GOD OF TOIL

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ABSTRACT

God of Toil is a feature screenplay in the fantasy genre that questions the concepts of destiny and birthright while exploring the morality of war. The hero Rufus is a retired warrior of mythical stature desperate to leave behind his violent ways in order to live a life of pacifism and service. When forced back into service, he faces the reverberations of the atrocities he committed in his youth. In failing to right them despite his most earnest efforts, he confronts the potential of his own irredeemability.

This supporting document details the genesis of the idea, the intentions that motivated choices of craft and art, as well the research and influences drawn upon to shape the narrative.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Nothing delights me more than great, sweeping hero stories. In them, our hopes, our desires, our secret wishes for the ideal selves and worlds we strive for reveal themselves. *God of Toil* results from enormous personal affection for superheroes and adventure stories. This thesis sought to finally seize an opportunity I've denied myself. It borrows from and elaborates upon all my personal obsessions and beliefs. *God of Toil* is as different in form, tone, structure, and setting from my previous works as could possibly be, yet it's nearer to my favourite stories than anything I've ever attempted.

Chapter 2: **World of the Story**

God of Toil envisions a world with a harsh class separation between haves and have nots. The world as we know it is ruled by a Royal Family named the Godkings. They're a decadent and entitled sort, with garish dress, luxurious finery, and ornate masks to disguise their essential sameness from the people they lord over. An unforgettable experience from my youth was seeing Salvador Dali's 1960 masterpiece *The Ecumenical Council* on display. Massive and masterful, the subject of the painting is Dali's perception of The Holy Trinity. At the top centre is the Holy Spirit, obscuring his face with his hand. The Guide explained that this was because of Man's unworthiness. That always stuck with me. His body was naked, yet somehow to share his face was to share with us a truth we'd be unable to come to terms with. Something so simple was so distancing, so belittling. That thought proved an absolutely central image for the Godkings' characterization. Their divinity (or lack there of) is linked irrevocably to their faces. So long as they are hidden, the lie they perpetrate about their superiority, their enormous difference, has a constant visual reminder.

Beyond wealth, privilege and military force, the Godkings wield genuine, inhuman power, like mythical Gods, justifying their narrative of entitlement, birthright, and privilege. Rufus, as the titular God of Toil, embodies the capacity for work, discipline, and persistence to overcome all within the world of this story. Yet to deny the part talent or luck play in placing people in positions of authority or success is absolute folly. None are luckier than The Godkings. No one has the gifts they have. Yet despite great power, they are fundamentally mortal and vulnerable, and their gifts don't render them unassailable. They loathe the traits they share with humanity, disguise their presence in them with deliberate spectacles of difference. Besides the masks and dress, very precise body language is

frequently alluded to. Prince Mathius, the favoured son, is dignified, reserved, and rigid. Prince Reznick is beastly, fierce, and cruel. For their oppressiveness and superior alien nature, *God of Toil* invites the audience to vilify them. Reznick in particular belittles even his own worshippers, going so far as killing a loyalist that Rufus spared.

So frequently in contemporary epics, entire races and nations are vilified and contorted into monstrous caricatures. The Orcs in *Lord of The Rings* are a mindless horde serving a dark Lord. The Klingons in early *Star Trek* are war mongering and brutal. The English in *Braveheart* are unforgiving and selfish. With The Godkings, *God of Toil* begins with a similarly sweeping depiction. As filtered through the point of view of Cyril, the Godkings and those loyal to them initially seem wholly evil, yet the emergence of opposing perspectives contextualizes and humanizes them. With Prince Mathius, a man tender with those he loves and merciful with those who wrong him reveals himself. He defies his father to care for his sister, and he takes pity on a man who ignorantly served as accessory to Reznick's killer.

Beneath The Godkings are a nation of slaves and servants. These are people that have been denied opportunity for progress, mobility, or autonomy. The loyalists worship the Godkings as what they claim to be, believe them benevolent defenders against ancient, savage, unseen evils. Up against the Godkings are a resistance of orphaned and victimized men and women called The Nameless, a monicker that incorporates their status as the lost, orphaned, and forgotten of the world, as well as their rejection of the self-aggrandizement of the Godkings. Ideologically, The Nameless defy the Godkings in all facets, espousing an aggressive ideology that emphasizes the value of the group over individuality and idolatry. Somewhat paradoxically, they comport themselves like ascetic monks. They embrace anonymity, humility, and unwavering devotion to their cause. They're a league of assassins taking children as young as possible, training and indoctrinating them callously and mercilessly. They deny

themselves all pleasure, respite, desire, and identity.

