

# THE NEW YORKER

LIFE AND LETTERS

## THE REAL MCKEE

*Lessons of a screenwriting guru.*

by Ian Parker

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Robert McKee, the screenwriting instructor, was having lunch the other day at the back of a dark Irish bar on Lexington Avenue. He had just told two hundred people in a Hunter College lecture hall that there were five elements without which a thriller was probably not a thriller: cheap surprise; a false ending; the protagonist shown to be a victim; a speech made in praise of the villain; and a hero-at-the-mercy-of-the-villain scene. Then, announcing a one-hour break, he had walked out into a light rain, followed by a number of students whose desire for a little extracurricular McKee outstripped their fear that he might somehow humiliate them, as he has been known to do. They waylaid him on the sidewalk, the way Nicolas Cage, playing the troubled screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, waylaid Brian Cox, playing Robert McKee, in Spike Jonze's 2002 film, "Adaptation." (Kaufman introduces himself as "the guy you yelled at this morning." McKee responds, "I need more.")

McKee, who is sixty-two, and likes to wear dark shirts with two buttons undone at the neck, suggesting a career in extortion, lit a cigarette, then walked down the street while listening to an agitated young man say that the last time he had heard McKee speak the effect had been so overwhelming that he had fallen ill. "All the stuff you don't want to face, which is to say emotional truth, the stuff of good storytelling, it was coming out!" the young man said, very fast. "It was coming out in such a way that it caused this pain in my back, because subconscious growth is such a painful process." One by one, the students dropped away, until, by the time McKee reached the bar, a few blocks away, only two were left. He asked them to join him in a booth, where he ordered a ham-and-cheese sandwich and a beer.

His guests were in their thirties. One worked in health insurance, and said that in ten years as "an aspiring screenwriter" he had not managed to finish a single script. He had taken a McKee course three times, and he had read McKee's 1997 book, "Story," many more times. "I'm starting to wonder if I have the patience for the whole process," he said. McKee looked at him. "Well, you might also wonder if you have the *talent*," he said. McKee, who used to be an actor, rarely speaks a sentence that does not call for a word so stressed that he bares his teeth.

The other student, whose name was Steven List, said he had already sold a script and three pitches but he was struggling with another screenplay, which was based on true events. As List described it, an American

mathematician had disappeared while on vacation in Chile in the nineteen-eighties. The State Department had told his family that he had drowned while hiking, but his sister did not believe it. She flew to Chile, where she learned that her brother may have been abducted and held in a remote religious colony led by a charismatic neo-Nazi who worked for the Chilean secret police as a subcontractor in torture and assassination—an arrangement supposedly well known to Washington. List had optioned this story from the sister. McKee usually has a rule against discussing a student's work in progress, but he allowed List to continue.

"I could do it from the brother's point of view, but he ends up dead," List said. "I've got a villain. I know there's a story."

"You don't have a story," McKee said in a smoker's growl. "You have a subject matter: this bizarre post-Nazi cult world. But who cares?"

"Well, the facts . . ."

"No, no, the truth of the matter is: Who cares? What you've got is a setting, and a piece of history. You've got to ask big questions. 'Why am I attracted to this material? Because I'm Jewish and I want to get at those Nazis one more time?' My advice is stop focussing on this one guy. I don't think there's anything at the end of that road."

The screenwriter considered his choices. "I've got to find a spine, a protagonist. I've been thinking, the sister . . ."

"That film's been done, and it's called 'Missing,'" McKee said. "Why do a woman-in-jeopardy story? You've got an organization in cahoots with the Chilean government, in cahoots with the United States government, which has caused the death of thousands—torture, suffering, etc.—and as a result we've got a woman in jeopardy? It's like hiring an elephant to pull a little red wagon. I can tell you a woman-in-jeopardy story: she gets a flat tire in the middle of the night, some guy offers her a lift." He went on, "What is interesting here is it's an example of the way the United States has habitually accommodated tyrants as long as they're our allies."

List leaned forward across the table and said, "That's what I'm interested in! We've protected monsters!" In the story of List's story, we seemed to be approaching what McKee calls an "inciting incident": things were about to change.

