

Ep #45: Anatomy of a Thriller

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On this episode, we're talking all about how to write a thriller. Yes, there are many different types of thrillers, so we're going to break them down. So listen in.

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This is the Script Reader Pro podcast, hands on advice, insider hacks and deeper discussions for the screenwriters who are serious about breaking into the industry.

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Hey, everyone, this is Desiree, and this is the Script Reader Pro podcast. I am your host for this episode, and you are

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so adorable today. I love when you wear these. What are they called? You call them your Real Housewives outfits, but they're joggers. Joggers. Yeah, like little jogging outfit, little lounge outfit. You're so adorable. And your Converse today, you've got this, like, Pinky ish purple, like, like, it's got a bit of purple in the pink. But they got little X's on them, and then they have these on the toe at the bottom of the lace, they have this shiny or crystal heart, like stone. So have our source, ye crystals in them. That's a stupid word. It's a name.

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Is it a name? Darsky, yeah, but where did it come from?

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It's the name of the company. Last name of the company come from. Where did you go? I would be crazy if the founder of swavarsky crystals was named crystal. Swarsky. Swavarsky, if her name was crystal, would you like me to look up where you will? I don't Why are you asking? Anyways, welcome to the podcast. I am the WHO ARE YOU? Call me your name. I'm the vat of useless information. I'm Scott. I am one of the readers, analysts, mentors, script doctors, on and on. Here at Script Reader Pro, and this podcast is designed to entertain you, but give you also information and education and that kind of thing. I always say, I'm not a guru, but it's sometimes. It's it helps to hear something explained in a different way from you've from how you've heard it from someone else. So that's my goal here. Is to explain things in a way that might make more sense to you, or hit something that can can help you advance your your career. And Desiree is here to make fun of me.

2:05

Essentially, I just roll my eyes because it's like, how long does your opening need to be? Well, for

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those maybe there's people who haven't listened before and have no idea because we started talking about your outfits and your converse, my rhinestones, yes, so that's what we're doing today. So we're talking Yes, this is I'm always the one that says yes, because you're the host. What are we talking about?

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You're interrupting me by looking at me. Oh, I won't look at you. Sorry. You can't not look at me because you can't function without looking at this cuteness overload. I can't or today we're talking about the anatomy of a thriller.

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Yes, thrillers are my favorite thing to write. Yes, favorite thing to write, favorite thing to watch, favorite thing to read, when it comes to books. So we're going to break down a lot of the things that I see not quite being done right when someone does write a thriller. So, but before we do that, what do we always start with?

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We always start by talking about a movie and when you when I just or TV show or TV show, when I just saw that, it is the anatomy of a thriller. I thought, I really hope that he brings up this movie we saw. Oh, you remember a title only because it was like two days ago, but even that is pushing it for me. Sometimes it's the it's a pretty unique title. You'll probably remember that one forever. And I think I love it so much because I like I was interested in watching it initially, because I am addicted to super yacht reality TV shows right now.

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Yes, and this movie was The Woman in Cabin 10, which obviously took place on a super yacht about a woman in a cabin who the one main character sees her, and then someone gets thrown off a boat, and no one else knew that this person was in cabin 10. So it's all about making her think that she's crazy, yes, but it was really, really good. Yeah, it was written by, I don't know who adapted it, but it was written based on the novel by Ruth Ware, who is an amazing thriller writer. One of my favorite thriller books ever. It's called in the deep, dark wood, and it was her first debut novel, and it's unbelievable. So check her out, check that movie out. Really kept the tension, really had a lot of surprises. We never knew what

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was coming. No, it was like kept you on the edge of your seat early. Yeah. So we'll

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reference that a few times here, as I point out different things that you should be doing as a writer when writing a thriller. If you haven't seen it, it's on Netflix. Give it a watch and then come back or just listen to this. We're not going to give her anything away. Not going to spoil it.

4:30

Yeah, we're going to spoil it. Spoiler, the girl in the end dies. Okay, I don't think so. But okay, all right, so let's get into it. So why are we getting into it already? I like this chatty, chatty. Oh, what?

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Chatty, chatty two by four. About chatty, chatty two by four.

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I guess because my dad's a woodworker, right? That's the first thing that came up. Was chatty, chatty two by four by four. Anyway, any other movies we've seen?

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Mean, no, but, but, here's something to say about about two by fours. Many cabin 10 have, like, there's certain actors or actresses that you see, and you can't help but think of the characters they played, right? And a lot of times certain actors, they just kind of play the same person over and over character, yeah, yeah. Sorry, play the same kind of character, right? To play it the same. You don't, you can't really differentiate. And there's, there's different kinds of characters, right? There's like the, you know, movie star Billy, you know, top billing actor, actress that, you know, they just, they're there because they're a good actor. And then there's character actors, like Johnny Depp, for example, right? Character actor. He is different in every single thing. He has iconic roles, but not just one. You know, in this movie stars Kira Knightley, I think she's great, but at the same time, she's one of those actresses that just kind of like, it's the same kind of role every time, same kind of character, not that she's not good, she's great, and she was really good in this story. But there's a an actor. He plays the main villain. His name is Guy Pierce, and I've always like, it's impossible for me to not that's a husband that was like the rich guy, the main rich guy, the husband, yes, and it's impossible for me to not see memento. And I know you haven't watched memento. I love memento, but it was Christopher Nolan's first movie, not a candy. That's a mento, not memento. Anyways, there's certain actors that it sometimes it's impossible not to think of something else while you're watching them. And that was that one that's always every time I see guy Pierce that's for me, two by four to me, yeah, two by four. So let's get into it. Hey, all right. So, hey, hey, hey,

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we are talking about like I mentioned, an anatomy of a thriller. For those listeners out there, I'd like you to count the amount of times that Scott says, yes.

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Oh, is that a game? That's a drinking game. Drinking Game every time Scott says, Yes, have a sip of your coffee or tea, of your Absinthe. If you're a writer, you're probably drinking that or whiskey or scotch or something like, whatever.

