

# Frank Darabont

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Frank Arpad Darabont was born in 1959 in Montebeliard, France, the son of Hungarian refugees who had fled Budapest during the failed 1956 revolution. Brought to America while still a baby, Frank graduated from Hollywood High School in 1977 and began his film career as a production assistant on a low-budget 1980 horror movie called *Hell Night*. After working nine years in the industry as a set dresser and production assistant while he struggled to master his writing craft, Darabont sold *Black Cat Run* in 1986 (it took over a decade for the story to reach the screen as an HBO film in 1998). Since then, Darabont has written extensively in film, many times in the horror and SF genres, co-scripting such screenplays as *Nightmare on Elm Street 3: The Dream Warriors* (his first produced credit), *The Blob*, and *The Fly II*. He has also done uncredited rewrites on such films as *Eraser* and *Saving Private Ryan*, as well as writing eight episodes of George Lucas's television show *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*.

In 1980 Darabont wrote to Stephen King, asking him for the rights to adapt his short story "The Woman in the Room." King assented, and Darabont wrote and directed his first short film. Then in the late '80s Darabont again approached King, this time asking permission to adapt King's novella, *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption*. His screenplay *The Shawshank Redemption* (which he also directed) would win him the USC Scriptor Award (shared with Stephen King) and the Humanitas Prize—in addition to being nominated for an Academy Award, a Writers Guild Award, and a Golden Globe. The film continues to be a favorite on the Internet Movie Database ([www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), battling with Coppola's *The Godfather* for top honors on their list of best films.

*Creative Screenwriting* caught up with Darabont in 1997 and 2000 as he was finishing some pick-up shots on *The Green Mile*. An adaptation of King's seri-

alized novel of the same name, *The Green Mile* tells the story of Paul Edgecomb, who in 1935 must balance his humanity with his job as a guard on the Green Mile (death row) in Cold Mountain Penitentiary. Paul's views of life, death, and humanity are challenged with the arrival of John Coffey, a gentle giant convicted of a horrible crime who has a magical effect on the guards, the inmates, and a mouse.

Darabont is a friendly, laughing man, a Hollywood veteran who talks energetically about his work and craft. Part film buff, part film professor, he punctuates his answers with a knowing wink or laugh as he leans over his desk (when he's not propping his red Converse sneakers on it). Darabont has the aura of someone who knows how lucky he is to work in a medium he loves, and he recognizes the irony of being seen as an "overnight success" after having worked as a professional screenwriter for over fifteen years.

*What were the early years working in Hollywood like for you? The nine years spent working towards becoming a screenwriter?*

Those were lean years. Those were very lean years. I did a lot of weird jobs throughout that time. I was a forklift operator, I bussed tables at The Old Spaghetti Factory on Sunset, I did whatever I had to do. Mostly, luckily, happily, I wound up set dressing for about six of those years on a freelance basis. So I was Mr. Glue Gun, Mr. Screw Gun, Mr. Where-do-you-want-it? It was a pretty thrilling time actually, a lot of intense effort and guerrilla warfare filmmaking. So we worked a lot of non-union shows, we worked a lot of commercials and low-budget, often bad movies. But it was a grand experience for me. As a set dresser, as the art department's representative on the set, next to the camera, boy, did I learn a lot. That was film school for me. That was learning how to make a movie, learning how to direct. That experience was really cool.

I didn't go to film school. I didn't go to college. I graduated Hollywood High back in '77 and decided to kind of attack life and hope it worked out. It actually worked out quite well. I'm sort of stunned. I don't recommend circumventing college, it's not for everyone, but I'm one of these fellows unburdened by the benefits of higher education.

*How did you learn screenwriting?*

Endless hours at the desk. Endless hours at the typewriter, then the computer, which came along later. It was really a lot of applied time and effort and self-study. Which is the way most people learn. I have many ambivalent feelings about the "screenwriting gurus..."

*The whole industry of screenwriting...*

Yes, the whole industry of "we can make you a screenwriter." I have ambivalent feelings because, ultimately, even though there is some benefit to be gained by those things—I stress the word "some" benefit, minimal benefit—ultimately you know what it all boils down to? You're sitting at your desk, all by yourself for years, trying to figure out your craft and applying the effort

necessary. And that's what nobody wants to hear. Everybody wants to hear, "I can teach you a three-act structure, I can give you a formula, and you'll be selling screenplays within six months." Bullshit.

*In only two days for \$249.*

Exactly. Exactly. Bullshit I say. And what's really funny is, these guys in the business of being screenwriting gurus, they don't ever write screenplays. I have never seen one of these guys' names on a screen credit in a movie. I do think there is some benefit to these classes, but I don't think people should be misled into thinking it's the be-all and end-all, and they're going to walk out a screenwriter. Everything is self-applied effort in life. Everything. You don't learn anything easily.

*What has it been like, these past ten years, working within the Hollywood game as a screenwriter for hire?*

It's been an abundance, a blessing, an example of putting in the effort and really reaping the rewards. That really does happen. I feel like the luckiest son-of-a-bitch on the planet. On the other hand, it's been a fucking drag, man. 'Cause it has all the complaints you've heard from screenwriters. They nail you every day. They just pop you in the nose every single time. And so, on that level, it's a slog. Would I trade it? Absolutely not. What, am I nuts? Look where I'm living. What else would I be doing? I'm unskilled labor. I never went to college. I couldn't get hired by McDonald's. It's been great.

*How did you work towards your screenwriting initial break with Nightmare On Elm Street III?*

The initial break is an interesting thing, because it seemed like every plan I had didn't pan out. The ones I didn't recognize as a plan were the ones that came through. Suddenly here's opportunity tapping on my shoulder. *Nightmare III* came about because of my friendship and association with Chuck Russell (director of *The Mask* and *Eraser*). He was a line producer, and hired me as a production assistant on my very first movie job. It was *Hell Night* with Linda Blair. Look at the end credits, I'm there! I'm in there, man. It was such an exciting thing to see that credit roll at the end. My very first screen credit. But it's a terrible movie.

Anyway, Chuck hired me again for the next movie he was doing, and it was on that show that the wardrobe lady, who had become a friend of mine, gave Chuck a copy of a spec I had done for *M\*A\*S\*H\** behind my back. Chuck read it and was sufficiently impressed that, once the show ended, he called me into his office and said, "Hey, I'm looking for a writing partner. Would you be interested in writing with me?" And I thought, hey, this is the first time anyone's asked me to write! I'll do this. In the ensuing years, he and I became very good friends.

He was doing a lot of line producing work and was trying to direct, so we were always generating scripts. He would pay me \$1,000 or \$1,200 bucks out

of his pocket just to keep me from having to go take a set dressing gig, which is how I was making ends meet by then. So we wrote together and turned out a lot of scripts, until one day he walks in and says, "I've been offered *Nightmare On Elm Street III*." He had just come from a pitch meeting over at New Line. They had a very problematic script on their hands and he had suggested a rash of solutions to the problems and it all made sense so they said, "Okay, you can direct." And he came home and said, "Okay, Frank, we've got two weeks to rewrite this script." And so off we went to Big Bear. Got away from the phones and everything else, locked ourselves in a cabin and rewrote *Nightmare III* in eleven days, beginning to end. We made sense out of it, to whatever extent it makes sense.

