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INDUSTRY PERSPECTIVES

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Fear and wonderment in a limitless world: Learning to write from a child's point of view

ABSTRACT

During my 25 years working as a screenwriter in Los Angeles, I developed a reputation as a writer who could craft vivid and believable scripts about young people. Initially, this was based on my teleplay for the first episode of Steven Spielberg's Amazing Stories series, and later for the semi-autobiographical Josh and S.A.M. released by Columbia Pictures. I also wrote uncredited revisions of DreamWorks's Small Soldiers and Castle Rock's Alaska, both involving prominent child characters. I have to confess that my reputation for writing content for children and adolescents realistically did not stem from any natural ability. It came from mining my personal childhood memories, and from studying movies and literature I felt authentically captured what it is like to be new in the world. This text explores my journey writing from a child's perspective.

KEYWORDS

imagination
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REDISCOVERING FEAR

At the age of 22 in 1982, I was in my first year of the MFA programme in screenwriting at UCLA. I had written two speculative fiction screenplays in class – as a former physics student I had a strong interest in the ‘what ifs’ of science – so for my third feature-length screenplay I decided that I needed to break out of the genre and put some diversity in my writing portfolio. As it was around Halloween, I thought something scary was in order even though I was far from an expert in the horror genre. What could I write from my own experience? When was I truly scared, and not about grades or romantic rejection or making rent? When was I scared for my life?

What came to mind was an incident from when I was about seven years old. I grew up in a Southern California basin below Mt. San Antonio, replete with citrus groves and large piles of granite rocks removed by growers to create arable land for lemons and oranges. A lemon grove was outside my bedroom window and, beyond the single street that constituted my neighbourhood, lay an uncleared and undeveloped land with a burned-out house and one of the tallest pile of rocks in the area (a child’s mind exaggerates, but I am certain the pile was large enough for a truck to drive to the top to dump more rocks unearthed from the grove land). This arid wilderness was our neighbourhood playground where we would fly kites and play hide and seek or capture the flag. On one afternoon, the older kids decided to turn on us, the younger kids, and we were suddenly chased and captured, and held prisoner under an expansive avocado tree. I believed my life was over at that moment and that these boys were capable of doing what they were threatening to do to us. But when someone’s big sister came into the wilderness to announce that ‘supper was ready’, the entire group unceremoniously disbanded. The sudden reversal from terror to the ordinary was to me like waking from a horrific nightmare.



Figure 1: Author’s brother celebrates puppet birthday, 1970. The rights to the photograph belong to the author and the photographer is Rupert Deese.

How could I recreate that fear on the page when the danger was only in my 7-year-old mind? With an adult sensibility, I know now those kids would not (likely) actually hurt us. But how could I write the point of view that says otherwise, where the impossible was possible, where a wilderness uninteresting to an adult is a place filled with wonder and potential terror to a child?

When I was very young, my older brother told my sister and me that if we looked down the bathtub drain while the water rushed out, we could see Disneyland. We believed it but could never verify it, and blamed ourselves for our inability to see better. Fire engines passing at night terrified my younger brother Sam. He also created a pretend world with his stuffed animal puppets so vivid that our family had a birthday party for his little green one-eyed hippo. This, I decided, was the world I wanted to recreate in my yet-to-be written screenplay. Initially, I had no story, just a commitment to a young point of view where there was little distinction between the possible and impossible and child characters can easily be afraid of and enthralled by things that do not exist.

As I searched my memory for moments of real childhood fear, though, one iconic movie came to mind not simply because of flying monkeys and a large hourglass marking of seconds before the execution of an innocent girl. What scared me most about MGM's 1939 musical *The Wizard of Oz* was the powerlessness of young Dorothy in the real world of Kansas in the face of a terrifying woman.

