

QUT University

Susan Cake

Inside the writer's head: embodying reflection on creative writing processes

Abstract:

Inside the writer's head is a response to Ian Macdonald's discussion of alternative approaches to assessing screenwriting within Higher Education (2001). Macdonald argues for consideration of the reflective work of students when assessing their screenplays. As both an assessor of student screenplays and a doctoral student engaged in creative practice-led research, this prompted me to consider how my own narrative comedy screenplays might be assessed as research outputs. My methodology of writing narrative comedy screenplays mirrored McKee's (1998) writer's method and occurred within an action research cycle of ideation, planning, writing, analysing, reflecting and evaluating (Christie et al. 2015). Reflective and creative writing processes such as idea generation, concept development, research and critical feedback were documented in a reflection journal. This action research cycle generated numerous ideas for screenplays. The screenplay discussed in this paper uses characters to explore the often competing rational, intuitive and emotional aspects of screenwriting and in doing so, contributes to the body of screenplays-as-research artefacts (Baker and Beattie 2013; Baker 2013, 2016; Batty 2014). The characters in *Inside the writer's head* articulate thought processes behind ideation, the role of research and consideration of audience in developing screenplays. *Inside the writer's head* challenges learners of screenwriting to consider why we write. The screenplay embodies critical reflection and demonstrates how reflective and creative perspectives can be integrated within the screenplay form. In doing so, *Inside the writer's head* illustrates a hybrid form of screenplay for how screenplays might be assessed within an academic context.

Biographical Note:

Susan has over 15 years experience teaching screen production in the vocational education and training (VET) sector and is a screen and media curriculum specialist. Her doctoral research mapped a journey of self-directed, transformative learning facilitated by writing a narrative comedy television series titled *Fighting Fit*. She identified how writing *Fighting Fit* performed a kind of creative resistance to the corporatisation of vocational and higher education. She has written an *Innovative Teaching Guide* as part of an ABC funded project to support TVET Journalism training in the South Pacific and has published papers in the *International Journal of Reflective Practice*.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Scriptwriting – Embodied reflection – Screenwriting as research – Assessing screenplays

Inside the writer's head: embodying reflection on creative processes

1. EXT. WRITER'S ROOM - MORNING

CLOSE ON a white door. The name plate reads: WRITER'S ROOM HEAD.

2. INT. WRITER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The room is as white as a blank page. In the centre of the room sits a table and four chairs. Seated around the table are FOUR PEOPLE, all deep in thought.

SUE, a MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN, absently sucks on the end of a pencil. A notepad, pencil sharpener and eraser are neatly arranged on the table in front of her.

Opposite her is FRANK, a conservative man in his 70s. He puffs on a smokeless pipe and stares at an old manual typewriter that sits solidly on the table.

BLAIZE, a 20-something topless model, wears a white bathrobe and combs her long, platinum blonde hair. A sleek laptop perches in front of her.

CHARLIE, a confident man in his 30s, paces around the table with his mobile tablet.

SUE

Who am I kidding?

Charlie stops pacing and rests a comforting hand on Sue's shoulder.

CHARLIE

You just need to let go a bit.
Stop judging.

BLAIZE

Stop fuckin' moaning and start
already.

FRANK

Language!

BLAIZE

What?! Fuckety, fuck, fuck,
fuck!

FRANK

I'm not putting my name on this
If you're going to carry on like
that.

BLAIZE

Oh forfucksake!

SUE

Come on. That's not productive.

CHARLIE

Having a go at each other isn't
going to help. (to Frank) Nor
will censoring ourselves.

SUE

We have to be free to just let
our creativity flow.

POP! A candle appears on the table in front of Sue. She lights
it and wafts the scent around.

FRANK

I understand that, but do we
have to plaster the page with
profanity?

BLAIZE

Nice alliteration.

They resume their contemplation.

CHARLIE

Is anyone else struggling with
our audience?

FRANK

You mean it's not us?

SUE

I'm worried we're not broad
enough.

Blaize loosens her bathrobe and shrugs it past her shoulders
exposing her breasts.

SUE

What are you doing?

BLAIZE

Expanding our audience to
include 18 to 35 year old
males.

FRANK

Works for me.

Blaize is creeped out and refastens her robe. Charlie looks
slightly revolted.

SUE

Could we start with a story
perhaps? Or character before we
go for the obvious? We need to
go back to the why.

FRANK

You mean theme?

Sue stands up to leave.

CHARLIE

Where are you going?

SUE

To hang the washing out.

Frank scrapes his chair back loudly.

CHARLIE

Where--?

FRANK

Crapper. Do my best thinking
there.

