

READER ROUNDTABLE - PART I

By R. E. Paris

If you're like most writers who have entered scriptwriting contests, you must have wished you could be that proverbial fly on the wall when scripts were vetted. Here's the next best thing. Nine readers and/or administrators from five international contests talk about the process.

The participants include:

Greg Beal - Administrator of The Don and Gee Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting, sponsored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

Rosanne DiMesio - Reader for CineStory Screenwriting Awards, sponsored by Egg, Redeemable Films and DeeGee Productions. DiMesio was a writer-for-hire on an independent animation project.

Joan Easley - Reader for The Screenwriter's Network/Carl Sautter Memorial Scriptwriting Competition in the situation comedy division. Easley is a past Warner Brothers TV Workshop fellow and a former journalist.

Jennise Hall - Reader for the hour-long television division of the Carl Sautter Memorial and for the Producers Outreach Program (also sponsored by The Scriptwriter's Network.) As a student, Hall won an NAACP-ACTSO writing award, and later won the 1995 hour-long Sautter award.

Wendy Moon - Reader for The Nicholl Fellowships. Moon has published three books, written columns for two national magazines, and was an executive producer/reader/assistant for an actor/producer and her nationally syndicated hour-long television program.

R. E. Paris - Moderator and Reader for CineStory. Paris received an NEA media artist's grant in 1995, was a writer-for-hire on two independent films, and is a freelance journalist.

Ron Peer - Finalist judge in The Austin Heart of Film Screenplay Competition. AHF semi-finalist judge for three years. Peer's first feature film, *Goodbye, Lover*, was released April 16, 1999 and was a 1996 semi-finalist in both the Nicholl and the AHF. Peer's second feature, *I Love You, Baby*, (with Maximilian Schell) was released in Germany in April 2000. *Falling Rocks* premiered on German television in 2000.

Marc Reed - Past Coordinator for the Wisconsin Screenwriters Forum Screenwriters Contest and presently on their Board of Directors. Reed is now an agent at the Lee Allen Agency.

Genia Shipman - Administrator of the Carl Sautter television category. Shipman previously read for the Wisconsin Screenwriters Forum and won both the Sautter and WSF television categories in previous years. Shipman has done on-staff and freelance writing for hour-long television.

How do you describe your responsibility as a reader?

BEAL: [As Nicholl administrator] I try to sit with every reader when they return scripts to give them the opportunity to say something, however brief, about each and every script. Some readers discuss every script. Others let their scores do most of the talking.

The process also allows me to ask questions if there is a discrepancy of any sort, and allows me to offer direction to an individual reader if I think that he or she might be grading too harshly or too easily or might be misunderstanding any other aspect of my initial instructions.

DIMESIO: I'm a first-tier reader, so my responsibility is to read as many scripts as possible and weed out the absolute dreck.

PEER: As a finalist judge, I was part of the group picking the winners. I did feel more of a responsibility than if I were a first-round reader. I couldn't merely say, "pass" and toss it into the reject pile. I had to think about the script in relation to others.

PARIS: Hey, I felt a tremendous responsibility, having been on the other end of those reads, even though I wasn't a finalist reader.

PEER: I felt the same responsibility as a semi-finalist reader, not just a finalist judge. I had to judge the scripts I had in relation to the others.

MOON: I take my responsibility as a reader very seriously because I'm a writer. I try to be as fair and accurate as I can -- but not kind. It wouldn't be kind to give high marks to an inferior script. The Nicholl is a writing contest, not a marketing contest, so I judge based on the quality of the writing, not the commercial viability.

DIMESIO: My comment about weeding out the dreck probably sounds pretty harsh to a lot of people. It is harsh -- and it's true. The first year I read, I only stopped at page 40 on one script. [NOTE: Most contests have an elimination read policy.] I read partly out of guilt -- I felt that if the writer went to the trouble to write it, I should at least read the whole thing -- and partly because I was a new reader, unsure of my judgment, and I felt it was better to err on the side of judging too easily.

