

Wisconsin Writers Association Fall Conference

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Dale R. Botten – Panel Handout-Screenwriting

“ON WRITING FOR DIFFERENT GENRES and OTHER NOTES”

ON WRITING FOR DIFFERENT GENRES

My approach to writing for different genres is three-fold and simple: 1) Research; 2) Research and 3) Research. Which of the first two you do first depends on your reason for choosing that particular genre. I will assume that the reason for choosing that particular genre is because you are interested in it. Confused enough? LOL

1. **Research #1:** You have always wanted to do a project on a particular subject because it interests you. One of mine was pirates and treasure. I decided to write my first novel, A NICE RELAXING SEA CRUISE, because I knew that the script (which is finished) would be easier to sell if it were based on an even moderately successful book. Even though I had been interested in the subject most of my life, I found there was a TON of details I needed to know, before I could help a viewer/reader feel the experience. A sailor, I am not. Even as I was writing passages and scene descriptions, I would come to a questionable fact that I could not answer. So, I turned to my good friend/producer/director and yacht racing guru, Alex Gutterman, for explanations of terms and “what if...” scenarios. I’d seen maps of the treasure island in question, Cocos Island, off the coast of Costa Rica, but I’d never been there. So, I researched maps and history to get island details right.

Research isn’t always pleasant. For my screenplay, THE LAW LOVER (based on Michael Fedo’s excellent book, THE LYNCHINGS IN DULUTH), I needed to research very tough subjects...hate and murder. What were the real reasons behind the lynching? Rapes (real or imagined) had occurred before. I’m sure the Duluth jail had held more than one previous suspect. Why were these lynched and not the others? Some research items just pop up. The jail that the mob assaulted (which is still there) had 4-5 inches of water in it from fire hoses, enhanced with vomit and possibly urine from the terrified victims. It had turned into a warm evening. Many in those days wore wool clothing, which can smell when wet. My good friend and stage-director, the late Matt Cetnar, said one day (paraphrasing), “Can you imagine how bad the stench was in that building?” Ergo: the scene where two of the rioters exit the building for relatively fresh air, where they trade hateful, racist rants in front of two impressionable young boys.

NOW, lest all this research talk dissuade you from tackling unfamiliar projects, remember that Edgar Rice Burroughs, author of the wonderful TARZAN series, never...to the end of his life, set one foot on African soil. YOU have the internet; he didn’t.

2. **Research #2:** You choose it because it’s a hot market. Interchangeable with Research #1. This is pretty cut and dried. You need credits (which is EVERYTHING in the biz) and a few \$\$\$ wouldn’t hurt, either. What market? Every filmmaker/writer would like to see his/her work get picked up and take off like a rocket. One in a gazillion do. What market do you want to assault?

- a. Local/regional market?
- b. National/international market?
- c. Niche market? If so, what niche?

These are things you probably want to decide, before you jump in. From what I've been able to ascertain, the indie market is hot for horror/splatter/slasher flicks. They're RELATIVELY cheap and there is a good sized market for them. They won't make you rich, but what they WILL do is give you (and everybody else on the project) a credit. AND CREDITS IS EVERYTHING. My agent (if I still have one) said, when he was trying to market my multi-award-winning screenplay, told me that the first words out of all his contacts' mouths were, "what else has he done?" In short, if you want to try running with the big dogs right away, I would suggest wearing a spiked collar and bringing a pack of Dobermans with you; otherwise, they might eat you alive.

3. Research #3. Producers/production companies. Who do you want to pitch this project to? You probably don't want to pitch a horror/splatter film to a company that does primarily religious films. If you have a high concept film (ie, big budget), then Joe-Poop-The-Ragman Productions down on poverty row probably couldn't handle it. Suggest you look for films that are in the same genre/sub-genre, find out who did them and go from there.

OTHER NOTES

1. If you are a praying person, or if you aren't, get down on your knees and thank SOMEBODY for the invention of digital photography. It has opened up a whole new universe of opportunity for writers, producers, directors, crew and cast. Now you have a viable path on which you can build credits.
2. BE STUBBORN. Don't quit. I learned that in Marine Corps bootcamp. You quit; you die. Don't quit. If you truly love your craft, you will prevail. You will find a way.
3. DON'T BE STUBBORN. What? What the hell did I just say? Be stubborn about prevailing, but be flexible. Remember the golden rule: "He/she who has the gold, makes the rule." That was never more true than in film. The first two versions of my script, THE LAW LOVER were (under different titles) ensemble pieces; that is, no one star. EVERYBODY, including my own agents, told me it would never sell as a high concept, social ensemble piece. Took me years to get that through my thick head, even though it won two prestigious awards. Awards do not necessarily translate into productions. Once I rewrote it as a star-power piece and changed the title to THE LAW LOVER, it began doing much better. However, it still has the big budget-social piece stigma. One producer I met with in L.A. said it doesn't matter how good it is, only a Spielberg, DuVernay, Lucas, Stone, Perry or someone else who is willing to put out \$30M will take a chance on it. It's a crazy biz.

STAY STRONG. DON'T QUIT.