THE TYRANNY OF MISS GULCH

This film had a profound effect on me growing up as it did a lot of children and adults, being the most watched film in cinema history (according to *The Making of the Wonderful Wizard of Oz* 2013). It was later in life that I actually saw it in colour – we did not have a colour TV – and got the full effect of the excellent production. But it was not the sets, costumes and cinematography that were the most effective in upsetting me: it was the screenplay. Credited to Noel Langley, Florence Ryerson and Edgar Allan Woolf, along with the uncredited contributions of fifteen other writers (*The Wizard of Oz* 1939; IMDb n.d.), the script departs significantly from the very popular novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum (1900) on which it was based, most notably in the Kansas scenes at the beginning and end that frame the Oz adventure. In the book, they are brief and inconsequential with the adventure stemming from a random tornado (Baum 1900). The reader gets no sense of Dorothy Gale's powerlessness and desire for agency in her world through the antagonistic bicycle-riding Miss Gulch (unique to the screenplay and film) a character who is hell-bent on taking Dorothy's dog Toto to be legally euthanized.

This was the thing that horrified me as a child watching the annual spring TV broadcast of the film. Miss Gulch wanted to kill Toto and no one was stopping her! How could Dorothy's aunt and uncle let this happen? Though her legal guardians are ineffectual, at least the three farmhands – Hunk, Hickory and Zeke – give advice to Dorothy about how best to deal with Miss Gulch by suggesting she use her brains and be smart about avoiding trouble, use her heart and be more empathetic to Miss Gulch and use her courage to stand up to Miss Gulch. Though silly, and a bit obvious, in the Kansas world they offer Dorothy some shred of agency. These men are essentially telling Dorothy: 'You have power'.

I have heard a lot of disappointment that *The Wizard of Oz* film is all a dream, as if that were a tacked-on bad ending. But it is obvious a dream was always the intention as the screenplay is clearly framed that way in the beginning. The Oz adventure all takes place in Dorothy's mind and the brains, heart and courage sought for by the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion constitute her own desire for what she needs to survive in Kansas. Within the dream, Dorothy immediately gains significance by liberating the Munchkins from, with her falling house, the terrorist Wicked Witch of the East. She has additional power because she wears the ruby slippers sought after by the Wicked Witch of the West, an obvious projection of Miss Gulch, and then as the yellow brick road tour guide for the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion.

Dorothy gains more power and significance on the journey until she is whisked away by the Witch's flying monkeys and then cornered with by the Witch's guards in the castle. Then, in a single act of courage, heart and brains, Dorothy puts out the fire on the burning scarecrow with a bucketful of witch-killing water. For the remainder of the Oz dream, Dorothy acts with confidence and forceful resolve, standing up to the loud, fiery Wizard, which brings about his exposure as a bumbling old man. Dorothy then does not take 'no' for an answer until the Wizard assuages the desires of the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion with a bag full of placebos.

Even as child, I felt like the 'no place like home' mantra was a message that missed the point of the story. It should have been 'there's no place like a home where you're not terrorized by abusive neighbours'. Dorothy may have survived the dream and tornado, but her dog is still in lethal jeopardy.

Thinking again about *The Wizard of Oz* as a graduate student, it reminded me that essential to a child's point of view is powerlessness and a longing for agency in the world, even if it has to be invented.

HUCK'S POINT OF VIEW

Another work of fiction that had a significant effect on me developing my understanding of a child's point of view was *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain. Written entirely in the vernacular, Huck's is one of the most prominent child voices in American literature. His adventure takes place in the very real word of 1840s Missouri, but is also a child's world with little distinction between the possible and impossible because it is unreliably narrated by the titular character who is uneducated and superstitious.

