

PROFILES

HOW A SCRIPT DOCTOR FOUND HIS OWN VOICE

For decades, Scott Frank earned up to three hundred thousand dollars a week rewriting other people's screenplays—from "Saving Private Ryan" to "The Ring." Finally, he decided to stop playing ventriloquist.

By Patrick Radden Keefe

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Frank has been hired to touch up nearly sixty Hollywood scripts, perhaps more than any other contemporary screenwriter. "I even rewrote a movie called 'Paycheck,'" he joked. Photograph by Greg Miller for The New Yorker

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hen Scott Frank was a child, his father, Barry, bought a small Cessna :

W*The plane is going down.* Scott was a sensitive child with a vigorous imagination, and these impromptu exercises in flight instruction were slightly traumatic. He never learned how to fly a plane himself. Instead, he became one of Hollywood's most prolific and successful screenwriters.

Frank tends to obsess about the beginning of any story: how can he introduce a character with a few deft strokes so that the audience is immediately invested in what happens to her? He has devoted entire months just to cracking an opening scene. But he also excels at endings. In the mid-nineties, he was adapting "Out of Sight," a novel by Elmore Leonard. The book culminates in a mansion outside Detroit; the federal marshal Karen Sisco (Jennifer Lopez, in the film) shoots the escaped bank robber she loves, Jack Foley (George Clooney), in the leg, then arrests him. But the movie version couldn't end with Clooney returning to prison and Lopez just going home. Frank needed a tiny dose of hope: nothing cheesy, but something in keeping with Leonard's playfully sardonic tone. So he invented a coda. Clooney is shackled in the back of a prison van, with Lopez sitting up front. She can at least escort him back to the penitentiary in Florida. Then a new piece is suddenly added to the chessboard. Another inmate, played by Samuel L. Jackson, joins them for the ride. His name is Hejira.

FOLEY: *Hejira?* What kinda name is that?

HEJIRA: The Hejira was the flight of Mohammed from Mecca in 622.

FOLEY: The flight?

HEJIRA: The brothers in Leavenworth gave me the name.

FOLEY: You were at Leavenworth, huh?

HEJIRA: For a time.

FOLEY: Meaning?

HEJIRA: Meaning time came, I left.

FOLEY: You busted out?

HEJIRA: I prefer to call it an exodus from an undesirable place.

FOLEY (*interested now*): And how long was it before they caught up with you?

HEJIRA: That time?

FOLEY: There were others.

HEJIRA: Yeah. That was the ninth.

FOLEY (*really interested*): The *ninth*?

Hejira mentions that he was supposed to leave for Florida the previous night, but for some reason “the lady marshal” wanted him to ride with Foley. A shot of Lopez, her face giving nothing away. “Maybe she thought we’d have a lot to talk about,” Clooney murmurs. “Long ride to Florida.” And the credits roll. The scene lasts just two minutes. Frank can stick a landing.

Screenwriting looks as if it should be easy, but it isn’t. In 1925, Herman Mankiewicz (“Citizen Kane”) sent a telegram to his friend Ben Hecht, the playwright, trying to lure him from New York to Los Angeles. “MILLIONS ARE TO BE GRABBED OUT HERE AND YOUR ONLY COMPETITION IS IDIOTS,” he wrote, adding, “DON’T LET THIS GET AROUND.” Countless books and seminars and podcasts offer advice to aspiring screenwriters, as if any idiot *could* do it. Yet the form is notoriously confounding. It’s one thing to write a movie; it’s another to get it made, and another altogether for it to be any good. And, as Frank points out, the bad ones are “just as hard to write as the good ones.” A formatted screenplay page equates to about a minute of screen time, so each scene needs the abbreviated clarity of a haiku. Screenplays “are this unique, weird thing,” Frank says—more disciplined than playwriting, and with a much faster tempo. The tools of the novelist are mostly off-limits: no extensive character description, no metaphors. Frank has written fiction, and finds it easier. Scripts, he says, are “more of an exact science.”

You can’t make a Hollywood movie without a script, yet a screenwriter, unlike a novelist or a poet, must eventually hand off his precious creation to a whole team of people, and the first thing they want to do is change it. Even at the highest levels, the job can make you feel stunted and contingent. The novelist and screenwriter John Gregory Dunne once observed that just wanting to be a screenwriter is like just wanting to be a co-pilot; Frank is partial to that analogy, and not merely because of the aviation angle. Though he fiercely believes that screenwriting is an art form, he acknowledges that,

in the world of streamers and big studios in which he operates, screenplays aren't so much written as built. Why would writers subject themselves to such a humbling vocation? There's the money, certainly, but the movies also possess a magnetic allure. An untold number of great novels have gone unwritten while their authors foundered in Hollywood. At the height of his literary powers, F. Scott Fitzgerald took time out to ride a desk at M-G-M, writing lacklustre scripts that never made it into production. Billy Wilder joked that Fitzgerald was like "a great sculptor who is hired to do a plumbing job."

When the Writers Guild of America went on strike earlier this year, the awkward truth was that most of the union's eleven thousand five hundred members were employed only intermittently as screenwriters. To be a so-called "working writer"—someone making a steady living off screenplays—is already to be a member of an exclusive club. When success comes, it tends to be fleeting. Frank is one of only a handful of American screenwriters who have managed to write good films and enjoy consistent success for four decades. His first movie, a cop-goes-undercover-in-high-school stinker called "Plain Clothes," came out in 1988, and he has since had fifteen films released, across disparate genres, from "Get Shorty" to "Minority Report" to "Marley & Me" to "Logan," along with several streaming series, most notably the 2020 Netflix megahit "The Queen's Gambit," which he wrote, produced, and directed.