Mind you, we retained all the good ideas that were there, we retained all that worked. We weren't and aren't in the habit of changing something that doesn't need to be changed just because it might get us credit. We did happen to get credit on that one, so there was a significant amount of work that went into that rewrite. Which Wes Craven, at that time, disputed. He was grinding an ax with New Line and unfortunately, Chuck and I got caught in the middle of it. Wes had been told some things about us that were not true. There was a certain amount of dishonesty going on there that Wes didn't realize. So he responded on a very visceral level, on a very emotional level, and was a bit childish in the press. That's okay. I've never held a grudge and have since met him and got to know him a little bit. He seems like a very nice man. I just think he was in a bad situation with those folks. There were a lot of hard feelings bouncing around and Chuck and I got caught in the crossfire.

I think within three weeks of Chuck walking through that door and making the announcement, he was on the set saying, "Action." Can you imagine being three weeks away from shooting and you don't have your director? I don't know what they were thinking.

*When you write a screenplay on spec, are you working to get it down on paper to be filmed as you see it, or are you also working at creating feelings in and motivating the reader?*

Both. Very much both. I've always felt my job was to try to describe this really cool movie to somebody who hasn't had the chance to see it yet, to make the reading experience as enjoyable and engrossing as possible in order to convey that's what the movie will be as well. If I can get them to picture the movie in their heads, then I've done the job I intended to do.

I not only do that for specs, but for any script I write. Even the most straightforward assignment, I'm trying to make it a thrilling experience for the reader. I want to get everybody who's involved in the making of the film excited about the movie. I think that's part of my job. In a sense, I'm kind of the cheerleader. So I wouldn't make a delineation between a spec and an assignment script here.

Mind you, I'm not terribly experienced in writing specs. I haven't done those all that much. I wrote a spec, *Black Cat Run*, in '84, two years before

*Nightmare III* came along. And that spec gave my agent, Allen Greene, something to show around, to get me in the door and introduce me with. That spec really got my career started, got read a lot, and led to a lot of work. The only other spec I ever wrote was *Shawshank*. And I speced that specifically because I wanted to direct it.

*You were getting hired a lot. How did you take the time out to write the spec for Shawshank?*

It wasn't easy, because being a writer who gets one job after another becomes a really cushy and easy thing to take. I wrote *Shawshank* in '92 and that was maybe five years after my career had started as a writer. And when you're only five years into a career you still figure it's kind of a fluke, and you're loath to turn down the work. So, it was a bit of a nerve-wracking thing to face, to say to your agent, "Knock it off. Leave me alone. No, I don't want to rewrite that sequel to that movie. Let me just sit home and write this thing and I won't make any money doing it, but it's something I really believe in." I had to shut down operations, barricade myself in, and not come out until it was all done.

*What attracts you to Stephen King's stories?*

That's like answering the question, "What attracts you to chocolate ice cream?" I loved King's work from the get-go. I read *The Shining* when I was in high school—seldom have I been that engrossed in a book. I became a fan of his work from that moment on. I have read every word that the man's published and some that he hasn't. What attracts me to his work? He's one hell of a story spinner. He spins yarns in a very old-school way that tend to be very involving, very rich in character. He's considered by some of the snobbier critics, the literary critics, to be a populist and therefore not to be trusted or endorsed. The same thing was said about Dickens.

Stephen is a very old-fashioned storyteller, in the best sense of being old-fashioned. Aside from character and absorbing narrative, he has one hell of a knack for suspense, as he's proven time and again. I may be the first person in history that draws a parallel between Stephen King and Frank Capra, but there's a real thread of humanity and humanism in King's work. King loves people; you can see it in his writing. He loves their nobility and their foibles; he loves the ways in which they can excel and the ways in which they can crumble and fall. He loves the good side and the bad side. He is an analyst of the human soul, if you will, as all the best storytellers are.

*It's been said King wants to stay close to the films adapted from his work, to keep them on track.*

Quite the opposite. If he's involved in a film, then he's very involved in the film. If he's not directly involved as a producer, then he's very hands off. He explained to me that very early on in his career, he had enough bad movies made out of his work that he learned to distance himself emotionally from the

movies being made, from anything he doesn't have a direct hand in. That way, if the movie turns out great, he can take enormous pleasure in it. And if the movie turns out poorly, he doesn't have to take all the emotional hits of seeing something go wrong and not be able to control it. Because, frankly, you can't control those situations. We've all felt that happen. So he was very hands off where *Shawshank* was concerned; he was hands off where *The Green Mile* was concerned. He trusts that I'm going to do right by him, which is really nice. His involvement has been that he read both scripts and said, "Yeah, this is great. Good luck." It's an enormous compliment, particularly coming from somebody that I respect and admire so much. He's been very generous to me. In my life, he's occupied the niche of patron saint. Let's face it, he's provided me with some amazing material that I have used to fuel my career.

*You started your career by adapting King's short story, "The Woman in the Room." The Woman in the Room is a thirty-minute short film that I made in my very early twenties. It took me three years to get the damn thing finished. And that is what opened up the door with Steve. It remains, I think, his favorite short film of the many short films that have been adapted by young filmmakers—he has a policy of granting those kinds of rights fairly freely. So a few years later, when I asked for the rights to *Shawshank*, he was of a mind to grant them, because he had seen that short and did like it very much. And also [chuckling] it was such an obscure story, I think he figured, "Ah, what the hell."*

Steve's always been a little intrigued by the notion that, as a director, I tend to gravitate toward his lesser-known works—until *The Green Mile*, which became a bestseller. But of all the youngsters who ever asked for the rights to a story, I was the only one who ever asked for *Woman in the Room*. I wasn't interested in [filming] the more obvious Stephen King-type stories. This is the story about a man whose mother is dying of cancer in the hospital. *Shawshank*—I think that request perplexed the hell out of him. I think part of why he granted me the rights was to see what the hell would happen—almost like a science experiment. So he's been great to me. I don't believe I'll ever be able to repay the debt that I owe him. But maybe the best thing I can do is keep doing well by him, when I adapt his work to the screen. Because he seems to derive an enormous pleasure from that.

*What initially attracted you to King's story? Why did you consider it cinematic?* More than cinematic or visual, I first responded to the emotional content of it. The really wonderful characters, the wonderful relationships, the obstacles they face and overcome. Secondly, there was the visual element of it which always boiled down to, "Gee, if we could find a really cool looking prison to shoot, this is going to be a really cool looking movie." And luckily, that happened. We found the OSR in Mansfield, Ohio, which they had just shut down two years prior. It was an incredible, gothic place. Mostly though, it was the emotional content. It's the little things that make a movie good, the little emotional moments. The rest of it is all candy.

*You were quoted in the press kit for Shawshank as saying the movie was about redemption. Whose redemption? Red's?*

Everybody. Everybody gets redeemed in that movie to some degree or another. One of the cool things about life—or drama, if not life—is that a forceful and righteous individual can really effect a lot of change. And some of it's awfully subtle, maybe it's just one tiny kernel of grace you take away from knowing this person. And that's what I love about storytelling too—everybody winds up getting kicked in the ass or uplifted in a really good story. Even the warden, when he puts the gun to his head and pulls the trigger, that's redemption for this guy.

*Wasn't the theme of the film really hope?*

I think the two are inextricably intertwined. I think hope is always redemptive. Hope really is the key word, isn't it? That's the finest part of us as human beings.

*In terms of craft, how did you approach weaving that theme of hope and redemption into the screenplay?*

That's a tricky question. Honestly, half the stuff I do, I don't know why or how it happens as I'm doing it. I don't think I really expended much of an effort on that because it's the whole core of the story. It's like all roads lead to Rome, every road marker led to that premise for me. Sometimes it was a conscious decision to just sort of bald-faced go for it. Some of the nicer moments in King's story are the little moments where characters reach for hope. For example, the beer on the roof scene—one of the scenes I love most from the book. Every once in a while I would make a conscious decision to do something that illustrated the point of the movie. Another scene that is similar in that sense is the Mozart scene.

