

Screen Adaptation

BEYOND THE BASICS

Techniques for Adapting Books,
Comics, and Real-Life Stories
into Screenplays

Eric R. Williams

A Focal Press Book

ROUTLEDGE





Screen Adaptation: Beyond the Basics

Once you understand the basics of screenwriting, ideas for your next screenplay are everywhere. Whether it comes from a favorite children's book, a summer novel you discover accidentally, a news story that catches your imagination, or a chapter from your own life—advanced screenwriting strategies should now guide you through your first adaptation. In *Screen Adaptation: Beyond the Basics*, award-winning screenwriter Eric R. Williams uses examples from award-winning screenplays to explain new storytelling techniques. His real-world examples illustrate a range of advanced approaches—including new ways to identify and craft tension, how to reimagine structure and character, and how to strengthen emotional depth in your characters and in the audience. This book teaches readers new ways to engage with source material in order to make successful adaptation decisions, regardless of the source material.

The book offers:

- Three detailed examples of award-winning adaptations by the author, including the complete short story and final scripts used in the *Voices from the Heartland* project;
- Breakout boxes highlighting modern and historical adaptations and providing examples for each concept discussed in the book;
- More than fifty charts providing easy-to-use visual representations of complex concepts;
- New screenwriting techniques developed by the author, including the Triangle of Knowledge, the Storyteller's Parallax, and the idea of Super Genres as part of a Screenwriters Taxonomy.

Eric R. Williams' screenplays have received the *Best New Work* award from the Writers Guild of America, an Emmy Award from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, and the *Award for Individual Excellence in Screenwriting* from the Ohio Arts Council. He has adapted novels by Luis Urrea (*Across the Wire*), Bill Littlefield (*Prospect*), and Guillermo Fadanelli (*The Other Face of Rock Hudson*). His latest projects include an adaptation of the anthology *Voices from the Heartland* into a thirteen-part television series. Eric received his MFA from Columbia University's School of Film. He currently teaches at Ohio University, where he has received the University Professor Award for Excellence in Teaching.

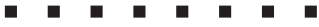
You can learn more by visiting his website: www.WilliamsOnStory.com.



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Screen Adaptation: Beyond the Basics

Techniques for Adapting Books,
Comics, and Real-Life Stories into
Screenplays

Eric R. Williams
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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents—Stu and Carole. On lazy Sunday afternoons, my father introduced me to the world of film, and taught me how to tell good stories by always telling good stories himself. My mother instilled in me a love for reading and writing, and taught me how to think things through and explain them. Thank you both with all my heart.



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Preface

As a professor and a professional screenwriter, I am torn and strengthened by having my feet in both worlds. A good screenwriter—especially one undertaking an adaptation—needs to be able to collaborate with other writers, producers, and directors about story, structure, character, and thematic interpretations. Students can be as demanding as producers. A professor must teach these practices to young screenwriters. Often, students (and producers) believe that screenwriting is an act accomplished alone. It is not. Screenwriting is a dance. It can be rehearsed, discussed, presented, experienced, and revamped. Of course, you can dance by yourself (many do), but the most rewarding dances involve more than one person. When hired, a screenwriter needs to understand the expectations of the producer, of the audience, and of himself (and writing partner). The same is true for a student, with the teacher standing in as producer, mentor, and audience.

As a writer, I frequently isolate certain elements of the adaptation process so that the script can be examined under different lenses. I discuss these elements with my students too. The process is very similar to going to the ophthalmologist. Neophyte screenwriters expect to work in isolation until they turn in their screenplay for the professor to grade it—or the producer to judge it—in its entirety. They want to know that their work is “good,” and what if anything will make the screenplay “better.” They look at their work holistically, like a cake, as if the answer might be: “add more frosting.” This is an amateur approach.

Rather, think of the ophthalmologist: placing different optical variants in front of your eyes, asking “Do these make your vision better or worse?” You answer. And a new lens snaps into place: “Better or worse?” And so it goes as your doctor tests each variant in your eye until, eventually, the device is removed and you are prescribed a set of glasses. Each aspect of screenwriting is its own set of variants. When critiquing a script, the question should not be, “Is it any good?” but rather, “Will an adjustment to the dialogue make it better or worse?” Character: “Better or worse?” Structural adjustment, thematic refinement, or a change to genre expectations: “Better or worse?” These are the questions I prefer to discuss with a producer ... a colleague ... myself, when I write.

Adaptations are a tough racket, but I believe in them. They are tough because, unless you personally own the rights to the underlying material, writing them requires doing work for hire. If the script isn’t produced, you can’t shop the material yourself. It’s a dead project (as far as the screenwriter is concerned). Yet, I believe in them because an adaptation gets to the heart of the

collaborative process. The screenwriter really gets to roll up his or her sleeves and mull over an idea with producers, directors, and sometimes the original writer. I find this incredibly rewarding. Some of my best work has come through adaptation. Others, I believe, would say the same. In 2005, the Writers Guild of America surveyed its members, asking them to determine the 101 Best Screenplays of all time. More than half of the screenplays chosen for this honor are adaptations; including five of the top ten, three of the top five, and both of the top two.

