challenges that—when applied with rigor and grace and humor, with a willingness to fail, to get lost and recover, to experiment and persevere—might actually point the writer's imagination to its own best self. Each idea, each writer, must be challenged in a unique way.

There is no key, no secret. The best we can hope for is a compass. A tool to orient the writer in a chaos of possibility.

No book, no teacher, no guru—no one—can teach you how to write. Ingesting theory, understanding past works, having an encyclopedic knowledge of film history won't make you a writer. Though perhaps you'd be really fun at a party. Or really annoying.

No one can teach you how to write. They can, however, teach you how to read. I will teach you how to read your own work. To challenge yourself toward completion, toward clarity. I will give you concepts and tools and (yes) tricks to help read your work as if it were not yours, so that you can see your creation as others see it. How else can you judge if you are accomplishing your goal?

Passion and creativity are insufficient to the task of composition.

The ability to read your own work objectively, critically, without bias or self-interest, generously but without either possessiveness or indifference—this kind of dispassionate reading is a necessary adjunct to genius and imagination. Passion and creativity are insufficient to the task of composition. You must also learn the craft of reading.

I like to think of the imagined film (the thing in your head that you're trying to get down onto paper in a legible manner) as a landscape. A chaotic and somewhat uncontrolled world. It has discoverable landmarks. It has a shape. But the shape, even as you think to put it down, is endlessly shifting and growing.

I like to think of a screenplay as the geography—both physical and emotional—of the imagined film.

A geography is more complex a concept than, say, a map. Or even a topography. A map implies delineated landmarks, accepted pathways. Direction and purpose.

A geography holds hidden and unexplored terrains. The dark places. A geography is about texture as much as detail. A map tells you. A geography needs to be explored and understood.

What follows might be thought of as a collection of tools to make you a better cartographer. To give you both a compass with which to find your bearings, and the technical means to convey your discoveries to the reader, who is, we must always remind ourselves, brand new to the terrain.

...character is not an element of dramaturgy, it is the thing itself.

I will lay out practical ideas and applicable concepts to help you discover the particular geography of your imagination, tools to help you navigate the unique problems posed by the struggle to articulate

vision, agenda, and story. I will help make some useful sense of the clichés and formulas tossed about by the myriad of how-to books. I will emphasize ways to create story and plot anchored in compelling behavior. I will tune your ear to voices, the voices that carry and create the dramatic action of your screenplay. You will learn that character is not an element of dramaturgy, it is the thing itself.

— **BIG DEAL—YOU'RE WRITING A SCREENPLAY** —

There is only one way to defeat the enemy, and that is to write as well as one can.

—Saul Bellow

Nobody wants to like your screenplay. Except your mother or your best friend or your lover. Everyone else will be looking for reasons *not* to like your screenplay.

That's not exactly true. It's not that your reader won't *want* to like your screenplay. When a reader first approaches a new script they are hoping it will be great and they will be the one to find it and shepherd it up the ladder toward production. But, it's also a fact that there are myriad pressures that will bias the industry reader against you.

Overworked and underpaid, the studio reader, the producer's assistant, the lowly intern will be anxious to find a reason to toss your manuscript onto the pile of rejects.

The reason for this is simple: it's safer for film professionals—readers, producers, executives—to say *No* than it is for them to say *Yes*. If they say *No*, well, that's an end to it. There are seldom any consequences for a negative report. However, if they say *Yes*, if they pass your work up the food chain, then that reader is at risk.

First of all, it means they have to write a more detailed and substantial coverage—the cheat sheet for the big bosses and agents who can't be bothered to read an entire screenplay. They have to be willing and able to defend a *Yes* to their superiors.

A friend of mine had a script given coverage by a major studio. The producer who had submitted the screenplay—as they often do—used connections to swipe a copy of the reader's report. It was glowing. Based on that one page, the film should have gone into production the next day. The producer's reaction was: "Wow. Must be a new reader. She's left herself no place to hide."

Things get even touchier if the film goes further along the preproduction line. Then the reader's *Yes* may actually cost money (one hopes some portion of which you have deposited into a money market). The stakes for the studio reader or production assistant get higher and higher. Until, in the best-case scenario, that simple *Yes*

turns into a production, into a film in the theater. And the reader's very job, at minimum their reputation, depends upon how well this screenplay—which they first met lounging by a pool along with forty other screenplays some distant weekend-read ago—is received by critics and fourteen-year-old boys.

The system is driven by fear. The intern is afraid they will not please the boss enough to get a paying gig or at least a good recommendation. The producer is afraid of wasted time, of rejection by the higher ups. The higher ups are afraid of the next major reorganization by the multinational corporation that owns the studio. Fear is not a good place to be when approaching new work.

Is it any wonder that their first instinct is to *Just Say No*? They want to put down your script and get on to the next, which might be the gem hidden amongst the dross. Back to the projects already in the pipeline. Back to the clients who are already employed.