Like Dorothy, Huck escapes from an abusive adult (his returned father) – not, however, into a fantasy dream world, but into an unfamiliar *real*-world travelling by raft down a wide, winding Mississippi River where anything is possible around the next bend. Huck longs for personal agency, that is, to live his life the way he wants, while his mind remains imprisoned by the backwards belief system of his 1840s Missouri culture. He sincerely and ignorantly believes he is committing an unpardonable sin in the eyes of God because he is helping his enslaved friend Jim steal himself from enslaver Miss Watson. Late in the novel, he is so racked with guilt he writes a letter to Miss Watson alerting her of Jim's whereabouts. He feels 'clean of sin' after that, but then thinks otherwise remembering what the man means to him and tears up the letter resigning himself to an eternity in hell for stealing Miss Watson's legal property (Twain 1885).

At the age of 16, I was just a few years older than the 13-year-old lead character when I read *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. I was thoroughly

transported by the novel not only to the time and place, but also into Huck's point of view so different from my own, but with many of the same youthful frustrations of powerlessness in an adult world. I was also aware of the irony that, in his way of believing to be true what was so clear to me not true, he was tortured and imprisoned by his cultural mindset while tremendously free in his physical environment. Huck's vivid description of that environment represented a young point of view particularly focused on immediate physical sensation:

Next we slid into the river and had a swim, so as to freshen up and cool off; then we set down on the sandy bottom where the water was about knee deep, and watched the day-light come. Not a sound anywheres – perfectly still – just like the whole world was asleep, only sometimes the bullfrogs a-cluttering, maybe. The first thing to see, looking away over the water, was a kind of dull line – that was the woods on t'other side; you couldn't make nothing else out; then a pale place in the sky; then more paleness spreading around; then the river softened up away off, and warn't black anymore, but gray; you could see little dark spots drifting along ever so far away – trading scows, and such things; and long black streaks – rafts.

(Twain 1885: 157–58)

Intentionally remembering the sights, smells and feelings from my own childhood was a big part of bringing it back and making it palpable again in 1982. That year, a film was released that very successfully represented children's points of view as well as a child in the form of an alien being.

MAKING ENEMIES OF ADULTS

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial was written by Melissa Matheson under the guidance of Steven Spielberg who, as a lonely child, had an imaginary alien friend. I loved this film when I saw it in the summer of 1982. Nevertheless, it did not figure prominently in my mind while developing my screenplay based on my own childhood until it was released in Europe in December 1982 and soon banned for younger children in Sweden and in several other Scandinavian countries due to the film's 'making enemies of adults' (Lambie 1984).

This controversy received a lot of attention in the US media and I found it completely unwarranted, to say the least. It implied a child's life without adult supervision and intrusion was unhealthy and destructive. That may be true in some instances, but children cannot help but lead separate lives from adults, even in the best of homes, due to the unique way they look at the world.

Like Dorothy and Huck, young Elliott from *E.T.* feels diminished and powerless when the story opens. His mother is distracted with her own heart-break, as his father has left the family, while his older brother keeps him at the periphery of his society of friends. Elliott quite literally has no one. After Elliott encounters E.T. near the trash cans, he demonstrates initiative by faking being sick so as to spend the day finding and luring E.T. from the forest back to his house using a trail of M&Ms (Reese's Pieces were depicted in the film as the Mars Candy Bar company did not want their product associated with an alien) (Staff 2001).

Elliott soon forms a symbiotic relationship with this curious and abandoned extraterrestrial being and thus goes from being alone and ignored to arguably the most important person on Earth.

As E.T. becomes a private guest in Elliott's world, which now includes the older brother and younger sister, the distinction between the possible and impossible disappears in what otherwise is a very real suburban world. Not simply an alien being, E.T. heals wounds with the touch of his glowing finger and effortlessly resurrects dying flowers. Even the sudden symbiosis between E.T. and Elliott seems magical and limitless and E.T.'s Elliott-facilitated building of a deep-space communicator with household items is a technological miracle.

Being new in this world, E.T. too is a child. He is alone and vulnerable. He longs to explore and understand. He touches everything in the house when he is left alone there, even getting drunk on the beer in the refrigerator. He seems to have a Huck-like appreciation for sounds and sensation. He is also a very emotional being as he longs for home to the point of illness. Even the light in his chest is an unsuitable metaphor for strong emotion.