Table P.1 Writers Guild of America top 10 best screenplays of all time (adaptations in bold)

| Rank | Screenplay | Screenwriters and Source Material (if any) |
|------|-------------------------|---|
| 1 | CASABLANCA | Julius J. Epstein, Philip G. Epstein, and Howard Koch Based on the play <i>Everybody Comes to Rick's</i> by Murray Burnett and Joan Alison |
| 2 | GODFATHER | Screenplay by Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola Based on the novel of the same name by Mario Puzo |
| 3 | CHINATOWN | Robert Towne |
| 4 | CITIZEN KANE | Herman Mankiewicz and Orson Welles |
| 5 | ALL ABOUT EVE | Screenplay by Joseph L. Mankiewicz Based on the short story and radio play "The Wisdom of Eve," by Mary Orr |
| 6 | ANNIE HALL | Woody Allen and Marshall Brickman |
| 7 | SUNSET BOULEVARD | Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder and D. M. Marshman Jr. |
| 8 | NETWORK | Paddy Chayefsky |
| 9 | SOME LIKE IT HOT | Screenplay by Billy Wilder and I. A. L. Diamond Based on <i>Fanfare of Love</i> , a German film written by Robert Thoeren and M. Logan |
| 10 | GODFATHER II | Screenplay by Francis Ford Coppola and Mario Puzo Based on Mario Puzo's novel <i>The Godfather</i> |

Source: Adapted from the WGA 2005 list of 101 Best Screenplays of All Time

Adaptation is an art: an art in and of itself. Each year, two Academy Awards are given to screenwriters: one to those who write original screenplays, and one to those who write adaptations. The skill and artistry that goes into the work of each is recognized by one of the highest filmmaking awards. Each year, thousands of people—if not tens of thousands—try to write the great American screenplay. I know that I do. You probably do too. Films that you may not expect are adaptations. Films like: *Raging Bull*, *Vertigo*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *No Country for Old Men* and *Shrek*.

I write professionally. I have for more than twenty years. Some of what I write is in the "original screenplay" category. My script *Crystal Messiah*, which won one of twelve *Best New Work* awards from the Writers Guild of America in 2000, was an original piece. I had joined the WGA a year prior, after writing one of the last *Columbo* murder mysteries for Peter Falk at Universal Studios. Unfortunately, due to his health, it was never produced.

I have also been hired to write a number of adaptations. Academy Award-winning producer Alvaro Donado first hired me to adapt Bill Littlefield's baseball novel *Prospect*, and then a series of newspaper articles by Luis Urrea published as *Across the Wire: Life and Hard Times on the Mexican Border*. After co-writing the script *Legendary* with director Alfredo Rodriguez de Villa (*Nothing Like the Holidays, Fugly!*), de Villa again hired me to adapt the Mexican crime novella *La Otra Cara de Rock Hudson* by Guillermo Fadanelli—a project in process as I write this book.

A well-kept secret is that many screenwriters make a good living from writing, even if their screenplays are not produced. Money is made, and money is paid, for the work a screenwriter writes. It is then the job of the producer to get the film made. Some of my best work, unfortunately, still sits in a dusty office drawer or stored on a hard drive—paid for, but never produced. Oh well. Keep writing, I say. As writers, we must.

Each script gets better. With each script we learn. *Brave Run Home*—a Sundance Screenplay semi-finalist—was a script that I co-wrote with Jennifer Aktins. In 2008, my students and I won an Emmy Award adapting reality TV shows into an interactive educational program. The next year, I received the *Award of Individual Excellence in Screenwriting* from the Ohio Arts Council for adapting a set of short stories into a spec television series called *Voices from the Heartland*. You will find examples of this project (the script and original material) at the end of each section in this book.

I share my successes and failures with you so that you know I have been through this process myself. The ideas in this book are not hypothetical. They are not theoretical. They are, to me, tried and true. This book is an explanation of my process, developed over a quarter century in the screenwriting trenches.

My hope is that you will use this book as a way to organize your thoughts when you are writing an adaptation—and also when you are writing an original script. I don't believe in painting by numbers. I don't believe that there is one "best" way to write. What I present to you in these pages is a culmination of twenty-five years of professional writing and teaching experience all rolled into one. It has served me well. I hope that it may do the same for you.

Eric R. Williams
Screenwriter and Professor
Athens, Ohio
summer, 2017



Acknowledgments

I would never have written this book if it were not for the inquisitive minds and creative scripts written by the students at Ohio University. Their desire to learn has made me a better teacher and, in turn, a better writer. Professionally, my screenplays and teaching methods are more innovative because of the support from, and collaboration with, Josh Antonuccio, Tyler Ayres, John Bowditch, Carl Craig, Alfredo DeVilla, Alvaro Donado, L. Harter, Michael Kortlander, Christina Lazaridi, Rob Levine, Dan MacLeith, Mark Mathis, Drew McDaniel, Jenny Nelson, Beth Novak, Mike Paulucci, Kate Raney, Aaron Rudelson, and Scott Titsworth. Additionally, the authors of the short stories from which the *Voices from the Heartland* scripts were adapted (Damion Armentrout, Jim Day, and Jo Weiss) started me on this road to adaptation many years ago. Thank you for that and for your creative excellence.

