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## **Interview with Christina Hamlett -- Part II**

Script Consultant/Instructor/Mentor

### **Screenwriting questions**

1. How can you tell if you've written a script that is suited for film, television, play, or novel?

Films are driven by action, plays are driven by dialogue, and novels are driven by imagination. A movie script written for the medium of television needs to be structured to accommodate the commercial breaks; a teleplay for a series also needs to take into account the commercials and – unlike the other listed venues of expression – focuses on themes that are plot-driven versus character-driven. (Put simply, characters in sitcoms never evolve; they simply react each week to a different crisis.) Interestingly, many of the screenplays I review suggest that their authors might be better suited to writing novels because of the copious amount of detailed descriptions they provide (right down to the wattage of light bulbs and the color of shoes) as well as lots of back-story on every single character. In a 400+ page novel you have room to meander; in a script that's roughly a fourth of that length, every word needs to count.

2. What is the biggest difference between a short and feature film?

Think of this as the difference between a short story versus a novel. A short has a minimal number of characters and scenes and an absence of subplots and character arcs. It's usually a slice-of-life event that the characters can react to and resolve in less than 45 minutes as opposed to an epic quest that spans decades and continents.

3. How do you adapt a novel to a screenplay?

It starts with analyzing whether that novel should be a screenplay. If there are enough compelling visuals, lots of action and a substantive premise to hold an audience's attention, it's then a matter of identifying which scenes to keep, which scenes to delete, and how the storyline needs to be manipulated and massaged to fit the parameters of a two-hour visual medium. Suffice it to say, very few novels make a seamless transition to the silver screen. Further, all those readers who may have loved the book and subsequently flocked to the theater to see the adaptation are often disappointed that the director didn't share their unique vision of how it should be cast or what all the settings should look like.

4. How do you adapt a biography to a screenplay? How do you handle the person who wants to put every detail from their autobiography into the screenplay? What if some details in the book were distorted? What are the legal repercussions? Who would be responsible?

In a nutshell, dead people are easier to work with than lives ones. Especially dead people who have been dead long enough so as to not have a slew of living heirs that want a piece of the action. As a cautionary tale, I like to share a personal story I call "Memoirs of a Shiksa". Many years ago, I was approached by an elderly feminist who wanted me to adapt her self-published memoirs to a feature film. The project started out somewhat fun at first. Toward the end of the first act, however, things took an ugly turn when what she believed was important ran counter to what I thought was unnecessary. I should have known, I suppose, that when the length of her email suggestions started exceeding the page count of the specific scenes under discussion, it was a smart time to bail.

*Her: So what's with deleting the Seder scene with Uncle Herschel?*  
*Me: It didn't really add anything to the plot.*  
*Her: Like you were there to hear it? It was really funny.*  
*Me: I'm sure it was but—*  
*Her: But what? You should put it back in already. It'll make him feel good.*  
*Me: Respectfully, you told me he's been dead 20 years.*  
*Her: And this means what? You think he's not going to know you dumped him on the cutting room floor?*

Tweaking someone's fondest memories to fit the dimensions and protocols of a different medium brings with it the ongoing challenge of reassuring them that (1) you're not criticizing how they lived, (2) you're not diminishing an event's importance by deleting it, and (3) you're not jeopardizing the original content because, truth be told, most people who have ever read a book know that its movie version won't follow verbatim. Unlike the random musings of real life as recorded in a diary, an adaptation to film means that the dull parts can be edited out, the setbacks can be magnified to evoke sympathy, and the intentions orchestrated to resonate with the target demographic. Unless the person whose life-story you're adapting understands these distinctions and agrees to defer to your creative judgment, the stress you endure during the collaborative process may not be worth the paycheck.

Legalities, of course, should always be of concern to writers whether they've been personally approached to adapt someone's memoirs to the screen or have always wanted to pen a biopic on someone in the past who interested them. Consulting with an entertainment law attorney is a prudent practice if you have concerns about content that could be considered defamatory. I also advise getting everything in writing insofar as how much participation and/or approval a client will be allowed to have on the project.

5. Music can impact a story. How do you handle music in your screenplay? What steps are necessary to get permission to use songs in a film?

If you're submitting a spec screenplay, you can certainly include suggestions if you think particular tunes would work. More often than not, however, directors have their own ideas about this as well as favorite composers they like to work with. If you're producing your own movie and incorporating music that someone else owns, you need to go through the formality of getting permission first.

6. How do you copyright your work? How important is it?

A mistaken notion new writers have is that a copyright protects their idea from ever being stolen. In truth, the purpose of copyright registration is only to provide a paper trail of when you created the material. Agents, production companies and screenplay contests usually require that your work be registered with either the U.S. Copyright Office ([www.copyright.gov](http://www.copyright.gov)) or Writers Guild of America ([www.wga.org](http://www.wga.org)) before they'll accept it for review. Registration can be done online for both agencies and full instructions are included on their websites. While we're on the subject, there are five other copyright misconceptions I'd like to clear up:

- The first is that you can't just copyright an idea for something you haven't actually written yet – "I plan to write a comedy about lemurs going to college!" - in the hope of keeping someone else from thinking up the same thing.
- Secondly, even though you should always go through the formality of protecting your work, you should never put this information anywhere on the script itself. What this

conveys to a reader is that you are a paranoid amateur. Even worse, a date of registration (i.e., Copyright 1983) can instantly make your material look stale if it's now 2010.