E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial (originally *A Boy's Life*) deftly employs all the fundamental aspects of a child's point of view. Additionally, it pushes that point of view by *only* telling the story of E.T. and the children. Except for the mother, Mary, no adults are specifically depicted or described until the end of the second act when E.T. is dying under medical scrutiny. It is here Elliott struggles to retain agency, pleading with the bevy of doctors and scientists: 'He came to me!' Here the pretend world ends, as does E.T.'s life, seemingly, until he is saved by the revived agency of the children (*E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* 1982).

SCRIPTING POINT OF VIEW

The controversy was, ironically, a motivational boost to my writing of the screenplay in the early months of 1983. It was called *Under the Rock Pile* and, though elements were horrifying, it was decidedly not a horror movie – *and* it was told entirely from the point of view of its child characters.

The central character is a 10-year-old boy who does not quite fit in with the neighbourhood kids and is outside his 5-year-old brother's vivid pretend world of stuffed animals and puppets. His only friend had been a kindly old man who lived alone in a nearby undeveloped wilderness until his house burned down. His subsequent disappearance becomes the source of mystery and speculation that draws the neighbourhood children into a singular, and increasingly misguided, effort to right a perceived injustice that never actually happened.

The script earned the positive attention of UCLA film professors who sent it out to contacts in the film industry which, the next year, secured me a place at a major Hollywood talent agency. My young and enthusiastic literary agent doggedly pushed it to studios and producers, none of whom wanted to purchase it – it was too dark and very realistically depicted children in serious jeopardy – but I spent the summer of 1984 meeting with studio executives and producers who were all enthusiastic about how I vividly captured what it was like to be a child.

THE YOUNG AND THE OLD

One of those meetings was with Steven Spielberg at Amblin Entertainment who was very interested in the topic of screenwriting from a child's unique point of view, which we discussed in some detail. He asked me if I would like to write an episode for his new NBC TV anthology series *Amazing Stories*, and then sent me an outline for a story about an old man coming to live with his son's family and his discovery they have built their house over the tracks of an ancient railroad that was scheduled to pick him up.

As I outlined and fleshed out a teleplay based on Spielberg's story, I began to realize that the point of view of an old man near the end of his life is very similar to that of a child. The elderly long for an agency they once had and are very appreciative of the present, with all its emotions and sensations, because their future is at best uncertain. Unlike a child, they clearly understand the distinction between the possible and impossible, but this often comes with a desire to challenge the limits of the possible – often through religious faith.

When writing the teleplay for 'Ghost Train', I went out of my way to emphasize the bond between young Brian and Old Pa. Mostly ignored by his busy parents, Brian loves spending time with his grandfather and hearing his stories of settlers and Indians, and how when he was a boy, he fell asleep on the train tracks and which caused the catastrophic derailment of the 'Highball Express'. Old Pa is now certain the same train will be picking him and that it will, unfortunately, travel right through the home.

Brian believes every word of Old Pa's fantastical prediction but his parents become increasingly concerned the old man is suffering dementia. Given the name of the series was *Amazing Stories*, part of my challenge was to misdirect the reader and audience away from the predictable ending that the Highball Express was going to actually tear through the house. The key to that misdirect was bolstering the idea the fantastic event was all in the old man's ageing mind. I also tried to emphasize the bond between the young and old through shared life point of view, and also that Old Pa climbing aboard the ghost train at the end was actually a metaphor for his death. Brian is saying 'good bye' to him forever.

Fortunately, Steven Spielberg was very happy with my teleplay from his story, decided to make it the first episode of the series and announced that he would personally direct the episode.

