

So you've always felt that, deep down, you really were more of a 'creative' person. Maybe you also thought that while the boring job or career that you picked for yourself all those years ago was just fine for paying the mortgage and putting food on the table, it just wasn't, you know, fulfilling.

Then along comes a major recession and you find yourself redundant, and with a lot of free time on your hands. Perhaps you might be tempted to take up painting or write that novel you always felt you had in you. Or maybe you think you can have a go at screenwriting. After all, we've all had that feeling on leaving a cinema or switching off the TV that what we've just watched wasn't very good, and that we could do a lot better ourselves. You might get to wondering: how hard can it be?

How then does one hope to become a professional screenwriter working in Northern Ireland? The first thing the potential screenwriter is confronted with is a wealth of potential reading material which aims to teach you how to become a good professional. Everything from learning the basic 'language' of screenwriting (relatively uniform and easy to grasp) through to various and often contradictory theories on how a screenplay should be structured (these can range from the relatively simple, through to the esoterically complex).

Visit any bookstore or online retailer and you can find a vast array of books on the subject. It can be pretty daunting for the uninitiated to decide which ones to go for. The message from the professionals would seem to be that the aspiring writer should read as much as they can – but not to be in thrall to them, nor forget about watching and analysing TV and film itself.

Hayley McKenzie is a professional script editor who also runs a script consultancy service. She has over ten years experience in the UK screenwriting industry, working for independent production companies, ITV and the BBC and on many 'household name' titles such as *Crossroads*, *Casualty*, *Heartbeat* and *Blue Murder*. How does she think the new writer should approach this abundance of material?

'Read it all and then take the lessons that feel important to you and your writing. Perhaps try out various different techniques from different courses and books and find the ones that help you. I wouldn't dismiss any of it outright, but equally I'd caution about being a slave to it,' is her message.

Terry Cafolla, writer of the critically acclaimed TV dramas *Holy Cross* and *Best: His Mother's Son*, agrees with this approach. 'I personally am very interested in the craft of writing and learning about it, so I am always keen on reading what advice other writers and non writers have to offer. I don't find everything equally useful but there's usually something interesting in almost every book I've ever read,' he says. 'Plus, there's usually something that you've forgotten and it's good to rediscover again. But I find I need to pick and choose and find the thing that's relevant to my own writing or how I'm thinking about the story.'

What about the aspiring writer on a tight budget who wants to maximise the return on his expenditure? Happily, there are a couple of authors whose names do come up with some regularity when the subject is raised. The American Sid Field is one, and Robert McKee is the other (honourable mentions also go to Mamet, Truby and Goldman). Both Field and McKee are world famous screenwriting 'gurus' and if challenged on having to pick one or two books, then the professionals do tend to opt for the work of these men as providing the best introduction for the beginner.

Phil Gladwin is a professional screenwriting consultant with over 15 years experience in script editing, with credits on shows such as *The Bill* and *The Sarah Jane Adventures*. He has authored the *Screenwriting Goldmine* books and hosts a forum for writers both novice and veteran. Gladwin goes even further when it comes to discussing McKee, recommending that if possible a writer should attend one of the (now unfortunately infrequent and highly sought after) face-to-face lectures delivered by the man. Gladwin does rate McKee's seminal volume *Story*, but thinks it is relatively impenetrable when compared to hearing McKee hold forth on his screenwriting philosophy in person.

In fact, Gladwin credits hearing McKee as being one of the important turning points in his own screenwriting career. 'I had been making an attempt at screenwriting before, but when I went along and heard him, he made it all seem to suddenly click into place.'

Cafolla also rates seeing McKee in person as a significant step in his own fledgling career. 'When I first started to write, it felt like the road wasn't signposted. Robert McKee was probably doing the only course at the time - although there were a lot of books about. Courses like these are directed towards features, but they still talk about the components that make up a great TV script: character, pace, plot, story, dialogue.'

'I did the Robert McKee course when I started writing. I paid for it myself, put myself up in London... and in a way it was kind of a self-validation. I was investing in myself. I was using holiday time from work because I wanted to be a writer. I was taking myself seriously for the first time as writer. Take yourself seriously as a writer and others will too.'

So, reading the books and perhaps even attending a seminar given a trusted guru like McKee or Field will set you on the right path, but of course there are no guarantees of success. It's a worryingly, often repeated fact in the screenwriting texts that many, many great literary writers such as F Scott Fitzgerald have tried and failed as screenwriters. If luminaries like that can fail, what other tips can professionals offer to ensure that you, a mere mortal, can make your screenwriting as good as it can be?

The most obvious answer is also the correct one. Everyone will tell you to write just as often as you can. Even as often as you can't. As in every other walk of life, we learn best by doing and sacrifices of time and relationships are perhaps unavoidable if

you want to put in the necessary hours to improve your writing. But aside from that, there are a few other tips offered to help you hone your skills as a screenwriter. The next one may also seem obvious but can be overlooked: watch and study film and television.

Sarah Stack, senior script executive at BBC Drama Northern Ireland says that this cannot be emphasised enough. 'If you want to write for TV then watch a lot of TV. Want to write for the soaps? Then watch the soaps. Want to write crime or police shows? Then take the time to watch them. It might sound very simple but you would be amazed how many people come to talk about writing for TV that don't actually watch it.'

Both Gladwin and Cafolla are advocates of watching individual episodes of television repeatedly and of mentally breaking them down to get familiar with the format, the acts and the individual story beats of different types of shows. 'Don't just sit there and watch passively. Watch material again and again until you know how it works,' Gladwin urges.