My daughter, Alex, motivates me to make the world a better place. She always has and always will. Most of all, I could not have written this book without the love and encouragement from my wonderful wife and best friend, Petra, and our faithful dog Kit who reminded me every afternoon at 3 p.m. that it was time to put the work away for a while and go for a hike.



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Section One

Basic Practices



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1



Beyond the Rules Adaptation

Adaptation is not transcription. This much I know. The process of adapting a screenplay is just as creative as writing a non-fiction novel based upon true events, painting a portrait based upon the person sitting before you, or directing a film based upon the screenplay. Adaptation is the process of reimagining ideas from one medium into the language of another. Adaptation is not transcription.

The Screenplay Format

This book is designed to move writers beyond the basics, so I presume that you are familiar with the fundamentals of writing a screenplay. If not, David Trottier's book *The Screenwriter's Bible* is an excellent resource. For the sake of discussion in this book, I'd like you to keep in mind three concepts that I believe create the core of the screenplay format. As you will note in the book's many examples, some screenwriters would say that these concepts are merely suggestions.

1. A script should be written so that one page of script translates to one minute of screen time. Therefore, a two-minute chase scene should utilize two pages of script; a 120-page screenplay will become a two-hour movie. To standardize this page-per-minute idea, all scripts should be written in twelve-point courier font according to industry standards for spacing.
2. Every scene begins with a Scene Heading in ALL CAPS, after which the scene is basically a combination of text description and dialogue. A new scene deserves a new Scene Heading. Some screenwriters will indicate scenes within scenes by capitalizing areas within the scene. For instance, at a party that takes place INT. NY LOFT—NIGHT, it would not be unusual to jump around within the scene, moving from the KITCHEN, to FRONT ENTRANCE to BACK STAIRS—without reminding us that we are INT (interior) or that it is NIGHT.
3. The screenplay should *only* describe what can be seen or heard by the audience. For example, a character's backstory or beliefs should not appear in a screenplay. Rarely will you see: "John smiles because he remembers the joke from when he was a child and it makes him happy."

Instead, John would simply “smile” because that is all the information the audience would have when watching the film.

With those rules in mind, a page of script looks like this (in 12-pt. courier font):

INT. CORNER STORE - LATE AFTERNOON

TARHEAD - skinny, 16, with a big bunch of black hair crammed inside his hoodie - stands at a SQUEAKY comic book rack, twisting it around and around. SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK.

While SETH BROWNING, - a bland band-geek with a wild mop of curly brown hair - sits behind the counter making French-to-English notecards from a dictionary. SQUEAK SQUEAK.

But he can't focus because his eyes keep wandering over to Tarhead. And Tarhead isn't looking at the comics...

His eyes keep wandering over to Seth. SQUEAK SQUEAK.

TARHEAD

Hey, where's Miss Kelly at?

(Seth shrugs)

Does that mean "you don't know" or "you don't wanna tell me"?

(Seth shrugs)

Fine. Be that way.

The SQUEAKING STOPS... Now Seth watches Tarhead even more closely... as Tarhead wanders back further into the store.

Seth eyes a surveillance monitor behind the counter. CLICK. CLICK. He tracks Tarhead's furtive movements.

Tarhead's not really buying anything he's just... traipsing.

DING-A-DING - the door flies open and...

However, this standard format is not conducive to printing a book of this size. Therefore, to maximize readability and to make best use of our space, I will format scripts like this:

INT. CORNER STORE - LATE AFTERNOON

TARHEAD - skinny, 16, with a big bunch of black hair crammed inside his hoodie - stands at a comic book rack, twisting it around and around. SQUEAK SQUEAK SQUEAK.

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But he can't focus because his eyes keep wandering over to Tarhead. And Tarhead isn't looking at the comics...

His eyes keep wandering over to Seth. SQUEAK SQUEAK.

TARHEAD: Hey, where's Miss Kelly at? (Seth shrugs) Does that mean "you don't know" or "you don't wanna tell me"? (Seth shrugs) Fine. Be that way.

The SQUEAKING STOPS... Now Seth watches Tarhead even more closely... as Tarhead wanders back further into the store.

Seth eyes a surveillance monitor behind the counter. CLICK. CLICK. He tracks Tarhead's furtive movements.

Tarhead's not really buying anything he's just... traipsing.

DING-A-DING - the door flies open and...

Adaptation is one of the few art forms where the final product (the script) is rarely seen by the general audience. Instead, they see the film. This is similar to an architect whose blueprints are never seen although the building is widely enjoyed. Oddly though, with an *adapted* screenplay the audience *has* had the opportunity to enjoy the:

- Children's Book;
- Graphic Novel/Comic Book;
- Short Story;
- Novel/Novella;
- Non-fiction/Journalism;
- Biography/Memoir;
- Stage Play.

As each medium has its own creative nuance and purpose, it is important for screenwriters to differentiate the media they are adapting from the screenplay they are trying to write.

Children's Book—Expanding Simplicity

The original source material for the screenplay *Shrek* is a picture book with no more than twenty-six pages. Most children's books include pictures, simple relationships, and a happy ending. The primary metamorphosis from children's book to feature-length screenplay involves expanding this simple world from a bite-sized snack into a full meal.

