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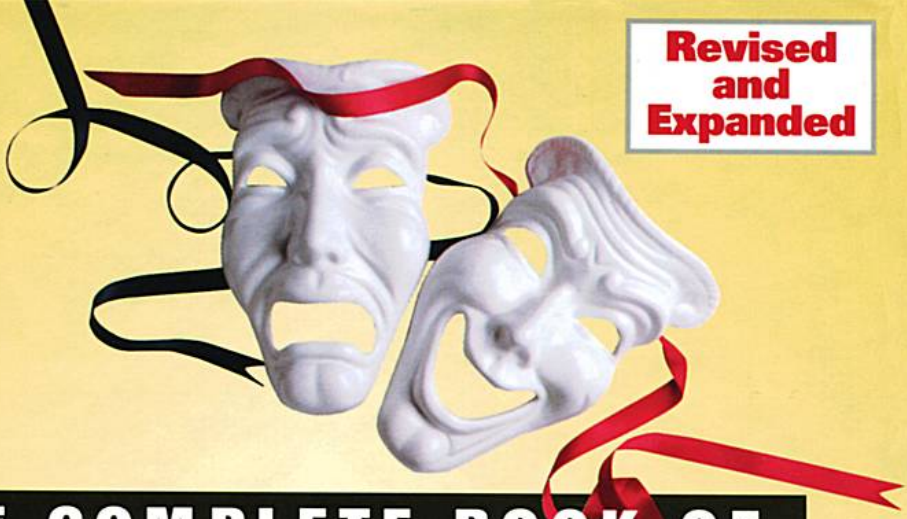

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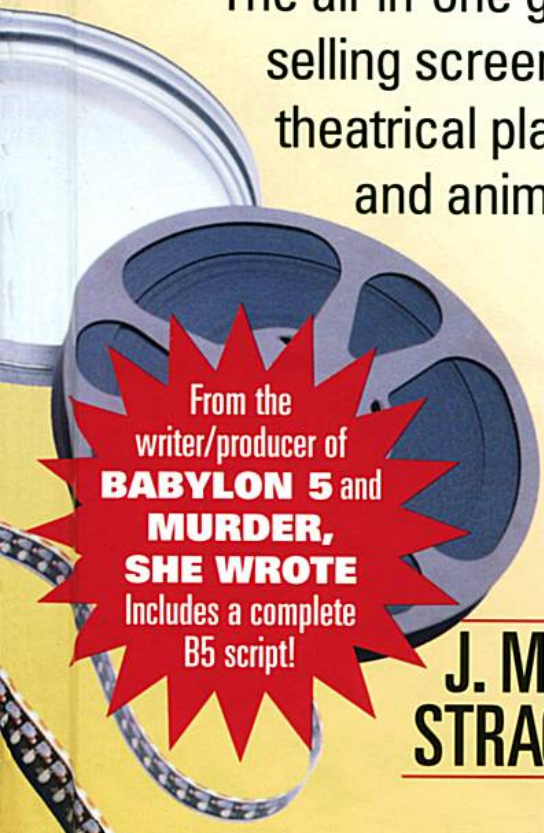

From the writer/producer of **BABYLON 5** and **MURDER, SHE WROTE**
Includes a complete B5 script!

J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI

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Dedication

To Harlan Ellison and Norman Corwin, friends and mentors, men of wisdom and vision and great talent, who proved through example that it is possible to sell without selling out.

To Bill Brohaugh, who was five years patient with me.