In crafting the dichotomy of these polarized forces, the warfare between the Ninja and The Samurai became a useful point of reference. The Samurai, as seen in *Harakiri* and *Seven Samurai,* were a culture of honour and nobility, with strict moral codes and practices that would put formality and duty to their masters ahead of the common good. Open combat was the norm, and appearances were paramount. Their armour was spectacular, their swords were their souls, and they even wore masks called Mempo. Practices of the Godkings and their military reference many similarities.

Ninjas, and their relationship to the Samurai, came to my attention initially via *Day of the Samurai*, an episode of *Batman: The Animated Series*. Ninja were brutal and utterly without glamour. They were shameless, working by night and in shadowy corners with espionage, sabotage, and assassination. Pragmatic and low born, they didn't have the resources or background to engage on equal ground with the nobility, so they made up for it with subterfuge and sabotage. Imagery, context, and methods were drawn from Ninjas to shape The Nameless, with a few key differences. For one, while Ninjas were mercenary, and thus by definition lacked a binding ideology, The Nameless are intensely devoted to and unified under a very clear moral code. Also unlike the Ninja, The Nameless are independent, rather than subject to the influence and pay of some wealthy interested party. The Samurai and Ninja were fascinating studies in contrasting styles and backgrounds, but in truth they were both puppets of the upper class. By conflating those differing approaches with more personal doctrine and philosophy, *God of Toil* concentrates one of the great dichotomous conflicts of history into something much more intimate.

God of Toil begins as a depiction of class warfare, the privileged versus the unwashed. The Nameless are scrappy underdogs, and they fight to elevate the downtrodden and stamp out oppression. Initially, The Nameless are designed to seem wholly righteous while the Godkings are meant to seem

wholly evil. Between Rufus' absolute brutality during his youth and Elizabeth's selflessness, the truth eventually reveals good and bad in both groups. To justify the conflict, the competing groups were framed as opposite as possible in appearance, approach, and philosophy. Draft after draft focused on honing in on both parties' distinct idiosyncrasies, and finding new polarities. One of the latest additions to the screenplay was the blunt rallying cry Thomas performs in an early scene. As extremists and revolutionaries, the doctrine belonging to The Nameless defines them. The fiercer their devotion to it, the more significant a force they present.

Chapter 3: Structure

Previous screenplays of mine have always told linear stories in as straightforward a manner as possible. Why complicate things, after all. Yet in *God of Toil*, I choose to challenge myself to a more non-traditional structure dependent on the interweaving of complimentary time lines. The result was a journey spanning decades that used flashbacks to further a subplot and contextualize the present in meaningful ways.

The Godfather: Part II features the dual plots of Vito and Michael Corleone, the fist and second generations of a brutal crime family, and was used as an influence in *God of Toil's* construction. Besides being similarly predicated on extensive flashbacks, its exploration of the decaying influence of violence on the soul made it an ideal pick. Throughout the film, Michael's position as head of a crime family pushes him away from the loved ones his father taught him to cherish most. He murders his brother. He loses his wife's love. Like Michael, Rufus is a man at odds with his own brutality. He dreams of disengaging himself from it, yet circumstances force his hand. In many respects, Rufus faces the same essential struggle as Michael, but succeeds where Michael fails. Rufus escapes Michael's self-created hell thanks to his selflessness. Investigating my appreciation and dissatisfaction with *The Godfather: Part II's* dual plots led me to layout criteria to aspire to with every venture *God of Toil* makes into the past.

One of the simple issues with *The Godfather: Part II* is the enormous physical and temporal distance between the events of the past and the present, which results in a disconnect between the two major plots. The characters of Vito's world are mere ghosts of Michael's, and those of Michael's are non entities in Vito's. Any influence one exerts over the other is separated by so many degrees that they

can't help but appear tangential. So, in *God of Toil*, every action in flashback directly concerns a character in the present, and is rooted in that character's experience, be it Rufus and Reznick losing their fathers, or Thomas earning Rufus' respect and obligation. Flashbacks inform motivation, and that motivation affects choices and action.