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Don't give like, that's what is that called, uh, stereotype, yeah. Are you stereotyping your own

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comment is true. I don't know a simple writer. I know,

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you dummy, all right. No sense. We're talking about a thriller. Yes, and oh, I just did it, yep. For those listeners, that would be the second time, because I think he's or maybe third, fourth, probably fourth, yes, that's what he says all the time. It's really quite annoying. And if you're listening still to this podcast, you're wondering, why is this so thrilling? It's because I'm on this podcast. I might get thrilling. I make it thrilling.

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Yes, but everyone loves a thriller. You know, there's so many different kinds. I think sometimes when people think of a thriller, they they kind of box it into just, oh, a person in jeopardy, right? It's, it's thrills, it's, you know, we're trying to figure out, you mean double jeopardy, that that's a perfect example of a thriller. And normally that used to be called a female in jeopardy thriller, right? And that was, like, a certain kind of, you know, all the movies of the week were usually about a woman who was in danger, things like double jeopardy, it's about a woman in danger. Obviously, said that already. Obviously, we're steering away from categorizing stuff like that. It would just be a thriller. All right, don't point out it's about a woman in general. Why? Why? Why do they say that? It's kind of sexist. Well, yeah, that was the time when, you know, in the 80s, 90s, that was the thing, right?

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It's also the time when you could smoke cigarettes while you were pregnant, sitting on an airplane or in the

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movie theater in the second row. Remember, there was a movie theater here that had a balcony? Parent? Remember it was Pacific cinemas, and they had a balcony, and you could smoke in the balcony.

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You're too old. I'm very old. I don't remember the balcony, smoking in the balcony,

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robbing the cradle folks. But yeah, so there's different kinds. So I mean, there's, there's a lot of different guys, and today's, there's sub genres and things have mixed up. But the kind of the main thrillers that you would categorize things, the first one would be a whodunit, right? And Desiree you love? Who does you love that murder mystery? But is who done it an actual word? I bet you, if you looked it up. Because look at the ways you're gonna look it up in a few minutes here. I know well, the way you have it spelled here, yeah, it's one word, like it's kind of stupid. It does well, it's a made up. It's just a blend of the words, but who done it? Yeah, it's a who done it, did it. But that's called a who done it, whatever, any word you say over and over, it just sounds like a dumb word. But who done it's like, knives out, right? Ryan Johnson's movie, knives out spawned a new kind of, like, love of, of those kind of who done it? And then murder mystery,

another example that Adam Sandler, Jennifer Aniston, movie, where they were all on a boat, someone died, Murder on the Orient. Express those kind of things, right? Someone gets killed. And then a bunch of people are trying to figure out who

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did it. Okay? They it is in the dictionary. I knew it. I not it okay, it is in the dictionary. And guess what? The definition is? What's that a story or play about a murder in which the identity of the murderer is not. Not revealed until the end, which is

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pretty much every movie. The killer isn't revealed to the end.

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But who? Oh, who done it? Who did it? Yeah, who done it? That's who. Oh, they said. Who done it?

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1930s Oh, So way back, all right. Well, there you go.

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Well, now we learned something even newer. I was a little bit after your time. Oh, thanks.

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So then the other one, like, we just talked about a person in jeopardy, right? So something like, back in the early 2000s I think the net was Sandra Bullock, right? Great movie. She's on the run enemy run, that one with the mother who tricked her daughter thinking that she has a disability and she has to get out of her chair and run, which is basically the Gypsy Rose story, right?

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Essentially, yes, it is. I never thought of that, yeah. And I

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think that's why you love, like, all the datelines and 2020, and stuff. Those are thrillers. Those are murder mystery thrillers.

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Who I'm just trying to get my material ready, really, yes. And there

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you go. Yes, it's a lot of time. Yes, it's about a wife killing her husband. Well, no, it's, usually has been killing her. Been killing her wife, killing his wife. But anyways, that's where desert got solar plans.

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Anyway, what it is, basically, I think, is it comes down to be like plot driven, and there's some sort of puzzle. I think, yes,

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oh very much. Yes, yes, yes, no,

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yeah, there's a puzzle that needs to be solved,

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and that's why they're fine, right? They're fine like to solve.

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Speaking of puzzles, Scott just told me, before we started airing, that he was really sad and bummed out because there was a puzzle exchange that took place on Sunday that he missed out on.

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Yeah, I have all these I liked. I got into puzzles couple years ago. I have a puzzler to Indiana Jones puzzles. I just finished that. I was telling my wife, I think I got to tape these up and frame them and put them in my movie theater. And then I was looking around, and there's no space anywhere on the walls to put anything else. Anyways, moving on puzzles. What's the next Yeah, what's the next one? Desiree, person in jeopardy. We just went over that. What's the next one, Desiree, who done it? That's above it, followed downwards. Action. Yes, action thrillers. So, you know, you usually have people call them action films, right? An action adventure or whatever, but it really is a thriller as well. Right? Mission Impossible. Every single one of those. It's it's about trying to get to the puzzle, trying to solve it. Who did it? Who's the bad guy? How do we stop them? And it's thrills. It's thrill after thrill, right? So it's a different kind of thriller. It's more about the action.

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Would you say that movie that we saw that I didn't actually think was that good with the two guys on the plane?

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The two guys on the plane? That's what the movie is called, two guys on a plane. No, but that would be? A really bad which one,

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the one where the Is he a president? Oh, yeah. I don't think it was that great.

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No, with idgis Alba and John Cena, heads of state, it was called, yeah, like, that would be an, I mean, that's more of an action movie. It wasn't that thrilling, right? We knew who the bad guys were. We knew who the bad guys were, right?