He tucks a newspaper under his arm and leaves. Blaize follows.

BLAIZE

Never too early for wine.

Charlie considers a moment then straddles a chair and boots up
Scrabble on his iPad.

3. INT. WRITER'S ROOM - LATER

A pot of herbal tea steams on the table in front of Sue.
Blaize has a giant glass of red wine. Charlie shoves handfuls
of Malteasers into his mouth. Frank packs his pipe with weed.

FRANK

It occurred to me that we need to go back to basics. What do we always tell our writing students?

CHARLIE

Start with what you know.

SUE

But doesn't Hauge say there's "a real danger" in writing from personal experience?

FRANK

He just means don't use it as therapy.

BLAIZE

He also said that *The Hurt Locker* had such an "emotional impact" because Mark Boal spent time with a bomb squad in Iraq.

CHARLIE

He was a journalist using what he saw to add authenticity.

SUE

Alright. How about this?

CUT TO:

4. INT. LOUNGE ROOM - NIGHT

A YOUNG WOMAN sits on a lounge chair in a dim pool of light, her feet tucked under her. She cradles a thick crystal cut glass. The ice softly cracks in the vodka.

WOMAN

Most people don't understand.

They think it's a cry for help. I had a friend once, Leanne. When she tried it she said, "They'd be better off without me." That was after Ben, her second child.

(MORE)

WOMAN (CONT.)

God he was a handful! He wouldn't sleep; wouldn't feed properly. Puked up anything he did have. Her breasts got all hot and red. Mastitis. Her mum told her to put cold cabbage leaves on them. When I saw her at playgroup she had these soggy bits of greenery poking out her top. The daft cow had cooked them. She thought it was her fault of course. Her first one, Daisy, was an angel. And didn't we know it! She slept through the night the same day they brought her home from hospital. She was the first to roll over, first to sit up, first to walk, talk; you'd think she was Einstein! And then--

It's hard as a parent. Everyone gives you advice like 'Your kid doesn't come with a handbook.' As if we expect the A to Z of Encyclopaedia Britannica to come shooting out after the placenta! (pause) God knows there's enough room. (pause) So you trust the doctors and nurses when they want to inject your baby with something the minute they come out of you. Your tiny, perfect miracle of a baby. They say if you *don't* vaccinate they're likely to get whooping cough or polio or some other fatal disease. They throw statistics at you and suddenly you think the air is full of germs! You just want to wrap your baby in a bubble. You'd do anything, *anything* to protect them. (pause) So you let them jab them.

Leanne was pregnant with Ben. Daisy had just turned four. She could already write her own

(MORE)

WOMAN (CONT)

name. She had the last shot of the three-in-one, you know, the triple antigen: diphtheria, tetanus and whooping cough. At first Leanne thought it was just the usual reaction. Temperature, rash. Then she thought maybe it was the flu. Poor Daisy had trouble breathing. They rushed her to hospital but-- She was such a bright, happy little girl. Mummy's little girl.

It was hard for Leanne when Ben came along. I think babies know when you're stressed. Babies and dogs. Leanne thought she was doing something wrong but I think it was because Daisy had been such an easy baby. The doctors said it was postnatal depression but-- Leanne was grieving! Her beautiful, bright, baby girl had been turned into a vegetable! (pause) She couldn't bear putting her in the wheelchair so she had her strapped to her body twenty-four seven. This vacant, dribbly, little lump of a girl strapped to her back like a pathetic growth.

Leanne was so organised. She arranged special childcare, returned videos, left a week's worth of dinner in the freezer. Even her suicide note was a to-do list. She thought they'd be better off without her. She thought her insurance payout would mean they could get *proper* care for Daisy. She thought she was doing the right thing. The *right* thing.

They found her just in time. She spent ten days in the mental ward. I went to see her and I asked her, *why*? How could she leave her kids like that?

(MORE)

WOMAN (CONT.)

I'm ashamed now, when I think of it. She said the doctors warned her people would be angry. I wasn't angry! I wasn't! I was-- How could she--? I couldn't--

The doctors put her on special medication. Afterwards, they said it was very unusual for someone to have *that* kind of reaction. (pause) Daisy wasn't the only one in the family to be a 'one-in-a-million' chance. That's a cruel kind of lotto. Most people would say Leanne was selfish. They'd say that it's easy to leave, end it all. It's tougher to live. I thought that too for a while. How could a mother leave her children like that? (pause) I was at her place one day. Ben and my bub, Jack, were asleep. Leanne had just finished feeding Daisy. She talked to her the whole time. Daisy never responded. Nothing. Just her eyes rolling around trying to focus. I tried telling Leanne it wasn't her fault. She was protecting Daisy. She didn't want to be like those stupid people who don't vaccinate their kids. That's what everyone thinks if you don't vaccinate. They say you're irresponsible; you put other kids at risk. Look at the statistics they say. (pause) I look at Daisy.