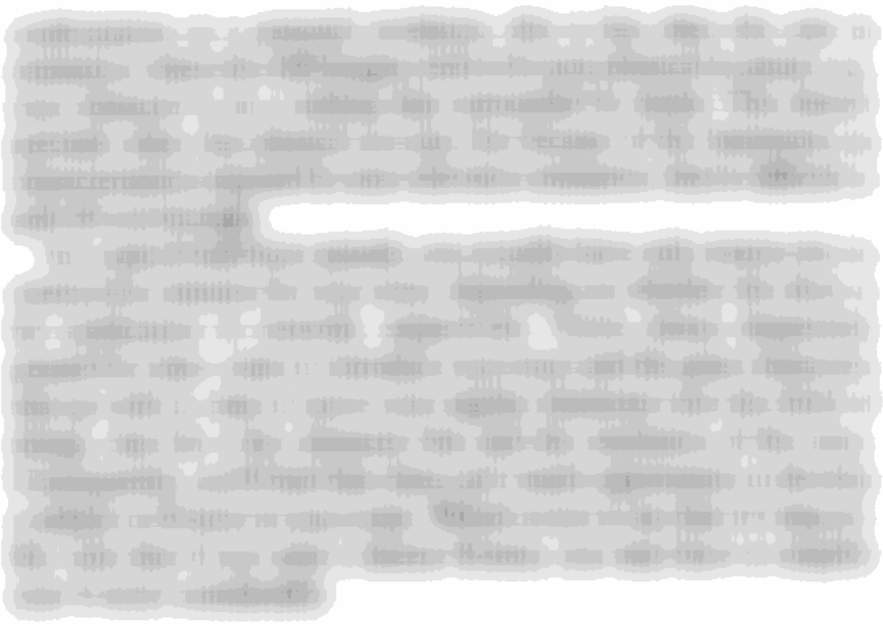
To the other writers, producers and story editors from whom I learned the tricks of the trade, and who allowed me to learn to fly by permitting me the freedom to fall on my face from time to time: David Moessinger, Jeri Taylor, Mark Shelmerdine, Doug Netter and John Copeland.

Finally, and most especially, to Kathryn M. Drennan, who gave more than anyone should ever be expected or required to give, who understood and waited and counseled and reminded and always encouraged. The debt I owe can never be repaid.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As Creator, Executive Producer and Head Writer for the Emmy-winning series *Babylon 5*, J. Michael Straczynski has written over 150 *produced* television episodes, including half-hour, hour and two-hour programs. He has served as writer/producer on such series as the top-ten rated *Murder, She Wrote*, as well as *The New Twilight Zone*, *Walker Texas Ranger* and *Jake and the Fatman*, among others. He has also story edited nearly half a dozen animated series, and is the author of numerous plays, radio dramas, nonfiction articles, short stories, and two novels, *Demon Night* and *OtherSyde*, both published by E.P. Dutton.

Straczynski currently resides in the Los Angeles suburb of Sherman Oaks, writing between 2,000 and 3,000 pages of published or produced material every year.



THE PREMISE

A written *premise* is the first step in the TV animation writing process. It's written in prose form, two to five pages in length and spells out the basic story line without getting into too much detail. In many cases, the premise will also indicate the act breaks, though this is not always a requirement. What you want is to spell out the conflict, the resolution and how they affect the characters. Dialogue is optional. Though dialogue helps demonstrate that you can handle the characters, it's perfectly acceptable just to tell the story in narrative.

I must make clear a distinction between live action and animation in terms of what's initially expected of the writer. Under the rules of the Writers Guild of America, you—whether a WGA member or not—cannot be asked by any WGA signatory producer to write anything on speculation for free. Not a script, not a treatment, not a premise, not a syllable or a comma. It is strictly *verboten*. The WGA contract covers television, movies, radio, news programs. . . .

But it does not cover animation.

I've fought this in meetings with network brass and producers, in magazine articles and interviews and in sworn testimony in hearings before the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board). So far, zilch, but this may change. Those of us who have taken on the fight against this are as determined as the opposition. But I suppose I should get to the point and tell you how this directly affects animation writers.

Unlike live action, the producer or story editor of an animated television series can ask you for work—premises as long as five or more pages—without ever paying you a dime and without incurring any obligations whatsoever toward you. I'll get more into the details of this when we turn our attention to marketing an animated television script, but for now all you have to know is that the job of a series producer/story editor in animation is to solicit written premises from freelancers, then sift through them, select the best of the batch and forward them on to the network and the studio for final approval.

No approval, no money.

It's not uncommon for freelancers to come up with four or five premises at a shot. Potentially, that's ten to twenty-five pages of writing that may not net you a dime. Some shows have received as many as one hundred written premises for as few as twenty available assignments. There are ways a story editor can mitigate the situation a little in the freelancer's favor. One way is by discussing story areas over the phone rather than waiting for the material to arrive already written, but even so . . . it stinks.