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There's not a puzzle to solve? Yeah, so is that the is that the part? Then, if there's not really a puzzle, you don't consider it to be I

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wouldn't consider it a thriller. I would just consider it a straight action film, kind of like that. Gerard Butler, one thing was called, was it called plane? I don't think it was flight. I think it was plane where he was the pilot, and then he had to crash it in the middle of the jungle, and then he had to save the people that were on board. Do you remember that one was it called two guys on a plane? No, but that's just an action you know. You know who the antagonists are. Okay, in the classic thriller, you don't necessarily know. Sometimes you will, sometimes you won't, but that's the kind of action one. Then there is the investigative thriller, which would be like, is that Dateline Right? Which is kind of like, it's investigation thing, but movies like seven, right, where you're like, there's a killer, and we're going to investigate the crime, pick up clues, get closer and closer, there's going to be twists and turns, and we don't know what's going on. And then the big ending, right? So that, and then, like, Primal Fear, if you if no one seen Primal Fear, fantastic movie. You have to watch it. Richard fear. It's Richard Gere and Edward Norton. Edward Norton's first movie, and

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he Oh, I'm thinking the wrong one. Because, you know what I'm thinking, what the first thing I thought of was that ape one where, because you said primal, which ape one with, with the apes, or the gorillas that come to life, and then they start talking

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Planet of the Apes? Yeah, oh,

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I thought that that's what, when you said primal, I was like, oh, yeah, the ape one?

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No, it's about a, it's like an investigative they're trying to figure out if this guy's innocent or not.

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But would that, what would that one be considered, of plunder, like apes, I would say

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like an action adventure movie, right? Because it's a lot of, like, big things, not but thriller, though it's still, yeah, that's, that's, the thing is, there's so many different types of thrillers, right? The only thing that wouldn't be a thriller would be like a comedy or like a drama, right? Even science

fiction, a lot of times it's a sci fi thriller. So yeah, there are lots of different kinds. Then you've got horror thrillers. And this is a tricky one, because a lot of times people think something, if it's about killing and there's like, some kind. Of, like darkness. It's a horror film, but like, something like Silence of the Lambs. I don't consider that a horror movie. I but a lot of people right. I consider it a thrill, you know, a thriller. It's, it's about this FBI agent just trying to find this killer, and she's talking this guy. It's not necessarily a horror, even though dark things are happening. But what about the shining? The Shining? Yeah, the shining is more than a thriller, because it's very slow paced, right? But, like, long legs. Do you remember long legs? We watched it last year. Nicholas Cage. Was this, like, crazy killer guy.

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Oh, with the doll?

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Did he have a doll? Oh, yeah, yeah, he had a doll in the basement. And then,

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no, I don't did he have a doll? But it was the doll. There was a doll

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in the room. It's like a voodoo thing. And he would like, yeah, so long legs, see, I know you remember that one that was a horror thriller, right? Because it's not that true horror movie with, like, supernatural elements and things like that. The Sixth Sense, exactly as well, is considered to be a horror. Really, I wouldn't, because the same dead people, right? And ghosts and there's jump scares, right? But to me, again, it's more of a thriller, right? You talk about Jump Scares for a second, don't? We've talked about how embarrassing I am when, no, I know, but we went to the

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Halloween store here, yes.

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And I know those things when you step on the sign, they jump at you. I know it's no one's coming, and it still scares me.

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I know. And then it was just two days ago, we were watching a movie or something, and you got scared with this wasn't even a scary movie, no, it was a scene change or something, I don't know. And then you hurt your shoulder.

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I'm old. Okay, anyway. Then, then, yeah, then what I consider a subtle thriller, which would be Woman in Cabin 10. It was more subtle. It was kind of like, okay, we're watch. It's more

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character driven, right to the point where I don't have to cover my eyes,

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yeah, and, and woman on the train, right? Is another one. Which one is that one? You'll remember if you saw like, a preview, right? It's complicated, but it's, it's like a slow burn, right? So a slow burn, it's a thriller, because it's not straight drama, right? There's secrets, there's twists and turns, someone will probably be a killer.

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If it's a slow burn, would that not kind of be under investigative

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No, because those, they're not investigative ones, aren't really a slow burn, because there's constant clues. Clue investigation going here, red herring all that kind of stuff, right? Whereas, like, you know, women in cabin 10, you know, there was no red herrings, right? It wasn't like, oh, it's got to be this person, or it's got to be this person. They just kind of like, focus. Of, like, focus more on her and like how she was, you know, try, how do I get through this? And how do I show people I'm not crazy? And right? It was more about her experience. So it was a little more subtle. That's kind of what I mean in that, that

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kind of, okay. So like, basically looking at all these, the who done it, person in jeopardy, action, investigative, horror and subtle for me, looking at them all, if I already say something that I mean keeps them or has them in common, it would be that they keep you kind of really guessing, is to what's happening next. Yeah.

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Great point. That is exactly it. That's the Golden Buzzer answer. Golden Buzzer. Golden Buzzer. Yes, they're designed to keep the audience guessing, right? And that's the fun of a thriller, is the audience gets to try and figure it out, right? You're always like, and you always tell me, don't even say anything, Scott, can you please not? Because I always want to be like, Oh, I think I know what's happening, and that's why I actually can see what's coming. But cabin 10, you did not. I did not. That was a great twist, and I even read the book like years ago and I didn't remember. Okay, so it's different, but here it's all about keeping the audience involved.

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Okay, so here's a question, because I'm very honest and blunt. What's the point of all of this?

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The point of all of what going over all this? Oh, I'm going to kind of point out what the thing Well, I

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just really want to know, because I'm my time is important here, as are the listeners. And you're probably wondering, why are we talking about all these different types of thrillers?