The implication of liking a screenplay, of saying *Yes* and passing it up, can be measured in millions, tens of millions of dollars. Of somebody else's money.

Even if your target audience is the Independent Film producer, or if you are making the film yourself on a micro-budget supplied by Uncle Mort, you still need to present your idea for a film clearly and cleanly. You still have to get them to finish reading.

A reader's reason for tossing your screenplay may have nothing to do with the inherent worth of your story. It might have to do with formatting, or with trivial details like typos or page count or misplaced character names. Or not enough white space. It may sound silly, but it's true.

Your first task as a screenwriter is to make sure you have given your reader no easy out, no excuse to stop reading.

Your first task as a screenwriter is to make sure you have given your reader no easy out, no excuse to stop reading. You need to break down the inherent antipathy of your audience. You need to convince the reader to get past the first twenty pages. To actually *read* your work.

You cannot control the idiosyncratic tastes of your reader. You cannot control the many intangibles that might influence how they respond to your work. They might have just broken up with a girlfriend, or lost a fortune in Vegas, or had a bad burrito for dinner, or be suffering from a hangover. They might be biased against action adventures, or can't abide romantic comedies, or perhaps they simply do not like your main character's name.

You can't make them unafraid.

Since there are so many pressures for a reader to dislike your screenplay, since there are so many mysterious forces combining to influence their reading, why not control the few things you *can* control?

Your best weapon against the fear or inertia or bad mood or simple fatigue that may color a reader's reception of your genius is to continually ask two questions:

- Is it *logical*?
- Is it *legible*?

Every line of description, every line of dialogue, is vulnerable to these two challenges, and will be improved if you answer them honestly.

By logical I mean: Is every line of dialogue, every behavior, logically consistent to the characters as drawn? Do the plot twists and reversals follow from what has been written? Does your action description have a visual logic, effectively guiding the reader's eye through the scene's geography?

By legible I mean: Have you challenged every word, every sentence for clarity and precision? Have you controlled the mundane elements of screenwriting, such as format and proofreading, so that the reader can actually consume your story without pausing over the mechanics?

It is not enough to have a great idea. It is not sufficient to be passionate. A fabulous story must be visible. Your screenplay must be legible. Clear, precise, cleanly presented. And what is legible must be compelling, seductive, self-consistent. It must make sense, be logical.

No matter how great a prose stylist you are, no matter how good your ear for dialogue, no matter how fabulous your idea or inventive your visual imagination, if those talents are not presented in such a way that the reader can follow your intention, if your intention is not legible, then you have failed as a screenwriter.

Screenwriter's Compass will give you deeper insight into character and plot and their symbiotic relationship. That's the central idea driving us toward logic and completion. It will teach you how to most cleanly and precisely craft your screen storytelling. It will detail the peculiar conventions and devices of screenplay form. That's how we achieve legibility. The end result will be a more compelling read and a more legible presentation.

GEAR UP

Writing is easy; all you do is sit staring at a blank sheet of paper until the drops of blood form on your forehead.

—Gene Fowler

The proposition that your reader is almost always antagonistic might seem discouraging. But it's a reality. You need to gear up. Grow a thick skin. And persevere.

Writing is hard. Much harder than most people think. Screenwriting is particularly hard. It has a specific form. It has a limited size. It is constructed with a fairly set number of tools and devices. It requires a combination of visual, narrative, and dramatic genius. And all that is in addition to the need and ability to conceive and tell a story.

The first thing to remember is that you are the originator. It all begins with the writer. Without your craft and artistry there would be no story. No film. At this point, as you begin, the story is all yours. You are the one entering the uncharted territory of the imagination hoping to bring back something worth saying, worth writing, worth turning into a film.

Find pride and confidence in the fact that not everyone can do it. Lots of people think because they can compose an e-mail that they are writers. They aren't. You are.

Remember that you love telling stories, that you love putting words on paper.

When it works there's nothing quite like the pleasure of invention and composition. Here, at the outset, you must remind yourself that in the midst of all the grunt work—the brainstorming and outlining and the simple physical labor of getting it into the computer—there will be moments of profound delight.

Be patient. Be brave. Be flexible.

SCREENWRITING IS WRITING

There is a truism that goes: Writers are born, not made. You either have the sickness or you don't. If you are *able* to do something other than writing, you should. Or, as Andre Gide put it:

If a young writer can refrain from writing, he shouldn't hesitate to do so.

Those who persist in the excruciating life of a writer are those who cannot do otherwise. Writing is their way of being in the world.

Even if your ultimate goal is to be a writer-director, or you hope to produce and direct your screenplay on a micro-budget, at this point you must engage that part of your talent that is the writer. Otherwise your screenplay will remain a private document, for your eyes only, and you will not fully finish your story.

Seems, sometimes, that everyone is writing a screenplay. And everyone thinks they know how. Everyone knows what a film looks like. How difficult can it be to write down the movie in my head? This is the first fallacy of the neophyte screenwriter. They think that describing a possible film is the same as writing a screenplay. It isn't.