



Who are you writing for?

One of the most interesting questions to ask any writer is why they have written a particular story or why they have chosen to write about a particular main character. There is a supplementary question: why they think they are the right person to write about this script. Feature film, television drama and novels seem to require different answers from documentary and non-fiction writing. There is usually less of the personal life of the writer in most documentaries than in most fictional stories and it is the relationship between the personal life of the writer and their work in which I am interested.

If we attempt a facile categorisation of film scripts that are circulating around the industry, they fall into several broad types: higher or lower budget; Hollywood or indie; genre or 'not easy to pigeon-hole' and adaptation or original, and any script may fit into more than one type.

Television drama is more circumscribed: in terms of formats there are series, serials, mini-series, singles (or two-parters). In terms of genres there are the ubiquitous Cops 'n Docs, Soaps, Legal and Medical series, an increasing number of Supernatural series, Sitcoms, Comedy Dramas and so on.

Is there any significance in the choices of story that writers make? It is difficult to include television series or serials since writers have less choice and freedom to reveal their innermost need to write when writing for established characters in an established precinct and where serial elements are in the hands of other people. So how revealing are films or single pieces of television drama?

I do not believe that one can necessarily deduce, as a psychologist might, significant aspects of someone's personality just by their writing choices. Too many other factors - notably, writing what might enable the writer to earn a living - influence choices but as someone who works with writers, I do believe that some self-awareness can be helpful.

To begin with, there are writers who rarely treat their protagonists with sufficient ruthlessness despite the fact that they know how important it is to make the conflict extreme and to increase it further before finally releasing the character into some sort of safety.

It might be worth mentioning here the 'holy trinity': the triangular relationship between writer, characters and audience, which is an important area for discussion. I believe that a writer's primary relationship is with their audience, not with their characters, although the characters are of great importance because I also believe that stories or plots should come out of character.

While much is written about character backstories and developing depth of character, little is written about understanding the motivation of the writer and making sure that the writer's personality, backstory and motivation is understood to be part of the writing process.

I once asked a client why he was writing a particular story (I expected a lengthy psycho-analytical answer) and he said, 'I want to make a lot of money.' The answer gave me an important piece of information by which to judge what he had written and we were able to work on his script with a shared vision.

Another writer amusingly recounted how her mother typed her manuscript that had been written in longhand but she couldn't give her mother a particular chapter. She had had to lie, saying it wasn't finished, because the description of oral sex would lead her mother to assume she had done it, and the writer couldn't face her mother having such thoughts. Why does each generation always think that the previous one was so innocent?

Much is also written about dreams (the ones we have when asleep, not fantasies about one's name in lights) and there are those who claim to be able to interpret a dream with significant accuracy. About this I am agnostic (although I have been present at such interpretations when they seemed very cogent). I am equally agnostic about whether one can or should attempt to deduce much from a writer's choice of story or character. If a character is killed who happens to be a father, that shouldn't necessarily suggest any sublimated Oedipal thoughts. I use that example to show the danger and absurdity of being too prescriptive.

However, I cannot get away from the feeling that subjects, genres, character types and even the tone that writers choose, can be a reflection of what is happening to them or has happened in their lives. The question really is whether this self-awareness can be beneficial? Therapists might well find it useful to read the fiction or listen to the dreams of their patients or clients but can writers write better with this kind of self-knowledge? I hope that some of you out there might have views on this and I would like you to email me with your thoughts.

This magazine will go to any lengths to help writers improve, including asking you how you do it. If you are a script editor or development executive, how much do such questions feature when working with writers? Perhaps we could all benefit from opening a discussion about the motivations of writers (instead of the usual discussions about the motivation of the characters)?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Julian Friedmann