

# An Interview with Robert McKee

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They say taking Robert McKee's 3-day Story Seminar is an experience like no other. Over three intense, eleven-hour days, McKee stalks the stage with the energy and enthusiasm of someone on a mission. Famously portrayed in the film *Adaptation*, McKee has been teaching the seminar for almost 25 years to over 50,000 students around the world.

McKee released his bestselling book *STORY* in 1997, which, he thought at the time, may make taking the seminar unnecessary. If anything, it's had the opposite effect as people pack theatres and auditoriums around the world to hear him speak. Talk to people at the end of the three days and you'll hear such reviews as "life altering," "the most important education I've ever received" and "priceless."

McKee's former students have written or co-written such commercially and critically successful films and TV shows as *Wall\*E* (which received 6 Academy Award nominations, including Best Original Screenplay), *Iron Man* (two Academy Award nominations), *Desperate Housewives*, *Hancock*, *Law & Order*, *CSI*, *The Lord of the Rings I-III*, *A Beautiful Mind*, *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, *Nixon*, *Scrubs*, *The Daily Show*, *Grey's Anatomy* and more. His classes also continue to attract A-List writers and celebs who usually go undetected amongst the crowd. (A funny story from the seminar in New York not too long ago has Jimmy Fallon signing in as "Ted Danson.")

At 68, McKee continues to keep a torrid schedule of events. In 2009 alone, McKee will be in LA, NY, London, Paris, Stockholm, Lisbon, Santiago, Vancouver, Acapulco... Like we said, McKee is a man on a mission.

Robert McKee recently took the time to answer several questions about writing, story, advice for writers and inspiration.

**Q:** What are the critical questions that a writer should be asking prior to crafting a story?

**Robert McKee:** Beyond imagination and insight, the most important component of talent is perseverance—the will to write and rewrite in pursuit of perfection. Therefore, when inspiration sparks the desire to write, the artist immediately asks: Is this idea so fascinating, so rich in possibility, that I want to spend months, perhaps years, of my life in pursuit of its fulfillment? Is this concept so exciting that I will get up

each morning with the hunger to write? Will this inspiration compel me to sacrifice all of life's other pleasures in my quest to perfect its telling? If the answer is no, find another idea. Talent and time are a writer's only assets. Why give your life to an idea that's not worth your life?

**Q:** Does a story always need to be believable? What makes it believable?

**Robert McKee:** Yes. The audience/reader must believe in the world of your story. Or, more precisely, in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase, the audience/reader must willingly suspend its disbelief. This act allows the audience/reader to temporarily believe in your story world as if it were real. The magic of as if transports the reader/audience from their private world to your fictional world. Indeed, all the beautiful and satisfying effects of story - suspense and empathy, tears and laughter, meaning and emotion-are rooted in the great as if. But when audiences or readers cannot believe as if, when they argue with the authenticity of your tale, they break out of the telling. In one case people sit in a theatre, sullen with anger, soaked in boredom; in the other, they simply toss your novel in the trash. In both cases, audiences and readers bad mouth you and your writing, inflicting the obvious damage on your career.

Bear in mind, however, that believability does not mean actuality. The genres of non-realism, such as Fantasy, Sci-fi, Animation and the Musical, invent story worlds that could never actually exist. Instead, works such as THE PRINCESS BRIDE, THE MATRIX, FINDING NEMO and SOUTH PACIFIC create their own special versions of reality. No matter how bizarre some of these story worlds may be, they are internally true to themselves. Each story establishes its own one-of-a-kind rules for how things happen, its principles of time and space, of physical action and personal behavior. This is true even for works of avant-garde, postmodern ambition that deliberately call attention to the artificiality of their art. No matter what your story's unique fictional laws may be, once you establish them, the audience/reader will freely follow your telling as if it were real - so long as your laws of action and behavior are never broken.

Therefore, the key to believability is unified internal consistency. Whatever the genre, no matter your story's specific brand of realism or non-realism, your setting must be self-validating. You must give your story's setting in time, place and society enough detail to satisfy the audience/reader's natural curiosity about how things work in your world, and then your telling of the tale must stay true to its own rules of cause and effect. Once you have seduced the audience/reader

into believing in the credibility of your story's setting as if it were actuality, you must not violate your own rules. Never give the audience/reader a reason to question the truth of your events, nor to doubt the motivations of your characters.