Beyond the matter of the flashbacks failure to maximize relevance to the present, *The Godfather: Part II* suffers for having Vito's adult life already so clearly defined by the first film. We know his final fate, and we even know the defining plight of his life: balancing the love and hopes of his family with the brutality of his profession. Nothing about Vito's life in the first film begs the question of his origins, because there's no mystery to his existence. *Citizen Kane*, another film predicated on digging up the past, famously built a massive question over the meaning of the term 'Rosebud', Kane's last words, in order to create a demand for exploring the past. *God of Toil* borrows that strategy, and attempts to create a series of questions by leaving a huge gap in the great narrative of Rufus' life. We know him to have been a force in his youth, a legendary and magnificent stoic warrior. We know he was singularly responsible for cataclysmic, world altering anomalies, achievements unique to him in all known history. Yet in the present, he defies every expectation. He's a pacifist, gentle, modest, and even gregarious. So, a massive and inexplicable transformation clearly occurred, that begs the question “how?”.

To its credit, the structure of *The Godfather: Part II's* Vito storyline stands on its own merits as a compelling plot. Initial drafts of *God of Toil* didn't put as much of a point of emphasis on this as was perhaps required. The initial goal with the flashbacks was merely to reflect and contextualize the present, to show the grand journey of Rufus' various transformations. They served as compliments rather than existing as an impactful, standalone plot. Later drafts focused very heavily on developing the narrative of Young Rufus, dramatizing his journey from sad pathetic boy to vicious killer. A greater

sense of his training and development was added, as well as what set him apart and changed him at his core. His relationship with Thomas also came into greater focus, as he became a reluctant mentor, who took Rufus' descent into hate and violence as a personal failure. That emotional investment on the part of Thomas raised the stakes of Rufus' initial brutishness, adding a level of collateral damage to Rufus' actions.

Chapter 4: Characters

Rufus is the meeting point of my great personal loves. Nearest and dearest to me since my adolescence is Batman. His virtues and flaws are endless. He is a man that is devout, selfless, and resolute. He eschews glamour in favour of function. He turns trauma into strength, and he sits at the head of the table among Gods thanks to his skill and craft alone. He takes the faults of the world and the people he meets for his own, and resolves to heal and help even the sickest and cruelest. At their simplest, the best Batman stories are about a person desperately committed to getting and being better. In Rufus, I have emulated the greatness of Batman and excised the bits that always pestered me. Rufus is the strength, discipline, and selflessness of Batman without the money, technology, vengeance, and grandeur of a family name.

Batman is frequently characterized as a ruthlessness pragmatist, a frightening vigilante in a cruel and corrupt city. Yet he clings to a beautiful and wildly impractical code that insists he never take a life. Many of my favourite Batman stories challenge his sacred commitment to the potential for redemption of even the most twisted and gnarled of souls. *God of Toil* drew from a trio of his stories. First and second, *Feat of Clay Part I and Part II*, written by Marv Wolfman and Michael Reeves, from the much revered *Batman The Animated Series*. Third, *Whatever Happened to The Caped Crusader?*, a graphic novel by Neil Gaiman. All three feature Clayface, a hideous, supremely powerful villain who was once a great actor until a drug addiction reduced him to a mess of infinitely malleable clay. In *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on a Serious Earth*, writer Grant Morrisson once described him as "Not born. Shit into existence." In *Feat of Clay*, Clayface is manipulated into attempting to blackmail Bruce Wayne. When things tumble out of control, he seeks vengeance on the puppet masters

responsible for feeding his habit and causing his transformation. Batman attempts to stop him, and in the climax makes a passionate plea for peace. Despite Clayface bringing him nothing but injury and trouble, Batman only takes pity. He reminds Clayface of all his great performances, and tries to steer him off the course he's on. He tells him he was great once, and he can be great again. Clayface refuses the olive branch, disappearing into the night and carrying on a life of crime.

Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader? features all of Batman's peers and enemies sharing eulogies for a series of hypothetical deaths of The Dark Knight each particular to them. Clayface recalls being carried away in a rush of water through the sewers, Batman nearly drowning himself trying to rescue him. “Don't bother. I'm not worth it.” Clayface proclaims, defeated and self-loathing. “Everyone's worth it.” Batman responds simply. In the supreme act of love for even his enemies, Batman dies saving the grotesque, abominable Clayface.