The Real Ghostbusters: A Sample Premise

For purposes of illustration, the following is one of the premises I wrote for ABC's *The Real Ghostbusters*. I've picked this one because those who don't know the series have a good chance of having seen the movie upon which it's based and because this series is still fairly popular and can be found on many cable networks (including USA Network) in morning hours. Although I served as story editor and wrote roughly twenty-five produced episodes for that series, I've deliberately selected a premise that was *not* produced. Why? Because I like this one enormously, and since it was never produced, I wanted it to see light somewhere.

THE REAL GHOSTBUSTERS
"Midnight on the *Lady* M."
Premise
J. Michael Straczynski

The place: New Orleans. The present.

Carnival. The last day before the end of Mardi Gras.

Streets full of partygoers. Floats being readied on side streets and alleys. Masques and sequins and satins and banners and laughter littering the night like broken glass.

Carnival!

Hysteria on the half shell, cakewalks down the middle of Bourbon Street, hustlers and singers and jugglers and mimes and three-card Monte on the corner. A kaleidoscope of colors and blissful anonymity.

It is Carnival, and anything goes.

And it is in this fantastic scene that we find our five visitors among a tidal wave of masked faces: Peter, eyes wide with anticipation, ready for anything; Ray, his face boyish and aglow with excitement; Winston, who finds it all very comfortable and very right; and Egon, as relaxed as a cat in a room full of heavily armed mice.

"AWFULLY LOUD OUT HERE, ISN'T IT?" Egon says.

Peter looks over at him with benign interest. "What did you say?"

"I SAID IT'S —" He stops. "You're toying with me again, aren't you, Peter?"

"Moi?" Peter asks innocently, blowing a party favor that stretches out nearly five feet to tickle the ear of a female partygoer, who is phenomenally gorgeous. She laughs, winks at him flirtatiously. "You I'm simply annoying. *Her* I'm toying with."

She comes over, takes Peter by the arm. "Later, Egon," Peter says, tossing Egon the party favor as they go off arm in arm. Egon examines the party favor as though it were an alien life-form. Then he notices another very attractive woman giving him a come-hither look. Egon smiles as best he can and blows the party favor. It gets about a foot before sagging. The woman giggles, moves off. Winston puts a consoling hand on his shoulder. "Happens to the best of us, m'man."

On that the remaining three set off to find their hotel. They've come for the Twenty-Third Annual Symposium On The Fantastic, which only Egon is interested in. The rest are there strictly for Mardi Gras, having missed it the last time they were in the area.

Those attending the Symposium are just about as oddball as those outside in the streets of New Orleans . . . difference is, they're like this *all the time*. Swamis, gurus, healers, psychics, channelers, you name it, you'll find it. The Ghostbusters are scheduled to give a talk on scientific means of dealing with the supernatural, which doesn't go down well with this crowd.

They find particular annoyance with the turbaned Swami Kishnu Wannaberichrich, who sniffs with great disdain at their equipment. He is an eccentric's eccentric. He keeps switching on Egon's proton pack while Egon tries to check them in.

"Don't touch," Egon says.

Kishnu does it again, this time also backing into Ray and knocking his PKE meter to the floor.

"Dangerous stuff!" Egon warns.

"Pfah! Tinkertoys!" Kishnu snorts. "Bright lights! Pretty sounds! But what does it do!?"

Egon turns on him. Nose to nose. "I could use it to part your hair."

"And what is so special about that?"

"I could do it from across the room. Through your hat."

Winston intervenes to calm things a little. "After all, we're all here for the same reason, right?"

Kishnu stalks off, utterly uncooperative.

"Let me just take a little off the top," Egon says quietly, hand on the proton pack. "I'll even leave one eye open."

Winston convinces him to go back to registering as Peter enters, covered in confetti, a big grin on his face, a woman on his arm. She is, it should be noted, *not* the same woman he had on his arm a few moments ago. He looks utterly mussed.

Ray goes to him. "Peter?"

"Mmm?"

"You okay?"

"Mmmm."

"What happened to you?"