**Q:** How do you design an ending that keeps people talking?

**Robert McKee:** By "an ending that keeps people talking" do you mean the hook at the end of a series episode that keeps people wondering so that they'll tune in the following week? Or do you mean a Story Climax that sends the reader/audience into the world praising your brilliant story to their friends and family?

If the former, I know two methods to hook and hold the audience's curiosity over a span of time.

A. Create a Cliffhanger. Start a scene of high action, cut in the middle, put the audience into high suspense, then finish the action in the head of the next episode. 24 does this brilliantly week after week.

B. Create a turning point with the power and impact of an Act Climax. A major reversal naturally raises the question "What's going to happen next?" in the audience's mind and will hold interest over the commercials of a single episode (for example, Law and Order), or over the week between episodes (for example, The Sopranos).

If the latter, the most satisfying, and therefore talked about, Story Climaxes tend to be those in which the writer has saved one last rush of insight that sends the audience's mind back through the entire story. In a sudden flash of insight the audience realizes a profound truth that was buried under the surface of character, world and event. The whole reality of the story is instantly reconfigured. This insight not only brings a flood of new understanding, but with that, a deeply satisfying emotion. As a recent example: the superb Climax of GRAN TORINO.

**Q:** What are the typical weaknesses you find in scripts?

**Robert McKee:** Three that jump to mind:

Dull scenes. For reasons of weak conflict or perhaps the poor shaping of beats of behavior, the scene falls flat. The value-charged condition of the characters' lives at the tale of the scene is exactly what it was at the head of the scene. Activity never becomes story action. In short, nothing actually happens, nothing changes.

Awkward exposition. To convenience the writer, characters tell each other what they all already know so the eavesdropping

reader/audience can gather in the information. This false behavior causes the reader/audience to lose empathy.

Clichés. The writer recycle the same events and characters we have seen countless times before, thinking that if he or she writes like other writers have, they too will find success.

**Q:** How important is the process of rewriting?

**Robert McKee:** Rewriting is to writing what improvisation is to acting. Actors improvise scenes countless ways in search of the perfect choice of behavior and expression. The same is true for writers. All writers, no matter their talent, are capable of their best work only ten percent of the time. Ninety percent of any writer's creative efforts are not his or her best work. To eliminate mediocrity, therefore, fine writers constantly experiment, play with, toss and turn ideas for scenes tens of different ways, rewriting in search of the perfect choice. The perfect choice, of course, is dependent of the writer's innate sense of taste. The unfortunate truth is that most struggling writers are blind to their banality.

**Q:** I thoroughly enjoyed your keen analysis of Casablanca, a movie made in 1942. Damn the crass modern movies (and I'm really not that old). My question: Whatever happened to subtlety and innuendo?

**Robert McKee:** They pulled up stakes and moved to television. Given hundreds of 24/7 channels, crap is unavoidable. God did not give out enough talent to fill those thousands of hours with quality. But setting the inevitable drek aside, we now live in a golden age of television drama and comedy. The finest writing in America is on TV. From HBO and FX to FOX and NBC, cable and commercial networks have become treasure chests of writing excellence. From Law and Order to In Treatment to The Wire to Damages to 30 Rock (to name a few of my favorites) television dramas are complex and subtle; comedies are rich in wit, irony, innuendo and outrageous schtick.

I never worry about the future of story art. Fine writers will always find a medium to express their visions of life. Today and into the foreseeable future, that medium is television.

**Q:** In the Story Seminar you say the best way to succeed in Hollywood is by writing a script of surpassing quality. If you have a great script, how do you get past the Hollywood system so that your script ends up in the right hands?

**Robert McKee:** If you write a lousy script, you haven't a prayer. But if you create a work of surpassing quality, Hollywood is still a

motherfucker. Because unless you can network a back pathway to an A-list actor or top-shelf director, you must sign with an agent. And the first thing to understand about literary agents is that although they may or may not have taste, they all have careers. Selling scripts is how they put gas in their BMWs. What's more, like everybody else, they want their gas money today. So they have little or no patience for spending months or even years submitting your work, one submission at a time, to dozens of production companies, and then waiting forever to hear back. They want to read work they can sell and sell fast. So the quality of the writing absolutely matters, but what any particular agent feels is fresh vs. clichéd, arty vs. commercial, hot or cold, who can say? Luck is a big part of a writer's life.

