

Fear and Wonderment in a Limitless World: Learning to Write from a Child’s Point of View

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 children and adolescents realistically did not stem from any natural ability. It came from mining my personal memories as a former child, and from studying movies and literature I felt authentically captured what it’s like to be new in the world.

REDISCOVERING FEAR

At the age of twenty-two in 1982, I was in my first year of the MFA program 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 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’m 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.

How could I recreate that fear on the page when the danger was only in my seven-year-old mind? With an adult sensibility, I know now those kids wouldn't (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 see better. My younger brother Sam was terrified by fire engines passing at night. 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 don't exist.



Sam's Birthday Party for One-Eye Hippo Puppet