

A LOOK AT LINDA SEGER Hollywood's Screenwriting Guru

By Rita Cook

She's an international script consultant and seminar leader whose clients include TriStar, Turner Network, CBS and MGM/UA. She's written four books about the seemingly glamorous job of writing a screenplay and her fifth book, "When Women Call the Shots" takes us into the world of women in the film industry.

You've probably heard her name mentioned in almost every screenwriting circle. One friend of mine in Hollywood even told me this woman's first book, "Making a Good Script Great" is known as the "Screenwriter's Bible."

Linda Seger has been around the world lecturing and training script consultants and, to her credit, she also gave the first screenwriting seminar in Russia in 1990.

Seger is an interesting woman, full of interesting stories and humorous anecdotes about her experiences in the entertainment industry.

She has a doctorate degree, but she hesitated to tell anyone early on in her career.

"I took my doctors degree off my resume and if you notice it's never on the front of my books. And it's only recently I've allowed people to introduce me as Dr. Linda Seger."

Hollywood, it seems, is an anti-intellectual society. Seger says she had to prove herself as a practical person first or she would have been dismissed as an academic "which is the worst thing in Hollywood you can be," she warns.

Along with being anti-intellectual, Hollywood is also extremely competitive, even in Seger's field. But, Seger and her group of friends decided early on that instead of being competitive they would help one another.

"It starts by deciding you are going to stay non-competitive," Seger explains. "And the second thing is you try to tune into where exactly each others strengths are, and you learn as much as you can about each other."

Seger talks about a friend of hers, Donie Nelson, who is a career consultant for writers and a past development executive at MGM. Nelson started a group referred to as "the breakfast group." It's a way that all the women can get together and discuss who's doing what in a non-competitive way.

"One of the things Donie looks at for a breakfast group is if people are supportive, if they're not she doesn't invite them," Seger says. "Donie also says if someone is an opportunist, if they're overly competitive, if they're putting people down or not listening to each other and affirming each other, she doesn't invite them."

Seger admits that she, like everyone else in Hollywood, does at times feel competitive. Her cure is to remember "I am here for the bigger picture. I think you also have to develop an idea that there is abundance, that there is enough to go around and that in some ways the more good script consultants there are the more people recognize that being a script consultant is a good thing."

The idea of abundance works for everything in life. So with that in mind, Seger gives some honest words of advice to screenwriters about how they can work and find abundance within their niche in the industry.

Of course, Seger says, it won't happen overnight, but it's not impossible. She says that a writer must first and foremost "feel a tremendous joy in writing."

What is the difference between your scriptwriting techniques as a script doctor and other script doctors, what do you do different?

I think the fact that I have an actual system that I developed as part of my doctoral dissertation so I have a very particular process I go through. I start with structure, I go to story, I go to character, I go to theme, I look at the integration of the elements and I've been able to successfully teach it. It takes one week to teach what I call the overview of what I do, three weeks to teach it when I do the whole script breakdown.

Now that is only working with people that are already professionals, so I am presuming that they have already been working on stuff for five years. It's not a formula, it is more an approach and it's not rule-oriented it is conceptually oriented and it's dealing with what are the underlying principles suppose to be in the writing and how you use those principles in a lot of ways and are aware of them as you craft your script. I put a lot of focus on just simply the craft, the shape of the story, the craft of the story, the movement of the story, the focus of the story.

What is the most important advice that you would give a screenwriter who is just starting out?

To see it as a process. And recognize that you get better as you keep doing it and you need to be prepared and you need to put in the time and if you don't love what you're doing don't do it. And don't think in terms of luck. When people say to me you're really lucky, I say luck doesn't have anything to do with this. This is hard work year after year, I'd say probably thirty years of hard work and one of the things I have discovered in myself is you get better at something as you do it, but the other thing is to seek professional help.

When I started my business any area that I had trouble with I said who do I know that can help me with that. It's the same thing with writers. Writers will be better at certain things than others and you need people reading and giving you feedback. As you say well I'm not sure if my script is good enough you get someone who is professional to read it. I would also recommend that people be careful of illusions. It's a business filled with illusions and you could spend ten years of your life thinking that because your script is over at Disney that they are going to do it. You learn not to say "my script is over at Disney, I'm sure they're considering it because it has been there for three months." You have to find out. The business will kill you with kindness and you have to try to stay grounded. I think another thing I would say is get a life. You know, if all you're doing is Hollywood stuff you're not going to have a lot to write about because you are going to be scratching the surface. I mean Hollywood is sort of a surface place and you've got to get in the midst of life and have something worth writing about.

What is the most important thing to get right when you're writing a screenplay, plot, character, or do you have to get it all right?

In a way what you are looking at is that people have different talents. You know people that are naturally good at character, some are naturally good at dialogue, theme, images, plot, whatever it is. And what you want to know is what you are good at and then continue to improve on the weaker areas. I know people that say I'm great at character, I have no sense of structure at all

and they have a partner who is good at structure and story and that becomes a good collaboration.

How do you know when a character is really good?

I think it rings true. There is something you haven't seen before just like with people.

Like when a character starts taking on its own life?

Yes, and it has its own will and you start beginning to think of things that you've seen with other real people and it comes alive and there's, sometimes there's paradoxes. I think the whole idea of paradoxes is interesting in a character. What you don't expect.

Do you have to live in LA to be a screenwriter?

If you're writing features sometimes you can get something done without living in LA, the problem is if you're not there it is hard to take the meetings and no one wants to represent you and it is difficult. But you can certainly write scripts somewhere else and wait to move while you are getting money together. But I think what people have to remember when they move to LA is that generally it's going to take you five years, it could take you ten years, but you need to be aware you are not going to move to LA and sell your first script.

Do you think it's also the people you know as much as the talent?

This particular woman I know is incredibly talented and probably the most cooperative writer I've ever seen and it was hard for her. I don't think it's just talent. It's push, drive, it's how much you are willing to get behind, how much you are willing to learn the other stuff. It's show business and the people that are going do the best, they are going to learn both sides of it. Talent is part of it, but it is just one part of it.'

Rita Cook is a producer, writer and currently President of Cinewomen Los Angeles. She was an associate producer on Trimark's *Route 666* and co-producer on three films *Schizophrenic*, *Gabriella* and *Lost Soul*. Editor-in-Chief of *Insider Magazine* and Staff Writer for SCREENTALK, Cook will be producing a horror film in November, *The Kiss Of The Vampire*, of which she is also co-writer.

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