

The Writer
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of the Folio Magazine
**EDITORIAL
EXCELLENCE
AWARD**

the Writer

August 2007
VOLUME 120 • NUMBER 8

The essential resource for writers since 1887

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STEP BY STEP

How to turn a short story INTO a screenplay

The form, our writer says, is uniquely suited to adaptation

By Jillian Abbott

TOO OFTEN, adaptation is associated with a favorite book ruined by being turned into film. Given that a screenplay is a 120-page story told in dialogue and pictures and a book is typically a 300-pages-plus story, and a novel is often set inside the protagonist's head, this failure begins to look inevitable. One of my favorite films, *Adaptation*, written by Charlie Kaufman, is about his life falling apart as he attempts to write a screen-

play based on Susan Orlean's book *The Orchid Thief*.

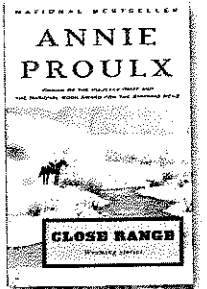
However, as *Brokeback Mountain*—the film based on Annie Proulx's short story of the same name—shows, the short story is uniquely suited for conversion to a screenplay. (Indeed, the film's three Oscars included Best Adapted Screenplay.) With its limited cast of characters and a relatively linear plot, a short-story adaptation is more likely to succeed than an adaptation of a novel's more rambling, interior and

complex form.

Many well-known films are adapted from short stories, including Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, based on "The Sentinel" by Arthur C. Clarke; *The Third Man*, based on a Graham Greene story; *High Noon*, based on "The Tin Star" by John Cunningham; *Rear Window*, based on a Cornell Woolrich story; and *Total Recall*, based on the Philip K. Dick story "We Can Remember It for You Wholesale."

If you've written a short story, you've

The short story "Brokeback Mountain," in Annie Proulx's *Close Range*, became an Oscar-winning film starring Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal (left).



already internalized a screenplay's structure. Opening yourself to screenwriting will not only expand your writing skills but enliven your writing and possibly help you improve your short story by providing fresh insight.

Here are some steps to help you adapt a short story into a screenplay. The story can be one of yours or another writer's.

1 Read your chosen story without taking notes and soak it in. Then read it a second time and analyze it. Write answers to these questions: What is this story about? Who are the characters? What events take place? Where is the story set?

Once you have this basic information, dig deeper. Ask: What does your protagonist want? What does he need? In *Brokeback Mountain*, Ennis Del Mar wants to be a regular guy with a wife and family. What keeps him from this goal is his love and need for Jack Twist. Knowing what your characters need and want gives you the central conflict that will drive your narrative forward.

2 Own the story—make it yours. The job of the adapter is to create something new that still captures the essence of the original. Again, the short story has the advantage over a novel. Diana Ossana, a co-screenwriter on *Brokeback Mountain*, said in the book *Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay*, "We did not have to streamline or condense. ... We had the luxury of using our imaginations to expand and build on that blueprint [Annie Proulx's short story]."

Shake off any notion that you owe the story or its author anything. The process of adaptation is one of the rare

situations where being unfaithful is the moral choice. Adaptation won't succeed unless the screenwriter chooses to be faithful to the form, not the original story. Watch movie credits. Do they say "based on" or "direct translation of"? Set the short story aside and begin writing free of all obligations.

3 Remember that not all short stories are created equal in terms of screenplay potential; some are better left as short stories. Where does your story's central conflict take place? What is its nature? Is it inner conflict, i.e., a character's struggle against herself? This type of conflict is hardest to dramatize into a screenplay because a camera can't go inside a char-

acter's head. That's why the pure prose of writers like John Updike is so hard to adapt into successful screenplays.

Is the conflict interpersonal, a struggle between two characters? This type of conflict makes an easier vehicle for adaptation. For example, the struggle between Clarice Starling and Dr. Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* or between the lovers in *Brokeback Mountain* is interpersonal.

Or is the conflict extrapersonal, with the protagonist's struggle against nature, environment or society, as in *The Shawshank Redemption*, adapted from a Stephen King short story?

Where a short story has description and dialogue, a screenplay's tools are dialogue, action and pictures. Film

BEFORE AND AFTER

Being heard above the noise

Nick Childs' award-winning short film *The Shovel* began with a mystery short story by Edgar Award-winning author Steve Hamilton entitled "A Shovel with My Name on It." (The short story is online at www.authorstevehamilton.com/excerpts/TheShovelSS.htm; the film's Web site is www.theshovelmovie.com.)

Problem

A short story is read quietly to oneself. A film comes with sound effects. The following scene in Hamilton's tale works well in a short story, but in a film the characters would not be able to be heard above a backhoe:

That's how I ended up standing in Hank's yard the next day, with the sheriff and six of his deputies, watching a big backhoe digging up that hole.

"What night was that again?" the sheriff asked. He was standing next to me with his arms folded across his chest.

"Saturday night," I said.