Frank is a commercial writer. He has never worked in independent film. Craig Mazin, who wrote the HBO series "The Last of Us" and "Chernobyl," told me, "In a good old-fashioned vaudevillian sense, Scott worries about the audience," adding that he regards Frank as "one of the best screenwriters of all time." The writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson told me that Frank's work reminds him of Hollywood's golden age. "He's a formalist, and I mean that as the highest compliment," Anderson said. "It's what I always admired and wanted to emulate. He understood classic structure in a way most people can't ever grasp, so they end up having to be 'inventive.' His scripts have

always felt like they had one foot in the nineteen-thirties or forties.”

Frank’s IMDb page obscures the true extent of his contributions to cinema, because he has also enjoyed a quiet, and extremely lucrative, sideline as perhaps the most in-demand script doctor in Hollywood. Studios summon him to punch up dialogue or deepen a character or untangle a contorted third act. For such assignments, which are generally uncredited, he commands a fee that he acknowledges is “insane”: three hundred thousand dollars a week. Most jobs last a few weeks. He has done rewrites on nearly sixty films—possibly more than any other contemporary screenwriter—including “Saving Private Ryan,” “Night at the Museum,” “Unfaithful,” “The Ring,” and “Gravity.” (He also did “a lot of the X-Men movies,” he told me, adding, “I don’t remember their titles.”)

It’s hard to turn down this kind of assignment, and Frank is keenly aware that the opportunities afforded to him are something most screenwriters could only dream of. Nevertheless, it can be demoralizing to expend so much of one’s creative energy servicing someone else’s vision. Steven Soderbergh, who directed “Out of Sight” and is a close friend, described Frank to me as “a ventriloquist.” Just as Frank can inhabit movie characters so completely that he can compose fluid dialogue in their precise manner of speaking, he is adept at channelling the voice of a director or a previous screenwriter. The producer Nina Jacobson, who has worked as a senior executive at three studios, told me, “Scott folds himself into the process. He’s sort of foolproof, in terms of being able to diagnose what you need, team up with the director, and deliver it.” Frank’s ability to offer solutions within an existing stylistic idiom makes him a “chameleon,” she said, adding, “You’d be hard-pressed to find an executive or producer who doesn’t think of him first virtually anytime they have a problem on a script.” The one trouble with having this talent, Jacobson pointed out, is that it can lead you to “spend your whole career rewriting other people’s movies.”

he two qualities that Frank finds most appealing in a character are c

T Frank has soft features and dresses in soft, dark clothes. His dark hair and neatly trimmed beard are going gray. But the actress and director Jodie Foster, a longtime friend, noted, “Even though he’s sixty-three, he still *feels* like a fourteen-year-old boy. He giggles a lot.” Several people who know Frank well mentioned the contrast between his writing, which can be dark and extremely violent, and his twinkle-eyed irrepressibility. He and his wife, Jennifer, a conceptual artist, have been married for thirty-five years, and they raised three children in Pasadena—adjacent to the social-professional vortex of Hollywood but far enough away to avoid its more virulent aspects. A decade ago, the Franks moved to New York, settling in an apartment around the corner from Café Cluny. “Like so many assholes who’ve come before me, I spend the summer in Martha’s Vineyard,” Frank told me, adding, “I’m also that asshole who goes to Connecticut on weekends.” With a hint of self-laceration, he admitted that he’d taken many jobs chiefly so that he could buy nicer homes. “I even rewrote a movie called ‘Paycheck,’ ” he told me.

One thing that sets Frank apart even among talented screenwriters is the sheer fecundity of his imagination. As Soderbergh put it, Frank has “ideas just pouring off him.” In elementary school, he would make up stories and occasionally present them to others as though they were true. After one such composition, involving domestic violence, prompted an alarmed teacher to call his home, Barry Frank held up a flight manual in one hand and a novel in the other and said, “Scott, one of these is true, and one of these is fiction. Do you know the difference?” From then on, anytime Scott wrote a story, he would pencil “FICTION” at the top of the page.

He was about eleven when, at the grocery store with his mother, he was browsing through a carousel of paperbacks by the register and discovered the screenplay for “Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.” This was fortuitous, not least because screenplays were rarely published then—even scripts for successful movies weren’t perceived to be of literary interest. “Butch,” however, had been written by one of the great practitioners of the

form, William Goldman, who also wrote “Marathon Man” and “All the President’s Men.” Goldman’s style on the page was visceral and conversational, as if he’d just walked out of the movie himself and was now breathlessly recounting it to you. Never had the words “CUT TO” been deployed with greater brio.

At fifteen, Frank saw “Dog Day Afternoon” at the Century cinema in San Jose, and, at the point in the movie when the bank robber played by Al Pacino starts chanting, “Attica! Attica!,” the audience rose to its feet and chanted along with him. Even today, Frank recalls the experience as a kind of religious awakening.