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Good segue. So let's talk about all the elements that are needed in a thriller, right? And this is television or pilot. Doesn't matter what you're doing. A lot of times now thriller novels that used to be put into like movies or or two part mini series. Mostly they go into series now, right? Four or five, six episode limited series is now what thriller novels turn into. That's what the one we've talked about before. Yeah, department Q, how do you know I was thinking that? Because it's the best one we've seen a lockdown. But all the Harlan Coleman thrillers and stuff too, they come from one book, and there's enough in there to fill episodes. So, so this is for both. Okay, so these are a lot of the things, and I'll put we'll post this in the show notes, just a breakdown of what I kind of think is important to remember, what I always kind of have on my little post it note on my computer when I hear post it notes. So this is what we're gonna look at. So number one, a vulnerable leading character. Okay, so you want a character who is vulnerable, who is not, you know, planted with their feet on their ground. That works really well for you. Examples from what we just talked about, science of the lands, you've got Clarice. She's a new FBI agent. She is a woman in a field that is all men. When she arrives, she's vulnerable. She has to prove herself. It's like, why did this guy choose her? You know what? Going on. So she's a vulnerable character. Woman in Cabin 10. She just came off a really bad case. Someone died getting her the story. She's kind of messed up. So it's a perfect place to put her in a position where everyone thinks she's crazy because she is kind of like not level.

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But here's the thing that you've taught me over the years too. Speaking of vulnerable leading characters and characters in general, is to never let the story get ahead of the character.

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Yes, yeah, that is this true, because it takes all the mystery away, unless it's a red herring, which it usually is, the character thinks they know who the killer is, and you're like, oh my gosh, I can't believe that. Okay, yes, and or there's some misdirection that that says this is the killer, and then it gets there, and it's not the killer, right? That's usually the mechanism that is in there. So if we get ahead of the of

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the character, when we have a vulnerable, vulnerable leading character, then do we want to have that vulnerability going all the way throughout, or do you want the character to change at the end, to not be as vulnerable?

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That's always, that's always the best option, right? They learn what they need to, right? Like, for example, Silence of the Lambs. We'll just use, because everyone has probably seen that. Clarice starts as a very shaky, scared. She knows she's good at her job, but no whatever's telling her she's not, she's not ready. And this guy, Hannibal, becomes her mentor, in many

ways, teaching her what she needs to do. By the end, she takes down the killer, and so she's becomes confident and stuff, even though she's scared out of her mind, right? So, yeah, they will grow it. I mean, you always have a character grow and change and overcome their flaw if they can.

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And then you also have here personal connections.

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Yeah, anytime you can make a story more personal, the better, right? When you can make it about that character, something in their life connects to it. Example, long legs, right? It starts out with this, this leading character having this premonition, or this, like precognition, that this is where the killer is in the house. So it speaks to her specific connection to the case. And as you go through the story, you find out that the personal connection is very personal, as it all plays out in the end, so that always makes it more impactful.

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Okay, but here's the question, then, can it be a personal connection, not just with the plot and the story, but a personal connection for the audience as well? Can you explain? How does that work? Like, you know, like, if you're watching something and you're like, oh my goodness, I'm really relating to that, because that's personal to me. I've dealt, dealt with that trauma, or I've overcome that. Is that something you want to try to look at as well as a writer,

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you can I mean, there's, there's no telling what a reader or an audience member has gone through. But do you know what I'm saying? I know what I'm saying? I know what you're saying, and a lot of times you'll see, I mean, that's why we see the same themes a lot in stories a leading character dealing with a broken family, alcoholism, abuse of some sort, a gambling addiction, self loathing, lack of validation. These are all human traits that most people have experienced in their lives, right? And so, you know, having that's why we tend to see the same thing, you know, oh, this couple is breaking apart because their kid died. Not everyone can understand that, but everyone has known someone who's lost. That's what I'm saying. So it's kind of a universal thing.

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So you want personal connection with the plot, but also, yeah, you try

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and create a character that is going to relate to people, right?

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That's what I'm saying, for sure. Then the next thing you have here is red herrings.

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Yeah, you want to pack your script full of red herrings, as many as red herrings. So red herring means a suspect that is most likely the killer that you get the audience and the other characters thinking, this is the killer. And if you only have one, then it's not going to work. You need to have three, four or five. You need to have a lot, like, for example, knives out right? Or or Murder on the Orient Express, you've got half a dozen or more characters, and it paints it that every single one of those characters could be the killer. And so the whole fun of the story, it's like a game of Clue, right, trying to figure out, okay, well, all of these people are probably they could have done it. They their alibis don't work, but it's only one of them, right? And so that's, that's that's red herrings, just throwing enough suspects in the air that the audience can't figure it out, because there's no fun knowing who the killer is ahead of time in stories

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like this. Well, that's not what the definition I found about red herring. Oh, okay, you looked it up. Yeah. Is that? It's a fish, a dried smoked herring, yes, which is turned red by the smoke. Okay? It also, though, says a clue or piece of information that is or is intended to be misleading or distracting, yeah.

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Oh, good point, because it doesn't necessarily have to be a character. It can be a weapon that they find that had blood on it. Well, that's just to misdirect us to think that that weapon that was in this person's house, but that blood came from a turkey they cut in their backyard at Thanksgiving or something, right?

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It's like, it says central point being away from the central point being considered. Yeah? So to keep you guessing, misdirection

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is what it comes down to, yeah, mister, yeah. But they must make sense if you're going to add misdirection, if you're going to add a red herring, it can't be so blatant that there's no explanation for it after it's like you set. This all up, and then, oh, the killer is right here. But you don't go back to that red herring, or you don't explain it, right. All it was there for was to trick us. And that's not, that's not good writing.

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You know, it would be really a good red herring is if there was, like, a murder in the middle of the forest, and you're trying to figure it out, and then some guy that you think is the murderer is there smoking a red herring

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on a fire that would be in, like, the Naked Gun

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type of that's what I'm saying, like that. What the one we just is that the one we just saw,

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yeah, yeah, stupid. Over the top comedy, right? It would be funny. Yeah, it's a red herring. It is. It's actually salmon, yeah? So, lots of red herrings. Another thing there's gonna be dead bodies in some way, right? Other some that dead body at the beginning, people dying along the way, big dead person at the end. You know, so dead that that's usually what makes a thriller, is someone has died, so that that should be in your script, no matter which level of thriller that you're writing, right?