William Steig's children's book *Shrek!* created a simple relationship between Shrek (a hideous ogre) and his new sidekick (a talking Donkey). This duo travels together on a quest to rescue a princess. The story moves quickly and does not spend much time on character motivations. When Shrek randomly meets the verbose Donkey—a meeting foretold by a Witch at the start of the book—they are quickly on their way together with very little character development. The scene from the book, in its entirety, reads:

"You jabbering jackass!" Shrek screamed. "Aren't you supposed to take me somewhere?"

"I am. To the nutty knight. Who guards the entrance. To the crazy castle. Where the repulsive princess. Waits."

"Then take!" Shrek shrieked, and he hopped onto the donkey's back.

Ted Elliott, Terry Rossio, Joe Stillman, and Roger S. H. Schulman adapted William Steig's children's book *Shrek!* into the animated film *Shrek*. The screenplay won the *Best Adapted Screenplay* award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts, and won an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature.

However, when adapting *Shrek!* the screenwriters needed to create a much richer world to captivate their audience for two hours. And, as a DreamWorks Animation film, the script needed to appeal to more than just children. A complex world with a wide variety of entertaining characters was subsequently developed. To engage adults, they satirized Disney characters and used them to populate their world. These characters, in turn, illustrate Shrek's motives for undertaking his trek and establish his relationship with Donkey. In this scene, Steig's single page has been expanded into three minutes of screenplay.

EXT. SWAMP

A Woodstock-like morass of fairy-tale creatures have filled the swamp. Refugee tents are everywhere; the Pied Piper camps with his rats next to the Old Lady Who Lives in a Shoe and her brood. The three bears huddle around the campfire with several of Santa's elves. Everywhere dwarves, fairies and unicorns have grouped around fires. The swamp is packed to the rafters.

Shocked and overwhelmed, Shrek is about to yell at the crowd when he is startled by a powerful roar, like approaching jets.

SHREK: (diving for cover) AHFFF!!

Shrek hits the dirt as witches on broomsticks land like fighter pilots. An intense elf wearing ear protectors glides the airborne hags in with signal flaps.

Shrek rises, fuming.

SHREK: (struggling, frustrated) WHAT ARE YOU DOING IN MY SWAMP?!!!

Desperate to get the creatures off his land, Shrek tries to round them up as they run around in terror. The effort is futile; there are too many. Frustrated, Shrek's glare finds Donkey.

SHREK: Alright, get out of here! ALL of you, MOVE IT! Come on, let's go. Hapaya! Hapaya! No, no, no not there!

DONKEY: Hey, don't look at me! I didn't invite them.

PINOCCHIO is volunteered by a shove from behind

PINOCCHIO: Well gosh, no one invited us.

Shrek wheels on him, intent on getting to the bottom of this.

SHREK: (incredulous) WHAT?!

PINOCCHIO: (frightened) We were forced to come here.

SHREK: By who?

One of the THREE LITTLE PIGS speaks up.

PIG: (German accent) Lord Farquaad! He huffed, und he puffed, und he - signed an eviction notice.

His brothers nod their agreement.

SHREK: Alright. Who knows where this... Farquaad guy is?

The creatures look dumbfounded. All except Donkey.

DONKEY: (hopping up and down) Oh, I do! I know where he is!

SHREK: Does anyone else know where to find him? Anyone at all. Anyone?

Characters point in different directions.

Donkey continues to leap up into Shrek's P.O.V.

DONKEY: Me! Me! Oh! Oh! Pick me! Oh I know, I know. Me, me.

SHREK: (sighs) Okay, fine. (yells) Attention all fairy-tale things!

The Creatures fall into an uneasy silence.

SHREK: Do not get comfortable. Your welcome is officially worn out. In fact, I'm going to see this guy Farquaad right now, and get you all off my land and back where you came from!

A beat.

CROWD: Yaaaayyyyyy!

Like Munchkins surrounding Dorothy, the fairy-tale characters cheer and celebrate Shrek as their hero. Birds drape the annoyed ogre in garlands. Shrek rolls his eyes.

SHREK: (utterly frustrated growl) Ugh! You! (points to Donkey) You're coming with me.

Delighted to be included, Donkey stamps his feet in glee.

DONKEY: Alright, that's what I like to hear, man - Shrek and Donkey, two stalwart friends off on a whirlwind, big city adventure. I love it!

Donkey catches up to Shrek as he takes off in search of Farquaad and dances alongside as they exit the swamp.

DONKEY: (singing) *On the road again... Sing it with me Shrek. I can't wait to get on the road again...*

SHREK: What did I say about singing?

DONKEY: Well, can I whistle?

SHREK: No.

DONKEY: Well can I hum it?

SHREK: All right. Humming.

Graphic Novel/Comic Book—Adding Movement

Screenwriters Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini had different issues to address when adapting *American Splendor*. Instead of expanding the story, they needed to whittle back years of comic book scenarios into one concise script. They also had to consider how to add movement to the story. Illustrations are still images, but they *imply* movement—both physical and emotional. It is the screenwriter's challenge to translate the implied movement from the page into active movement on the screen. With a superhero story, the movement is easy to translate. But in some graphic novels, even the smallest movements, like reading a book, must be dramatized into a more cinematic language.