His parents were dubious about his interest in the cinema. “*Pilots can write,*” Barry said, suggesting that Scott pursue a real career and save screenwriting for weekends. But in 1980, when Scott was a nineteen-year-old student at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he wrote his first script: “Little Man Tate,” a comedy about a seven-year-old prodigy being raised by a single mother. In an early scene, one-year-old Fred Tate is at a diner, repeating what sounds like a fragment of baby talk, “Koffer.” His mother has no idea what he’s saying until she notices the manufacturer’s name on the plate he has been eating from—and realizes that he can read. Like many Hollywood scripts, it spent years in development. Jodie Foster eventually directed and starred in the movie, which came out in 1991. Foster was raised by a single mother and had been a prodigy herself, delivering, at the age of twelve, a discomfitingly assured performance as a child prostitute in “Taxi Driver.” She told me that when she read Frank’s script she responded to “the autobiography of it.” She felt a kinship with Frank, she added, because he, too, had been something of a prodigy.

Lindsay Doran was a young studio executive in L.A. when, in 1984, she picked up the script for “Little Man Tate.” She experienced a jolt reading the scene with the plate. “I remember my hand snaking to the phone almost involuntarily,” she said. “I thought, Who *is* this guy?” When Doran was

appointed vice-president of production at Paramount, she offered Frank a contract and an office on the lot. Like other Hollywood success stories, Frank has been known to reminisce about his humble early days as a bartender. But, as Tony Gilroy, another prolific screenwriter, who wrote and directed “Michael Clayton,” points out, Frank broke into the business almost immediately. “I think he tended bar for, like, twelve minutes,” Gilroy said.

The writers’ floor at Paramount was not so different from the one where F. Scott Fitzgerald had toiled at M-G-M. But Frank loved it. He and Doran developed a campy Hitchcockian thriller called “Dead Again,” which Kenneth Branagh directed and starred in, alongside Emma Thompson. One character butchers another with a pair of scissors. (After Jordan Peele released his 2019 horror film, “Us,” he acknowledged his debt to “Dead Again” for the scissors-as-murder-weapon motif.) Branagh’s movie, which was released in 1991, was a hit. Friends of Frank’s wife asked if she felt safe sharing a room with the twisted fellow who had written it. In one memorable scene, Andy Garcia, playing an ailing chain-smoker who has had a cancer operation, inserts a cigarette directly into the breathing tube in his trachea. To Doran, “Dead Again” captured “the essence of Scott Frank—funny, mysterious, cynical, but also somehow hopeful.” She coined a term for it: film blanc.

When Frank goes to movies, he can sometimes predict when people will get up to use the bathroom. A lapse in the action, half an hour in—one character says to another, “So, what made you want to become a cop?” Frank believes that moviegoers, in an almost Pavlovian way, have learned to recognize “baldly expositional” writing as a sign that they might safely sneak out for a bit. One conundrum of screenwriting is how to smuggle into the mouths of your characters the necessary information that a novel can just *tell* the reader. Frank tries to avoid disquisitions, and if he can’t avoid them he injects an element of surprise. The exposition in his scripts is often imparted by an eccentric minor character, in an unusual milieu: in

“Dead Again,” Robin Williams, in a bloody butcher’s apron, talks to Branagh and Thompson about reincarnation, upon which the plot hinges; in “Minority Report,” Tom Cruise sneaks into a greenhouse, where a comically brusque botanist divulges secrets about the police state they live in. To hold the interest of a jaded audience, nothing is more important than unpredictability—a promise that if you look away you might miss something.

“Most people can do story *or* character,” Stacey Sher, who produced “Get Shorty” and “Out of Sight,” told me. “Scott can do both, and that’s really rare.” Character always comes first for Frank, however. He avoids outlines, preferring to navigate his scripts without G.P.S. Ideally, his characters will become so fully realized that they’ll grab the wheel and steer the narrative in unexpected directions. By forging story to fit character, rather than the other way around, Frank often ends up surprised himself. One of his daughters, Stella, told me that as a child she would fall asleep “to the sound of him typing.” When she walks in on him at work, she finds him mouthing dialogue. If it’s going really well, he sometimes laughs in delight.

Because Frank has such intuitive mastery of narrative structure, he finds rewriting other people’s screenplays easy. “Scripts become transparent if they’re not my own,” he told me. He subscribes to a Billy Wilder adage: “If you have a problem in the third act, the real problem is in the first act.” Often, studio executives will have mandated cuts to the script’s first sections, because they want the movie to get to the point, but the abbreviated opening means that the audience never becomes attached to the characters enough to be concerned about their fates. At the end of such a movie, Frank observed, viewers “understand how they’re *supposed* to feel—but they don’t feel it.” This is one reason that he is not overly alarmed about a future in which artificial intelligence replaces screenwriters. A.I. can certainly assemble a recombinant screenplay by drawing on the collected works of people like Scott Frank, and the result may even be schematically sound—but getting an audience to really care about what happens to fictional characters requires a different sort

of magic. The Tom Cruise character in “Minority Report” is, essentially, a fascist: a cop who works for a futuristic “pre-crime” unit that apprehends people who intend to break the law before they can pull it off. But in Frank’s rendering, he is also a man who has lost his own child—a son who was abducted—and is coping with that loss by trying, in extreme ways, to stamp out crime forever. On paper, we should not find a protagonist with this job description sympathetic. Yet we do.

On rewrites, Frank tends to work quickly—and often under enormous time pressure. Nina Jacobson told me that Frank was brought in to rewrite “The Hunger Games: Catching Fire” when the film was just weeks from production. She likened the process to “laying down new train track while conducting the moving train at the same time.” On his own projects, it takes a year or more to write a script. He always starts with the first scene. William Horberg, who produced “The Queen’s Gambit,” recalls Frank pitching what became the opening of the series: “He said, ‘You’re in this hotel room. This girl throws open the curtains. There’s somebody in the bed, we don’t know who it is. She’s hungover. She goes down in the elevator and through the hotel and into this big room, and it’s a *chess tournament!*’ ” This was not the beginning of the 1983 Walter Tevis novel upon which the series is based, but a scene from later in the book. Frank plucked out that moment, Horberg said, and “it just established the whole show.”