Peter leans toward him, eyes wide. "*Carnival!*" He gives Ray his bags and heads back out into the night, where he disappears in a flurry of movement and color and music.

Ray watches him go, and allows a smile. "Carnival," he whispers. And the smile gets bigger.

Later, the team set off for their separate evenings. Winston and Ray leave to check out New Orleans, while Egon is in heated debate with, well, just about everyone within range.

Not long after they get swept up by the flowing crowd, Winston and Ray get separated. Ray doesn't much mind, he's having too good a time.

After a bit, Ray steps out into a side street to catch his breath. He looks down the street and sees a woman standing alone, watching the parade go by. She is stunningly attractive, but in a very refined, gentle fashion. Her dress is distinctly late 1800s in design. There is something almost wistful about the way she watches the partygoers dancing past.

Summoning up his courage, Ray approaches her and tries to find his voice. "Hi," he finally manages to squeak out.

She looks at him, and the moon and stars and everything in between are there in her eyes. "Hello."

He rocks on his heels, smile frozen on his face in utter terror. He's not very good at this. "Come here often?" he says, wincing at his own use of that pickup line.

She nods. "Every year. Lovely, isn't it?"

He looks out at the street. "Yes, it is."

They talk briefly, a tentative conversation full of feints and false starts. Then she begins to move off. "I have to go home," she explains. "I have to get ready. We're all leaving tomorrow night after Mardi Gras."

"I—could walk you there," Ray offers. Silence. "At least part of the way."

She accedes.

Their walk, mostly in silence, sometimes with a few words, tells us very quickly that Ray is smitten by her. Her name, he discovers, is Elizabeth Metairie. Their quiet is in sharp contrast to the streets around them, which echo with the sounds of carnival. They come to a small rise, on one side of which she stops and thanks him for the walk home. "I'm sailing tomorrow night on the *Lady* M.," she says. Her voice is wistful, sad.

"Don't you want to go?"

"I must go," she says, without further explanation. "But perhaps I will see you again, before then."

Ray says that that would be very nice. With a smile, she turns and heads over the rise in the hill, disappearing down the other side. Ray starts back the way he came when he suddenly stops, realizes that he didn't get her address. He turns and hurries after her, cresting the top of the hill, and calling to her—

Only to stop dead in his tracks as he looks down on what is on the other side of the hill.

The Greenwood Cemetery.

Rows and rows of mausoleums and tombs and marble vaults, spires climbing against the night sky like bone-white fingers.

And there is no trace of Elizabeth Metairie . . . except for a tombstone bearing her name.

Act Out

In Act Two, we follow the three threads of our story: Mardi Gras itself, with Peter bouncing from one oddball confrontation to another, poker games, parties, everything; the Symposium, and Egon dealing with the eccentrics there; and Ray tracking down the facts about Elizabeth Metairie.

He finds that Elizabeth Metairie died the last night of Mardi Gras in 1853 when the boiler on the steamship *Lady* M. exploded, sinking the grand paddle wheeler and killing all aboard. It's rumored that every year at midnight, at the end of Mardis Gras, the spectral ship rises from the bottom of the Mississippi, and in that moment, all is as it was before: the fine dresses, the roulette wheel doing business on the main deck, costumes and laughter and the glittering madness of Mardi Gras.

The steamship is trying to navigate its way past the fate that struck it last time.

It is trying to reach . . . the other side.

And year after year, it fails.

We follow the love-struck Ray as he unearths the truth and decides that they must try and help. Kishnu, overhearing part of this, decides to intervene *his* way and nearly botches everything. Peter, lost to the city's pleasures, at first declines, only to return when he is most needed, ready to put his life on the line to free the spirits of those trying to reach the other side.

And it *is* a dangerous proposition . . . because the only way to safeguard the *Lady* M. is to stand on the bow of the ship, proton guns at the ready, blasting at obstructions. Sounding the river, keeping the ship safe.

And there are other, dark forces that do not wish to see the ship reach its special safe harbor. Creatures of darkness that surround the ship, plucking at its defenders, trying to pull them off.

As if matters weren't bad enough, even if the Ghostbusters somehow succeed, if they don't get off the ship in time, they'll be caught up and taken to the other side along with the rest of the ghostly passengers.