American Splendor was nominated for an Academy Award for *Best Adapted Screenplay*, and won the *Best Adapted Screenplay* award from the Writers Guild of America. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini wrote the script, based on Harvey Pekar's comic book series *American Splendor* and the graphic novel *Our Cancer Year* written by Harvey Pekar and Joyce Brabner, illustrated by Frank Stack.

Take these four sequential frames explaining how Harvey Pekar met Robert Crumb and became interested in his work as an example. With very little visual action, the audience understands that Harvey can't pry himself away from Crumb's work.

A man reading a book in silence doesn't play well on the big screen for very long. So, Berman and Pulcini injected verbal and physical movement into the scene. They animated their characters and filled in the metaphorical spaces



Figure 1.1 From *American Splendor: The Life and Times of Harvey Pekar*

Source: Stories by Harvey Pekar, Art by R. Crumb; Ballantine Books, 2003. With permission from Joyce Brabner

between frames. They also verbalized the non-verbal aspects of the comic. This scene similarly captures Harvey being introduced to Crumb and his work—but this time with much more physical, visual, and emotional movement.

INT. HARVEY'S LIVING ROOM - FALL - 1962 - DAY

A disheveled mess that gives new meaning to the term bachelor pad. Records and books are strewn everywhere.

HARVEY: (V.O.) So Crumb showed me this comic book novel he was working on - THE BIG YUM YUM BOOK. I'd never seen anything like it.

HARVEY marches back and forth holding Crumb's illustrated comic novel. CRUMB sits on the floor nursing a beer and sorting through vintage comic books. Harvey's bursting with so much enthusiasm, it's almost aggressive.

HARVEY: It's terrific, man! I really dig your work.

Crumb ignores Harvey's praise.

CRUMB: (holding up a vintage comic) This PETER WHEAT book is by Walt Kelly... It's pretty rare.

HARVEY: Yeah? Can I get good bread for it?

CRUMB: Nah! Not yet.

Harvey flops down in an overstuffed chair. Stuffing flies out. He sips his beer.

HARVEY: Listen man, let's get back to your book. What are you gonna do with it?

CRUMB: (looking up) I hadn't thought about it. It's just an exercise.

Harvey flips through the book.

HARVEY: It's more than an exercise. It's breaking ground, man. There's some wild shit in here.

Crumb is immune to Harvey's enthusiasm.

CRUMB: You're spitting on me, Harvey.

Short Story—Interpreting Literary Techniques

Similar to adapting a picture book, the short story often requires expansion. However, the short story has additional challenges. Short stories entertain the audience with literary techniques that need to be translated into film language if they are to retain their impact.

Jonathan Nolan's short story "Memento Mori" begins by addressing the reader in second person, placing them into the shoes of someone with a dead wife and a memory problem. It's an intriguing technique and immediately pulls the reader into the story.

Your wife always used to say you'd be late for your own funeral. Remember that? Her little joke because you were such a slob—always late, always forgetting stuff, even before the incident.

Right about now you're probably wondering if you were late for hers.

You were there, you can be sure of that. That's what the picture's for—the one tacked to the wall by the door. It's not customary to take pictures at a funeral, but somebody, your doctors, I guess, knew you wouldn't remember. They had it blown up nice and big and stuck it right there, next to the door, so you couldn't help but see it every time you got up to find out where she was.

The guy in the picture, the one with the flowers? That's you. And what are you doing? You're reading the headstone, trying to figure out whose funeral you're at, same as you're reading it now, trying to figure why someone stuck that picture next to your door. But why bother reading something that you won't remember?

Christopher Nolan used a similar approach in his screenplay *Memento*. Using the protagonist's second person narration, the character (Leonard) speaks to both the audience and to himself. Similarly, Nolan designed his story in a way that forces the audience inside the mind of a man with a memory disorder.

INT. MOTEL ROOM 21 - DAY ##BLACK AND WHITE SEQUENCE##

Leonard lies on the queen-sized bed. He lifts his head.

LEONARD: (V.O.) So you're in some motel room...

He gets up, surveys the room as if for the first time. He wears BOXERS and a PLAID WORK SHIRT.

LEONARD: (V.O.)... you don't know how long you've been there, or how you got there...

There is a room key on the dresser. The plastic tag identifies it as the key to ROOM 21. Leonard opens drawers in the room.

LEONARD: (V.O.) Just some anonymous motel room. Won't tell you anything. Nothing in the drawers, but you look anyway.

He reaches for the bedside table drawer.

LEONARD: (V.O.) Nothing except the Gideon Bible.

He opens the drawer to find a Gideon Bible.

CUT TO:

INT. DISCOUNT INN OFFICE - DAY

E.C.U. of fingers rifling bills in a wallet. Leonard counts out some money and hands it to the fat, sweaty middle-aged man behind the counter. (BURT). Burt takes the money, spotting something over Leonard's shoulder.

BURT: That guy's here already.