"So start with a guy who's a bureaucrat in Washington, works for something other than the C.I.A.," McKee said. "Something pops up, a missing professor." He paused. "In the English tradition, a murder is committed and the investigation drives inward: you know, you've got six possible murderers. In the American tradition, a murder is committed, we start to investigate, and it turns out to encompass all of society. That's what your thing sounds like. An innocuous note saying that a professor has disappeared while hiking in the Andes, and some little bureaucrat is charged with finding out what happened, and he finds a conspiracy that runs to the White House. It's 'The Parallax View.'"

"That's brilliant," List said.

An hour later, back in the lecture room, List was still buzzing with enthusiasm: "You know, I've talked about this project with any number of studios, and they didn't see it—and he spotted it in five minutes. Oh, that was extraordinary."

**S**creenwriting instruction is a transformative business: students are there to learn about the way a protagonist undergoes change in the two hours of a movie (dumb to smart, nobody to somebody, bureaucrat to whistleblower); and they learn about the change they may have to undergo before they are able to create such a character. And students may also get a sense of the change to come in their lives when word reaches one of them that a studio chief was charmed by his unsolicited script, and would like him immediately to bring to a close his life in, say, high-school history teaching and start a career focussed on ambling around a Malibu mansion wearing expensive track pants while balls of scrunched-up yellow legal paper drift across the patio in a warm breeze. The forces at work in other branches of adult education may be similar but are likely to be weaker: students at a screenwriting seminar are learning how to create, on the page, a story of struggle and resolution that at least appears to echo the struggle and hoped-for resolution of the screenwriting life. The work promises to precipitate the action it often represents, which is a life redrawn—a star, one way or another, being born. So it's easy to see why an effective screenwriting instructor could become a commanding figure in the life of his students, and why McKee is more frequently referred to as a "guru" than anyone giving classes in animal husbandry.

McKee himself leads a life mostly unaffected by screenwriting success. He has written and sold many screenplays, but, if one excludes "Abraham," commissioned by Turner Network Television in 1994, none of them have been made into a movie. McKee has houses in Bel Air and Arizona, and a handsome black Jaguar, and membership in a country club just north of the Getty Museum, but these are mostly the benefits of a rather

uncinematic life of repetition: McKee has given the same screenplay course for twenty years—the same three-day, thirty-hour performance during which he assumes, variously, the roles of after-dinner raconteur, gloomy controversialist, and freewheeling, cross-disciplinary university lecturer. Among the estimated forty thousand people who have taken the course are David Bowie, Ed Burns, Drew Carey (twice), John Cleese (three times), Kirk Douglas, Faye Dunaway, Emilio Estevez, Eddie Izzard, Quincy Jones (three times), Diane Keaton, Barry Manilow, Joan Rivers, Julia Roberts, Meg Ryan, Joel Schumacher, Brooke Shields, and Gloria Steinem. McKee is careful not to take direct credit, but he recently estimated that his alumni's films have earned more than a billion dollars at the box office in the past year or so: he was thinking of the work of Andrew Stanton (who wrote and co-directed "Finding Nemo"), Peter Jackson (who co-wrote and directed "Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers"), Steve Koren (who co-wrote "Bruce Almighty"), and Zak Penn (who co-wrote the story for "X2"). In McKee's promotional literature William Goldman calls him "knowledgeable and passionate"; Lawrence Kasdan describes McKee's course as "stimulating, an innovative approach to the age-old challenge"; and Akiva Goldsman calls himself "a believer." Pixar sends ten people to every McKee seminar in San Francisco; Miramax sent five or six to New York in 2001. Antonia Ellis, a producer of "Sex and the City," lists McKee's course as "additional post-graduate course work" on her HBO biography. Last year, McKee gave his three-day seminar twice in Los Angeles, New York, and London, and once in Boston, San Francisco, Miami, Dallas, Las Vegas, Sydney, Melbourne, and Paris. This year, he made his first appearance in Singapore, where he was asked not to use the word "fuck" onstage, and in November he will teach in Pamplona. McKee has given a private, truncated version of his course for ABC News. He has been hired to teach C.E.O.s the commercial virtues of telling a compelling (rather than a blindly upbeat) story of a corporation's life. He has been invited to make a presentation to *nasa*. Recently, for senior members of an Arizona-based church, he adapted the seminar as "The Glory of Story."