[But] to get started, first rent every recent film and television show that is somehow like your script. Write down the names on the writing credits. Call the WGA, ask for the representation office and find out who agents these writers. This creates a list of agents who have actually made money selling scripts very much like the one you've written. Next, go to Amazon.com and buy The Hollywood Creative Directory and find the addresses of these agents. Do not call them. Instead, write an intriguing letter about you and your story and send it to every agent on your list. Wait, God knows how long, to hear back. If your letter captivates curiosity, and if you send out enough of them, the odds are that a few agents will actually want to read what you've written. When that happens, pray that your work is of surpassing quality.

**Q:** As a beginning fiction writer, the greatest challenge always seems to be the start. What advice would you give?

**Robert McKee:** By "start" do you mean writing the opening chapter or just getting into your pit and hitting keys? If the latter, you're blocked by fear. I suggest you read Steven Pressfield's *The War of Art*. He'll help you find the courage to face the blank page. If the former is your problem, first scenes or opening chapters are usually discovered after you have conceived of your Inciting Incident.

If you feel that your Inciting Incident, without any prior knowledge of your characters' biographies or sociologies, will immediately grip the reader, then use the Inciting Incident to launch the story. For example, the Inciting Incidents SHARK EATS SWIMMER/SHERIFF DISCOVERS CORPSE in Peter Benchley's *JAWS*, or MRS. KRAMER WALKS OUT ON MR. KRAMER AND HER LITTLE BOY in Avery Corman's *KRAMER VS. KRAMER*, dramatize Chapter One of each of these novels respectively.

If, conversely, you feel that you need to provide your readers with exposition about history, characters and setting in order for them to

grasp the importance of your Inciting Incident, then this exposition - well-dramatized, of course, perhaps even building into a set-up subplot - must start the telling.

The principle is: Bring the Inciting Incident into your story as soon as possible, but not until it will hook reader empathy and arouse curiosity. Finding the perfect placement of the Inciting Incident is the key to starting any story.

**Q:** Do you think the state of the economy will force studios to take more risks with lower budget films, or will they become more cautious and stick with what they know works?

**Robert McKee:** In fact, Hollywood has never sold more tickets than this past year. 2009 looks even more promising. The worse the economy, the more people go to the movies and watch television. Hollywood is recession proof.

**Q:** Do you think Slumdog Millionaire would be as commercially and critically successful if we weren't in a recession? Are people looking for happy endings now?

**Robert McKee:** Life is hard, no matter the economy. Happy endings always make more money than tragic endings because life turns many people into emotional cowards who cannot face tragedy in life or fiction. Besides, why worry about it? By the time what you are now writing is finished, sold, packaged, produced and distributed years will have passed. Who knows? In the next decade down endings may go through the roof. To contrive an audience-pleasing, happy ending before you've created your characters, told their story and discovered a truthful climax is to think like a hack.

**Q:** How did you end up as a character in Adaptation? Do you think it was a fair portrayal of you?

**Robert McKee:** Ask Charlie Kaufman. It was his idea. I just said, "What the hell," and had the great pleasure of casting my dear friend, Brian Cox.

**Q:** Do you see the art of story via screenwriting evolving over the decades, and if so, how?

**Robert McKee:** No. Tastes and trends come and go, but the essential art of story has not changed since Cro-Magnon storytellers

sat their tribes around the fire and held them slack-jawed with tales of the hunt. Personally, I wish filmmaking would devolve from the nervous cut-cut-cut move-move-move herky-jerky camera of today back to the expressively lit, framed, fluid images of the past. Too many contemporary directors seem inflicted with HADD.

**Q:** What are one or two pointers you would offer a documentary filmmaker to help guide his crafting of a story as he films his subjects?

**Robert McKee:** Study the classic cinema verite documentaries of Frederick Wiseman-- Racetrack (1985), The Store (1983), Model (1980), Meat (1976), Welfare (1975), Juvenile Court (1973), Basic Training (1971), Hospital (1970), High School (1968), Titicut Follies (1967). He will show you how life shapes into story.

**Q:** What's the best advice you can give for emerging screenwriters today? Is there one thing that you could say is most important when trying to break in?

**Robert McKee:** Go the gym and work out. Writing burns you out, but then you have to get up off your tired ass, put your script under your arm and knock on every door 'til your knuckles bleed. That takes the energy of a five-year old, the concentration of a chess master, the faith of an evangelist and the guts of a mountain climber. Get in shape.

### **Upcoming McKee Seminars:**

Los Angeles - March 6-8, 2009

New York - March 20-22, 2009

London - April 17-19, 2009

*Chile - April 25-28, 2009*

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