The second year (about 50 scripts later) I finally realized that I wasn't doing anyone any favors by not stopping at page 40 on very bad scripts. One of the harsh realities of contests is that they have a lot of scripts to judge in a limited amount of time. Weeding out the very worst scripts as quickly as possible is the only way they can do this.

I should mention that one of the scripts I read the first year turned out to be one of the three winners, and I was very excited about that. It confirmed my own judgment. I knew from page one that script was special.

REED: [My job is] to fairly assess the material according to the criteria of the contest. For example, characterization. If the script is a detective movie, it's not going to get high marks if the main character is a Columbo-clone, or a nail-filing, blond bimbo. I want to see something new, something I can relate to, something which is not simply a rehash of old stereotypes.

The WSF judges are required to give feedback. It's one of the few contests where the writer receives a short critique. Instead of a "Sorry you didn't make the cut" letter, the writer finds out why the script didn't make it.

SHIPMAN: The Sautter also gives critiques to all contestants.

MOON: I wish the Nicholl could give critiques, at least when they're encouraging.

BEAL: I once tried to read every script that made the quarterfinals. At that stage I wasn't scoring scripts. In the past I've served as one of the first-round readers, but this year we had 5489 entries and 285 quarterfinalists.

SHIPMAN: I think readers have a huge responsibility. No offense to the Nicholl, but I think the responsibility is even greater in competitions with fewer entries. The first year the Sautter accepted one-hour scripts there were THREE entries. In '98 there were 48 entries.

Writers enter competitions to get some sort of validation -- "I'm good at this -- aren't I?" While winning a contest where your script is better than 47 others isn't on par with beating 4000 others, it's still validation and the readers damn well better take it seriously.

MOON: I see your point, but my dilemma is precisely because there *are* so many entries. It's going to come down to a few points, maybe even one point, to determine if a writer is going to make the quarterfinals. The Nicholl totals the two scores of the first round readers and those with, I believe, scores of 120 or above are considered for the quarterfinal round. There can be up to 400 scripts within ten points of that range. That's when the subjectivity factor hits me hard.

PARIS: Absolutely. My biggest concern is my own prejudice. I mean, we all have favorite genres.

EASLEY: That's why I prefer to read one thing -- situation comedies. I wouldn't trust myself to recognize a good thriller, or a good action adventure. Comedy is the only genre in which I feel I know enough about the craft to recognize someone who is exceptionally good.

MOON: Now, I think this is very important for contestants to know. I WANT to be impressed. I want to give high scores. I want them to succeed. I want to recommend their scripts. I think contestants assume we read to reject. No one in their right mind chooses to read bad scripts.

DIMESIO: I don't get paid anything to read for CineStory. When I started, I did it because I thought I could learn from the experience -- and I certainly have. But the main reason I'm still reading at this point is simply that I like to read. Curling up with a good script is just as enjoyable as curling up with a good novel.

MOON: We certainly don't read for the money! I'm reading to find those scripts that "wow" me. It feels good to see them in the quarter or semifinals. And if I find a script someone I know might want to read, and they like it -- it's good for me.

So what stood out for you in the scripts you thought were the best?

DIMESIO: Not a single moment was wasted. The whole was greater than the sum of its parts. By that I mean the elements -- dialog, description, character -- weren't just good in themselves. They worked together to create something more powerful.

Meaning is in the transitions (I think Mamet said something to that effect.) The juxtaposition of scenes, the way in which you move from one scene to the next, carries meaning in and of itself. The best writers exploit this to the fullest.

BEAL: What stood out for me? Quirky, engaging characters. An intriguing story. Solid craft. Better than average writing and dialog. Scripts that take me to places I've never visited before.

MOON: What has stood out for me is *voice*, that mysterious, magical element. It's also cool to see it in scripts that haven't mastered the craft, and to hope that the writers persevere so they can write to sell. A compelling story, told with passion and joy, is like love. It can cover a lot of flaws.

PEER: The standouts for me used a mixture of humor and drama to tell the story. Even if the script was a tragedy, the writer managed to inject some humor to lighten the material. I

appreciated that. It helped to hold my interest. Hell, even *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* have funny moments.