This isn't a dynamic all writers explore, but with a long history of serious mental illness in my family, there's nothing more beautiful to me than a belief in every person's capacity for redemption, no matter how damaged, destructive, and seemingly ill fated. It's an intensely personally valuable belief that my most beloved Batman stories challenge relentlessly. Take Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, for instance. Whether it be the malevolence of the Joker, or the fall of his friend Harvey Dent, Batman constantly faces proof of the futility of his quest. Yet he persists and endures, despite endless failures and disappointments. He takes upon himself the hate and pain of his city to spare its people disillusionment. That profound moral testing is something that shaped *God of Toil* from the very beginning. Consciously and unconsciously, it seems to find its way into everything I write.

For many readers and fans, love of Batman leads to a disdain for Superman. In a lot of ways, super heroes are like sports teams for nerds. Allegiance to one necessitates contempt for another. Batman and Superman are deliberately designed as opposites or compliments, depending on their

characterization. Batman works in night, Superman works in day. Batman fights in the streets, Superman fights in the skies. Yet to better serve as a complex and rich character, I chose to develop Rufus from both Superheroes. At his best, Superman is a small man thrust into absurd responsibility. *Kill Bill: Volume 2* characterized Clark Kent as a disguise, an insulting parody of how a God views Man. The opposite is true. Superman is a persona, the attempt of a boy who never expected to leave his parents' farm in Kansas to give the world what it needs.

What elevates Superman beyond cliche is the recognition of his tragedy. The great *Superman: for All Seasons* shares the experiences of a young Clark Kent reluctantly drifting away from his small town friends as destiny beckons. He'd love to live simply. He could have been so happy being nobody, marrying the girl down the street he'd known all his life. He has power to shape the world, and more than anyone else an obligation to put it to use. When catastrophe is on the brink, the only one who doubts his abilities is himself. Only he knows his limits, only he knows he can fail. Yet he puts on the cape, and pretends he's so much more than he is. He takes on the world, even though every step he takes into the absurd or the galactic is a step away from where he wants to be: home on that farm. The same goes for Rufus. He wants peace, home, and anonymity. Yet the world asks so much of him.

Rufus' tale is one of endurance rather than discovery. His journey is not that of a bold new messianic figure, but of a once lionized warrior attempting to leave behind a life of violence. His life has had many chapters, and he doesn't want to be defined by what most people know him for. His war time triumphs haunt him. He wants to lead a humble, peaceful, nurturing existence. Like Superman, he craves simplicity denied to him. He wants to stay home, he wants to be with those he loves. Like Batman, his commitment to his beliefs brings heartbreak after heartbreak. Despite Rufus' most earnest efforts, Reznick proves beyond saving. Rufus' apologies fall on death ears, and he must watch helplessly as years of misery for the poor boy come to an end with his suicide.

In order to put Rufus at odds with his mythology, *God of Toil* offers up a number of details to distinguish reality and perception. First and foremost is Rufus' relationship to his weapon, Penance. Initially, Penance is framed with a legendary name and magical characteristics that allow only the destiny-kissed Rufus to wield it. In truth, Rufus resents the name given to it, and as Rufus reveals to the thug Crag before a fight, the only thing that keeps people from lifting it is that it's really, really heavy. Wielding Penance and Rufus' strength have nothing to do with destiny. The rumours of Rufus' demigod status are unfounded. Like Batman, his strength comes from the profoundness of his trauma. Just as Batman lost his parents, Rufus lost his father. From that unique pain, strength is forged through commitment and toil alone.

Attempting to subvert some of the tropes of modern hero stories also led to making Rufus an older figure. Central to the narratives common of the fantasy genre are allegories for transitioning into adulthood. For a young protagonist, that usually includes being adopted by a mentor, being exposed to a new and exciting world, and then finally stepping out from their protector's shadow for some great self-actualizing struggle. Luke Skywalker, Harry Potter, and Neo serve beneath Obi-Wan, Dumbledore, and Morpheus. Those youthful naifs then take the lead when circumstances force the more experienced and capable figures out of the picture. After teasing Cyril as a young man on the precipice of coming into his own, I attempt a swerve. Rufus denying Cyril mentorship destabilizes expectations, and sets Cyril in a direction his type seldom experiences. Rather than embarking on a journey that expands his understanding of a larger, more complicated world, Cyril makes peace with the mundane. He comes to respect, admire, and enjoy a life of humble service.