Book adaptations are Frank’s specialty. Translating a novel for the movies, especially a popular one, is often fraught. After the success of “Dead Again,” Frank signed on to adapt the Elmore Leonard novel “Get Shorty.” Before he started writing, he had lunch with Leonard at the M-G-M commissary. Leonard once published a list of ten “rules of writing,” which included “Avoid detailed descriptions of characters” and “Don’t go into great detail describing places and things.” His novels are lean and well paced, like good screenplays, so you might suppose that they’d transfer easily to the screen. But at lunch Leonard regaled Frank with horror stories about how much he hated all the adaptations of his books. The young screenwriter wanted very

much to impress the older novelist. By the time Leonard said, in parting, “Have fun,” Frank was nauseous.

Faithful adaptations usually make terrible films. There are exceptions: Frank especially admires Ted Tally’s script for “The Silence of the Lambs,” which, apart from some judicious pruning, seems to have been lifted directly from the Thomas Harris novel. The screenwriter Steven Knight has remarked that, if a book is a mountain, then a good adaptation is a painting of the mountain—a vivid impression that can never be as multidimensional as its subject but that retains its essence. The first time Frank read “Get Shorty,” he went through it with a green highlighter, coloring the parts he thought he might use. When he finished, practically the whole book was green. With any adaptation, he reaches a point where he must decide what the novel means to him, then build the script around that core idea, discarding everything else.

One theme Frank frequently returns to is reinvention. He often invokes a famous chapter in Dashiell Hammett’s “Maltese Falcon” which was left out of the 1941 film. During a respite from the action, the hardboiled detective Sam Spade relates a seemingly extraneous story about a Tacoma man named Flitcraft, who has a near-death experience when a falling beam at a building site almost kills him. Shaken, Flitcraft radically changes his life, abandoning his family and leaving town. The punch line is that when he reëmerges, in Spokane, after several years of drifting, he ends up more or less re-creating his old life, only with a new woman and a new kid. Hammett fans have long puzzled over this enigmatic digression. To Frank, the Flitcraft parable illustrates how “a single moment” can cause a person to reassess who they are and who they want to be. The name of his production company is Flitcraft, Ltd.

Chili Palmer, the hero of “Get Shorty,” is a loan shark who doesn’t want to be a loan shark anymore. He wants to be a movie producer. Adapting Leonard books is tricky, Frank told me, because they’re “all talk.” You can get

halfway through one before the plot kicks in. But Chili was a Flitcraft type, and Frank knew how to write such a character. Departing from Leonard's book, he imagined Chili as more of a movie fan, allowing the character's wiseguy savvy to be comically offset by flashes of childlike enthusiasm. In one scene, Chili (played by John Travolta) is accosted in a parking garage by a burly leg-breaker named Bear (a pre-“Sopranos” James Gandolfini). Bear, a former Hollywood stuntman, has repeatedly tried to beat Chili up, but Chili keeps getting the better of him—this time kneeling him in the face. As Bear wheezes on the floor, Chili suddenly changes the subject:

CHILI: So . . . how many movies you been in?

BEAR: About sixty.

CHILI: No shit? What're some of 'em?

“Get Shorty,” which was directed by Barry Sonnenfeld, came out in 1995, and was a commercial and critical hit. Even Leonard liked it. He later said to Sher, “I never know the themes of my books until Scott Frank tells me.” The film's success led Frank's agent at the time to say that he would be guaranteed ten years of steady work as a screenwriter. This was meant to be encouraging, but it filled Frank with dread. He was thirty-five. He and Jennifer had two young children, and another on the way. At night, he would walk the family dog around Pasadena, and upon reaching home he'd look at his family through the brightly lit windows and wonder, “What if I run out of ideas?” There was no reason to believe that creativity was a renewable resource. Writers burn out, fall out of fashion, become blocked. Frank was seized by a fear that he would “fail three or four times in a row,” and be finished. Looking in at Jennifer and the children, he would think, “These people are in trouble!”

Most screenwriters grapple with the tension between art and commerce. Joan Didion, who wrote films such as “The Panic in Needle Park” and “A Star Is Born” with her husband, John Gregory Dunne, once suggested that “to understand whose picture it is one needs to look not

particularly at the script but at the deal memo.”

Frank is philosophical about the mercantile aspect of his profession. Early in his career, he got to know his hero, William Goldman, who became a mentor to Frank and other young screenwriters. Even Goldman lamented that half the scripts he'd written went unproduced. If you set out to make great art in Hollywood, Frank found, you frequently ended up in a purgatory of development. On a few occasions, he told me, he has declined to rewrite someone else's script, because he saw nothing he could improve—it was perfect. When I inquired about the titles of these films, he said, “Oh, they never got made.” By contrast, some of his most creatively fulfilling experiences have come from money jobs. When Sher asked him to adapt “Out of Sight,” he was wary: he'd managed to write one Elmore Leonard movie without pissing off Elmore Leonard, and he wasn't eager to try his luck again. But his third child had been born, leading him to buy a bigger home, and he was still haunted by his agent's “ten years” prophecy. So he took the job. Soderbergh turned out to be an ideal match for Frank's sensibilities, preserving the wry, sexy vernacular of the script. As Chili muses in “Get Shorty,” “Sometimes you do your best work when you got a gun to your head.” The screenplay that Frank wrote to pay for his new house was nominated for an Academy Award.