*That scene wasn't in King's novella.*

Right. That was me just saying, "What the hell, I'm going to try to go for the throat a little here and if people think it's too corny then, well, I've shot myself in the foot." But I think it's heart-felt enough not to be corny. That scene was really a result of my listening to that opera, hearing that one piece of music over and over again. Every time I heard that piece, my soul was just lifted up, my spirit soared and I thought, what the hell. You wind up playing "let's pretend" a little bit. You think, if I were Andy and I had the opportunity, I would play this piece of music for the whole prison to hear. Maybe that would be a cool scene in the movie, but it also reinforces the whole premise—we have to grab for hope wherever we can, even in the bleakest of circumstances. Every once in a while there was that conscious decision, but for the most part it was an unconscious pursuit of Stephen King's theme, which was very strong in his story.

*How did you approach the adaptation?*

You do what you always do, you try to make the most sense of the story that

you can. You try to smooth out the bumps and plug the holes and find an emotional through-line.

*Were there certain things you thought you had to do to bring it from a novella to the screen?*

My real conceptual breakthrough was the James Whitmore character. I think this was prior to the writing, in the thinking about the story that he just kind of popped into my head and unlocked the whole movie for me. The trickiest aspect of adapting King's story was the issue of institutionalization. Which, in a larger sense, represents hope versus despair. Very fundamental to the theme of the movie. And I had no idea how to do this because King, by benefit of the printed page and just being able to describe the character's thoughts, could tell you what being institutionalized is, and how scary the thought of parole is after you're behind bars long enough. We, the screenwriter, need to figure out a way to illustrate that. Sure, you can talk about it to an extent, but you can't *just* talk about it. You have to *show* it. I realized that Brooks Hatlen, a character mentioned in passing in one paragraph of the novella, needed to be a main character, and that we needed to see his experience in order to relate to the entire theme of the movie, and to Red's (Morgan Freeman) experience at the end of the movie. I thought, ahh, there is light at the end of the tunnel. I get it. That was my biggest breakthrough. The rest of it was just sewing the elements together and having little inspirations here and there. I'm making it sound easier than it was, probably, but the rest did fall into place.

*One of the things that really struck me about the screenplay for Shawshank was the way it broke the rules on showing vs. telling.*

Rules are there to be broken.

*Could that movie have been made as effectively without Red's continuing narration or voice-over?*

Not at all. Not at all. And I'm delighted that it worked. I'm delighted people responded to it. I'm delighted I had Morgan Freeman to deliver that narration. Let's start there. If you're going to listen to somebody's voice for two hours, that's the guy to do it. Thank God it worked. There were many arguments in favor of it, starting with Stephen King's narrative voice in the story, told from the point of view of that character.

*Much of that narration is verbatim.*

Much of it is verbatim. Much of it is simply the narrative of Stephen King. And it was such a strong voice, it was such a present voice, the whole story was, "Let me tell you about this amazing guy I once knew, Andy Dufresne." It was like Red, this character, was spinning a yarn for you on a porch somewhere, telling you this story. I couldn't imagine the story working some other way without that voice. And I thought, okay, it's got to be narration. Half of

what's interesting about the story are the insights of this man.

So I started writing it, and I got really freaked out halfway through. I suddenly thought, oh my God, I'm breaking the rule. I'm going to be damned to movie hell. I'm telling instead of showing. I'm relying too much on it. As if a sign from God, I turned on cable that night and it's the premiere of *Goodfellas*. And I thought, this is a really great movie and it has a lot of voice-over. It had been about a year since I had seen it in the theaters, and I sat and watched it again. And I thought "I'm a piker, man, I'm a stingy little bastard when it comes to narration compared to these guys" [Nicholas Pilleggi and Martin Scorsese]. There are no rules, and as soon as you think there are, you're fucked. Because it all comes from the heart, from the instinct, and if it feels right, it probably is right. So, my talisman in Ohio was my tape of *Goodfellas*. I took it with me, and on weekends—my weekend was Sunday—I'd sit there totally blown-out and depressed, and I'd pop in *Goodfellas* and get inspired again.

*It's a great movie. I don't know how many times I've seen it.*

Yeah. You lose count with a movie like that. It's a brilliant movie. One of the best ever.

*Another thing that struck me about your adaptation was the way you added a lot of violence to the cinematic version. What do you think the relationship is between violence and effective cinematic drama?*

Was there?

*If you look at it, yes.*

Well, you're right. Tommy gets killed, and Fat Ass gets killed. Then the warden commits suicide, right. That was not really an effort to spice the movie up with violence, which is something I don't believe in, so much as it was an attempt to create more dramatic closure for these characters. In King's story—and mind you, I'm not criticizing King's story because I think as a story it's largely flawless—but on the printed page you can be a little more ambiguous, a little more ambivalent. Movies need a greater sense of closure in plot elements and in an overall sense. In the story, Tommy is merely transferred out of Shawshank to a minimum security prison. He's only got another six months to go and he'll be back with his wife. And I thought, well that makes Tommy kind of a shit. Granted, I understand. We can't all be brave and courageous and take a stand in life, but, one, I like him less. Two, we're missing a good opportunity to make a better villain out of the warden. And three, we're missing a great opportunity, by virtue of the first two, to intensify Andy's triumph. So, to tighten all these dramatic screws, I thought, okay, we've got to whack the kid. We've got to love him, and then we've gotta whack him. It makes the warden such a terrible man that Andy's triumph is that much greater, and there's much greater catharsis in the movie for the audience. So, in honesty, shooting the kid to pieces was not just me trying to have squibs on the set one night and do a cool bit of violence on screen.

It was really an attempt to make a dramatic turn more precise and satisfying. The same thing with *Fat Ass*. You can tell people all you want that this is a terrible place. They see a guy being beaten to death the first night in, they *know* it's a terrible place.

But I don't think the violence that was added to the narrative of the movie was glamorized. I remember sitting there, tapping my head, asking myself: how do we do this scene where *Fat Ass* gets beaten to death? Do we do the obvious, do we do the sort of erotic close-up, big blurry quick-cut shots of some guy getting beat up and blood hitting the wall? I thought, screw that, I'm sick and tired of that. I don't find it interesting or erotic anymore. I think it's pretty sophomoric now. The solution to *Fat Ass* was to just do a wide-angle, static, very objective point of view where you're looking at figures in the environment. It's not about violence, it's about the place.

*Could you talk a little bit about setups and payoffs?*

I'm a big believer in them. I love them. It's a popcorn rule of thumb. You always have to have a setup and you always have to do a payoff. But, you know what? It works great! And it works in great movies as well. I noticed some setups and payoffs in *Courage Under Fire* that were very subtle and sophisticated, but they still work on the same level of your basic action movie setup and payoff. They're great! I live and die by my setups and payoffs, and most good screenplays do.

*In Shawshank, the one that seemed particularly clever to me was the Bible and "Salvation Lies Within."*

Thank you.

*What do you think little clever bits like that do for a movie?*

I think they delight an audience, for starters. When I see something clever like that, when I see something that is carefully thought out and planted, I'm simply delighted. I always want to thank the storytellers for doing a good job. Setups and payoffs, at their best, create a sense of irony that is delicious. You take it home and think about it and ask, why isn't life like that? It should be. I think they're really an intrinsic part of storytelling.