Introducing Rufus presented a number of challenges. It was critical to show a degree of success and joyfulness in his new life, all the while allowing for Cyril to see it as pathetic, selfish, and wasteful. That meant a life that was productive but modest, demeaning at first glance yet honourable upon

inspection. Beyond that, *God of Toil* still had to allow for the possibility that Rufus could triumph in his call to action, so he still had to exude power despite resisting any opportunity to exert it. One of the late additions to the screenplay was to a montage of Rufus' happy life. Initially, the montage served as basically a humorous collection of vignettes that suggested a ludicrously simple and happy life inconsistent with the Rufus we've been told about. The addition of a late night trip to the shed to pound a punching bag was intended to complicate Rufus' life, a demonstration of power as well as a hint at the uneasiness of a big man in a small life.

Pulling away from one cliche can often lead into another. Rufus' beginnings are designed in part to tease a conventional mature warrior's story, the journey of an old, marginalized soul reclaiming dignity when circumstances demand his particular skills again. In *Taken*, Bryan Mills is a divorced father, a lonely, retired CIA field operative shunned by his ex-wife and reduced to providing security for starlets. When his daughter is abducted on a European vacation, suddenly his abilities and competence become invaluable. Similarly in *Die Hard,* John McClane is a conservative, traditional New York cop abandoned by his family, his wife Holly having made a substantial career for herself in L.A. In attaining independence, she undermines his sense of self as patriarch and bread winner. When violent thieves overtake the building at which she works, John is the only man with the grit and fortitude to save the day, and he wins back her respect and love.

Stories like *Taken* and *Die Hard* play like comforting fantasies for those who fear impending obsolescence. Like John McClane and Bryan Mills, Rufus at first blush seems to be living a life too small for him. He surrenders at a market when bullied, his dog disrespects him, and he can't move around his own house without coming within inches of knocking something over. *God of Toil* finds righteousness in the simple life. Rufus loathes his abilities, and has no interest in becoming relevant again through their application. In fact, in *God of Toil,* unlike *Die Hard*, the assumption is Rufus' skills

have value, that they can shape the world. Only he knows how poisonous they are, and his actions in the past haunt him in the present. A major sequence turns on him facing off with Reznick, the son of a man he assassinated. In traumatizing the boy, every evil and cruelty Reznick perpetrates is in a sense a consequence of Rufus' mistake. Simultaneously, Cyril discovers the merits of Rufus' life by taking his place in the household. *Taken* and *Die Hard* glorify dominance and rescue their heroes from impotence. *God of Toil* reveals the tole of violence and the dignity of pacifism.

It's long been a personal writing philosophy that the worst thing that can happen to a person is the worst thing that's ever happened to them happening again. There's no greater fantasy than ridding ourselves of a long standing regret, so there's no worse nightmare than helplessly seeing it come to pass again. A magnificent example can be found in a rather unexpected place: *Back To The Future*. Though fun and light, the film cleverly builds to an emotional climax that suggest a potentially devastating result. A subplot throughout the film focuses on Marty's attempts to avert the disaster he witnesses just before disappearing into 1955: the death of his best friend Doc. Yet despite all his efforts, when Marty finally manages to return to his time, he's too late, and he witnesses the murder that haunts him all over again. His agonizing defeat and heartbreak is brilliantly juxtaposed against the original outrage of his first self's experience of the moment.

Back to the Future is kind enough to spare us that nightmare, as Doc lives. The pain of that moment, however, has always been so poignant to me, and Rufus experiences endless versions of it throughout *God of Toil*. In the midst of his new quest, he faces echoes of his great failures, and futilely attempts to right them. He hates that he orphaned Reznick, and tries to show him that his tragedy need not define him. He hates that he killed Prince Darnett, and is forced to kill Mathius. He regrets abandoning The Nameless to a fate worse than death, and fights desperately to heal and restore Thomas. Rufus endures all his nightmares. In surviving all the worst things that could possibly happen

to him, the eventual victory of his return home, however slight and modest, is all the more exhilerating.