With barely a minute to spare, they achieve the task. The way to the other side opens up. Winston, Peter and Egon pile off, with only Ray lingering briefly to say a difficult goodbye to Elizabeth, to whom he confesses his love. For a moment, it looks as though he might not make it off the ship in time, that he might willingly accompany her to the other side. But at her urging, at the last moment, he dives

off the ship and into the river, watching as it melts into the sky, disappearing.

Soaked, they make it back to town just in time for the last few hours of Mardi Gras. They go into a club, and raise a toast: to the memory of the *Lady M*.

THE OUTLINE

Once the premise is approved, it becomes the basis for the outline, which usually runs from ten to fifteen pages, written in the same prose style as a live-action outline. The main difference between a premise and an outline is that in the latter, each plot turn is spelled out clearly. For example, instead of saying, "Ray discovers the truth about Elizabeth Metairie," we indicate that he searches the local newspaper for the date and means of her death; that he goes to a nearby museum that has photos of the *Lady M.* in which we can see Elizabeth Metairie and so on.

Invariably, the producer, the story editor and the network (or any combination thereof) will have notes on the premise, which are incorporated at the first-draft outline stage. If there's something you don't agree with, feel free to fight it, but at some point, the story editor has to close out the argument if you haven't managed to convince him of the rightness of your views. Be firm, but don't kick over the table.

Unlike a premise, an outline is an actual assignment, for which you must be compensated, usually at the rate of 30 to 50 percent of the total price of the script. The first-draft outline is due on average one to two weeks after approval of the premise and may lead to a second (or possibly third) draft of the outline.

THE SCRIPT

Once the outline is approved, you'll have two to three weeks in which to turn in the first-draft script. It's at the script stage that the difference between live-action writing and animation writing becomes most pronounced.

In live-action writing, you generally write in master shots, calling out individual angles only when it's necessary to emphasize something important to the story line. As noted earlier, in animation every individual angle or shot must be called out in detail, and no single shot tends to run more than about half or one-third of a page.

So the animation writer not only has to tell the story, he also has to consider, Who needs to be in this shot? Should this be a wide shot, a two-shot (just two characters in frame) or a close shot? Should the dialogue be

over this scene, or should we actually see who's talking?

This is necessary not only in action scenes, in order to make clear who's doing what to whom, but even in quieter scenes. Take, for instance, a dinner conversation. The following is excerpted from "The Haunting of Heck House," a tribute to the work of Shirley Jackson and Richard Matheson that I wrote for *The Real Ghostbusters*. In this scene, the characters have taken on a million-dollar bet that they can cleanse a chronically haunted house of its ghosts *without* the use of their proton packs. (The Slimer referred to is the little green ectoplasmic spud from the first movie who hangs around with the guys these days.)

As we join the story in progress, it is now nearly midnight, and they have gone through far more trauma than they had expected. Ray and Winston have had an encounter with something that's shaken them to their core, and it's slowly dawning on them that they are in serious trouble.

INT. DINING ROOM—NIGHT—WIDE

Dark wood paneling, shadows and paintings and candles and a long table set for dinner, where we FIND Peter, Ray and Winston. In front of each of them is a plate, a cup of coffee, and an unwrapped sandwich. But only Peter is eating. Ray and Winston look frazzled, eyes glazed, fixed at a nowhere spot in front of them. They look like they've just come out of a war.

RAY
(softly, numb)
—and it, it tried to grab me . . .

TWO-SHOT—RAY AND WINSTON

As Winston shakes his head. His voice is low.

WINSTON
I don't want to remember. Eat your dinner.

RAY
Yeah. I'll eat my dinner. Good idea.
(he doesn't)
It was green, Winston.

WINSTON
(sighs)

WIDEN TO INCLUDE WHOLE ROOM

As Egon enters, carrying an armful of books. He heads toward Peter, at the end of the table, who looks up at him glumly.

PETER

There you are. Say, Egon, you've got some medical training, don't you?

TIGHTEN—EGON AND PETER

Egon sets the books down at the corner of the table beside Peter.

EGON

A little, mostly in first-aid. Why?