**B**efore the arrival of cinema, there were how-to guides for aspiring novelists and playwrights. Then, when movies appeared, so did books like "How to Write Moving Picture Plays," by William Lewis Gordon (1913), and "How to Write a Photoplay," by A. W. Thomas (1914). Thomas nodded to Aristotle (as most modern guides do), and used the kind of subheadings—"Modeling the Dramatic," "Hiding the Climax"—that seem to call out for PowerPoint software. According to Gordon, "in practically every story there should be an element of rivalry with one or more obstacles to overcome." He steered his readers away from children, animals, autobiographical stories, Westerns, expensive military plots, and slapstick. "the scene action must be the explanation and tell the story," he wrote, exactly anticipating the spirit (and uppercase letters) of his modern successors.

Today, a fair-sized Barnes & Noble will carry about sixty books in a similar vein, including "Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters: Storytelling Secrets from the Greatest Mind in Western Civilization." Most are alert to the obvious booby trap in the how-to-write genre: the author has not written a hit screenplay, and so offers guidance only in general structural principles—a form, not a formula. All the same, many of these books—and their accompanying courses and software packages—find it hard to resist dropping a number into the title, to hint that science will take charge of the slippery mess of words on a page: "How Not to Write a Screenplay: 101 Common Mistakes Most Screenwriters Make"; "500 Ways to Beat the Hollywood Script Reader: Writing the Screenplay the Reader Will Recommend"; "Power Screenwriting: The 12 Stages of Story Development." In "How to Write a Movie in 21 Days," Viki King explains that "by page 45, your hero has reacted to what happened on page 30. He is now different, and we begin to see that here, in a symbolic scene. Also, by page 45 we begin to see a resolution of the original desire your character had on page 10."

The first modern best-seller in the genre was "Screenplay," by Syd Field. First published in 1979, the book still carries a special thanks to "Werner" and "all the people in *est*," and half a million copies have been printed. Derived from a course that Field taught at Sherwood Oaks Experimental College, a private school in California that sought to use people active in the industry as instructors, including Dustin Hoffman and Paul Newman, "Screenplay" is a slim, friendly, upbeat book, with exclamation points and one-sentence paragraphs. Movies had always had beginnings, middles, and ends. Since "Screenplay," they have had three acts: Act I is the setup; Act II is the confrontation; and Act III is the resolution. "Plot points" spin the story around, from act to act. (According to Field, who argues that he is teaching "only form, not formula," the second act runs from page 30 to page 90.) Field's language burrowed deep into Hollywood—a fact that some find maddening, including John Truby, a screenwriting instructor with a standing just below that of McKee and Field. Truby, who teaches seminars and markets a computer program called "Truby's Blockbuster," recently said that he regarded Field's three-act idea to be "the triumph of complete superficiality over any type of content."

McKee, who says he has "no competition," presents himself in contrast to Field as a bold, angry intellectual.

“Story,” in its first few pages, praises Ingmar Bergman and quotes from Yeats and Jean Anouilh; the book has only ever been available in a hardback edition, which has sold more than a hundred thousand copies in the United States. McKee chose Brian Cox to play him in “Adaptation,” after looking over a list of names that included Michael Caine, Terence Stamp, and Christopher Plummer; but one guesses that he would have been most pleased with Harold Bloom. “‘Story’ is about eternal, universal forms, not formulas,” McKee writes at the start of his book, but for him this construction becomes more than a disclaimer: it is his platform. McKee displays his own relative impotence, and so—in a happy paradox—establishes his intellectual force. Those born with talent will succeed, every one else will probably fail. Life is “drudgery and disappointment”; and death lurks around the corner. When I met McKee in London earlier this year, the day before a “Story” seminar, he told me, “What I teach is the truth: you’re in over your head, this is not a hobby, this is an art form and a profession, and your chances of success are very, very slim. And if you’ve got only one story, get the fuck out of here. Writers are people with stories to tell. I think I do a great service, by sending the dilettantes out of the door. The amazing thing is that, no matter how hard I try to drive them out of the art, the reputation I’ve gained by being honest brings them to the course. They know I’m not a phony, I’m not selling them a dream.”