"Six days ago?" he said. "You waited six days to call us?"

Solution

Childs' screenplay for "The Shovel" separates two actions. First, we see and hear the backhoe, then its engine dies and the characters speak.

EXT. HANK'S FIELD - DAY

The huge teeth of a BACKHOE bite through dark earth. The blade swallows a mound of dirt and drops it ... on the grass next to a growing hole.

The machine pulls back. As the engine dies, a DEPUTY steps into the shallow hole.

Ten paces away, Paul and the SHERIFF look on. The sheriff is handsome, in his late 30's. He squints at the sun, low in the eastern sky.

SHERIFF

All right, so, what night this happen again?

PAUL

Saturday.

SHERIFF

So you waited three days to call me.

—J.A.

excels at dramatizing extrapersonal conflict, but in doing so the best films also use these tools to externalize inner conflict. Look for opportunities to turn inner conflict into action or dialogue.

4 Reduce your story to a series of events, and then reorder those events to suit the needs of your screenplay. The short story "Brokeback Mountain" begins with a poignant scene in which a middle-aged Ennis Del Mar wakes in his spartan trailer, alone but heartened because Jack Twist was in his dream. The screenplay, however, begins the day the two young men meet.

5 Create a storyboard by drawing a picture for each beat in a scene. A beat, Robert McKee says in *Story*, is an exchange of behavior created by action and reaction. Strung together, a series of beats creates a scene.

Filmmakers use storyboards to plan a scene-by-scene shoot, but I've found them very useful in helping me plot out stories and novels. By creating a storyboard for the first chapter in my thriller *The Leopard's Claw*, I was able to visualize it beat by beat and reorder it to strike the perfect balance of character, action and information.

A storyboard takes words off the page and out of your head and can bring them to life. The visual depiction (even with crude stick-figure drawings like mine) can reveal flaws in your narrative.

WORKOUT

TO DEVELOP a storyboard, take a long scene from your short story and break it into beats. For example, in the short story "Brokeback Mountain," the scene where Jack and Ennis meet and sign up for work in the trailer office has three beats. The first is where they shake hands. The second is where Joe Aguirre explains what their job will be. The third is when Joe throws a watch at Ennis.

In the film, their introduction stretches over three scenes. It begins in the office parking lot, continues inside,

6 Identify those scenes and beats in the short story that cannot be dramatized or only with difficulty. Consider either leaving them alone, inventing something in their place, or being certain that they are adequately visualized in the screenplay. In this regard, I felt that part of the screenplay for *Brokeback Mountain* didn't work. In the short story, Ennis and Jack, after having become lovers, part after they come down from the mountain and it is clear that an emotionally distraught Ennis vomits because of his loneliness and longing for Jack. But I saw the film first and thought that this scene was Ennis' way of purging Jack from his life.

It seems presumptuous to rewrite an Academy Award-winning screenplay, but I wonder if that scene would have been more effective if Ennis had paced about until Jack drove away. Once Jack was gone, he could run down the street in pursuit, but both he and the audience would know that his longing would go unfulfilled: It's too late; Jack has moved beyond his reach.

7 Adjust for the limitations of film. Although written fiction is only limited by the writer's imagination, narrative film has an inherent structure that places restrictions on the writer. Furthermore, the screenplay is merely one stage in the production of a film. Teams of artists—including

art directors, cinematographers, actors, sound mixers and the lighting crew—also work to adapt the screenplay to film.

Read your completed screenplay for unadapted content. For example, in Steve Hamilton's short story "A Shovel with My Name on It," the character Hank calls someone "every bad word he could think of." Unless you're using voice-over narration, this won't work in film, and so in the screenplay Hank issues a string of actual curses.

Film writers also need to consider the medium's hierarchy of sound. This is a convention that makes hearing dialogue the most important thing. For example, the ambient sounds of a raging battle may suddenly become muted as the stricken hero lies whispering his final words. Once he's dead, the volume of the battlefield can rise again and unimportant dialogue may be shouted. For an example of hierarchy of sound, see the Before and After sidebar on page 37.

These steps will help lift your short story off the page, transforming it into a story told in words and pictures. They may also give you fresh insights, allowing you to improve the story further.

RESOURCES

- If you're unfamiliar with the basics of writing or formatting a screenplay, start with David Trotter's **The Screenwriter's Bible** and Syd Field's **Screenplay**. But also see **The Writer's Journey** by Christopher Vogler.
- **Brokeback Mountain: Story to Screenplay** by Annie Proulx, Larry McMurtry and Diana Ossana.
- **No, But I Saw the Movie: The Best Short Stories Ever Made Into Film**, edited by David Wheeler
- **Story** by Robert McKee

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Jillian Abbott

Jillian Abbott has published a number of short stories and won awards both in the United States and Australia. One of her stories will be in the forthcoming mystery anthology *Queens Noir*. She has taught adaptation for CineWomenNY, a nonprofit group for women filmmakers.