Burt TAPS the POLAROID PHOTOGRAPH of Teddy which is sitting on the counter. Leonard picks up the photo and turns to see Teddy APPROACHING the glass door of the office. Leonard watches carefully as Teddy shambles up to the office door. A BELL CHIMES as Teddy enters and breaks into his shit-eating grin. Leonard slips the photo into his pocket.

TEDDY: Lenny!

Leonard nods in apparent recognition, wary.

LEONARD: It's Leonard... like I told you before.

Teddy pretends to think hard.

TEDDY: Did you? I musta forgot. I'm Teddy.

LEONARD: (smiles) I guess I've told you about my condition.

Teddy grins and holds the door open for Leonard.

TEDDY: Only every time I see ya!

Christopher Nolan wrote the screenplay for *Memento* (2000). It was based on the short story "Memento Mori" written by his brother Jonathan Nolan. The Sundance Film Festival awarded both Christopher and Jonathan Nolan with the *Waldo Salt Screenwriting Award* in 2000. Nolan won *Best Adapted Screenplay* that same year from the Southeastern Film Critics Association.

Novel/Novella—Condensing and Externalizing Complexity

The story in a novel is usually much larger than can fit into a two-hour screenplay. Characters need to be condensed. Story elements need to be shortened or removed. And the internal world of the characters needs to be externalized, making it critical to examine the point of view of the novel. In Ken Kesey's classic novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, the story is told through the eyes of an inmate in a mental hospital—Chief Bromdon. From the very start of the novel, we see what the Chief sees.

They're out there.

Black boys in white suits up before me to commit sex acts in the hall and get it mopped up before I can catch them.

They're mopping when I come out the dorm, all three of them sulky and hating everything, the time of day, the place they're at here, the people they got to work around. When they hate like this, better if they don't see me. I creep along the wall quiet as dust in my canvas shoes, but they got special sensitive equipment detects my fear and they all look up, all three at once, eyes glittering out of the black faces like the hard glitter of radio tubes out of the back of an old radio.

"Here's the Chief. The soo-pah Chief, fellas. Ol' Chief Broom. Here you go, Chief Broom..."

Stick a mop in my hand and motion to the spot they aim for me to clean today, and I go. One swats the backs of my legs with a broom handle to hurry me past.

"Haw, you look at 'im shag it? Big enough to eat apples off my head an' he mine me like a baby."

They laugh and then I hear them mumbling behind me, heads close together. Hum of black machinery, humming hate and death and other hospital secrets. They don't bother not talking out loud about their hate secrets when I'm nearby because they think I'm deaf and dumb. Everybody thinks so. I'm cagey enough to fool them that much. If my being half Indian ever helped me in any way in this dirty life, it helped me being cagey, helped me all these years.

I'm mopping near the ward door when a key hits it from the other side and I know it's the Big Nurse by the way the lockworks cleave to the key, soft and swift and familiar she been around locks so long. She slides through the door with a gust of cold and locks the door behind her and I see her fingers trail across the polished steel—tip of each finger the same color as her lips. Funny orange. Like the tip of a soldering iron. Color so hot or so cold if she touches you with it you can't tell which.

Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman, when they adapted Kesey's novel, included the Chief in the story but moved the point of view to one that was more omniscient. The Chief still plays a key role in the film. If you read the novel, you can imagine that he is still our guide through this tale, but to an audience new to the story the Chief would seem to be just another ward of the state until a reveal in act two.

From the 1975 screenplay, you'll notice how the ideas from Kesey's novel are kept intact, but the point of view has shifted:

INT. MEN'S DORM - OREGON STATE HOSPITAL - DAWN

Strange HUMMING SOUNDS, CLANKING PIPES and HISSING RADIATORS as we see beds, with patients lying asleep, line two walls. The third wall is a heavy gauge steel grill, with a door that opens on to the day room. The door is open. On the far side of the day room, a long hallway with other doors opening into rooms: the latrine, washroom, tub room, mess hall, seclusion room, psychiatrist's office, visitors' room, etc.

Across the day room, a glass enclosed nurses' station where TURKLE, a Negro night attendant, is seen preparing to go off duty.

The CAMERA PANS the beds in the men's dorm. One man turns, another twists, a third lies as if dead.

CAMERA PAN ENDS on BROMDEN, who lies still, eyes wide open, very alert. He reaches down, plucks a stale piece of gum from under the bed frame, puts it in his mouth and starts chewing.

A beat, then Bromden carefully undoes the leather strap which binds him to the bed. He slips out of bed and quietly makes his way down the aisle, paying no attention to the other patients, some of who are beginning to stir awake.

Ahead, at the end of the hallway, the door opens and three Negro day attendants, WASHINGTON, WARREN and MILLER, dressed in white uniforms, enter and move down the hallway and disappear into a side room.

Bromden continues his silent journey towards the day room as Turkle emerges from the side door to the nurses' lounge, goes up the hallway as MISS PILBOW, the day nurse, comes in, passing Turkle on the way out. She crosses to the nurses' station and enters as Bromden reaches the day room.

INT. DAY ROOM - DAY

As Bromden makes his way across the day room, past the nurses' station, unnoticed by Miss Pilbow who is busy preparing the day's medication.