McKee grew up in Clawson, a northern suburb of Detroit; his father was an engineer at General Motors and his mother worked in real estate. “My father was in many ways a marvellous guy,” McKee told me. “He got me into reading. He had high standards. But he was also a paranoid alcoholic.” McKee was sixteen when his father left the family. “When I was in psychoanalysis, it was a lot to do with my relationship with my father,” McKee said. “And my analyst said that the central conflict in any man’s life is with his father, and you’re in a dilemma: you want to impress your father, but you cannot surpass him, because if you do, it humiliates him, even if he’s dead.” McKee’s mother “had a great imagination, but in many ways was a child. When I was ten, she came to me and said, ‘Bobby, what shall I do about your father?’ I was counselling her.” McKee had two younger brothers. One died in middle age; the other became a senior Ford executive, and has now retired and lives in Florida.

McKee was a golf caddie from the age of twelve, and he won an Evans scholarship (given to caddies) to the University of Michigan. He had liked the idea of a career in dentistry, because of the free time for golfing it seemed to promise, but, after being given a part in a student play, he decided to major in English. He took a master’s in theatre, and was taught by the late Kenneth Rowe, who had also taught Arthur Miller. McKee became a theatre actor and a director, first in Michigan, then in London, and then, in the late sixties, in New York. A first marriage, to a stage entertainer, ended after eight months.

McKee remarried and returned to Ann Arbor in 1970 to pursue a Ph.D. in film studies. There, he and his wife had two sons, and he made two well-received short films—one an adaptation of a Tennessee Williams play, “Talk to Me Like the Rain,” and the other from his own screenplay, “A Day Off,” about two lonely men spending an awkward, drunken day together. He did not receive his Ph.D., failing to finish a dissertation on narrative design (years later, much of it emerged as “Story”); instead, McKee took a teaching job at San Diego State University, and wrote the first of his screenplays, “Dead Files,” about a hired assassin who seeks psychiatric help when he discovers that he can no longer kill. He sold it to avco-Embassy Films in 1976, but, in the first of many such disappointments, the company changed hands, and the project was dropped. “You get your heart broken again and again and again,” McKee told me. He took work as a story analyst for NBC and United Artists, and also began writing episodes for television dramas. He directed “Greeks 6-Trojans 5,” a play set entirely in the body of the Trojan horse, and wrote “Miss Julie Montgomery,” a screenplay that recast Strindberg’s “Miss Julie” as an interracial period love story set in the South; it has been optioned four times and never made—although last summer McKee was pleased to see that it was optioned again, twenty years after it was written. (He showed me the script, which in places has a miniseries feel to it, as when Julie’s father says, “And old times here are not forgotten. . . . If all goes well today, I’ll be changing times . . . from the governor’s mansion.”) McKee’s other scripts are “all dead,” he said. A career was visible but just out of reach. “Of course you mind,” he told me with a slight sneer. But he consoles himself with the thought of the odds against him—only one in twenty scripts optioned ever gets made—and the amount of money that some of his unmade films earned him. He told me, “Warner Bros. said, ‘Bob, we want “Jagged Edge” goes rock and roll for Cher.’ I wrote a thing called ‘Trophy,’ for an embarrassing amount of money, about a rock star who murders a husband and gets away with it. They loved it. Loved it.” But apparently Cher did not.

In 1981, McKee began teaching a course called “Story Structure” at Sherwood Oaks. His audiences grew, and in 1983 Jeff Dowd, who later became a key figure in the world of American independent film, and the Coen brothers’ chief inspiration for the character of Jeff Lebowski in “The Big Lebowski,” asked McKee to teach a

compressed, three-day version in Seattle. It was with this gruelling format that McKee began travelling the country, and the world. (After his second marriage failed, he lived for several years in Britain, in a remote spot on the Cornish coast.) McKee became part of a great boom in screenwriting instruction which had its roots in the end of the studio system and the subsequent rise of the American auteur director: a screenwriter being one step from a director, and a director being God. The boom was further propelled by public knowledge of the multimillion-dollar fees paid to writers like Joe Eszterhas and Shane Black. Screenwriting began to look like the weak point in a wall standing between the people in the land of joy and self-fulfillment and the people outside, a perception that led, in time, to such courses as “The Magic of the Midpoint,” which is being offered this month at Screenwriting Expo 2, a carnival for aspiring screenwriters, in Los Angeles.