PETER

I need something removed.

Peter puts his left foot up on the table. And we find Slimer wrapped around his ankles, shivering, frightened, holding on so tight it'd take a crowbar to peel him off. Egon shakes his head.

EGON

Not qualified.

PETER

I'm hip.

PULL BACK

Peter lets his foot fall back down to the floor with a THUMP and a SQUISH.

SLIMER
(os)

Owww . . .

PETER

Sorry, spud.
(to Egon)
So where've you been all this time?

EGON

In the library. I've found some things that—
(noting Ray, Winston)
What's wrong with them?

ON RAY AND WINSTON

Who haven't so much as budged, eyes fixed on something only they can see.

PETER
(os)
I don't know. I think they saw something upstairs.

RAY
And it—it had two hundred eyes. I know. I counted.

ANGLE—FAVORING EGON

As Egon opens up one of the books and turns to selected pages.

EGON
Listen, everyone, I've found something that could help us survive the night. This book contains the history of Heck House, everyone who's ever lived here—or tried to.

ANGLE—ON THE BOOK

As Egon flips pages, we SEE handwritten entries, drawings, old photos of people in circular holes, on and on.

EGON
(os)
They recorded what they saw. With a little work I was able to cross-reference the data and come up with a figure.

ON EGON

Pushing back his glasses, looking rather proud of himself.

EGON
Based on that, I have a rough idea of how many ghosts are in this house.

DRAMATIC ANGLES:

ON PETER

EGON
(os)
By way of comparison, the Whatley house in Arkham had 13.

ON WINSTON

EGON
(os)
The Vincent mansion had 10.

ON RAY

Still numb, listening.

EGON
(os)
And the most haunted house on record, the Crowley house in London had 25.

ON SLIMER

Poking his head and eyes about the tabletop, staring across at Egon.

PETER
(os)
Okay, Egon. Don't hold us in suspense. How many ghosts are in *this* house?

ON EGON

Who closes the book with a THUMP.

EGON
Two thousand, four hundred and thirty seven.

SLIMER
(os)
YEEOOOWWW!

And there's the SOUND of a CRASH.

ANGLE—ON WALL

Where we find a Slimer-shaped hole in the wall.

MEDIUM SHOT—PETER AND EGON

Peter raises his foot again, revealing Slimer gone. He nods to Egon.

PETER
Good job.

EGON
Wait till you get my bill.

To explain why some things were done in that section . . .

If you're going to have a goodly sized chunk of exposition, it's a good idea to use the visuals to break up the exposition with either camera angles or movement. In other words, we start with a character explaining something, cut to someone else listening to what's being said as the dialogue continues offscreen (os), then go back again at the end. The longer the exposition or the more people in the room, the greater your opportunity to break things up a little, rather than leaving the camera on one character for a prolonged chunk of exposition.

Offscreen dialogue can also be used as a transition between shots, as when Egon asks what's with Ray and Winston, and we have Peter's reply under the shot of those two characters. His reply becomes the transition. Ray's line at the beginning of the scene acts as a transition from the previous scene.