On the first day of shooting, he showed me around the set in a Universal Pictures soundstage where the full-size train engine had been built to burst through the house. After that, the Writers Guild called a strike and the union prohibited me from entering the studio. *Amazing Stories* premiered with 'Ghost Train' as the first episode on 29 September 1985 (Wikipedia 2021).

PERSONAL MYTHOLOGY

Amazing Stories professionally validated me as a writer of children's content and I immediately attempted to break away from it as I found producers and studio executives to be patronizing, as if I were a child, to the point that I turned to writing stories with violence and edge like Tri-Star's *The Principal* as well as a screenplay called *The Company Man*, also Tri-Star, about the Central Intelligence Agency during the Cold War that was scrapped after the close of the Cold War. In 1990, however, I was approached by director Martin Brest and renowned film editor Billy Weber to come up with a story involving

a relationship between brothers as Billy had recently, and tragically, lost his own brother.

I very much wanted to pursue this project, but after six years I felt I had lost what I had taught myself about writing child characters. I contacted an old classmate from high school who happened to be teaching kindergarten in the very same classroom in Upland, California where I had been a kindergartener. Being there in that tiny classroom that was so expansive to a 5-year-old mind – reliving the sensations of naptime, circle time and graham-crackers-and-juice time brought it all back to me as a young adult.

I revisited thinking about my own relationship with my younger brother and also how my older brother told tall tales about everyday life ('if you crawl to the bottom of your sleeping bag you end up under the house'). So I imagined two brothers who have to travel back and forth across the country between a mother wrapped up in a new romance and a father who has remarried with step kids. The brothers, 11 and 7, are lost souls and the older one, Josh, responds to his loneliness and lack of agency by inventing a big lie. In great detail, he tells Sam that his name derives from him actually being a Strategically Altered Mutant (S.A.M.) created to serve as a child soldier in an overseas war of profit. The lie is horrific and cruel, but Sam embraces it as truth because it explains the cold, isolated way he feels. Conversely, when the two are forced to layover in Dallas on a flight back to their mother's and, in another complication that I will not go into here, Josh embraces the belief that he has killed a drunk man with a pool stick when he has only knocked him unconscious. The brothers escape in the man's car and drive north from Dallas towards where they know they will both be free: Canada. Both lacking agency in their lives, they embrace the impossible (in Sam's case) and the improbable (for Josh as his believing he killed a man ironically satisfies his own desire for significance and masculinity).

I intentionally modelled their drive northward after *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* with back roads serving as the big river and the car as Josh and Sam's raft – a trip comedically complicated by their self-delusions and the fact they are kids driving a car. I was also very conscious about this being a journey of misfits heading towards a promised land like Oz (the parallel to *The Wizard of Oz* was so obvious that the logo for the film's production was a car speeding towards a distant Emerald City).

Josh and S.A.M. was filmed in 1992 and released by Columbia Pictures in 1993. Even though it was not a financially successful film, the script I wrote served the same function as *Under the Rock Pile*. I was known again as someone who could write children and much of my career afterwards was doing uncredited rewrites of movies where the child characters lacked authenticity in the original scripts.

READING TO CHILDREN

It was at this time, when my work mostly involved writing from a child's point of view, that I became a father myself and took charge of buying books for and reading to my two small children. At various ages they had bedtime favourites, but at a very early age they were drawn to the sensual simplicity of author Margaret Wise Brown.

The Noisy Book is all about 'Muffin', a small dog who has to wear a blindfold after a medical procedure and tries to understand his urban world only by its many sounds. Both my kids responded enthusiastically to this

book, which had very little story except some mystery about a squeaking noise that turned out to be a baby doll for Muffin. They seemed to love the familiar repetition of the sounds and the uncomplicated point of view of a child-like dog.

Another of Brown's books that I practically memorized from repeated readings is the very well known *Goodnight Moon*, which is a storybook without a story – just a recitation of sensations before bedtime. But as a book, it perfectly captures the warm familiarity of home for a small child with all its sights, sounds and warmth.