REED: [Standouts have] the ability to create the movie in my mind as I'm reading. If I can picture the character, hear the dialog -- it's a great script. Clear, concise, dramatic writing will do this. Too many writers want to go into minute detail about things which are unimportant to the story.

SHIPMAN: As the Sautter Competition Administrator, I got to sit in on the Judges' Dinners (when the judges chose the winners). The one element of every script they read which most informed their decision was RESONANCE -- if a script stayed with them after they put it down.

PARIS: And more specifically about the television scripts?

HALL: It's a little scary, but no contest entry that I read was so good that it stood out in my mind. Of the scripts I read, the best ones had the series character voices down, and told an interesting story.

SHIPMAN: What stands out in the best television specs I've read is that they're absolutely true to the show. When I think about them later, (and I ALWAYS think about them later) I find myself wondering if I'm remembering an episode I actually saw.

MOON: That's when you know the TV writer is good. [Lack of trueness] was also a major flaw in freelance work I read for the show [with which] I was associated. [Freelancers who] didn't know the show pulled me out of the read and made me very critical.

EASLEY: I was assigned to read a spec for a cartoon show. I don't much like cartoons in general. They seldom make me laugh, and I'd never seen this show. I watched a couple of episodes before I read the script. The show wasn't bad -- it was kind of amusing. But the script was BETTER, funnier than the show! It was a good story and laugh-out-loud funny.

Laugh-out-loud funny is a real, visceral way to separate the fair from the really good in any comedy writing. A lot of people can sort-of amuse you, but very few can really make you laugh out loud. You have to be able to do that to be a comedy pro.

What about pet peeves? Are there consistent problems you see in contest scripts? Misunderstood advice from writing "gurus"?

MOON: Don't get me started! Illogical actions or motivations. Plot holes. Wildly inaccurate information. Sloppiness in general. Text art, fancy fonts, things like that.

PEER: [Peeves?] Not really. Formatting was uniform and the scripts seemed to flow well overall. No deficiencies in language or logic. Probably because the finalist scripts were the cream of the crop.

BEAL: Structure. Too few writers really know how to *tell* and how to *order* a movie story.

REED: Agreed. I don't see consistent problems, but a number of (I presume) first-time writers don't know how to structure a film. The vast majority of commercial films have a three-act structure. The first-time writer, to make a sale, has to follow the rules. Hollywood makes movies to generate income. The writer has to save the art films for when they're famous and can do anything they want.

BEAL: In the best scripts (semifinalists), I find that too few writers include enough conflict. Escalating conflict. Movies are about conflict between principal characters.

DIMESIO: Peeves? Stories about an aspiring screenwriter who overcomes writer's block by writing a screenplay about a writer with writer's block are my pet peeve. There's usually a subplot about the writer's problems with women, too. I see several of these every year. None of them are any good.

[Laughter]

PARIS: I found too many writers use blocks of description or action. By this I mean more than five lines. Not all, but most of these scripts seemed overwritten.

MOON: I know what you mean. I think those writers are afraid of filling 120 pages. Writers don't have to do the set designer's job. Less is almost always more. The value of whitespace.

PARIS: Another problem with blocks of description is that the writer often buries important information, or the introduction of a character.

While I'm at it, I should mention dialog. One script I read drove me crazy because every little greeting was included. Dialog should mean something for the story or character.

MOON: That writer didn't know "Steve Larson's Rule of Bad Parties and Good Scenes." Come in as late as possible. Leave as early as possible.

PARIS: I think the problem goes back to transitions, too. Effective transitions can and do tell so much in a story, and tend to eliminate unnecessary exposition and set-up from scene to scene.

MOON: Writers often think too linearly in scene changes. They think the reader won't understand a scene without repeated exposition. Not true.

PEER: I said I had no finalist pet peeves, but there was one script that annoyed the hell out of me because it jumped back and forth in time in flat, undramatic scenes -- nothing happened. I found it confusing and boring. I was mystified that it made the final round. Writers should arrange scenes in order of escalating conflict to achieve critical mass and blow the reader away.

EASLEY: It's important to have a good, interesting story and a workable structure, even in comedy. People think jokes are enough, but they're not.