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Do you like we've said this just recently, too, where I don't remember what it was we were watching. And we were so upset because they killed people, and we were like, what? Oh, yeah. I remember what we were watching. I want to say what it is, why we just watched it.

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Oh, okay, yeah.

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Though, you know the, yep, the family one,

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the family one, with the

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son who came back.

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I'm so confused right now. Do you have a title

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that was just the other son who came back? Yeah, and his girlfriend was pregnant, the mob one.

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Oh, yeah. That was really, that was really well done. It was called Dead. It was called riffraff.

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Yeah, riffraff, exactly what I was thinking riffraff,

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but yeah, there's dead bodies, and then you're not sure. Sometimes they're not.

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No, no, that's not what I'm saying. Oh, don't put words in my mind. I'm sorry. What were you saying? I'm saying, speaking of dead bodies in that movie, we're both like, wow, oh yeah. When

people like in movies, and I never said, I'm like, I hate when they do that. And I wonder if the listeners agree when they go and they kill someone for the sake of killing someone, but you're like, Why did you have to kill the

27:12

convenience store clerk? Right? If it's in a movie and they go in and oh, they said their name, and then, bam, they kill the person. I'm like, that sucks. Like I did such a gross feeling in my stomach. I know it's like, it's different, if it's a character that is something, or even like a cop that's trying to save the day and he dies. I'm like, okay, so he died for a reason, but like, some just random person, like you, oh, a stranger shows up at the door, and you don't want them to be there, so you then you kill them. I'm like, I know. I don't. I just that gives me such a gross settling. Yeah, it is, anyway, this which also like, like, the Fast and Furious movies, for example, you've got all these car chases. They're like, 2070 dies. Well, 27 cars get completely destroyed in their Chase. But they never care if those people die in the car. Is like, people driving down the street. It's like, boom. It's like, what? Like, yeah, that it Yeah.

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So it's different, yeah, it's different anyway, dead bodies, yes. So dead bodies, then we have life or death stakes. Yeah, the

28:07

stakes are high in a thriller, right? If they don't solve this, some a killer will go free kill again. If they don't stop him in time, he's gonna kill this person, right? There's always or a hostage, or if you don't do this, I'm gonna kill your wife. There's always someone that is providing the stakes of life or death, right? Not just oh, I'm gonna lose my job or oh, I'll get I'll have to go bankrupt, or I'll have to go to court. It's life or death. That's the stakes that should be Mission Impossible, for example, huge stakes. Pretty much every single one of those movies, the world will end, right? Like it's high stakes. Everyone, everyone will die. So, yeah, you need stakes in there, life or death, stakes

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for sure. Next one that you have is obstacles become personal.

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Yeah, and that's what really gives depth to solid thrillers, is the obstacles that these characters face force them to look at their lives, or they intersect with their lives very personally, right? Seven? Perfect example. If you haven't seen seven, I don't want to spoil it for you, but the big thing in the end, the big climax, comes down to a very personal connection to the main character. It becomes more and more personal. Bleeds into their lives, or it's like in that movie, he's a cop. He's trying to prove himself. He gets more and more distant from his wife because he's getting further and further into the case. So there's always something there that should be pushing, pushing a personal connection, a personal issue in in any kind of movie, for someone, right, even like a character who like, like the Bone Collector with Angelina Jolie and Denzel, it's like there's a mentee, mentorship relationship there. It starts to get very personal as the case

goes on and it bleeds into it so bleeding into their personal lives. Woman, The Woman in Cabin 10, right? All these things are bleeding into her believability or trustworthiness as a journalist, right? She's gonna look crazy. No one's gonna trust her stories like it becomes very personal

29:56

to the character, then you have building intention.

30:00

In, yeah, it has to be building. Things have to get more intense. More intense, more intense. Like you want to picture, is this going to make the audience member lean forward in their seats? Right? Are they going to be holding their breath? Are they going to be gripping the chair you need to be building? If it isn't building, it just it can fall flat and you're like, Okay, well, so what's the point of this? Why are we just meandering like, let's think like seven perfect example. Because every death, that of these seven sins that are being, you know, put out, put to life in these tableaux, every single one of them gets worse and worse and worse. So you want to build it and build it. And, you

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know, is there any though, that, are there any movies that'll be like, that won't build until the very end, and then it's just like,

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yeah, those would be, like, the subtle ones, right? Like the, you know, woman, or even, like, sixth sense, right? It doesn't build an intensity, but it builds in character, okay? And the character is different.

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So you're saying not building like, it can be building in different areas, yeah, necessarily, like the

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tension, right? But there should be like, even in the sixth sense, even though you're saying it like, that's kind of like that, these characters are like, you know that if the if the detective guy or the psychologist guy can't help this kid, then this is supposed to be his redemption story. And he, you know, every time, and he gets further further step back from helping this kid, it raises tension, right? What's gonna happen to this kid if he doesn't help him? You know? What's gonna happen to the what's gonna happen to the psychologist if this kid doesn't help him heal? So there should be building towards something bigger than than just a dramatic narrative. If that makes sense, maybe that's confusing.

31:35

It is okay. I'm sorry. Maybe you can talk. Maybe we can do a podcast on that building tension. Sure. Yeah, sounds good. You have fast first act, deeper second act, and then short final act. Yeah.

31:47

So in a thriller, like every genre, has a little bit of a different formula as far as structure goes in, how long everything is, but a great thriller is a very fast first act, right by 20 pages, we should be kind of like shifting into the second act, because you want people leaning in and being getting like, excited and pulled in and, oh my gosh, what's happening. So you want to be quick. Then that second act is all about the clues, right? Finding the clues. Here's a clue. Let's open this door. Oh gosh. Bigger obstacle. Overcome it. Find a clue. Next Door. Bigger obstacle. Find a clue. So you want to be kind of like, you know, you're getting into the plot, you're picking up all those clues. Your character's learning stuff, you're getting involved. Getting invested. And then when the climax hits right, when they're like, this is a killer. Let's go. That's the ending, right? Silence of the Lambs, again, for an example, right? Very quickly, we meet Clarice. We find it about Buffalo Bill. We meet Hannibal. Here we go. That second act is all about her learning and investigating and skills and all this kind of stuff. And then the final act is, okay, we know where Buffalo Bill is. Let's go, right? And then they go, and that's the finale. So it's a longer movie, but it is very quick in its in its format.