After “Out of Sight,” he was inundated by rewrite offers. Frank adheres to an informal code of discretion when it comes to this sort of work, but when I pressed him he said, “Ninety per cent of what I get called in on is character work.” In “Saving Private Ryan,” he helped round out such soldiers as the Scripture-quoting sniper, giving them active connections with people back home. In “The Ring,” he developed the relationship between the protagonist, played by Naomi Watts, and her son. In “Gravity,” his assignment was to give Sandra Bullock's character, an astronaut, “a life outside of space.” In “Rise of the Planet of the Apes,” he created the father character, played by John Lithgow, who forms a bond with a chimpanzee

named Caesar and is cured of his Alzheimer's disease before regressing to an impaired mental state.

All the while, Frank deferred his own projects. This was a high-class problem, by any definition, but Craig Mazin, who has also done rewrites, explained the psychological effect: "There is something so vulnerable and frightening about doing your own thing, because it's your fault if it doesn't work. And then there's this other kind of work, where you're paid an extraordinary amount of money, you're the hero before you walk in the door, you're not even held that accountable, because you have a limited amount of time, and all you can do is make it better." Sometimes, an executive would tell Frank, "We have a script coming in a month from now, and we need you to rewrite it."

Frank stresses that these gigs allowed him to work with many directors he admired. He did a rewrite several years ago on a "Scarface" remake for Luca Guadagnino, which has since been abandoned. And his work on some films, such as "Minority Report," which was directed by Steven Spielberg, was so extensive that he received an official screenwriting credit. Nevertheless, it could sometimes seem as though Frank's many friends in the industry were taking advantage of his biddable nature. "Why are you saying yes to this?" Jennifer would ask after he'd accepted yet another assignment.

A prominent film producer told me, "For a long time, Scott Frank was the name people would bring up as a cautionary tale about the dangers of the rewrite system. This was someone who could be the next William Goldman, but he kept doing these weekly rewrites instead of his own original work." When I asked Frank about that critique, he readily accepted it. "My career is probably best defined more as a failure of nerve than anything else," he told me. "I used to book myself up three years in advance, out of fear." Such anxiety can be a great motivator, but it can also amount to a life of safe choices.

By the time Frank reached his fifties, he was feeling a rising unease. There was no one eureka moment when he decided, like Flitcraft, to change his life. But, as Frank surveyed his career, he thought back to those childhood excursions in the Cessna with his father. For a good part of the past thirty years, he realized, he had just been “picking places to land.”

One day last year, I visited the South of France, where Frank was directing a new limited series, “Monsieur Spade.” It was early October, but it still felt like summer. At a remote farmhouse an hour north of Montpellier, I found Frank, in a baseball hat and sunglasses, preparing to shoot a scene with Clive Owen. The series is not an adaptation, but something like it: several years ago, Frank was informed that the rights to the Sam Spade character were available. Apart from “The Maltese Falcon,” Spade appears in only a few Hammett stories, but Frank saw an opportunity to build a new tale around the famous detective. As it happened, he had been trying to obtain the rights to a different Dashiell Hammett property, “Red Harvest,” which is one of Frank’s favorite novels. (He likes to tell young writers that “Red Harvest” can teach them more about the velocity and economy of screenwriting than any manual.) So initially he demurred on the character rights. But then he had a thought: “I went, Wait, I know what this is about. It’s about middle age.” What if Spade was no longer a detective but an expat—in France? “He’s living a quiet life. Tranquil,” Frank told himself, warming to the idea. “And it’s about to get very untranquil.” He approached Tom Fontana, a veteran TV writer who created the HBO drama “Oz,” about collaborating. Fontana told me, “Scott said, ‘Sam Spade, twenty years after “The Maltese Falcon,” living in the South of France.’ I said, ‘I’m in.’ ”

As French crew members adjusted lights around a storage shed where the scene would be shot, Frank conferred with Owen, who was dressed in suspenders and a high-waisted suit; the look was reminiscent of Humphrey Bogart, the quintessential Sam Spade (though Owen is about twice Bogart’s height). Owen, a lifelong Hammett fan himself, expressed amusement to me

that when the opportunity arose to play Spade it was in a series that would deconstruct the very macho iconography that made the character famous, and portray him as a man out of his element. The first scene Frank wrote finds Spade with his pants around his ankles, prone on an examination table, being given a prostate exam by a droll French physician who says that it's time to quit smoking. Chuckling over the humiliations Frank had visited upon his hero, Owen drawled, in his malty baritone, "I don't get the hat, I don't carry a gun, I don't smoke. I've got one word for this job—I've been duped!" He picked up a folding chair marked "CLIVE OWEN," relocated it to a spot in the shade, and sat down to study his script.

In the course of the past several years, Frank had experienced the kind of reinvention that his characters often undergo. Several changes transpired in close succession. After he and Jennifer moved to New York, he did "a ton" of therapy. He began taking Zoloft for anxiety, a move that he had resisted for a long time, because he felt that fear might be integral to his creative process. He wrote a novel, "Shaker," about a dissolute hit man whose plan to execute someone in L.A. is upended by an earthquake. The book, which Knopf published in 2015, didn't find a big audience, but writing it was cathartic. "Part of the exercise was getting all these other voices out of my head—all these people I liked collaborating with," Frank said. "I wanted to just write for myself." Perhaps most consequentially, he decided to stop doing rewrite jobs. "My identity for so long was defined by a lack of self-confidence in my own ideas," he told me. "Pleasing others seemed like a perfectly reasonable thing to organize my art around. Until it wasn't."