An example of supplying payoff to a setup in *Shawshank* was the fact that in the novella, Andy's revenge is simply to escape. His false identity, the money he walks away with, was all a separate issue. King mostly got away with it in the story because he could finesse it. But, from the bald storytelling point of view of a screenplay, it was a bit of a contrivance. Andy had a friend on the outside whose existence is introduced very late in the story, who set up this false identity and made investments for him. Somehow, it didn't feel integral to the story. It worked fine, but for my purposes, I needed something a little cleverer. So, I decided to tie it in with all the scams Andy was doing for the warden. I thought, if he's doing all these scams, if he's generating all this money, why can't he also be setting up a false identity for himself? Why

can't he be setting up his own score? It makes him a cleverer hero. It makes the warden a more defeated villain. It provides a payoff to the setup, because the setup was in the story to begin with. What a great setup. To not have that be the payoff seemed a bit of a misstep. Sometimes doing a rewrite or an adaptation, you're trying to take those elements and tie them in. Trying to make those connections work a little better.

*I thought one of the real strengths of the screenplay vs. the original novella was its increased dramatic unity.*

Thanks. The screenplay was a much more mechanical affair as well. By necessity, it is a mechanical construct. Whereas, a work of fiction doesn't have to be. Getting back to what I was saying about the story feeling as if Red were telling it to you on the front porch one night, not only was that a delightful kind of folksy technique, but it also provided a loose, rambling narrative. The real challenge was to take that nice rambling narrative and put all the pieces together as if it was the transmission of a car. Do the linear, mechanical structure a movie needs and still retain that sense of whimsy in the narrative. That was the challenge of the adaptation. Telling what seemed like the same story, but actually with a lot of differences along the way.

*Are you really conscious of structure when you write?*

Oh, yeah. But not like some people. I'm not a big carder. I'm not a big pre-structurer. I find that to be an onerous task. I fuckin' hate it. My best work has been the result of writing organically, or starting without a completely firm notion of what the next scenes are going to be. And, funny enough, apparently some of my best structured work is the result of doing that as well. I know my beginning, I know my end and I know certain key things along the way. Certain markers in the road. That's how I like to write. Otherwise, it becomes nothing more than a mechanical exercise and writing shouldn't be that. But, if pre-structuring things in a firm way helps a writer organize his or her thoughts, great. Whatever works is what needs to be done. Chuck Russell always cards things. He always wants to know in the first act these things happen...George Lucas is the same way. One can't criticize results, can one?

*How do you approach the rewriting process? In reading the two drafts of Shawshank, there weren't any major changes, just a tightening.*

Right. By the time I've got a first draft done, my structure is pretty much there. I don't feel the need to reinvent the wheel when I rewrite. Sometimes, however, the areas are gray. You wrestle with whether or not you need something on the very basic level of two plus two equals four. The audience will understand what is going on without it. But perhaps it's a grace note that makes the experience or the character richer, so you don't want to lose that. It's not just math and mechanics, sometimes it's poetry and you need to follow your heart and not lose something that enriches the moviegoer's experience.

There were a couple of scenes toward the end of the movie that were cut pretty late in the process. Right after our first test screening. They are scenes of Red after he's been paroled, after he's gotten out of Shawshank and before he gets to the tree. This is the section where he's coming to grips with the fact that he's not going to make it, that he's institutionalized as Brooks Hatlen was institutionalized, that all he really wants to do is go back to prison.

*That seemed pretty well mirrored in what was left.*

Yes. The scenes I cut out were good scenes. One was a scene of Red walking along, it's the Summer of Love and there are hippies in the park. It's like he's on a different planet all of a sudden, looking at all these crazy people, at women not wearing bras. The audience loved that scene. There's another where he has a nervous breakdown, this huge anxiety attack in the super-market where he's bagging groceries. And there's another scene where he's talking to his parole officer. It was all meant to build up the notion that he's not going to make it. But, ultimately, all it built up was a terrible impatience on the part of the audience, because they knew it already. They had seen James Whitmore's experience, and Morgan himself says, "I know I can't make it on the outside. I'm just like Brooks Hatlen was." When Morgan says it, the audience believes it. The man has nothing but integrity on screen. So they bought it immediately. They knew the moment he left the prison and walked into the same hotel room—*boom*, the point was made. After that, anything I gave them was just taxing their patience, 'cause now they wanted to see where the movie was going to go. They wanted to see the end of the film. They wanted to see what happens when he gets to that tree. That's part of the fun of it. You discover your own movie when you're cutting it together. That's my favorite part of making the movie.

*How has Shawshank and all the heat it generated changed things for you?*

Obviously, it's been a huge blessing. My credibility level has risen to a point that was unprecedented for me before. Now I'm a guy they wouldn't hesitate to let direct something, which is sort of a remarkable place to be. The downside to that is you have to slog through a lot of really bad scripts they send you. Half the time I read these things and I want to call them and say, "What exactly in *Shawshank* leads you to believe I would be the right director for this *Die Hard* rip-off, or yet another serial killer movie? What exactly was there in that film?" *Shawshank* also elevated my visibility as a writer in the industry, and it's nice to know I always have that to fall back on.

Doing the script doctor routine is not a bad deal for me now. Lord knows, the money is great. And there's something really satisfying about feeling you know your shit about at least one aspect of your life. I've been doing the writer-for-hire routine for so long now that it doesn't faze or intimidate me at all anymore. Which I never thought I'd hear myself say. If I feel I have something I can contribute to a script, I'll take the job. I know I can make it better. I know I can give them what they want.

In a way, however, on a personal level, it's made me more cautious. More cautious about what I want to do next as a director. Perhaps a little more cautious than I need to be. I started out so strongly, I don't want to just roll snake eyes.

*Has living up to Shawshank forced you to be tougher on yourself as a writer?*

Absolutely. But more so as a director. As a writer there are so many kinds of writing jobs. I know I can take a rewrite job on so-and-so's next movie and write a draft or two, and know I'm not going to be judged on that. I can come in and clean the windows and detail the car, so to speak, but I'm not the guy who's going to have to be driving it.

*That's interesting because many writers complain they're not recognized for their contribution to movies. The flip side to that is the anonymity you seem to cherish.*

There is an anonymity that can be very comforting sometimes when you're a writer. You can go and make a great living and remain fairly anonymous. Somebody like John Sayles is not judged by the rewrites he's done, he's judged on *Lone Star*. That's him, that's John Sayles. Your visibility as a director is much higher. And sometimes one is grateful for that. I've had credit on movies that are embarrassing to me. Sometimes you don't get credit at all. You've just gone in and done a job of work for somebody and given them what they needed, and your name won't even appear on the screen. And there's some comfort in that too. If the film turns out successfully, you'll take pleasure in it anyway. My ego doesn't need to have my name up there, necessarily, to be satisfied. I don't need to steal somebody else's thunder. Although if I've provided a substantial amount of work, if I feel I've helped shape the movie, I definitely like to share credit. But in that situation, I'm never interested in having my name up there alone. I'm certainly glad I shared credit on *Frankenstein*, for example, because I didn't have to take the blame for how that ended up.

*I haven't read your draft for Frankenstein. How did it differ from the final film?*

I've described *Frankenstein* as the best script I ever wrote and the worst movie I've ever seen. That's how it's different. There's a weird doppelganger effect when I watch the movie. It's kind of like the movie I wrote, but not at all like the movie I wrote. It has no patience for subtlety. It has no patience for the quiet moments. It has no patience period. It's big and loud and blunt and rephrased by the director at every possible turn. Cumulatively, the effect was a totally different movie. I don't know why Branagh needed to make this big, loud film...the material was subtle. Shelley's book was way out there in a lot of ways, but it's also very subtle. I don't know why it had to be this operatic attempt at filmmaking. Shelley's book is not operatic, it whispers at you a lot. The movie was a bad one. That was my Waterloo. That's where I really got my ass kicked most as a screenwriter.