'Goodnight clocks, and goodnight socks, goodnight little house, and goodnight mouse, goodnight comb, and goodnight brush, goodnight nobody, goodnight mush, and goodnight to the old lady whispering "hush". Goodnight stars, goodnight air. Goodnight noises everywhere' (Brown and Hurd 1947: 19–31).

This recreates the uncomplicated point of view of a very small child. It is written in present tense in almost tedious detail. In many ways, it is a very juvenile version of Huck's sensual description of life on the river.

Still another book by Margaret Wise Brown that my kids loved at about the same age is *The Runaway Bunny*. It, too, is hardly a story but a repetition of a situation; and that situation was the desire of a child to separate and explore the world, but also feel the warmth and safety of a mother that will always come looking for it.

"If you run after me", said the little bunny, "I will become a fish in a trout stream and I will swim away from you".

And:

"If you become a fish in a trout stream", said his mother, "I will become a fisherman and I will fish for you" (Brown and Hurd 2001: 2–3).

The book expresses the natural desire for the child to explore the world and acquire its own agency. The mother bunny is, in equal parts, annoying and comforting. She allows for the bunny child's exploration, but removes the possibility of loneliness and abandonment.

Another book I also read to them repeatedly was the *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jacks Keats, which describes a boy who wakes up to a city neighbourhood transformed by a heavy snow fall and how he sets out to explore his new snowy environment. Because he does not fully understand it, it is a world of unknown possibilities and sensations – almost like a fantasy world close to home that will return to the familiar when the snow eventually melts – which it does, inside the boy's pocket when he takes a bath (Keats 1962).

As my children grew a bit older, they both became enraptured by Maurice Sendak's *Where the Wild Things Are* as did I at the same age. The illustrations are vivid and lush – I remember wanting to crawl into them as a child – but it is the story that perfectly depicts many of the fundamental aspects of a child's point of view. In this case, the young mind's desire for agency, significance, escape and adventure is realized through his ability to vividly pretend.

After having been sent to his room for the crimes of restlessness and anti-social behaviour, Max invents what he cannot have in reality: a forest in his room, and a sailboat with his name on it. There he crosses an ocean in his mind to a place where he tames wild beasts with his stare, is crowned king and revered by the 'Wild Things' and has absolute power over them (if his mean mom could only see him now!). But once he has relaxed, the things he longed for become tiresome and he now wants to return, and be a normal

child, and be taken care of. So he sails home to his room where he finds his supper waiting for him: 'and it was still hot' (Sendak 1963: 38). Max's reverie ends with a return to where he is loved, not revered, but again powerless and insignificant (Sendak 1963).

CONCLUSION

My own children are now adults and most of my present work life is teaching screenwriting to college students. When students write about children, I encourage them to not make the mistake often found in bad writing of having child characters speak and act the way an adult with no connection to childhood might imagine how children speak and act.

Children have a natural and unique point of view that needs to be understood and appreciated by those who wish to write compelling child characters that resonate with authenticity. Children are generally powerless in their lives and therefore long for significance and an ability to control events. Being new in the world, they tend to be restless with a desire to explore the unknown; but, also being new, they have not yet fully absorbed the rules of what is actually possible and impossible. Children have a potent ability to pretend, not only in consciousness, but also in dreams. Ironically, as they tend to lack agency, they are capable of inflating their own responsibility for events to which they have little or no control. As I have discussed, not all of the fundamental aspects of a child's point of view will apply to all child characters or actual children, but taken together, my experience is that they are remarkably universal.

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Frank Deese launched his screenwriting career with a feature script based on his childhood in Southern California, which earned the attention of producers and directors in Hollywood, including Steven Spielberg – for whom he wrote the child-centred first episode of the NBC anthology series *Amazing Stories* – and Rob Reiner whose Castle Rock Entertainment produced his remembrance film *Josh and S.A.M.* He is currently an assistant professor in screenwriting at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York.

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