It may have helped that Frank, like Spade, had woken up one day in a world that had changed. The movie business had become unrecognizable, with the studios essentially giving up on freestanding R-rated thrillers and dramas. Frank was forced to admit that most of the films he had built his reputation on would probably not get made today. Many talented screenwriters have opted to hold their noses and squander their gifts writing for superhero franchises. Frank wrote the X-Men movies "The Wolverine" and "Logan."

But he was angry at himself for taking those jobs, and if you read the script for “Logan” you can tell. On page 2, he prefaces an action sequence with a warning to the reader: “If you’re on the make for a hyper choreographed, gravity defying, city-block destroying, CG fuckathon, this ain’t your movie. In this flick, people will get hurt or killed when shit falls on them. . . . Should anyone in our story have the misfortune to fall off a roof or out a window, they won’t bounce. They will die.”

The script, which Frank wrote with the film’s director, James Mangold, rejected so many tenets of the genre that it turned out to be quite interesting; part noir, part Western, it was “Shane” with retractable claws. Frank received his second Oscar nomination for the screenplay. “If Scott wanted to write those movies, he could write them all day long,” Stacey Sher remarked. “He made ‘Logan’ singular. He got nominated for a fucking Oscar for it. What’s distinctive about Scott is that he never did it again.” By the time “Logan” came out, in 2017, Frank had discovered a new medium in which the stories he actually wanted to tell could still get made: streaming.

For the past two decades, Frank has worked with a researcher named Mimi Munson, who lives in Maine. Inspired by Francis Ford Coppola and Elmore Leonard, both of whom employed full-time researchers, Frank hired Munson to help him explore broad areas that he might want to write about, or to answer highly specific queries on deadline. Munson told me, “He’ll say, ‘I have a soldier and he needs to be very sick. But it can’t be an illness that’ll definitely kill him—it has to be something that *might* kill him. And it has to have a psychological component, so people might doubt he is compos mentis. And it has to go away. And I need it in forty-five minutes.’ ”

Frank, who loves Westerns, had long wanted to write one, and when Munson was visiting New York she discovered, at the Strand bookstore, numerous published diaries of women from the Wild West. An idea took root, and Frank wrote a movie script, called “Godless,” about a town in New Mexico where a mining accident has killed most of the men. People loved

the screenplay. It was violent but soulful, and filled with those moments of narrative subversion that Frank enjoys: the inhabitants of a remote ranch brace for an attack when they see a figure approaching, only to discover that it is a mother seeking help for her sick baby; a callow deputy sheriff twirls his pistols and talks a suspiciously big game, then turns out to be an excellent shot. But it was a sprawling, ambitious story that tracked a dozen intersecting characters, with no connection to a comic book or a line of toys—precisely the sort of movie that Hollywood now avoided. The idea was rejected all over town. Frank finally ended up at Netflix, which offered him the broader canvas of six episodes. (During production, he was allowed to add a seventh.) The show appeared in 2017 to strong reviews, and helped establish the “limited series” as a streaming staple.

One curious feature of Hollywood sociology is that people who write movies may be wretched, powerless, and replaceable, but in television the writer is king. Frank wrote all the episodes of “Godless,” and as the showrunner he enjoyed a level of creative authority that a writer seldom does on a film set. He also directed every episode.

For about a decade, Frank had been developing into something like an auteur. As a young screenwriter, he had talked about directing but had insisted that it was not the right time. He took comfort in the predictable domesticity of a writer’s life, and worried that becoming a director, which can mean long stretches away from home, might put a strain on his family. Like the characters he writes, Frank occasionally says one thing when he means another. Jennifer decided that he was using his family as a pretext. “He kept saying, ‘I can’t direct because of the kids,’ ” she told me. “And I said, ‘Don’t hide behind the kids.’ ”

When Frank was in his thirties, he had written a thriller, “The Lookout,” about a former high-school hockey star who suffers a traumatic brain injury and is coöpted by a gang of local crooks into assisting in a heist. Some prominent directors considered making the movie—Sam Mendes, David

Fincher, Michael Mann—but none did. Finally, in 2005, Frank decided to make it himself. He shot it in Manitoba, with Joseph Gordon-Levitt and Jeff Daniels. The finished film is moody and effective, but Frank was forced to admit that his level of mastery as a director lagged considerably behind his abilities as a writer. After Soderbergh saw the film, they had what Soderbergh described to me as a “very blunt” conversation: “I said, ‘Look, you are a writer who has directed now, but you are not yet a director. You documented what you wrote. But that’s not the same as being a director.’ ”

When I asked Frank about this, he confirmed that Soderbergh had said those things—and also that, for some time after that conversation, they didn’t speak. Frank, still sounding a bit wounded, pointed out to me that the movie won an Independent Spirit Award for Best First Feature. But Soderbergh said that he loved Frank too much to offer disingenuous enthusiasm, and that he wouldn’t have said what he did if he hadn’t thought that Frank could ultimately “get there,” and find a distinctive directorial voice.

After such an appraisal, it must have been tempting for Frank to retreat to what he knew he was good at. Instead, he directed a second film: a grisly detective story, based on a book by Lawrence Sanders, called “A Walk Among the Tombstones.” While he was working on the film, in 2012, he experienced a crisis of confidence: the movie didn’t cohere. Panicked and stuck, Frank stifled his pride and went to Soderbergh for advice.