Bromden is sliding along the hallway wall, when he is suddenly cut off by a mop which THUDS against one side of his neck. A second mop yokes him on the other side. Bromden freezes. Terrified.

MILLER: Where you goin', Chief?

WARREN: You goin' t'see the Big White Fathuh?

WASHINGTON: He goin' t'see the Big White Muthuh...

They cackle, legs jiving, as the ammonia stings Bromden's eyes and burns his nose. He tries to twist his head, but Washington jams the mop harder. Bromden freezes, panic spreading across his face.

WASHINGTON: Haw, look at 'im, big 'nough to eat apples off my head an' he mine me like a baby...

A KEY is HEARD hitting the lock in the main door. Washington very adroitly releases Bromden, hands him the mop, and turns, along with Warren and Miller, to their duties, as BIG NURSE enters the ward.

ATTENDANTS: (simultaneously, as Big Nurse passes) Mornin', Miss Ratched. . .

BIG NURSE: Good morning, boys.

She sweeps by and disappears into the nurses' station. The three attendants put their mops and rags aside and start towards the men's dorm, leaving Bromden pressed against the wall, mop in hand.

Hauben and Goldman adapted the Chief's paranoia by externalizing it into actions and ambiance. Sounds, props, movement, and color are used to adapt Bromdon's first person point of view from the novel.

The screenplay for *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* was written by Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman, based on Ken Kesey's novel of the same name. It won the BAFTA and Academy Award for *Best Adapted Screenplay*, and the Golden Globe Award for *Best Screenplay* in 1975.

Non-fiction/ Journalism—Fictionalizing Fact

Non-fiction work can sprawl as much as a novel, or be as pithy as a short story. They tell stories just as intriguing as their fictional counterparts, yet delve deeply into the facts. Pages may be dedicated to historical detail, legal arguments, philosophical theories, or simply the chronology of the main characters. Adapting non-fiction is a careful balance of eliminating and illuminating the dramatic elements of the source material.

Always keep in mind that a film adapted from reality is still fiction. You are not writing a documentary script—that is a different process entirely. Our process involves the use of non-fiction source material to craft an entertaining piece of fiction. It may be important to retain the journalistic integrity of the original story, but often, creative decisions will trump the facts.

For example, the film *Argo* is based upon the true story of CIA agent Tony Mendez's extraction of six American diplomats from Iran during the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979. The screenplay was adapted from two sources: a gripping magazine article and a tension-filled biographical book chapter. The story makes our hearts race with simple facts. Yet, facts are not always the fodder needed for screenplays. Take this paragraph as an example (from Joshua Bearman's May 2007 article in *Wired* magazine, upon which the screenplay was based):

Everyone breathed easier when check-in at the Swissair counter and customs went smoothly. The group made small talk as Schatz approached immigration, presented his passport, and got his stamp. The Americans were momentarily terrified when the officer disappeared with the rest of the crew's passports. But then he absentmindedly wandered back to the counter with some tea and waved the group on to the departure lounge without bothering to match the yellow and white forms.

In truth, there was very little drama at the airport. But screenwriter Chris Terrio understood that tension must be delivered through to the climax—especially in a Thriller about a CIA agent trying to rescue diplomats from a dangerous situation. Terrio knew that the climax should probably be their moment of departure from Iran, and so he wrote a tension-filled scene where the Iranian guard chased Terrio's plane down the tarmac trying to stop him and the diplomats from leaving the country.

INT. MEHRABAD FLIGHT TOWER - MORNING

An Iranian FLIGHT TRAFFIC CONTROLLER calmly speaks into his radio in British-accented English.

INT. SWISSAIR DC-10 - MORNING

Out the window of the plane. Two IRANIAN POLICE CARS and a CANVAS-TOPPED TRUCK are headed down the runway toward the plane.

INT. SWISSAIR DC-10 - MENDEZ'S POV - MORNING

looking out from his window seat.

EXT. AIRPORT RUNWAY - MORNING

An IRAN AIRLINES 747 takes off, revealing the Swissair jet behind it. Only empty runway ahead of Swissair 363 now and -

INT. MEHRABAD FLIGHT TOWER - MORNING

ANGLE ON BOOTS

taking stairs two at a time.

Three KOMITEH WITH AUTOMATICS rush up the tower stairs -

EXT. AIRPORT RUNWAY - MORNING

We're SPEEDING BEHIND two Iranian police cars and a canvas-topped TRUCK as they speed toward the Swissair plane. In the back of the truck we can see half a dozen Komiteh, weapons drawn and -

INT. SWISSAIR DC-10 - COCKPIT - MORNING

FT CONTROLLER: (V.O.) Swissair 363 -

The Pilot puts his hand on the throttle control.

INT. MEHRABAD FLIGHT TOWER - MORNING

FT CONTROLLER: - you are cleared for take-off.

The Flight Traffic Controller moves his head-set mic away from his mouth to take a drink of very strong Iranian tea, and - the door to the Control Room BURSTS OPEN.

Three Komiteh with automatics, shouting instructions to the Traffic Controller, who spills his tea -

INT. SWISSAIR DC-10 - MORNING

Mendez looking out the window -

EXT. AIRPORT RUNWAY - MORNING

ANGLE ON THE THREE IRANIAN VEHICLES

speeding ahead - they're GAINING ON us -

INT. COCKPIT - CONTINUOUS ACTION 313A

The CO-PILOT looks out the window. Sees they are being pursued by militia and police. He looks to the Pilot.