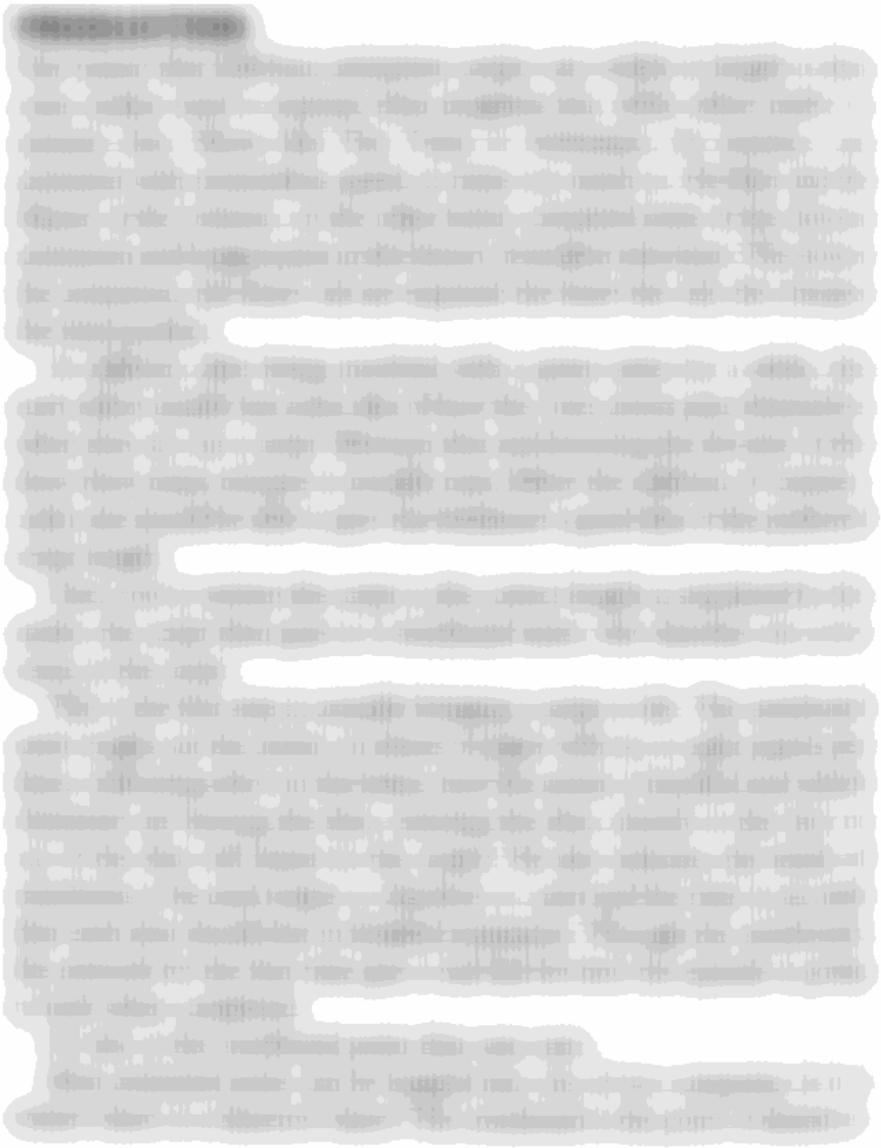
Studios and animators also like offscreen dialogue because that means they can get away with not animating the mouth. Watch almost any animated program, particularly low-budget programs, and you'll see that they cut away from the mouth as often as possible. You'll see somebody else listening or the back of the person's head or just their eyes or a long shot of them walking, whatever it takes to get away from the mouth. That's because getting the lips to correctly sync with the English language is one of the toughest steps in animation, particularly when the episode is being animated overseas. You not only have to get the shape of the mouth right to form the correct sounds, you have to pause at all the right inflections. So whenever they can get away with not doing this, animators tend to do so.

One of the things many contemporary animation writers never seem to appreciate is the use of offscreen dialogue or movement to convey action in lieu of showing everything. As was done most effectively in the Warner Bros. cartoons, sometimes what you *don't* see is funnier or more dramatic than what you *do* see. Hence, we don't actually see Slimer being stepped on or going through the wall. We *hear* the first instance and see the *result* of the second (the hole in the wall).

The more elaborate the scene, the more action, the more you have to keep things moving. The images must connect, and the description must be explicit. You can't just write, for instance, "And the battle is joined. The Gray Army gains the advantage at first but is then pushed back to the sea." The secret of animation writing is in the details. This is a strictly subjective opinion, your mileage may vary, but I feel strongly that animation writing is fundamentally more difficult than live-action writing

because of the need to direct the episode on paper. I've seen a lot of animation writers make the transition to live action, but very few seem able to move in the opposite direction.

The length of your script can vary widely and is determined by a number of factors, including the studio's set policy, the timing on the voice track and the storyboarder. I've written and story edited half-hour scripts that have been as short as thirty pages and as long as sixty pages. Since much of this is determined in the production stage, it now behooves us to examine that aspect.



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J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI has worked on **The New Twilight Zone**; **Babylon 5**; **Murder, She Wrote**; and other television programs. He has also written films, plays, books and articles. He lives in Sherman Oaks, California.

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