*Did people associate you with Frankenstein?*

No. Branagh had made himself such a visible target by proclaiming himself the ultimate auteur of this work, that when people started shooting bullets, they were only shooting at him. They were punching holes in his hide, not mine. He really took the brunt of the blame for that film, which was appropriate. That movie was his vision entirely. If you love that movie you can throw all your roses at Ken Branagh's feet. If you hated it, throw your spears there too, because that was his movie.

*What did you bring to the adaptation The Green Mile?*

Oh, golly—this is going to be a very unsatisfying answer. The normal set of changes one usually brings to something. In that sense, it was no different from *Shawshank*. You're trying to exploit or heighten the dramatic turns as much as possible; you either pull out or circumvent or reinvent narrative that can be more concisely presented. You're trying to tie up any loose ends that might be there. But for the most part, trying to mimic King's voice; trying to speak in his patois—not just in terms of dialogue, but in terms of the characters. You're trying to be very true to the author of the original material, as much as possible—at least I do. And that does involve a certain amount of texture and a certain amount of poetry. It's not just, "Let's put the simplest version of the narrative on screen that we possibly can," because often that winds up being unsatisfying. If an adapted story tells you the story but you feel it's not quite the same—well, we've all had that experience of seeing a book we loved turned into a so-so movie. It's the same story but it's missing the soul; it's missing the blood in the veins, somehow. And that's because often times [writers who adapt are] focused on narrative and they toss out a lot of that in-between-the-lines stuff, which is another thing that makes King such a compelling writer. There's a lot of between-the-lines stuff with his characters, and with his texture, that's important. So even when I invent new material, I try to keep it organic to the story that I'm telling. For example, there's a scene in *Shawshank* where Andy locks himself in the warden's office and plays his Mozart over the prison speakers—that doesn't exist in the book. That was invented by me, out of whole cloth, because I love that aria. I was listening to "The Marriage of Figaro" quite a lot while I was writing. And I thought, "What if Andy locked himself in...?" That thought took me into a different place, but it worked very seamlessly with the story that King was telling. So I try to do that as much as I can. Speak in the author's voice, even if you're using your own.

*How long did it take you to write the adaptation for The Green Mile?*

Two months. To the day.

*Some reports implied it was an ongoing process, over years.*

You've been looking at the Internet, I bet [laughs]. The wellspring of misinformation and speculation. I promise you, the adaptation took two months.

With one exception, I have never spent longer than two months writing any script. *Shawshank* was the same thing. That tends to be my rhythm. I lock myself in; two months later, I come out, like a groundhog, see if my shadow's there, and then I move on.

*When you go into a new script, are you confident that it's going to be a two-month hike, and that you'll have a great piece when you're done? Or is there still that "What the hell am I doing?" aspect to it?*

A little of both. The "What the hell am I doing?" aspect doesn't ever go away—nor should it. It keeps you on your toes; it keeps you trying. But I've noticed that in recent years, I've gotten to the point where I'm at least relaxed about my uncertainty. I feel like I've done it enough times—and it's worked out well enough—that whatever the problems that arise, I'll manage to figure it out somehow. And that's a nice place to arrive at, because I never thought that I would.

*When did you arrive at that point?*

Post-*Shawshank*. Pretty much in the last couple of years, writing *The Green Mile*, doing work for Steven [Spielberg] on *Saving Private Ryan*, and some of the other things that I've been working on in the last three years or so [his ongoing adaptation of the Robert R. McCammon novel, *Mine*]. It doesn't make them any less challenging to write. You always feel like you're making it up for the first time as you're going along, as if you've never done the job before. But at least I figure I have a decent shot at making it work. So I'm a little more relaxed about that aspect of it. I'm hoping that one day I can look that way at directing.

*You open The Green Mile script with a one-page scene of the manhunt. What is the function of that scene?*

I'm not sure how obvious it is on the page, but the way it works in the film is that it's a very provocative shot. Because you don't know what the hell's going on. Obviously, something horrible and heated is happening. But in a subtle way, it also serves to introduce us to the old man [the old Paul Edgecomb] in the nursing home, because the scene functions almost as a dream he is having. It's the past torturing him in his head, even in his dreams, even after sixty years. And when he wakes up, all of these events are very much on his mind. As the story continues and we see how those events unfold, we wind up understanding exactly what that shot meant at the opening of the film. It's pretty cool.

*It sets up certain questions.*

I love setting up questions about the movie that the audience is seeing. I love people not getting it until later. Because that makes for a much more satisfying storytelling experience for the viewer. If you know everything that's happening every inch of the way, that's boring. You're not involved in the story

so much as you are watching it. If the filmmaker poses questions, and you have to be patient to see what those questions mean, it makes for a much more engrossing experience. It's the more cerebral version of the set-up and pay-off. And those questions are wonderful. There's a scene in the first five minutes of the movie with old Paul in the nursing home. He's in the TV room, and the channel is being changed on the television set and he sees *Top Hat* playing. And it's the moment in *Top Hat* when Fred Astaire starts singing "Cheek to Cheek" to Ginger Rogers and they begin to dance. And this huge emotional train wreck occurs in the character of old Paul watching what is an innocuous and lovely moment from an old movie. It prompts him to tell his story to his friend, Elaine. It's the past catching up with him. The audience hasn't a clue what it means. It's unexplained, until later in the movie. Very late in the movie, you find out how *Top Hat* figures into all this. That is pretty satisfying, when filmmakers can work those kinds of threads into a film.

*In The Green Mile, you set up the question about John Coffey much like Andy Dufresne in Shawshank—is he guilty or not?*

But those are red herrings. What's fun about working with such material is ultimately, the question of their innocence takes a back seat to the story. It's not a huge gasp to reveal that Andy Dufresne is innocent. It's not a huge gasp to reveal that John Coffey is innocent. They're amazing in other ways. And it's how they effect those around them that is significant. That's the character-based, character-driven story that I'm interested in telling. Are they innocent, are they guilty? It's not the big plot point of the movie. So I love those red herrings.

*Could there have been a middle ground between innocent and guilty? Could the story have functioned if Dufresne was not shown to be a victim of circumstance, or if John Coffey may not have committed that particular crime but may have had a record. Dirtied their souls a little bit.*

A story can work in that fashion, but I think these stories could not have worked in that fashion. It's more than a question of a sympathetic main character for the audience. Both characters have a purity of soul that drives what they do and what they are, and if either of them was guilty of their crimes, it would so fundamentally change those characters that the stories wouldn't be the same. But I can see a story being compelling about a man who is guilty, who finds a redemption through the process of incarceration. In fact we've seen that story told very well. Frankenheimer's great movie *Birdman of Alcatraz* leaps to mind.

*And in some ways that's a more easily told story, because the path is from dark to light. It's always hard to write a hero, and it's hard to write a hero who stays a hero. Is it? I don't know, I have no basis of comparison necessarily. Although most of the characters I've known as a writer have traveled something of a path from darkness to lightness. Those are the characters that I love: those who*

seek some kind of enlightenment or betterment, a nobler sense of themselves. Those are the characters I tend to write. It's a recurring theme in my work.

I love that. I want more movies showing us the potential of ourselves. People seeking what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature," rather than necessarily being mired in all the ways in which we can fail—spiritually or emotionally. I want to see more movies about working through those pitfalls and coming to a better place. Hey, I just described Frank Capra, didn't I? [Laughs] That's another thing I've always admired so much about Steven Spielberg's work, and George Lucas's work. Not to say that there isn't room in this world for nihilism, but we seem to be nihilistic at the exclusion of all else in our movies of late. And that's very disheartening to me. I don't want to get into a big debate about Hollywood's responsibility, but it's all too easy to tell a stupid story about a guy who solves his problems by picking up a gun. We're better than that. Not that I don't like the original *Die Hard*, because it's one of the best movies I've ever seen [laughs]. I love that film! But even there, there was something greater going on. There was more to it than just body count. I've always described *Die Hard* as a guy who spends the entire movie [laughs] trying to make up with his wife.