'Audio commentaries on DVDs are another incredible source,' adds Cafolla. 'David Milch on *NYPD Blue*, Joss Whedon on *Buffy* and *Angel* and Sean Ryan on *The Shield* are all things I've found really instructive. As well as that it's also relatively easy to get hold of scripts these days and I really like to sit down with a script of a show that I've really enjoyed or have found interesting in some way - not always the same thing.'

Let's assume, then, that you are a promising writer who thinks either that they have grasped the 'language' of screenwriting or have the potential to do so. Furthermore, you've got a story or two rattling around in the old cranium. What are your options? Thankfully in the UK there are a couple of doors that are potentially open that are not available in other parts of the world.

The first of these is the BBC's Writer's Room, which guarantees to read at least the first ten pages of all unsolicited scripts sent to it for film, TV drama, radio drama and comedy. Ten pages may not sound like much, but getting anybody of importance to read any of your work gratis can be a real uphill struggle. Besides, the script readers toiling away at the thousands of manuscripts they receive are convinced that they can pretty much tell within those first ten pages whether the writer has potential. Assuming that they think you do have potential, they will give your script a full reading, offer you some written feedback and perhaps may even contact you with a view to developing you further as a professional writer.

Another possible route to recognition for the newcomer is Channel 4's Coming Up scheme, ran in conjunction with production company Touchpaper TV. The aim of this project is to discover fresh writing and directorial talent, with aspiring screenwriters

encouraged to submit previous writing samples and an idea for a one-off half hour television drama.

Having sifted through the applicants, Channel 4 and Touchpaper aim to produce up to seven original pieces per year – providing new writers with a much desired produced credit to their name, and further opportunities to break into professional writing. Northern Ireland's Ronan Blaney was successful in last year's competition and his drama *Boy* was screened recently at the Dublin Road Movie House in Belfast by NI Screen and executives promoting the 2010 competition.

If you are ready to consider letting other people read your work, what are the writing mistakes that you should check for and what are the common errors that the professionals see people making? McKenzie has identified two main areas of concern: 'The most frequent problem I find in scripts by new writers is that there is no clear story. A collection of events happening to a group of characters isn't an interesting or engaging story. There's also often far too much going on and lots of different story ideas all competing for screen-time.

'The key is to get good at building simple but emotionally powerful stories, stories that make the reader feel something. The next most common problem is characters which are too nice and therefore bland. All the most interesting and endearing characters are complex and have flaws and that's often absent in the works of new writers.'

That last point is something that Cafolla can identify with. 'My first ever script had the most passive character ever as the central role. I did this on purpose because I was really interested in how outside events affect the lives of people. But actually it was incredibly boring because the protagonist could not make any changes in his life. At that stage I was still writing in my bedroom and it took me ages to realise why the story wasn't working.'

Gladwin points to a lack of 'emotional life' in some of the scripts that he sees. 'These writers think they have mastered the principles but in reality they have only been half understood. Certain 'beats' are in what they think are the correct place, but the story is lifeless on the page.'

The next and perhaps most valuable lesson to learn is that even if you are a good writer producing good scripts full of originality and drama, there is still no guarantee of achieving a breakthrough into the industry. This may come as a shock to people who have a romantic image of starving hermit writers struggling away in a garret prior to their works of genius being discovered by an adoring public, but the harsh reality is that it does not always happen like that.

Gladwin thinks that an aspiring writer should have at least two other arrows in his or her promotional quiver. 'You have to be able to make contacts to find out about opportunities, and you have to be able to handle people well to convince them of the

worth of your ideas, and even, as is sometimes the case, to tell them in a diplomatic manner that you don't agree with their point of view.'

The ability to 'pitch' is one that Cafolla recognises that some people struggle with. 'You always have to pitch. I hate it, I think most writers do, it goes against our nature to sell ourselves and our stories, but it's an essential tool. You have to find your own style. I personally tend to come from the character end when I pitch, but have various 'tent poles' of the story, the teaser, the act breaks etc. It's good to know what your strengths and weaknesses are (although you don't have to share them in the room). I know I'm not the best salesman of my own work. Some writers are, but I hope my passion for the story and the love of TV gets me through.'

Sarah Stack advises that writers trying to make that breakthrough into professional screenwriting should utilise all of their contacts and consider all possible methods to get their work produced in some format. 'That could involve writing a play for the local theatre company to perform and inviting your writing contacts along to it, or it could involve making low budget short films or writing radio plays. That is a great way to learn and develop as a writer.'

And does writing out of somewhere like Northern Ireland offer any advantages or disadvantages? 'Not to me, no,' remarks Cafolla, 'but I guess it depends what you want. If your work is UK based then it's relatively easy to get over to London for a meeting. I have a Welsh colleague on *Law and Order* and we both leave the house at the same time to get to a meeting in London. And my tickets are often cheaper!

'I also think if you've made the effort to go to London you're less likely to have meetings cancelled on a whim. It feels to people like you've put yourself out to be there. And I also think it's important that not every writer is based in London, that we all bring different voices and ideas into a process. I do know other writers who manage to be based in the UK and work in the US as well.'

As it happens, writing in Northern Ireland might actually be advantageous at this particular moment in time. Part of Stack's remit with the BBC is to find and encourage new talent in the province - evidenced by her recent support of scriptwriting seminars and a new writer's group in Belfast - and there are production companies now based here on the lookout for fresh voices. It's just a matter of making yourself heard.