They had not been entirely out of touch. When Soderbergh was editing his 2011 film “Contagion,” he had asked for feedback, and Frank had offered his own blunt assessment. “He watched the movie and said, ‘You’ve got huge problems. I don’t even know where to start,’ ” Soderbergh recalled. Frank’s bruising suggestion was that they reassess the narrative and make a ninety-minute version, effectively shaving forty-five minutes from the film—which Soderbergh proceeded to do. “The fact that he was right, coupled with the fact that he got to be tough on me, was probably a necessary and helpful step

in our reconnecting,” he said.

Soderbergh, who has made nearly forty films, possesses the sort of diagnostic acumen when it comes to directing and editing that Frank does with a screenplay. After watching Frank’s cut of “A Walk Among the Tombstones,” he said, “You’ve edited it very insecurely.” Frank had aspired to make a seventies-style thriller, in the fashion of Alan J. Pakula. But he’d hedged his bets by compiling multiple alternative versions for every sequence. The result looked “as if every scene was a different movie,” Frank says now. Soderbergh offered to clear his schedule and recut the movie with him. Scene by scene, they excavated the film that Frank had originally intended to make. It took three weeks, and it was during that time, Frank told me, that he “really learned how to be a director.”

On set in France, Frank seemed amiably frazzled. Whereas he tends to prefer neurotic overpreparation, his French crew favored a more spontaneous approach. “They don’t *prep*,” he whispered. “It’s terrifying. They’re super casual.” Clive Owen told me that, because Frank had written all the episodes with Fontana and knew precisely what he wanted from each scene, “he doesn’t do many takes.” He likes to move quickly, so as not to dissipate the actors’ energy or fall behind schedule. For the actors, Owen said, it means that “you have to come ready to work.”

While the crew adjusted the lighting for a new shot, Frank mused on his role as writer-director. “The hardest part about the job is learning to live with disappointment,” he explained. There’s never the budget to shoot the scene exactly as you’d imagined it, or the weather isn’t cooperating, or you couldn’t book the perfect location, or an actor can’t nail the tone. “You have this thing in your head, and *you* can’t do it,” he went on. “You see your vision leaking away.” And yet you can’t blame the result on anyone else. Directing, he concluded, is “the loneliest job in the world.”

Yet he told me all this with a smile, as if he were deriving some madcap joy

from the process. The trick, he went on, was to find a way to embrace the uncertainty and to recognize that the thing you shoot will be different from the thing you wrote—and often better, in unexpected ways.

The cinematographer Steven Meizler, who shot both “Godless” and “The Queen’s Gambit” and has also worked with Spielberg, Soderbergh, and Fincher, told me, “A lot of great directors, they’re out of reach. There’s a persona when they get on set.” But Frank directs without the armor of such a mystique. It takes a certain confidence to be open to the ideas, and even to the criticism, of the people around you, Meizler said, and to be candid about your own uncertainty. “Scott’s shield is that he doesn’t have one,” he remarked.

It was after the editing master class with Soderbergh that Frank came into his own as a director, with “Godless.” The series was a success, so Netflix agreed to make “The Queen’s Gambit.” As one of the show’s producers, William Horberg, pointed out to me, the story did not seem particularly commercial: “Girl? Chess? Fifties? Orphan? Drugs? Pass.” Several notable filmmakers had tried and failed to turn the novel into a feature film, including Bernardo Bertolucci and the actor Heath Ledger, who, before his death, in 2008, had planned to make “The Queen’s Gambit” his directorial debut. The problem with doing it as a feature, Frank decided, was that at that length it would inevitably turn into a “Karate Kid”-style sports movie. He was less interested in whether the protagonist, Beth Harmon, would win the big tournament than he was in a theme that he had first explored in “Little Man Tate,” and had grappled with in his own life: the hazards of mastery, the costs of brilliance. As he had with “Godless,” Frank secured a green light from Netflix before he wrote all the scripts—a risky move for the company, generally speaking, though the suits presumably took comfort in knowing that if they ran into trouble they could always call Scott Frank.

The series was shot in Berlin, because Frank was determined to work with the German production designer Uli Hanisch, having admired his work on

the series “Babylon Berlin.” Beth Harmon was played, with eerie poise, by Anya Taylor-Joy. Whereas “Godless” features wide shots of people in vast landscapes, much of “The Queen’s Gambit” plays out in closeups of Taylor-Joy, because so much of the drama takes place inside her head. When Soderbergh saw Frank’s first rough assembly, he said, “This is going to be huge.” Released in October, 2020, at the height of the pandemic, “The Queen’s Gambit” was watched by sixty-two million Netflix subscribers in its first month of streaming, becoming the service’s No. 1 show in sixty-three countries. The series triggered an international boom in the sale of chess sets. Netflix even introduced its own “Queen’s Gambit” board game. (“It’s . . . not chess, which I wasn’t expecting,” Rebecca Root, who plays a choir teacher in the series, told me dryly.) The show was nominated for eighteen Emmys and won eleven; Frank got one for directing, and was nominated for writing.