- Third, it isn't necessary to keep getting a new copyright every time you do minor revisions like changing a character's name or their wardrobe. Unless it's a substantive change from the original content, save your money.
- Speaking of money, the fourth issue is that you register a script with the U.S. Copyright Office OR Writer's Guild of America, not both. (You'd be surprised how many people do this with the reasoning that their work will be doubly protected.)
- Last but not least, newbies assume that people at the U.S. Copyright Office and WGA actually sit down and read all the manuscripts sent to them for registration. They don't. Back in the 1970's I was a newbie myself. I was on pins and needles for weeks waiting to hear back from someone on whether they liked my work.

#### 7. How do you know if your characters are extraordinary?

Writers like to think that all of their characters are extraordinary just as mothers like to think that their babies are the most beautiful creatures on the planet. It's lovely to think this but the real test comes from sending them out into the world and seeing if total strangers agree with you.

#### 8. How important is it to hire or work with actors to read your dialogue?

It's an absolute must. What may read just fine on paper may sound horrible when it's coming from the mouths of real people. Most writers "hear" inside their heads exactly what they want everyone to sound like but don't always convey this well in dialogue.

#### 9. What is the appeal of writing the same movie only with different actors? It's been written that Nancy Meyers does this and that George Clooney plays the same role.

It's a lazy way for writers and actors to make lots of money without having to stretch themselves.

#### 10. How much influence does a studio hold over screenwriters?

It depends on whether the screenwriter is a new kid or a veteran. Veterans have more clout insofar as getting what they want.

#### 11. How many times can you write the same screenplay before the audience tires of the same characters and same plot? Will vampires, werewolves, witches, divorced women, college bound students, and other ideas go out of fashion or bore the audience?

Whether it's vampires, talking babies, apocalyptic doom, or urban rants, everything is cyclical. On the one hand, audiences have very short attention spans; something catches their fancy for a while and then they get bored with it and gravitate to something else. On the other hand, there's always going to be a faction that craves predictability. (These are the same people, I think, who like to read the last chapters of books first so that they won't be caught off guard with surprises.) That said, what sustains audience interest and enthusiasm are stories that cause them to laugh out loud, reach for the Kleenex, reminisce about the past or feel more optimistic about the future. These will never go out of style.

#### 12. Hollywood likes to *repackage* or remake films because they're easy to market. What is your opinion of this?

No one wants to take a risk, especially in a tanking economy. By playing it safe and rehashing projects that have already proven to be commercially viable, they're assured of keeping their jobs.

## **Concluding questions**

1. What classes and workshops would you recommend aspiring screenwriters to take? How will classes and workshops help with their writing?

If you live in a film-centric community like Los Angeles or New York, you can always find university classes, film camps and weekend workshops to attend and to fraternize with kindred spirits. If attending classes in a traditional setting doesn't work, yours truly just happens to have two ongoing courses in screenwriting and playwriting that take place completely online. What's valuable about this type of instruction is that students turn in projects via email that demonstrate their understanding of the topics discussed in each module and receive one-on-one feedback. Since it's not a chat room or conference call tableau, it's been very practical and affordable for learners who have squirrely schedules that might cause them to miss a class as well as though who completely mess up their assignments and want a do-over. I'm entirely flexible about that and always available to answer questions they have that are specific to the projects they're working on. And while aspiring screenwriters might not necessarily think of playwriting as an interesting venue to dabble in, it imparts a boatload of advice about character development, dialogue and economy that will serve them well in the medium of film. Prospective students can either contact me through my website or register directly through WOW! Women on Writing ([www.wow-womenonwriting.com](http://www.wow-womenonwriting.com)). The next start date for both of these six-week classes is April 5<sup>th</sup>.

2. It is time to market your film. What advice can you give screenwriters who are ready to go to the next level?

Start your quest for a reputable agent. In the meantime, enter screenplay contests to get feedback on your work and also create an account with InkTip ([www.inktip.com](http://www.inktip.com)), a secure site that allows agents, directors and producers to troll for new projects that fit their specific interests and budgets.

3. What advice can you give on handling pressure? Some writers are not used to having deadlines.

It's essential to be able to prioritize, to have the discipline to keep to a schedule, and to be able to say "no" if too many requests are being piled on your plate. Further, if you have trouble handling pressure or meeting deadlines, this may not be the best career path for you to pursue. If a director likes your script but wants to see you make "x" number of changes in the next 48 hours before she commits to a decision, she's not going to wait around a couple of weeks for you to collect your wits.

*For additional information on Christina Hamlett or to schedule a screenplay consultation, visit her website at [www.authorhamlett.com](http://www.authorhamlett.com).*