32:53

Well, sometimes, though, when you watch a movie too, they have the really short beginning, they have the long center, and then they have the way too long ending, and you're just like, oh, let's wrap this up. Know when to end your story, yeah? And that, that is the opposite effect that pulls you right out, yeah.

33:11

And this thing, like, back in the day, 2030, years ago, like movies could take 45 minutes to set everything up, and people didn't care, because there was nothing else that they could do there. They it's not second screen syndrome back then. Right now, people just don't have the attention span. They want something to happen fast. And so, you know, getting into a thriller as quickly as possible. You know, moving through the bulk and then hitting that ending in like, 1015, pages, that's going to really create a solid impression with with a reader. Okay, makes sense. So you always want to have a climax, right? You want to have a big climax, and that can sometimes be twists and turns, right? Here's the big reveal, you know? Then the sixth sense, for example, right? We get it, we find out what is actually happening with Bruce Willis. That's the climax, right? And then it all kind of like comes together after that. So you want to make sure that when you're building something, it actually it actually has an explosive moment, a confrontation with the killer, the big action sequence, the life or death moment. Oh, you're all of a sudden, you're stuck under water. How you going to get out? You want to have that big climactic it has to if you're building tension all the time, and everything's getting bigger and bigger and bigger, and then your climax is half the size of everything else. It's just not gonna feel like it doesn't work. So, yeah, so that's kind of like, those are the main kind of bullet points to make sure you keep in mind that can help your thriller come to life the next one. And this is the best part. This is the biggest one. Is secrets. This is like, this is the post it note to put on your computer if you are writing a thriller. Give every single person in your story a secret. This works in every genre, but especially in thriller. Perfect example of this is the TV series. Pretty much every Harlan Coleman TV series, but there's one in particular called safe, and it stars, can't remember his name right

now, the guy who plays Dexter. Every single person in that movie, in that in that series, has a secret. And some of them are big. Some. Of them are small, but what a secret does is it makes a character do something they normally wouldn't to protect their secret well, and that makes them look guilty.

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Then the audience is questioning like, yeah, what? What do they know? And what aren't they telling us? And, yeah, what do we want to know as an audience? And what do we need to know exactly?

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And it makes them a red herring, right? So they're not necessarily the killer, but they're acting like they did it or they know about it or something, right? And the secrets don't necessarily always have to come out, either. But if you give every one of your characters a secret in a thriller, they are constantly going to be making a second guess who is actually responsible and playing out a lot of those secrets is what kind of keeps everything glued together? Because you'll see that the people investigating the crime or the person who's in trouble, they find out, okay, that's person's actually not. I didn't I thought they were the bad guy, but they're not the bad guy. I thought she was shifty, but she's not shifty. It's for something else that it usually gets revealed. So playing with that intelligently to reveal the secrets at the perfect time when everyone, the characters, the audience, thinks that this is the person responsible, then the secret comes out. You're like, okay, I guess you know you're not, you're not like, you're not who I thought, Okay, now we wasted all this time. Look, the killer has got to be this way. So secrets will will definitely make your thriller pop.

36:13

Okay. What's next after secrets? You have mystery.

36:19

Mystery, yeah. I mean, most thrillers are a mystery, especially like the whodunits, right? You want to kind of picture your kind of, like mystery, your thriller, like, like a spider web, right? Like it's constantly weaving in and back and forth within itself, right? You want to have a lot of layers, a lot of mysteries. You know, not just the main plot mystery, but you want to have other things around it. You want to reverse engineer and think, Okay, this is where I want to go. What are all the things as I go backwards? These are the pieces of information that will get them to solve the crime. So how do I keep that as the final one? Let's give little bits and pieces until we get back. So reverse engineering and knowing you're ending, you kind of have to, well, you don't have to. You don't have to, you don't have to do anything, but knowing who the killer is, you know ahead of time, right? Giving out to yourself will help you make sure, like, department queue was perfect example. We never knew the actual bad people were, but they obviously did right because of how complex it was.

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But speaking of like, a winding web, it makes me think about in the summertime when there was that spider web in the back. It's like, so intriguing to look at a spider web and like you go, you wipe the spider web out, and the web still comes back. And that's what it should be with a story, right? That's a good point. No matter what you take from that it should just the pieces should be able to come back in and follow back into place the way that they are supposed

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to be. Yeah. And when you sometimes we look at a spiderweb, I do anyways, so I try to, I try to trace it, to see how it started. Where did they start? How did they do that? How do you want to know where the starting and ending Exactly? And that's kind of how a thriller should make you feel, right? You're trying to get all those pieces together. The best ones are when you when you kind of, like, have to pause and go, Okay, wait a minute. I gotta get how did this work? And right? Like, because it gets you so invested, right? But yeah, and we should never see the ending coming. We should never see the I mean, sometimes you can't get away with it. Sometimes, some people will predict who, who the the antagonist, the true antagonist is. But you want to do everything you can so that it's still a support. Still a surprise. That's why having more than one suspect, right, having red herrings that helps to keep our eyes off who truly is.