This triumph was marred, slightly, on Emmy night, when Frank went up to accept his directing award—in a tux, his curly hair carefully combed—and brought with him a two-page speech, with a long list of people to thank. He was nervous, and running long, when the band struck up to play him off. “Really?” he said, with a dismissive wave of his hand, plowing on. “Um, I’m also grateful to this incredible array of actors, none of whom really need much help from me and all of whom—seriously, stop the music.” To people who know Frank, this moment, though clumsily expressed, illustrated his humility—his desire to showcase collaborators. Nevertheless, for a man who is so adept at writing concise, elegant speeches for fictional characters, it was a puzzling lapse, on a very big stage. Twitter went berserk. “The 2021 Emmys Featured the Worst Acceptance Speech in History,” the *Independent* declared. Months later, Sterlin Harjo, the co-creator of the show “Reservation Dogs,” delivered an acceptance speech at the Gotham Awards in which he took a jab at “the chess-player show, or whatever that was,” exclaiming, “Don’t fucking talk so long!”

Over lunch one day in New York, I spoke with Tony Gilroy about how

difficult it can be to remain relevant as a screenwriter as you age. When he and Frank were young, Gilroy pointed out, they were “surrogate sons” to older, accomplished figures such as Goldman and the director Sydney Pollack, and they absorbed a great deal of wisdom from those relationships. (They no doubt benefitted as well from the fact that Hollywood was then such a boys’ club.) But Frank and Gilroy also watched their mentors lose their touch. Goldman “hated to revise,” Gilroy said, and it is all too easy to let your prowess and your ego seduce you into believing that your first instinct is always right. Both Frank and Gilroy offered counsel on Pollack’s troubled final film, “The Interpreter.” After decades of success making such movies as “Three Days of the Condor” and “Out of Africa,” Pollack had “a way of working,” Frank said. “And it stopped working.” Suddenly, Pollack was out of step. Frank urged him to do “something different, something small, something that’s not a love story where they end up together.” He even tried to get Pollack to direct his thriller “The Lookout.” But Pollack couldn’t change. To Frank, the lesson was clear: you can’t “just double down on what you used to do.” The only way to remain vital is to take chances.

On a bright Saturday morning this past spring, I met Frank at a theatre in Hell’s Kitchen, where he was rehearsing a new project, an opera set to the music of the Killers. The concept was for Frank to stitch songs by the band into a fictional Cain-and-Abel story about the founding of a Las Vegas-like city, called “Dustland”: a film with musical numbers. “I’m trying to do something based on Brecht’s ‘City of Mahagonny,’ ” he told me excitedly. “I’m listening to the Killers’ songs over and over. But the bastards just released a new album, so now I’ll have to reconfigure it.” He had spent the past week workshopping with the band’s front man, Brandon Flowers, and Thomas Kail, the director of “Hamilton,” along with a pickup team of accomplished Broadway vocalists whom Kail had assembled. As a small audience of friends and family sat down to watch, Kail said, “This is really about just experiencing this music in sequence. We’re not going to tell you the story right now.” He sat next to Frank and Flowers at a folding table in a

corner of the stage while a pianist played the pretty descending riff from the song “Enterlude,” and the performers, assembled in a semicircle, sang, “We hope you enjoy your stay / It’s good to have you with us, even if it’s just for the day.”

While I was working on this article, Frank periodically sent me an updated version of a document titled “My Stuff”—an ever-evolving list of twenty or so active projects. Some are films that he is producing, as a way of mentoring younger writers. Since the nineties, he has been an adviser to the Sundance Screenwriters Lab, and in that capacity he has worked with many filmmakers who have gone on to substantial careers. Among them are Marielle Heller, who directed “Diary of a Teenage Girl” and “Can You Ever Forgive Me?”—and whom Frank cast as Beth Harmon’s mother in “The Queen’s Gambit”—and Charlotte Wells, who directed the recent film “Aftersun.” In 1993, when Paul Thomas Anderson was writing his first feature, “Hard Eight,” he attended the lab. “Stop watching movies and start reading,” Frank told him, recommending a list of books, including “Red Harvest.” It was “the best advice I could have gotten,” Anderson told me.

Even after the global success of “The Queen’s Gambit,” Netflix passed on Frank’s next three projects. One was an adaptation of “Laughter in the Dark,” the 1938 novel by Vladimir Nabokov. Frank is co-writing the script with the novelist and screenwriter Megan Abbott. The material is tricky; the novel, often described as a precursor to “Lolita,” tells the story of a middle-aged art critic who becomes infatuated with a seventeen-year-old girl. Frank wanted to do it as a film noir, and Abbott, who was an academic before she turned to popular writing, is an authority on women in noir. “We talked about the femme fatale as this character who gets short shrift,” Abbott told me. “But really great noir is always toying with that. Scott wanted the female point of view to be foregrounded.” If they can get the movie made, Anya Taylor-Joy is slated to play the femme fatale.

“Monsieur Spade” will begin airing on AMC in January. By the time that

happens, Frank will be in Scotland, directing a project that Netflix *did* go for: “Department Q,” a series based on crime novels by the Danish author Jussi Adler-Olsen. Frank is also working on a follow-up to his novel, “Shaker,” this one called “Faker.” The story is centered on a crooked Hollywood money manager. “A sequel to the novel nobody read,” he said. “That’s how I roll. Giving the people what they don’t want.” He has also, after decades of trying, finally secured the rights to “Red Harvest”; he and Abbott will write a script for A24.

When the band had run through eight or nine Killers songs, the audience applauded. Frank climbed down from the stage. “It’s fun, right?” he said, grinning. “It’s so different.” He seemed exhilarated. He has never written an opera, or anything like it, he acknowledged, and that was a little scary. “I literally Googled ‘How do you write a libretto?’ ” he said. “It feels good to not know what I’m doing.” ♦

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