*What is the meaning of Coffey's inevitable end?*

I haven't the foggiest clue. And that's the truth of it. The exciting thing about *The Green Mile* to me is that I can't sum it up. I don't know how many times that's going to happen in my life. But it's for the audience to define this one, not for me. *Shawshank*, I can tell you what that's about. It's about hope and resilience and the redemptive essence of the human spirit. Boom, I just told you. I'm not sure what *The Green Mile* is about. All I know is that it's a hell of a story. And it will be fascinating to see what conclusions are drawn by the people who see it. Because I'm not sure that I've drawn my own yet.

*At the end of the story, when Paul explains his situation, he has his theories as to why he is where he is. But even in the context of the story, these sound more like theories than answers. It seems that an answer might be that this was Coffey's gift. But Coffey doesn't quite understand the downside of that gift. That's a perfectly good answer. And on that level, it would be my answer. But there's also the "because it feels right" answer. There is a poetic irony that—as compassionate, as well-intentioned as Paul is (and he is, very much so)—a man who makes his living from death winds up having to live. There's a monkey's paw beauty and clarity to that, poetically, that I can't resist. It feels right.*

*In the script, Bitterbuck asks Paul: "You think if a man sincerely repents on what he's done wrong, he might go back to that time that was happiest for him, and live there forever? Could that be what heaven is like?" And then at the end of the story, when we find out the fate that Paul has been given, it seems to be almost the antithesis, that Paul won't reach heaven, that his earthly existence from that point on, all that he's learned, has given him an E-ticket to a bad place, at least temporarily. Is*

*there any connection between those two aspects?*

I've never considered it, but there might be. It's a provocative question. If Steve King were here, I'd ask him [laughs]. Because the words you quote are virtually verbatim King, and a very interesting notion to me. I don't know. How's that for a lousy answer? [laughs]

*The Green Mile plays with the idea of the denouement where the hero rides off into the sunset. That doesn't happen for Paul and that's a little disturbing for an audience member.*

Paul is in an unfortunate position. He is an honorable man, yet if he were any less honorable, he wouldn't have gotten himself in the position of being the one to pick up the karmic baggage of events, whether it's fair or not. What I find fascinating about the character is that he's one of the few people involved in the situation who had the strength of character to shoulder that burden. If you'd given him a choice in the matter perhaps he wouldn't have, but there he is. Again, it's a wonderful storytelling irony, to me.

*Ironic if not necessarily pleasant.*

In the context of the fantasy that's occurring, it is a very realistic thing, a very melancholy thing. Not that it's complete hell; you can still see his light shining. He hasn't been beaten down by what's occurred to him, completely, as many people would.

*Green Mile comparisons to Shawshank are, unfortunately, inescapable. While Shawshank is about hope, Green Mile seems to be—well, the easy pitch is the anti-Shawshank. It's not, but it is a very grim story.*

I don't agree because everybody's humanity rises to the surface. That's the measure of a great story. There's a very haunting and melancholy quality to this story. Save for those who don't know any better (i.e., the villains of the piece) the people in it are all very human and they're trying very much to do the best they know how. They're trying to do right by the situation they find themselves in. And they're wrestling with issues of compassion and morality, all the things I love to see in a story.

*They're trying to make things work for themselves.*

And for one another, as well. There's a lovely sense of camaraderie among these characters, that I particularly relish, which came out in the ensemble that I was lucky enough to put together. The actors in this are the top grade. They're an amazing group.

*The interesting thing about the script—as in the novel—is that you don't give any background as to what these inmates have done to deserve death row. They're portrayed as average people; we're not tainted by knowledge of their crimes. Was that a conscious decision?*

It was, for a number of reasons. Number one, that kind of conversation tends

to be expository: the “Gee, what are you in for?” dialogue. I like it that, tonally and conceptually, you’re meeting these guys for the first time, objectively and in this place, and you’re seeing how they behave and how they react, and not being loaded down with baggage about what they did to get there. The same thing was true in *Shawshank*. The only thing that you ever know about anybody, why they’re there, is the Morgan Freeman character. Interestingly enough, he’s one of those characters we were talking about before, a man who is guilty, and who has found a peace and a redemption in his incarceration. He goes from darkness to light. He’s the only one who cops to what he did. And it was important there for us to know that about him. I didn’t go into any specifics or particulars or detail, he just said, “I’m in for murder, and yes, I’m guilty.”

*“I’m the only guilty man in this prison.”*

Exactly. And I love that about him. He’s obviously been in that place long enough that he’s cut through the bull and is perfectly willing to admit his responsibility for things. I think when Red first got to Shawshank he was like everybody else: “I’m innocent, I’m innocent.” So that was very important. It was important that Red be guilty of his crime and that he cop to it. The real power at the end of the movie is the final parole scene, where—in a manner that doesn’t beg sympathy—he basically unloads his soul on the parole board. Here’s who I am, take it or leave it. That’s his walk, that’s his trajectory, that’s his arc as a person. And boy, how lucky am I that Morgan Freeman was the actor to say that speech [laughs].

*You worked for years writing genre films, dealing with creatures and monsters. And then you become known as the Shawshank guy, the warm-hearted guy who makes us glow when we walk out of the theater.*

I loved it when *Shawshank* came out. There were a number of reviewers who pondered, “Where the hell did this guy come from? He did *Nightmare 3*, he did *The Blob*, he did *The Fly II*. Where the hell did this come from?” That was funny. Most recently, there was some mention of me in the trades: “Darabont, known for star-driven drama...” I thought, “Wow! Off of one movie!” Very funny how the perception of people changes as time goes by. You’re remembered for your last movie more than anything in this town.

*Why did you use the framing device of old Paul?*

Because without it, there was no beginning and no end to the movie; there was no context for the movie to exist in. *The Green Mile* has now proved to be the world’s longest *Twilight Zone* episode. But without the character of Paul Edgecomb as an old man in the retirement home, there’s no story to tell. There’s a lot of narrative, but it needs context; it needs the point that it’s making. In the same way that I couldn’t see an alternative to using Morgan’s voice-over narration in *Shawshank*, because that was the narrative voice of the story that King told—I couldn’t imagine the story any other way but hear-

ing it from Morgan's perspective, with his observations and his point of view. The same thing with *The Green Mile*. I took the framing device from Steve's framing devices. He had that framing device operating in every volume of *The Green Mile*. I pulled that out and focused on the most straightforward narrative version that I possibly could, so that the movie itself would have a framing device; in other words, a beginning and an end. Steve went back in [on every book in the series] and had a lot more to say about the old man. But then he also was functioning in a serialized form, as Dickens did. So the old man in the nursing home device was a handy literary way for Steve to bring the reader into each new volume, re-introduce the world to the reader, especially if somebody came to a later volume without having read the first ones. Steve could ease them into the story. It was a very clever device for him, but certainly not something that the screenplay required. [In the film adaptation] we set up a question at the beginning and we answer it at the end, using that device. And that was the enormous value of it. Plus we found an actor to play old Tom Hanks who kicks ass. Man, Dabbs Greer is great. Wait'll you see it. He's awesome. I shouldn't admit that. We should try to convince everybody it's Tom Hanks in old age make-up.