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Sometimes they make a point of making you like specifically think it's definitely not that person, when it actually ends up being that person, yeah, like that killer will actually

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be in a helpful position and be healthy character that when we watched untamed and the conservation park that series, oh yeah, yeah, you never expected who that was, Thanksgiving. Remember that horror movie, Thanksgiving with the pilgrim guy and killing everybody over Black Friday? Do you remember that one? No, the killer ends up being someone you never expected them to be because they were not in that type of position, right? So it's always making us look at other, right? Other suspects you have here, S o, t, l, example. What's that? That's Silence of the Lambs as an example of that you've already had. Yeah, and I mean that end, because the ending of Silence of the Lambs is one of the best endings ever, just the way they did it. And it's complete misdirection, right? And it's, it's purposeful. I'm going to spoil it a little bit, but everyone has probably seen it, but you have Clarice going and thinking, this is where Buffalo Bill is, and we see her in the house, and we know she is in Buffalo Bill's house. And it cuts back and forth between the FBI being outside that house, and are they going to get there in time they got to breach the door? Clarisse is in there. The killer staring at her. All of a sudden, they break down the door, and that's not the same house. So then we know, oh my gosh, they're not there. She has to get out of this on her own. You never see it coming.

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That's so well done. But that happens after that movie. That's happened quite a few times where they have used that same scenario. Oh yeah. They do back and forth, and you're like, oh gosh, get in the house, and then it's like, an empty house

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because of that. Now, you kind of know, we kind of okay, they're not gonna Yeah, but that was probably one of the first of its time, and it was just so well done because we were in Clarissa's chest and we felt her heartbeat, and it was so good. But, yeah, that's, that's an example of never letting us see it coming. Then you have twists here listed, yeah, and most thrillers will have some kind of twist, right? The big reveal, oh my gosh. Can't believe it was that person. But, you know, the trick of it is, you want to make sure that if you want to be able to write your movie as though it's going to be an amazing movie, even if the twist isn't a twist, right? Like, the sixth sense, always a great example, if without that twist of who, what was really happening. I don't want to spoil it, in case anyone hasn't seen it up to that point, it's still an amazing movie. It's so so so good. The twist makes it unbelievable, right? One of the best ever. But you want to make sure that even if your twist isn't that isn't going to be there, is your movie great up to that point. That's the true test of whether it's if it's a twist that finally makes it work. Not so good, right?

41:03

I get your saying, yeah, so, so that's kind of it's keeping like, it's keeping the audience guessing again, right?

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Yep, subverting our expectations, right? You want to make them expect something and then change it. So how long

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should, like, we've talked before about length of of a script and how long a script should be, yep. And so when it comes to a thriller like we know the drama is the standard hour and a half, right? Yeah, Thriller do we want to have longer or what?

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Yeah. I mean, thrillers, in my opinion, should be closer to nine to 90 pages than 120 pages, right? If a thriller takes 132 pages to go through. It's probably not going to be that thrilling. It's not going to keep us on the edge of our seats, right? That's more of like a dramatic thriller, where it's like, it's more about the drama, more about the characters, right? But you want to kind of like be shorter, shorter, and a thriller just keeps everything moving. Right? Your pages need to be fast and just another piece of advice, read thriller novels if you can really great thriller novels showcase a perfect way to build that tension, to create that web, to set up suspects. If you'll notice that, the thing you'll notice in a great thriller, whether it's a James Patterson novel or Ruth Ware, like we talked about, every chapter is kind of like a scene, right? They end the chapters in a way where you cannot not start that next chapter. You're about to fall asleep, and you're like, oh my gosh, no, I have to read at least the next page. That's what you want your scenes to be like. End it in a way where you're like, Okay, I got to keep going, right? That readers being like, what? Okay, and now we're in the next scene, boom. So you want to, they're great, and they're so successful, most thrillers that are made these days are based on thriller novels. So, you know, reading and reading and picking up and studying that, you know, study, study, study. That's that's the key. Look at the best thrillers you've ever watched. Get the screenplay, read

them, study them. Why did it work? How did it work? That's what you want to do so, give character secrets, build tension, put in lots of red herrings. Those are kind of like your foundation blocks. So, yeah, so that's, that's kind of what I have to say about

43:10

the audience guessing. That's the main thing, I think, for me, is when I watch all of the dateline or 2020s, is the guessing, like, what's gonna happen? Like, what, what is the end gonna be?

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And what I love about them sometimes they don't do it very often, but I've seen in a couple, when I come in and out of the bedroom, when you're watching them, is they have the killer, the suspect, sitting there talking, yeah, like they're like, they're not in jail, right? And then they cut away to them at their end, and they're actually sitting in a prison, in a prison, or in a room with their jumpsuit on, you're like, they're actually serving life like, that's fun. They don't really wow that, yeah, so So subverting the expectations, and that's what you want to do. That's what people will remember when they walk away from a script. That's what they remember, oh my gosh, like they keep thinking about it in their head. And that's what you need to do for a reader to want to pass a script onto someone else.

44:01

Well, I think just the fact too, with us talking about past movies that we've seen, that movies that stick with you, stick with you and stay with you, right? They do something so I that's the kind of script that you want to write yourself. Is something that will stick with your audience and then keep them talking about it for years and years to come.

44:17

Yep, they create a visceral response where you feel something, you don't just see it, right? You feel it. That's the main that's what I mean. That's gold, right there. So anyways, that's thriller stuff. So we're gonna take a quick pause for a moment and have a little explanation of one of our services here. So hang tight.

44:36

Feel like you've taken your script as far as you can on your own. We know how frustrating it can be sometimes to get the great ideas that are in your head properly on the page, but imagine having a professional screenwriter jump in and rewrite it for you to create a market ready script. Send us your script for a rewrite proposal, and the pro of your choice will. Write up a page or so of notes on exactly how they'd approach a rewrite head on over to www.scriptreaderpro.com forward slash rewrite and use the code rewrite 15 during checkout for the rewrite proposal to get 15% off.

45:19

And we're back. Thank you so much for joining us again today for the Script Reader Pro podcast. This is the section of the episode that we talk about question and answers. Yeah. And I want to just say that if you have any questions, answers, comments, ideas for future podcasts,

feel free to submit them at Hello at scriptreaderpro.com Yes. So thank you to those who have listened, who have submitted these questions.

45:44

Yeah, keep them coming. And yeah, let us know kind of stuff that you want us to talk about, what you want Desiree to talk about. She's a endless, endless fountain of information. I am yeah. So what are our questions?