Refining depictions of Young Rufus was a focus of later drafts. One of the latest additions was a montage that covered Rufus' development in The Nameless. Intensifying Rufus' cruelty and brutality in his days with The Nameless was critical. The uglier a man he was, the more significant his transformation, and the more tenuous his new life. The last scene written, in fact, was his "coming out party" in front of the elders of The Nameless, which included the callous and horrifying demolition of a credible yet outmatched female member of The Nameless.

Next to Rufus, Elizabeth merits recognition as the most important character. A member of the Godkings long thought dead, she is the guiding moral compass of Rufus' life, and it's her ideals to which he aspires. She exists to defy every expectation. She's unequivocally the head of the house, and the leader in their shared business. She doesn't dote, and she doesn't reveal any ache in Rufus' absence until she's sure he's gone forever. Even then, his existence doesn't define her. She moves on and makes a new life for herself with Cyril. She's tough, competent, empathetic, and an exclusively positive presence in the world. She isn't glamourous, and she isn't defined by chastity, innocence, or even maternity. Triumphs of strength and violence are utterly irrelevant to her, perhaps even deplorable. She doesn't need protection or saving. She's independent, a leader, and a testament to the value of pacifism and decency. She casts off the life of isolation and elitism enforced upon her by her father. In serving the wounded and desperate of the world, she achieves where Rufus fails.

Cyril, a brash, angry young man and true believer in the cause of The Nameless, was offered up as a potential surrogate for the audience. We learn things as he does, and his point of view is meant to shape our perception. Unlike Rufus, Cyril is a man of few doubts and zero reservations. He's indelicate, unwavering, and didactic. His story is one that expands his horizons. As he learns and develops his conception of the world, so too does the audience. His assumptions are the most persistently assaulted,

and his transformation is the most tangible. He exists in some part as a reflection of Rufus, and follows a similar path as the younger Rufus before him. Walking in Rufus' shoes, the road Cyril travels is one of forgiveness. Cyril accumulates understanding and empathy. Like Rufus before him, Cyril discovers the invisible depths of his enemies. Because of Elizabeth, Cyril comes to better understand not only the Godkings, but Rufus too.

The major sources of antagonism in the screenplay are the Princes Mathius and Reznick of the Godkings. Mathius was designed as a villain as opposed to my own beliefs and tendencies as possible, yet as sympathetic as could be imagined. Despite his status as the visible head of the Godkings, he is assigned virtues and convictions worth admiring. He loves his family desperately, and values them above all else. Its preservation and success motivates every choice he makes, and so much as that allows, he is selfless, merciful, and kind. In seeing himself as a servant to a nation of masters, Mathius characterizes himself quite plausibly as the defender of the greater good. In fact, Rufus' eventual corruption of him hopefully serves as tragedy. Every action Mathius takes until forcing The Nameless to kill themselves, from insisting Reznick stay underneath his protection, to sparing Clyde, can be construed as a reasonably moral act.

Making Mathius a massively imposing, powerful figure was also a major priority. As I see it, nothing illustrates power like accomplishing much while doing little. Nothing signals ability like effortlessness. The most vivid example that springs to mind is Black Bolt of Marvel Comics, a stoic King who never speaks, because even a whisper from his lips is so mighty it could level cities. Similarly, though somewhat more practically, Mathius' telekinesis allows him to do seemingly anything without so much as lifting a finger. Characters like Reznick and Rufus are intensely physical presences, with power defined by the weight of a spear or the tactility of chains. By touching nothing, Mathius seems untouchable.

Initial drafts opened simply, focusing on Cyril and Thomas. Yet in attempting to develop pathos and depth in Mathius, I resolved to shift focus towards him. From the opening image of the screenplay, he is framed as a man of high ideals with a massive sense of his value and place in the universe. The enormous, magnificent painting he admires exists as an aspirational icon. Unlike Rufus, he is a man embracing his own status and legend. He aspires to genuine otherworldliness and benevolence.

Mathius and his paintings continue to serve as a motif throughout the story. Later, a painting of Reznick hides the boy's true nature and posture, illustrating his status as black sheep and disappointment. A painting after Reznick's death emphasizes Mathius' bitter loneliness. Finally, the last painting shows Mathius and his siblings and nephew reunited, and it brings with it a revelation: that Mathius is the artist behind the masterpieces. Besides linking him with Rufus and his sketching, it serves as an indication of the depth of his devotion to the ideology of his family. They inspire him in every aspect of his life.