In London, I asked McKee if he had ever thought of writing a novel. There was a long pause, then he nodded and said, “It’s got a title: ‘The Woman Who Tells Lies.’ ” Fifteen years ago, McKee began plotting a story about a successful woman writer who has run out of ideas. At lunch one day in a restaurant, she goes to find the bathroom, and passes a man who has collapsed by the cigarette machine: “He is a well-dressed, fifty-five-year-old professional man, and he is crying. She takes him to her table and calms him down and he tells her that he’s looking for a woman whom he met ten years before. And he’s been searching for her, he’s come to this city searching for her. She says, ‘I know this city like the back of my hand. I’ll help you.’ And then she gets on the phone and calls her editor, and says, ‘I’ve got a book! This guy is a walking novel.’ ”

McKee motivates writers for a living, but he has not been able to get this book done. When I asked him why, he said, “It’s a good question. Why haven’t I? Fear is part of it. And I have created a life that is so demanding.” He is writing “The Art of Darkness,” a book about “the nature of writing from the dark side of life,” and at the end of this year he is launching *The Writers’ Quarterly*, a magazine that he will write himself for the first year. “And then I’ll pull back on the lectures and the travel. I think I will pick up the novel again in about three years. I’ve got the whole plot, but I’ve got to clear space in my life.”

McKee said that he never mentioned the novel to his family or his agent. I asked if the “Story” industry had been a kind of unconscious scheme to avoid writing “The Woman Who Tells Lies.” He replied, “I’d say that. That would be honest.” He added, “See, what I do is very seductive. On Sunday night, I’m going to get a standing ovation. I am an old actor and this is thirty hours of performance to a captive audience. It’s very satisfying.”

The next morning, in a lecture room at the Institution of Electrical Engineers, McKee took the stage without introduction or fanfare. Holding a coffee cup with his elbow locked into a right angle, he cleared his throat before making fierce announcements about the location of the restrooms and his policy of never answering questions from the floor. Like a wise political candidate, he presented himself as the reluctant outsider who had accepted the task of cleaning up a mess left by corrupt predecessors.

Hollywood makes five hundred films a year, “and the large percentage is perfect shit,” McKee said, from a script that barely changes a word from one performance to another. In its search for material, Hollywood sets aside seven hundred and fifty million dollars a year in development budgets; most of this goes to writers. “And look what you get.” McKee raised his eyebrows and took a stagy sip of coffee. “Look. What. You. Get.” Since the end of its Golden Age—since about the time McKee began teaching—Hollywood has been so hungry for spectacle that it has come to neglect the fundamentals of storytelling, he said. B movies have become the new A movies. Those in his class who rediscovered the structure of stories, and understood that they are “metaphors for life,” might enrich both themselves and the culture around them. “You must have real insight into human nature and society. . . . You must have an idea. . . . You must have talent.” This is McKee’s pitch: first, be born an artist. And then avoid clichés, but know that there are elements of deep, structural narrative that have been consistently satisfying through human history—in caveman stories, in Shakespeare, in “Snow White and the Three Stooges”—and that to work within this tradition is not to pander to corporate stupidity but, rather, to listen to the human soul.

“I’m not here to teach you how to write a Hollywood movie,” McKee said, the scorn in his voice sending a wave of reassurance through his well-educated audience. But then he drew a triangle on an overhead projector slide: at the top was “Classical Design” (stories with causality, closed endings, linear time, an external conflict, a single, active protagonist); in the other corners he wrote “Minimalism” (open endings, passive protagonists) and “Anti-Structure” (coincidence, nonlinear time). “This course is about the top, about classical design,” he said, pointing at the triangle. “Why? For your careers. As you move down the triangle, your audience shrinks. Why does it shrink? Because people see themselves as protagonists of their own lives. Classical design is a mirror of the human mind. It’s how we see the world.” McKee is a subversive who teaches tradition. He urges students to earn a living doing something intelligent near the top of the triangle—creating “worlds we’ve never seen but a humanity

we all recognize”—but they need not feel that they have turned their backs on the avant-garde. They can get to that later: “Every great writer who found success launched his career at the top of the triangle: Bergman, Fellini, Godard.”