*What other changes occurred from page to screen?*

Brad Dolan [the vicious orderly in old Paul's nursing home] is history. Brad wound up being a burr in my side in that script. It took me a while, but before we shot the bookends I removed him from the script. And indeed, I believe when we publish the screenplay, I probably will not include him in the published screenplay. I'm pretty much a believer in publishing the script you went to the set with, even if stuff changes. But it's such a fundamental change, and I'm so happy to have him gone [that I'll probably omit his appearance in the published screenplay]. Steve needed to go back to this old folks' home at least six times, and Brad was a very clever invention in order to do that. Otherwise all you're left with is old Paul reminiscing. Steve needed a device to keep the reader in that old folks' home. In my loyalty toward the original author, Brad Dolan was an unnecessary hangover from the book. The end of the movie in my first draft was very much like the end of the books, where Brad Dolan shows up at the end in the shack when Paul is explaining everything to Elaine. And, man, he felt like a bump in the carpet to me.

Brad was beside the point. He has an interesting echo of Percy Whetmore. The interesting thematic point that King made is that there's always going to be a Percy, somebody in some position of power, even minimal power, who lacks the reason and compassion to be a person. But the bookends for the film didn't need Brad. When it came time to shoot the bookends, I thought, I have got to get rid of this guy [laughs]. 'Cause if I don't I'm going to be in the editing room trying to cut him out. Brad Dolan was a red herring in a bad way, something that never paid off for the movie.

*When it came down to translating The Green Mile into a screenplay, how did you*

*put it together? Did you work with paradigms, three-act structures, reverse structures?*  
I don't think I'd know a paradigm if it came up and bit me. I don't think in terms of three-act structures. I can't tell you what's going to happen in the third act, 'cause I ain't there yet. For me, writing is a much more organic process. You sit down from page one and you try to experience the story as you go, and you try to make the most of the dramatic potential of the story. I generally have an idea where a story begins and I generally have an idea where a story ends. Believe me, there are plenty of screenplays I never wrote because I could never figure out where the damn thing was going. Why bother starting then? I tend to know certain signposts along the way, and I start working toward the first signpost. And once I'm there I know that off in the distance is the next signpost, and I have to get to that. All the structural elements flow from walking down that path, and from what the characters are telling me. That's not to say the more organized method is wrong. Whatever works for the writer is what the writer ought to do. Left to my own devices, it's an organic process.

In adaptation you have a leg up, because if the material is good at least you know what those signposts are. The method with which I approached *The Green Mile* was to go through all six books and type out a list of scenes. I had a page for each book: "Number one, here's what happens in the first scene in King's book. Number two, here's what happens in the second scene." And so on. And that gave me, at a glance, the structure of the whole damn thing. Beyond that I jumped in, and I would obviously refer to the book for the content of the scenes. That was the first time that I ever typed out the structure that way. But I needed to, because the thing was so sprawling. It was a real pleasure to go down that list and say, "Well, I won't need this scene and I won't need that scene," and cross them off. What you're left with is what winds up being molded into the screenplay. So that's my lazy method. Well, I'm not sure if it's lazy or not, but that's my method. It's only paper and time. If you go down a blind alley you can always backtrack.

*How do you see the relationship between your writing and directing? Is one an extension of the other?*

Ideally, yes. But I could never be Joel Schumacher because he apparently thrives on the process of directing a movie. He goes from one film to another to another. I admire that so much. I don't know how he does it. I'm not sure I want to do it all that often. I'd like to have some time off in between, because I do find the job hard. I'm going to be cautious about what I choose to do.

Luckily, I do have a pretty good career as a screenwriter to fall back on if I have to. So, I don't think everything I write I'm going to want to direct. Although, that has been the ultimate goal, hasn't it. Being able to protect what you do. There are some screenwriters who just luck out, they get great directors who vibe with their material, and actors who understand the subtext and make marvelous films. Part of me wants to go across town and slap the shit out of Eric Roth [*Forrest Gump*]. It's like, "How'd you get so lucky, you bastard?"

He writes a good script and they make a good movie. Why can't I do that? Usually, it's been the opposite experience for me. And after a while, you can only weather so many disappointments. I'm proud of the movies Chuck and I made, even though those are early works and, creatively speaking, not high on the ambition scale. *The Blob* and *Nightmare On Elm Street III* are not works of art and weren't meant to be. But at least the director got it right. But most of my other experiences have been very poor. Dick Donner directed one of my *Tales From The Crypt* that I'm very happy with, a western titled "Showdown." There was an episode of *Young Indiana Jones* that I'm as proud of as anything that's hit the screen. It's an hour of TV that made me cry, and I knew what was going to happen. Simon Wincer really nailed it.

*You've always written for both TV and the movies.*

Features were always my focus, although television did come along and seduce me here and there. Not with big paychecks. "I'm being paid what for this? Oh, my God, can I afford this?" I just got seduced by virtue of it allowing me to have a little bit of fun. The first thing I did for TV was *Tales From The Crypt*. I grew up reading *Tales From The Crypt*. Obviously not in its initial incarnation, but the reprints. EC Comics were always one of those magic little things that only I and a few other fans really knew about. Now, of course, everybody knows about them because of the series. When I was given the opportunity to write something for them, I grabbed "The Ventriloquist's Dummy" because it was always my favorite of the stories. I adapted that and was nominated for a Writers Guild award. One of my two. Then George Lucas came along and asked me to be one of the writers on *Young Indiana Jones*, which was one of the best, most satisfying, thrilling, creative experiences of my life.

*How did you get that gig?*

George was looking for writers. He had apparently interviewed a great number of writers and had picked six of the seven writers he wanted for the show. A woman named Sara Boman recommended me to him. She was working at Amblin at that point, but when I first got to know her she'd been at TriStar as an assistant to the executive I was dealing with. She remembered the script I'd written there and recommended George read it. He read it and was interested enough to want to meet with me. So I went and met George Lucas, who is one of my gods. That was really a fun meeting because he's so down-to-earth, so unimpressed with himself, and soft-spoken. So I went in and we talked for about an hour about everything but my TV credits, because I really didn't have many. We talked about education, socio-political issues, we talked history. He was pleased I knew my history, which apparently many TV writers don't. I asked him once, "George, what was it that recommended me—why me?" And he said he'd had one meeting with a very, very popular writer, a guy with a list of television credits as long as your arm. He came in, he's Mr. Hollywood, Mr. Powerhouse TV writer. And he proceeded to get George into an argument about when World War I took place.

*One of those debatable issues.*

Yeah, exactly. Apparently, this guy didn't realize it took place in the teens. He thought it took place in the thirties. So George was looking for someone with a basic knowledge beyond television.

*How did you develop the stories for that series?*

They were very much a group effort that sprang from George. We would go up to Skywalker Ranch, flying in from all points of the planet, because at least half the group was British. George would come incredibly well prepared. He'd have historical events or historical figures he wanted Indy to meet or become involved in. Along with those, he'd figure out a way to get Indy to whatever part of the world he had to be, and would often have at least the thumbnail of a story. Many times it was very fleshed out. And, on occasion, he hadn't a clue. It was just, "I want him to meet Tolstoy. And obviously if he's going to meet Tolstoy he's going to be here in Russia at this year and he's going to be nine years old." And we'd sit and have our story session. We'd do our homework, we'd read through the material, and George would say, "Well, my idea is this. Anybody have anything to add?" And we'd spend an entire day just brainstorming and then in the afternoon George would start, "Okay, in our first scene this happens and in our second scene this happens." And we'd go, "In the third scene this should happen." And he'd go, "Okay, fine." Or, "No, but what if that happened." So it was George and the seven dwarfs. We'd sit there in the room and hash out a storyline every day. And this would go on for a couple of weeks. Then we'd get our screenplay assignments—we'd vie for the scripts we had the most desire to write individually. Oftentimes, it worked out pretty well. If there was a tie breaker, George would decide who got what, and we'd go off and do our first drafts. We'd send those in, they were disseminated, and we'd all fly back for the second draft sessions where we'd go over everyone's first draft as a group and do second draft notes. It was amazingly creative.