Some of my favourite scenes in film involve an antagonistic or violent character showing unexpected pity or kindness. *The Godfather* opens with a scene in which Don Corleone hears the pleas of a victimized Funeral Parlor Owner. Corleone ominously promises vengeance in exchange for a "favour" to be named later. Eventually, the favour Corleone asks is a modest, pathetic one. With his eldest son Sonny brutally slaughtered, Corleone visits the Funeral Parlor Owner. He begs the man to do his best to fix Sonny up so that his Mother can see him before he's buried. It's a potent, touching moment, a surprising yet affecting moment of humanity from a brutal and fearsome man.

Footloose is a far less revered film, but it affected me similarly, and objectively influenced the scene of Mathius taking pity on Clyde more explicitly. What surprised me about the film was the nuanced depiction of its antagonist, the Reverend Shaw Moore. As the spiritual leader of his community, he spearheads the anti-dance movement due to an extremely earnest and honest desire to

protect his town following the death of his son. In an early scene, he finds a whole restaurant gleefully dancing and partying, led by his daughter. Everyone freezes when they notice him. There's a tangible sense of an imminent explosion. Yet, quietly embarrassed and with disappointment rather than anger, Shaw merely approaches his daughter,. He sadly explains his presence by telling her that her Mother thought she could use some money, then silently exits.

That little moment of unexpected tenderness and vulnerability endeared Shaw to me immensely. I saw Mathius as a similar character, a man of high ideals who saw his lot in life as lifting all to paradise. Just like Shaw, the narrative leads Mathius to a moment where he may assert his power over Clyde, who has played a part in Reznick's passing. Yet Mathius takes pity on the man, and only seeks a sliver of comfort. All he wants is a deeper understanding of his nephew's passing. Like with Corleone and Shaw before him, the audience is trained to expect disaster when an innocent falls under Mathius' attention. As told by Cyril and as seen by Reznick's actions, the Godkings are cruel. Yet through that moment of vulnerability, Mathius becomes a more dynamic, human character.

Reznick, meanwhile, is the absolute zenith of how Cyril and The Nameless characterize the Godkings. Cruel, violent, and petulant, Reznick is an insecure boy convinced of his own superiority. He defies his noble uncle, and he treats his worshippers terribly. He invites contempt, yet in him, Rufus also sees the consequences of his own indiscretions. As the outcast and black sheep of his family, the more horrible and tortured his existence, the deeper Rufus' failure. The manifestation of his powers, the fleshy, ugly chains that hang from his wrists, were chosen for their monstrousness as well as the burden they presented. He was meant to be something gnarly and ugly, and the revelation of his boyish face and traumatic childhood serve as one of the first great shocks of the screenplay. In his defeat at Rufus' hands, he sways from garish caricature to a lonely, beaten down boy.

Thomas was slow to develop as a substantial presence and contributor to the narrative.

Eventually, it was resolved that he needed to be the face of Rufus' obligation to The Nameless. Creating a greater and deeper debt to Thomas really aided in shaping a more fully realized plotline for the flashbacks to Rufus' time in The Nameless. As Rufus' reluctant mentor, Thomas rescues him from being lost and alone upon being orphaned. Much more importantly, he attempts to steer Rufus away from the actions that eventually haunt him. Before Rufus kills Prince Darnett, Thomas warns him how dangerous his hate is becoming. When Rufus decides to leave The Nameless after sparing Elizabeth, Thomas encourages him. That adds to the emotional significance of Thomas' brainwashing and eventual betrayal of Rufus. Short of perhaps Elizabeth, no one believes in Rufus or wants happiness more badly for him, yet Rufus fails him completely.

Chapter 5: Plot

All my favourite stories are ones that defied expectations. Achieving the pleasantly unexpected in this hyper film literate era requires careful manipulation of genre and tone, leading audiences down a path they think they recognize intuitively, then lurching them in a new direction. Doing so while maintaining coherence is the real trick. A goal with *God of Toil* was to use people's growing understanding of genre to better defy expectations in meaningful fashion.