In McKee’s description, this is what a story is: a human being is living a life that is more or less in balance. Then comes the “inciting incident.” (McKee borrows the phrase from “Theory and Technique of Playwriting and Screenwriting,” which was written in the late forties by John Howard Lawson, the first president of the Screen Writers Guild, and an inspiration to McKee.) The protagonist reacts, his life falls out of balance, and he now has had aroused in him a conscious or unconscious desire for whatever it is that will restore balance—“launching him on a quest for his object of desire against the forces of antagonism.” McKee speaks some of these key phrases very fast, like a police officer reading a suspect his Miranda rights. “He may or may not achieve it.”

Can his students achieve it? Can McKee? These are the dramas of the “Story” seminar. Pacing back and forth beneath portraits of Michael Faraday and Alexander Graham Bell, McKee spoke for three days about risk, jeopardy, desire, turning points, conflict, and choice—moving between his own life (most of it bad), the lives of his students, and the life of Rick in “Casablanca.” He made close, clever readings of favorite movies (“Tender Mercies,” “Carnal Knowledge”), and—uniting accounting and therapy—drew charts that showed lives zigzagging into emotional credit and debt in response to antagonistic forces. He screened “Casablanca” over six hours, and afterward (his shoes kicked aside) he reached an extraordinary crescendo of metaphysical, motivational talk (being and becoming, Schopenhauer and Derrida) that discovered in “As Time Goes By” the richness of a “Hamlet” monologue. He even sang the song, softly, to an audience that for a moment looked as if it had been caught on “Candid Camera.”

There were also times, during the weekend, when McKee resembled nothing more than a man still talking, talking at the end of a cocktail party. McKee is an instinctive aggressor. When he talked about “The Art of Darkness”—a study of film noir, crime stories, and black comedy, seen in the context of human wickedness—he referred to “What Evil Means to Us,” by C. Fred Alford, a political-science professor at the University of Maryland, whose thesis is that “doing evil is an attempt to transform the terrible passivity and helplessness of suffering into activity.” Echoing Alford, McKee explained that “life is saturated with dread because you know you’re going to die, and there’s nothing you can do about it.” (At this point, some in the audience wrote “going to die” in their notebooks.) “People who feel that in the extreme try to alleviate it by causing dread in other people.” This gives them “the momentary sensation of having power over their own death.” There were occasions when McKee might have been illuminating Alford’s equation. After he had repeatedly heaped scorn on the indulgence of “The English Patient” and the clichés and vacant spectacle of “Titanic,” a student who was a generation older than the others interrupted. “But they made money,” he said, not out of love of these movies (he later told me in an e-mail) but to find out how McKee made sense of their success: are some resonant stories not metaphors for life? Or are the fans of “Titanic” leading lives that make lousy metaphors? He was hoping that McKee would discuss the power of commerce. Instead, McKee roared, “Do not interrupt me!” The student, an academic with twenty-five years of teaching experience, was struck silent. “I kept my eyes on the stage and said nothing,” he recalled. “My stomach was churning, I was overcome with embarrassment and fear.” McKee cried, “If you think that this course is about making money, there’s the door!” He pointed an Old Testament finger, and seemed to be enjoying himself.

A few weeks ago, I visited McKee in Bel Air, at the home, a mile or so north of Sunset Boulevard, that he shares with his third wife, Suzanne Childs, who was a high-profile spokeswoman for the Los Angeles District Attorney’s office during the Menendez and O. J. Simpson trials, and who now runs the L.A.D.A.’s Victim-Witness Assistance Program. (Childs, who was married to Michael Crichton in the eighties, met McKee at a “Story” seminar.) They live on the steep side of a canyon in a single-story home—not a show-business mansion—that has an easy, seventies feel to it. On a low table in McKee’s office, a dozen translations of “Story” were stacked alongside a plaque commemorating a hole in one he’d made at his local golf course. Books and articles—“The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness,” and many similar titles—that McKee was reading for “The Art of Darkness” were lined up by his desk. He showed me the index cards that he fills in every time he gets back from the movies. “‘Swimming Pool’: Bergman’s ‘Persona’ without the genius.” “‘The Secret Lives of Dentists’: Shrug about a guy who just wants peace and routine.” “‘Finding Nemo’: Good adventure with at least six rescues at the end—everyone takes turns rescuing everyone else.” Outside, on the terrace, McKee has a southwesterly view that on a good day stretches to Santa Catalina Island, sixty miles away, and here we sat on wicker chairs while McKee smoked steadily.