A beat. The Pilot reaches down and pushes all four engines to go FULL THROTTLE.

EXT. AIRPORT RUNWAY - CONTINUOUS ACTION

ANGLE ON THE JEEPS

We start to PULL AWAY FROM them - leaving them behind - beginning to RISE UP -

INT. MEHRABAD FLIGHT TOWER - MORNING

The Flight Controller has his arms up... THROUGH the floor-to-ceiling windows of the tower, as three Komiteh watch a Swissair DC-10 angle upward and leave the ground...

EXT. AIRPORT RUNWAY - MORNING

The Komiteh from the Jeep are now standing on the runway watching the plane disappear.

In the end, the essence of the story remained, but Terrio took liberties in order to craft tension at the climax of the film. Few of the tension-raising elements of the film's third act ever happened, but it made for award-winning storytelling.

Chris Terrio's screenplay for *Argo* won the Academy Award for *Best Adapted Screenplay*. It was based on the May 2007 *Wired* magazine article "The Great Escape" by Joshua Bearman, and Chapter 9 of Antonio Mendez's book *The Master of Disguise*.

Biography/Memoir—Broadening the Perspective

A biography or memoir is also non-fiction, but with a more personal point of view, often told within a political or historical context. A screenwriter must strongly consider how the voice of the memoir will be reconstructed for the new medium. Sometimes, a first person point of view can be utilized to give the film a more personal touch, while at other times the point of view is broadened to make the story more universal in nature. Notice how the first person voice of Solomon Northup creates great intimacy and personal connection from the early pages of his memoir, *Twelve Years a Slave*:

Having been born a freeman, and for more than thirty years enjoyed the blessings of liberty in a free State—and having at the end of that time been kidnapped and sold into Slavery, where I remained, until happily rescued in the month of January, 1853, after a bondage of twelve years—it has been suggested that an account of my life and fortunes would not be uninteresting to the public.

Since my return to liberty, I have not failed to perceive the increasing interest throughout the Northern States, in regard to the subject of Slavery. Works of fiction, professing to portray its features in their more pleasing as well as more repugnant aspects, have been circulated to an extent unprecedented, and, as I understand, have created a fruitful topic of comment and discussion.

I can speak of Slavery only so far as it came under my own observation—only so far as I have known and experienced it in my own person. My object is, to give a candid and truthful statement of facts: to repeat the story of my life, without exaggeration, leaving it for others to determine, whether even the pages of fiction present a picture of more cruel wrong or a severer bondage.

John Ridley could easily have used Northup's narration in voice-over when penning his script *12 Years a Slave*. Instead he chose a more distant point of view that introduces the audience to a wider African-American experience of the 1800s. By *not* including a personalized voice-over, the story is no longer simply Northup's story—it is *our* story. By scene four in the final shooting script, Ridley has already established the livelihood of Solomon Northup and his family in the year 1841:

EXT. STREET - DAY

Solomon and his family are out walking along the streets and groves of Saratoga.

The streets are well populated this morning with many people out strolling. Most are WHITE, but there are BLACKS as well. They are FREED BLACKS who mingle fairly easily - though not always completely - with the whites. We see, too, a few BLACK SLAVES who travel with their WHITE MASTERS. These pairings are largely from

the south and - despite the fact the blacks are slaves - they are not physically downtrodden, not field hands. They are well dressed and "leading apparently an easy life" - comparatively speaking - as they trail their masters.

As they walk, Solomon and his family arrive to an intersection well-worn and muddied from horse and cart traffic. Solomon and his children easily jump across the muck. Anne stands at the lip of the puddle, calls for Solomon to help her across.

ANNE: Solomon...

Solomon, turning back to his wife with a broad smile waving her forward:

SOLOMON: Come, Anne. Jump.

The children, now smiling as well, egg their mother on.

ALONZO: Jump. You can make it.

MARGARET: I've done it. You can make it.

ANNE: I will not ruin my dress. Catch me!

Solomon moves close, holds out his arms. Yet, there's still just a bit of mischievousness in his eyes. Anne gives her husband a lightly stern look to which Solomon replies.

SOLOMON: I will catch you, Anne. (beat) I will.

Again, lightly stern:

ANNE: You *will*.

And with that Anne takes the leap. Solomon catches her, swings her around grandly and sets her down lightly to the delighted applause of the children. That done, Solomon takes Anne's hand and leads her on.

As Solomon and his family make their way, among the slaves on the street, we see one in particular; JASPER. As he trails his MASTER he can't help but note Solomon and his family as they enter A STORE. His intrigue of this most handsome and harmonious group should be obvious.

With his Master occupied, Jasper moves slyly toward the STORE. Frozen on the spot, Jasper looks on admiringly. Suddenly a voice barks out-

A VOICE: (O.S.) Jasper! Come on!

By opening up the point of view, Ridley has expanded the story beyond Solomon's perceptions. We now must consider the plight of Jasper and others in the community as a central part of the story Ridley is telling.