I'm lucky. My little Jack's fine. He's sailed through the triple antigen, but, (pause) he'll be four soon.

CUT TO BLACK:

5. INT. LOUNGE ROOM - NIGHT

FRANK, BLAIZE and CHARLIE stare at SUE. She lays the monologue on the table in front of her.

SUE

Well?

FRANK

I wasn't expecting something
so controversial.

CHARLIE

Isn't that why we do this? To
make people think?

BLAIZE

Hell no! I just want to
entertain people.

CHARLIE

Is it a true story?

SUE

Does it sound authentic?

CHARLIE

If I believe the government
media I *would* be stupid not to
immunize my kid. Your story
humanizes the debate, makes
you realize the statistics are
children. Babies.

BLAIZE

So, her kid will be the same
age Daisy was when she had the
bad reaction? Makes me wonder
what she'll do.

SUE

(to Charlie)

I've borrowed bits and pieces
from a variety of sources. The
suicide attempt was reflecting
on something that happened to
a friend, same with the
adverse drug reaction. I've
researched the vaccination
debate and spoken to families and a
microbiologist who chose not to
vaccinate his own kids
because he knew what went into
the vaccines. I just wanted to get
people thinking about the issue

(MORE)

SUE (CONT.)

without jumping to the default
'public good' versus 'stupid if
you don't' reaction. As
screenwriters we have an obligation
to see the world, not as black and
white but--

BLAIZE

--fifty shades of grey!

END OF SCRIPT

Research Statement

Research background

Inside the writer's head was provoked by critical reflection on creative writing processes and consideration of how the screenplay text might also embody critical reflection. In assessing screenwriting in higher education, Macdonald (2001) recommends a mixed-methods approach to capture evidence of a learner's ability to apply craft skills and demonstrate breadth and depth of learning and creativity. One of these methods is to consider the *reflective* work produced by students that provides insight into the student's thought processes. This screenplay is itself a reflection on Macdonald's suggestion and seeks to integrate reflective and creative scriptwriting processes. The characters in the screenplay embody reflective perspectives played out within a fictitious writer's room.

Research contribution

By embodying and performing critical reflection on the creative process of scriptwriting, *Inside the writer's head* contributes to understandings about the craft of screenwriting which are often overlooked in favour of structure, character, plot or theme. The characters express vulnerabilities, behaviours and thought processes experienced by a learner within the creative writing process, though not necessarily acknowledged, nor desired, in the pursuit of writing screenplays: procrastination, meditation, internal debate, inner doubts, extrinsic and intrinsic motivations, and discussion of the writer's intent. *Inside the writer's head* builds on the work of other screenplays as research artefacts and was particularly inspired by Batty's research screenplay, *Frankie goes to Hollywood: a comedy script* (2013). By building on the work of other screenwriter-researchers, *Inside the writer's head* demonstrates how existing research screenplays have impact and influence emerging research.

Research significance

Inside the writer's head presents a hybrid form of screenplay which integrates and articulates knowledge of screenwriting craft and reflective and creative writing processes. It proposes that screenplays as research outcomes can embody critical reflection to challenge learners of screenwriting to consider why we write. By articulating thought processes behind the construction of the screenplay, it also illustrates how learners of screenwriting can articulate reflective work within the screenplay form to address the challenge of assessing academic screenplays.

Works cited

- Baker, Dallas and Debra Beattie 2013 'Scriptwriting as creative writing research', *TEXT*, special issue 19.
- Baker, Dallas 2013 'Scriptwriting as creative writing research: A Preface.' *TEXT*, special issue 19.
- Baker, Dallas 2016 'The screenplay as text: academic scriptwriting as creative research', *New Writing* 13 (1)
- Batty, Craig 2013 'Frankie goes to Hollywood: a comedy script' *TEXT*, special issue 19.
- Batty, Craig (Ed) 2014 *Screenwriters and Screenwriting: Putting practice into context* Australia: Palgrave Macmillan
- Christie, Michael, Michael Carey, Ann Robertson, and Peter Grainger 2015 'Putting Transformative Learning Theory into Practice' *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* 55 (1)
- Macdonald, Ian W 2001 'The assessment of creative screenwriting in higher education' *Journal of Media Practice* 2 (2)
- McKee, Robert 1998 *Story: substance, structure, style and the principles of screenwriting* London: Methuen.