Too much dialog, even clever dialog, without a goal-directed story is boring. The best comedy comes from good characters with interesting foibles. It's important to outline, polish, and punch up jokes before you send out your script. You get one shot with a reader. Make it your best shot.

REED: Otherwise you're only wasting your time, entry fee, and postage.

SHIPMAN: Far too many writers seem to think it's okay to submit their first draft. Guess what? It isn't.

MOON: This is a major failing: the unwillingness to rewrite to perfection. To miss the deadline this year in order to send in a potentially winning script next year. I've read great scripts -- up to the last act. Then you can tell the writers rushed to finish to meet the deadline.

I don't think writers realize how much that sticks out.

SHIPMAN: Without fail, the really bad TV scripts have been those [in which] the story is about the guest star(s) instead of the regulars.

And -- this one is tough to describe -- some writers go too far. One script in the contest had a recurring character die. The effect was jarring, and not in a positive way. That [plot decision] said to me that the writer didn't "get" the reason for writing a TV spec. The same emotional effect could've been achieved by having the character badly injured or close to death.

MOON: Plus, killing off a character is something only the producers can decide to do. Everyone in the TV industry knows this. [Killing off a character] speaks volumes -- the writer doesn't understand how TV works, and that's what a spec script is supposed to do -- show you're ready to enter the field.

HALL: [My pet peeve:] Format.

DIMESIO: It worries me when readers talk about format. I see so many beginning writers obsessing about picky little formatting details when they should be directing their energy into telling a good story.

MOON: Format is used in two ways here. In TV, format refers to the series bible elements, the things that make one show that show. Archie was a bigot, Mary worked at a TV station, not a radio station.

HALL: Yes. Write to the series. When writing a spec for a TV series, your job is to capture the show's voice. In some scripts, the writer doesn't quite *have* the show. In others, the writer attempts to "fix" the show by writing their spec the way they feel the show "should" be written.

DIMESIO: Still, there are too many "experts" running around convincing new writers that their script will be tossed on the bonfire if it's not formatted exactly. But the truth is, if I'm really caught up in the story I'll overlook all sorts of errors.

MOON: You're right. But these kinds of errors sometimes go along with an overall lack of mastery. Lack of mastery in the most basic elements usually, but not always, coincides with a lack of mastery in more important areas.

REED: About "gurus." There will always be someone who comes along and says they know a better way. A lot of what they all say is simply an expansion, or complication, of the three-act structure. Some scripts are even more predictable and duller than if they just used the basics and some imagination.

PARIS: I like Aristotle's big view -- beginning, middle, end. When I notice "perfect" script structure, that's generally a bad sign for the story.

MOON: The standard advice goes: "grab me on the first page." It's true. I can tell within the first two pages whether or not the contestant can write.

DIMESIO: I think the single most misunderstood piece of advice is to grab the reader on the first page. I see way too many scripts in which this is interpreted to mean "put something lurid on the first page." If you put something in just for the shock value, it's going to be obvious, and it backfires.

The truth is, you have the reader's attention on the first page. What writers should really worry about is holding on to it for the next 100-plus pages.

SHIPMAN: Most misunderstood advice: "Write what you know." That doesn't mean write about yourself. It really should be, "Write what you know and research the rest."

Most ignored advice: "Don't write a spec pilot." Most people try this too soon in their writing lives and end up writing about themselves and their families. [There's] plenty of time to write a pilot after you've developed your talent. Most needed advice in TV: "Don't write what everybody else is writing."

PARIS: So how can writers know if they're submitting the same show as other contestants?

SHIPMAN: You can find out what others are writing by talking to them. But I don't think you can accurately gauge what scripts a contest will receive.

I always advise people doing TV specs to start by writing their favorite shows. Those are the shows they'll know the best and have the best ideas for.

PARIS: Could it be a good strategy to write for a new show?

SHIPMAN: Conventional wisdom says *don't*. However, some new shows are safer to write for than others. It all comes down to ratings. This is the only thing to look at other than whether or not it's a show you love.

Look at the ratings, find out if the show has gotten a full-season pick-up, and learn the level of network support.

(Originally found at www.screentalk.biz/art045.htm)