“I discovered this enormous hunger for what I thought was common sense, common knowledge,” he said,

contemplating his career as itinerant adult educator. “I’m repeating what I was taught, and then adding some little insights I’d had—but basically recycling Kenneth Rowe and John Howard Lawson and Aristotle, and putting it in a contemporary context for these people. I’m putting the obvious into a new context, and I see their slack-jawed, wide-eyed look, and their tremendous hunger to know what I knew. It’s obviously needed. I can see the emptiness out there.”

The critic Barbara Hardy wrote in 1968 that “we dream in narrative, day-dream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.” Alasdair MacIntyre, the philosopher, quotes Hardy in his book “After Virtue,” and then continues, “Stories are lived before they are told. . . . And to someone who says that in life there are no endings, or that final partings take place only in stories, one is tempted to reply, ‘But have you never heard of death?’ ” McKee seems persuaded that real life has the shape of a story—there are third acts, even if they may have a second-act air about them. “Yes, there are turning points, and points when the curtain comes down—ta-da!—then the thing starts again.” For all McKee’s gloom, and his love of stories in which grown men cry (the category includes “Casablanca,” “Tender Mercies,” and his own unwritten novel), he is driven by a kind of melancholy optimism: “Hopefully, you can live in a way so that you can die with the notion that, on balance, the sense of achievement outweighs the regret.”

Whatever McKee’s day-to-day influence is on Hollywood screenwriting—I heard one young producer wonder if all screenplay guidance exists primarily to give executives a scientific, salary-justifying language of script criticism and script rejection—he knows his teaching has a powerful subtext. “The students realize that it’s their life I’m talking about: it’s out of balance, they’re struggling to put it into balance,” he said. “How are they going to do it? They have conceived of that object, that something, that if they could get it, would restore the balance of their life. Now, for the character, it could be that he needs to right the injustice that was done to his family; it could be to find something worth living for to get him up in the morning. Right? But for the students it’s a successful piece of writing. And until they achieve a successful piece of writing, their lives will be perpetually out of balance.”

**I**n the movies of our own lives, McKee argues, we can take the role of protagonist. (“Have you ever been in love?” he asks. “The day you met that person, that was an inciting incident.”) But three years ago, when McKee was sent Charlie Kaufman’s screenplay for “Adaptation,” he had a glimpse of another possible (and gloomier) truth: that in the movies of other people’s lives we are lucky to get anything better than the role of a character actor, who, with a bundle of evident virtues and vices, bounces for a moment or two off the protagonist. “I got this phone call in the middle of the day from New York, a very embarrassed producer,” McKee remembered. “He said, ‘This is the most embarrassing phone call I’ve ever had to make. I don’t know how to say this, but there’s this guy Charlie Kaufman, who did ‘Being John Malkovich,’ and he’s written this new screenplay, and he’s quoted freely from your book and lecture without copyright permission, and we don’t know what to do.’ He needed McKee’s permission. McKee read the script, and asked the opinion of two people: one was his friend William Goldman, the screenwriter and author of “Adventures in the Screen Trade.” “Don’t do it,” Goldman said. “Don’t fucking do it. It’s Hollywood, and you can’t trust them.” McKee then called his son, Paul, who is twenty-five. “He said, ‘Do it.’ I said, ‘But suppose they make fun of me?’ He said, ‘Dad, you’re going to be a character in a Hollywood film.’ ”

McKee asked for two changes to the script. He wanted a “redeeming scene,” and he was given it: an Obi-Wan Kenobi moment, in a bar, between his character and the Charlie Kaufman character. McKee also wanted a better ending. Although McKee does not quite see it this way, the joke of “Adaptation” ’s final scenes is that, after Charlie Kaufman hears McKee lecture, the impulses of dumb blockbuster writing—sex and murder—take over the movie. McKee says that, in real life, he was trying to fix it. “I said, ‘Before I can consent, we have to have meetings. You have serious third-act problems.’ ” McKee laughed—a loud “ha!”—remembering that in earlier versions there was a character called the Swamp Ape, “who came roaring out of the swamp and killed the Chris Cooper character.” McKee killed the Swamp Ape. As he told “Adaptation” ’s producers, echoing the hope of redemption that runs through the heads of McKee’s “Story” students, “I cannot be a character in a bad movie. I can’t be.” ♦

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