*It really sounds like a wonderful environment.*

It was a great environment. It was a great way to work. We knew even at the time what a special situation it was, but you're always too busy to really appreciate it. Now I look back on it and I think, aw man. George really is the Wizard of Oz, he's the man behind the curtain. He's so busy. My God, I've never seen a busier human being in my life. Nor one with a more focused work ethic. This is not a guy who sits around and takes it easy, which is one of the reasons he's George Lucas. One of the reasons he's the mogul that he is. He's really a throwback, I think, to an earlier brand of visionary. As far as inspiring people, every time I turn around I'm meeting another *Star Wars* baby. My assistant Dave's the same way. He saw *Star Wars* when he was seven and his life hasn't been the same.

*I'm the same way. Exactly. It had that effect.*

I was a senior in high school when I saw *Star Wars*. At eighteen, it still had a major impact. It was really one of those remarkable experiences sitting in a theater where everybody is seized by the filmmaker and possessed by the movie. And knowing what you're watching is changing all the rules. Which you pretty much knew from the first shot of the movie. For better or worse it has had an effect which is still being felt more and more every summer. It's got to be a blockbuster, it's got to be the BIG thing. George is really the guy who got us into this mess and now it's up to him to get us out.

*There's been scuttlebutt about you writing one of the next series.*

At times it seemed like a sure thing, at times it seemed like an impossibility. Right now the jury's still out. George has pretty much written the first one and their focus is on getting that started and made. I don't think he needs any help on that first one. Whether or not he wants me to write the second or third, whether or not I'll be available, it's all still up in the air. I've learned not to hold my breath in this business.

*Are there more opportunities for beginning writers in the entertainment industry now?*

Sure. I think so. Just in the sense alone that the market is constantly expanding. We're making more and more movies every year. The foreign markets are expanding. They need more movies, they need more product. Obviously, that's going to make more opportunities for everybody.

Sometimes there's too much emphasis on youth, on young writers. What's the hottest, what's the latest? There are some serious Academy Award winning dudes who have written some of the best movies in history who can't get a gig. It's nuts.

A lot of the product of the last so many years has been aimed at twenty- and eighteen-year-olds. They figure the writer's got to talk on the same level. It's lowering the curve—their life experience is formed by movies and television, so we're getting less sophisticated insights into life in our movies.

*And a lot more references to other films.*

Yeah. Which is really starting to be a drag, as far as I'm concerned. Having made references to other films myself, hey, I'm as guilty as anybody. It's also tough on the very real level that everything has been done before. No matter what you try to come up with, somebody else has done it. So where do you get a really good original notion or good original idea? They're as rare as diamonds in your garden. You can't completely blame Hollywood, it's us as well. Sometimes you go to bed at night praying for a good idea to come along.

So having absorbed some of the blame, let's now turn to Hollywood and blame them too. 'Cause even if you do come up with one, chances are they won't want it. This is where I love Castle Rock. They're into trying different things. Miramax seems to be blazing some trails too. But most of the big studios want their big action star movie for next summer. That's their key focus,

and yeah, they tend to be derivative because they don't understand what makes a movie successful either. They understood what made that movie successful, it was really cool and a lot of things blew up, so let's do that again. Or let's try to copy *Home Alone*, or whatever. I can understand it. It's not an evil conspiracy, it's just people trying to do their jobs as best they can.

I think audiences are in the mood for more sophisticated movies again. The big, dumb action movies that have held sway for so long are starting to crumble around the edges a little bit. You can only shovel the same horse-shit so many times. There's nothing wrong with a good action movie, but some movies invent form while others imitate it.

Sit down and read Eugene O'Neil. Sit down and read Paddy Chayefsky. These were writers who drew from life. When I see a movie like *Courage Under Fire* that doesn't seem to recall another movie, that seems to be taken from life experience, I think to myself, "That's the most honorable job we do."

*With The Green Mile, you're mixing a bit of fantasy in with the dramatic. The story is set in the real world, and we're not expecting anything magical. The rules are different because in this case you can't say, "Everyone knows about Freddy Krueger." How do you bring the fantasy into the real world and make it realistic?* That's King's greatest strength. He's always done that: he took Dracula out of a crumbling castle and he put him in a small town in Maine where people go to McDonalds. It's an approach that Steve credits Richard Matheson for introducing him to. Matheson was also a very fundamental writer in my world. A brilliant, amazing, and evocative writer, Mr. Matheson. One of my all-time favorite novels is *I Am Legend*. It's a guy in a tract house in Los Angeles who's apparently the last man on Earth in a world where the vampires come out at night and try to bust in and get him. *Night of the Living Dead* owes a huge debt to Richard Matheson. It might be an oversimplification to say he took the uncanny and put it in suburbia, but he did take those elements and inject them into a world that we're all familiar with. And that's what Steve does so well. Most of his work is very much planted feet-firm in the real world. No matter how fantastic the extraordinary is, you're usually next door to whatever's happening. I believe that's why King is such a popular writer. It's very relatable stuff. The same thing with *The Green Mile*. There's something very magical that plops into this very unlikely place, in the character of John Coffey, who is a bit of a Christ figure.

*Crucified for what people believe he's done, or fear he's done.*

Crucified for the inevitability of having to crucify visionaries, and those who are plugged into something higher. Though I won't mention this to *Entertainment Weekly* [laughs]—because I don't want that to be seized upon and turned into a mountain—I do believe that on a thematic level this is about Christ being crucified and the guys who have to crucify him, who have to drive the nails. What's fascinating about it is, what if the guys who have to drive the nails know what they're doing? And what if they are decent and compas-

sionate men? That's what's so provocative about the story.

*What are your views on miracles, and the death penalty? Are there some of your personal views which come out in this film?*

Some. Not all. The ones that do are somewhat ambiguous, and I'd like to keep them that way. Because the audience will want to draw their own conclusions, they'll bring their own views to the table here, which to me is very exciting. Am I in favor of or against the death penalty? I'm going to keep that one to myself. Do I believe in miracles? Yes, I do, but not necessarily the kind the Biblethumpers have been drilling into our brains. I believe in miracles that spring from the better angels of our nature.

*What's an angel to you?*

Raoul Wallenberg. Oskar Schindler. Albert Schweitzer. Gandhi. Martin Luther King. It's the best part of us. I have yet to see somebody in flowing robes with wings flitting around my house. I'm not saying they're not there. But, I'm also fairly pragmatic about these things [laughs]. And I am also desperately and deeply skeptical of anything that people have to tell me. Like the ones who wrote the Bible, for example. I promise you, God did not sit with an Underwood, slamming this thing out on a deadline. The problem with people telling us things as absolute fact is that everybody brings their agendas to the table. I was raised Catholic, so I've earned the right to be skeptical.

*What is your personal vision? What do you want your stories to bring to people?*

[Pause] The notion that we can be better than we are, as human beings; that there's a bar that can be raised in all of our lives. And that there are certain acts of incivility that we should no longer indulge in. Maybe we should try to do a little better.

*Helping everyone on their personal angelic flight?*

That's why I hesitated to answer the question. Because when you say it, it sounds cultish and preposterous and pretentious. I don't shout it from the rooftops; I'm no evangelist. But I think that's the element that keeps popping up in my work.