

A 20 YEAR ROAD TO "OVERNIGHT" SUCCESS

Pasadena resident and John Wick creator Derek Kolstad explains his convoluted path to screenwriting success.

By JULIE CARLSON
Photos SHANNON COTTRELL

It's been an epic six years," said screenwriter Derek Kolstad referring to his film phenomenon action trilogy *John Wick*, starring Keanu Reeves as the retired assassin seeking vengeance.

On an early Wednesday morning, before Kolstad set off for meetings in Hollywood, we sat down at Charlie's Coffee House in South Pasadena and discussed writing, working in the industry, living in Pasadena, and, of course, Keanu. The business major-turned-screenwriter is humble about his Midwestern roots. He grew up reading Stephen King and since the age of nine dreamed of writing films. Around that same age, on a cruise to Alaska, Kolstad recalled writing his first screenplay.

"Probably longhand on a lined yellow notepad," he said fondly. "I programmed a template in WordPerfect. I always wanted to write movies, but I never thought it could be a career."

So, like many aspiring screenwriters, Kolstad went in another direction by working in advertising in Chicago. Then one day, years later, his brother called to see how he was doing.

"I was an emotional cat," admitted

Kolstad. "I started crying." At 26, he knew in his heart he had to give another stab at writing for the big screen. Not knowing anyone but a former schoolmate from kindergarten, in the area, he moved to L.A. and began making the rounds. "I did everything I could to pay the bills but kept writing."

Even though Kolstad was not ready with some of his scripts and was turned down, he never gave up. "I always say I have a corporate thick skin, but not a mean-streak."

He wrote a script called *Acolyte* which was purchased by Voltage Pictures, the same production company that produced *The Hurt Locker* and *The Dallas Buyers Club*.

"I got a manager and wrote two direct to DVD movies." Both films, *One in the Chamber* and *The Package*, starred Swedish martial arts actor Dolph Lundgren.

"The next script I sold was *Scorn* which became *John Wick*," said Kolstad. "That was six years ago. It's weird because it feels a lot longer. When people say 'you're an overnight sensation.' Yeah, but it took 20 years. I was living my life and getting better at my craft."

Thunder Road Pictures, founded by film producer Bail Iwanyk, known for gritty

films and action thrillers such as *Scarier*, *The Town*, and *The Expendables* purchased *Scorn* toward the end of 2012. Keanu Reeves agreed to sign on as the lead star. The pair worked closely on the film together and as the well-known story among *Wick* fans goes, Reeves asked for the name of the film and main character's name to be changed -- to the far cooler name of Kolstad's centennial grandfather, John Wick. Has Kolstad's grandfather seen the films? Kolstad laughs and says no, but John Wick is definitely proud of his grandson's success.

John Wick has become a smash success for Kolstad personally and professionally. For Reeves, as well.

"It's a perfect recipe," said Kolstad. "At first, we all didn't know what the hell we had. I love Keanu. So does everyone else. The one line that never changed in the script is when John goes 'People keep asking if I'm back and I really haven't had an answer, but now yeah, I'm thinking I'm back.'"

When Kolstad watched the film with an audience and that line came up, the audience went crazy. He continued: "I think it was more than the movie. It was all of his movies that came before it. It's a love letter



to Keanu.”

In 2017, the sequel *John Wick: Chapter 2* was released to critical acclaim. The film also starred Common, Ruby Rose, and Reeves’ *Matrix* co-star Laurence Fishburne. It grossed \$171 million worldwide. The third film, *John Wick: Chapter 3 - Parabellum*, co-starred Fishburne, Halle Berry, and Anjelica Huston. The film grossed \$326 million worldwide and received tons of praise from critics and fans for its outstanding stunts, action scenes, and being a rare top-notch third film. Kolstad is taking everything in stride and continues remaining humble.

He tries to write one page of spec every day and always has files open on his computer. But Kolstad is also very much in demand.

“The fun part about ‘John’ has always been I didn’t go away from that movie to start my career as the movie action guy. I got to be known as the world-builder.”

Kolstad is now able to have more than one niche. He can write in any genre. *Wick* not only allowed him to kickstart his career, but has been a platform for him to leap and try new things, such as television.

“As much as film will always be my first love, I’m doing a lot more TV,” said Kolstad. “With TV, you get to slow down and rewind. It’s been a lot of fun.”

Soon to be airing on the new Disney+ streaming app is *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* based on the Marvel comic of the same name. In July 2019, Kolstad joined the writing team. The series is produced by Marvel

films such as: *Some Like It Hot*, *It Happened One Night* and *His Girl Friday*. He likes the snappy, quick banter dialogue.

“Of all the genres, comedy is the hardest. To a certain respect, sci-fi is a bit of a beast because you have to build out the rules and not necessarily break them, but bend them. But comedy...I could write something that’s the funnest thing to me and [another writer]



magician and artifact smuggler named Kell who wears a magical coat which gives him the ability to travel between parallel Londons — Red, Grey, White, and Black. Kell ends up going on an exciting and dangerous adventure with a cocky cut-purse, Delilah Bard, through the different Londons.

“With an adaption, I tell everyone — whether you’re a comic writer, a video game writer, or a novelist — the best adaptations, you warp the world and warp rules, but you maintain the main characters, their journey, their hearts, and their souls.”

Kolstad and Schwab began emailing back-and-forth and found a connection between their same sense of humor, sensibility, lack of ego and self-deprecation. “She is a joy and a friend,” said Kolstad. “I’m doing everything I can to do right by her and her fans. She treats her characters with respect and grounds them.”

Between his various writing projects, pitching, and attending meetings, Kolstad tries to stay grounded himself. He and his supportive wife, Sonja, who used to work for ArcLight Theaters as a manager, have lived in Pasadena for 15 years. The couple love Pasadena’s suburban vibe, restaurants and green spaces. They have two doting three-year-old twins and taking care of them has become Sonja’s full-time job.

“She had been the breadwinner for years while I worked odd gigs,” said Kolstad. “So, when *John Wick* and *John Wick 2* really started happening,

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Studios with creator Malcolm Spellman serves as head writer.

“It was a good experience,” said Kolstad reflectively on the limited series. It centers around the aftermath of the film *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) in which character Sam Wilson (*Anthony Mackie*) aka The Falcon takes over as the first black Captain America. “It was fast. It was mind numbing in a positive way.”

Kolstad explained he learned an “ungodly amount” from Spellman and being in the *FATWS* Writing Room. He’s also working on a comedy and enjoys watching classic

reads the script but doesn’t get it. When shown to an audience, there’s chuckles. When you see a comedy and it works on all levels — it’s a miracle. So, I think with comedy it’s about respecting your audience. They’re watching because they want to root for the hero. You want to build up that character, not tear them down, to get that reward of laughter.”

Also on his his agenda, Kolstad received a call from Sony about how fantasy novelist Victoria Schwab aka V.E. Schwab was interested in him adapting *A Darker Shade of Magic*, her NYT Bestselling novel into a screenplay. The story centers around a young

she said go and do what you want to do. She’s also my editor. She makes me better at what I do. She’s my sounding board.”

Kolstad doesn’t have a writing process but he works on getting in at least six hours a day.

Is there a *John Wick 4* on the horizon? He says there will be, but at the same time... “For *John Wick* what it spawned and what it has become is a little bit bigger than me because it is a studio creature. But I give massive props to that creature. I’m proud it bears my grandpa’s name and proud he’s happy about that. I hope to be involved in in *John Wick 4*.” ■