45:56

What does it mean when someone says they don't take unsolicited material or queries?

46:01

Oh, good question. It just means that, like, sometimes you'll pitch someone, or you'll go to the website and they'll say that we do not take unsolicited queries or material, it just means that they are not going to look at your script because of legal reasons. They don't want to deal with people they don't know.

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Right? Solicited, though, does solicited mean you have an agent, or

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solicited means they've asked you for it. Unsolicited means we didn't ask you. Okay, yeah, so, yeah. So that's what it means, is you're trying to get it to someone who didn't ask for it, and they don't want to deal with that, so they'll put that up saying we don't take it.

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And that's just like outside, like when you people in their mailboxes say, no one's no flyers, please. Yeah, no unsolicited information, right? Yep. Or materials Yes. Question two, can I trust a company that asked me to sign a release form to read my script? Yeah?

46:48

I mean, I would. I mean, you're never going to script read if people don't read, if people if you don't let people read it. Usually, if someone has a release form, it's just them protecting themselves, because if they have something that they're already developing that is similar to what you have written, that gets them in a in a bad position, right? Right? So they just want to make sure that you're signing to say, if, for some reason, they make a movie that has pieces of something similar to mine, I'm not going to sue them, right, right? And so, yeah, you got to take a chance. You got to take a chance on, oh, no, one's going to read it if you don't take people don't steal stuff in this business. I mean, yeah, it's happened, but it's more expensive now to try than just to I mean, people know that most writers are going to take whatever payment you want to give them, right? So, yeah, trust, trust.

47:28

Okay. Question three, what is the difference between a contest and a fellowship?

47:32

That's a really good question. I bet a lot of people don't know the difference, because fellowship is, I have no notice. So a contest is a one time win thing. You win and you get some cash, or you get a newsletter, or you get a meeting with someone. A fellowship is more involved a fellowship is we're going to work with you. We're going to work with you over the next year. We're going to pair you with a mentor of some sort. You're going to come in this group, and we're going to all work out our scripts together on a 10 day thing. That's a fellowship. It's it's something, if you can win a fellowship over a contest. That's a fellowship can help you launch your career. It can help you get doors open. A contest can as well, but a contest is a little more removed from that. You can use it as like an accolade of, hey, I'm vetting my script. I was in the top 10 finals of this contest. Whereas a fellowship is, hey, you're amazing. We're gonna work with you come into our space, right? That's the, you know, the nickel fellowship. That's what you want to Sundance, you know, all that kind of stuff. That's what you that's what you the big one. Those are more worthwhile to your

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career than for sure, for sure, yeah, question four, what would you say is the best movie and TV show you have ever watched this

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year? Oh, you would say? What would you say?

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Oh, geez, I don't know names of stuff.

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Well, what TV what's the TV show you watch this year that you just keep talking about her, can't stop thinking about, we talk

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about it all the time. Yeah, department. Q, no, but that wasn't, wouldn't be the one that wouldn't be, oh, what would be the best TV show, Firefly lane? Oh, yeah, I didn't know that was this year. Yeah, I guess. So, hey, was it this year or Sullivan's crossing? You really like Sullivan's crossing those two? Yeah, is what I watched this year that I couldn't get enough of. And there was also that sisters one, but it wasn't as good as the other two.

49:08

Oh yeah, that one with Jessica Alba, or Jessica, it's

49:13

her name anyway. Really loved Sullivan's crossing, which is Canadian, and I loved

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it for me, TV shows, I mean, department queue is amazing, but man, the boys and Gen V, I just watched Gen V Season Two over the last couple of days, and I said to my writing group, I'm like, like, there is nothing on television that is so intricately and smartly written than those two shows. Everything is connected. Everything comes back. There's constant surprises. You never know what's coming. It's just I couldn't stop watching it. I watched six episodes in a row. I didn't start till like nine at night, so I was, it was a late one for me, but I just couldn't stop watching. I'm like, Okay, I got to go to bed now. So yeah, Gen V and the boys for me, they, they're they're connected together.

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Isn't that weird? What TV shows used to be like, like, what used to we used to find entertaining decades ago? I would not be entertaining to

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the to anyone, and you can watch it back to back, either you have to wait a week every time, family ties,

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like, I think of family ties, growing pains, growing pains,

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yeah, or even, like, Fresh Prince of Bel Air, but even like the heavier, like Breaking Bad. I mean, it's not from 20 years ago, but it's been a while, right? Yeah, certain shows, sopranos, you know, like, yeah, Best Movies for me. Best movie I saw this year. I saw just the other day, one battle after another, Paul Thomas Anderson's movie with Leo. It's so it was just like, Man, this is why people need to keep making original movies. This is exactly the reason. It was just like every single beat, like I can see it from beginning to end in my head again, right? Still. It's just still, stick with it. It's just so surprising, unexpected, fun, best movie I

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saw this year. I don't know for movie for me. No, any anything

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that you're just like, oh my gosh, I love that.

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I mean, I'm sure I've seen stuff, but nothing that I can think of offhand.

51:02

No, okay. Well, I mean, remember titles, but thank you. I know maybe what, what were you gonna say? Maybe I'll think about it and it'll come back to me. Okay, all right, so, yeah, I don't think there's been the one that's like Florida, not for no, nothing, just been okay, yeah, for you. Yeah, guess what? We're done. Oh, we're done. Nice. All right, cool. Well, if you if you learn something fantastic, I hope you did, if you were entertained. Even better, if you want to share

this and tell your friends about it that you do, if you want to subscribe stars, yep, five stars would be great. We're going to be a little more consistent here with our podcast coming out and lots of great stuff to come. We've got some great interviews lined up, and we're going to be doing some script page breakdowns and things like that that people enjoy. So check us out at scriptreadpro.com

51:50

and feel free, like I said, to email your questions or comments or ideas or anything else. Yeah, to Hello@scriptreaderpro.com Yep.

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And check out all our services, because we are here to help writers, craft wonder one page at a time. You.