Nothing delights me like a genius bit of comedy in otherwise serious fare, or better yet an unexpected moment of poignancy in a silly comedy. *Shaun of The Dead* leaps to mind, where in the midst of an outrageous British parody of Zombie movies, tension comes to a boil when the main character Shaun must confront his Mother's transformation into a zombie while an undead horde pounds at the door of his temporary stronghold. Shaun, after struggling mightily with the decision, kills his Mother. It's a genuine moment, delivered without irony in a movie that had been non stop cleverness, parody, and absurdity. Yet it lands, because the relationship was real none the less. So, *God of Toil* fluctuates in tone. It begins dourly and seriously, with Cyril and Thomas doing battle with Mathius and Reznick. Then it shifts to the light and gentle world of Rufus and Elizabeth, where humour and good nature are abundant. *God of Toil* attempts to lull audience members into a false sense of security, and then destabilize them by alternating moments of levity with moments of poignancy.

God of Toil also tries to flood the audience with conflicting rooting interests. Structurally, the story is based on a pair of contrasting journeys between Rufus and Cyril which eventually dovetail into a heated conflict. The screenplay balances pathos between the two, with each moving towards and away from audience empathy. Rufus' fall coincides with Cyril's redemption. As Rufus grows harsh and

bestial, Cyril becomes loving. Rufus falls into darkness while Cyril is lifted out of it. When they face off in the third act, Cyril is justified in his assumption that Rufus is irredeemable.

As for types of plot, *God of Toil* attempts to draw from Norman Friedman's plots of character, which focus on heroes encountering profound change to their personal moral understanding. Rufus clearly finds himself in an absolutely brutal testing plot. He sports high ideals, and his journey puts them under scrutiny. The lowest point, the greatest possible ordeal for a man in this position would be disillusionment and acceptance of his own monstrous nature. The climax of *God of Toil* involves Rufus coming as close as possible to being everything he hates. After killing Mathius, all seems lost. Yet facing his own death, he still maintains grace, and acts as selflessly as humanly possible.

Cyril, on the other hand, finds himself in a plot of maturation. His encounters with Elizabeth steer him towards growing beyond his youthful anger, resentment, and bloodlust. In engaging Elizabeth, seeing her strength and kindness, learning about her suffering, his hate for the Godkings dissipates. In discovering what Rufus discovered, in experiencing a version of his life, he comes to let go of his spite and disappointment in a man he thought a traitor. Entering act two, Rufus and Cyril embark on a pair of contrasting adventures, entering worlds so very foreign to them: Rufus tastes war for the first time in ages, and Cyril experiences peace he's never known. As *God of Toil* comes to a close, they return to the worlds they left behind, one renewed and the other transformed.

The second act of *God of Toil* focuses on a series of tests for Rufus and Cyril. Rufus encounters challenges to his pacifism while circumstances force Cyril to reevaluate his commitment to The Nameless. Rufus sees his mercy and restraint punished. He puts himself at risk to spare his enemies harm. An battle with poorly trained loyalists to the Godkings requires him to absorb damage to spare his attackers the consequences of their ineptitude. His duel with Reznick ends with Reznick killing himself in shame. Finally, Rufus arrives at the isolated, secret prison housing The Nameless, only to

discover Thomas and countless others completely brainwashed and under the psychic mind control of Prince Mathius, now members of his new elite Royal Guard. Rufus, doing battle against his own brothers and sisters, tries not to do them harm. He fights his way to Prince Mathius, and with his spear at his throat, demands the Prince free The Nameless. That momentary mercy costs him dearly, and the Prince seizes the opportunity to put the entirety of The Nameless at risk, using his control over them to threaten a mass suicide. The second act turning point comes with Rufus' begrudging surrender, his quest to save his brothers failed but his hands relatively unsullied.

Again Rufus' plot draws from my all encompassing love of Batman. Batman, like many superheroes, has a strict code about no killing, born out of some sacred commitment to the belief in even the most wayward soul's capacity for redemption. After all, Batman seeks his own redemption, the restoration of the innocence he lost when his parents were murdered. As he sees himself as the supreme failure and twisted soul, believing he has any opportunity to affect change in himself means he must believe he can affect change in everyone else.

Batman's code is constantly under assault. Though beautiful in spirit, it's often ludicrous in practice. Despite explicitly acknowledging the code, each of the Christopher Nolan movies ends inevitably with Batman killing someone. The films try and make the deaths mostly convenient accidents, to their massive detriment. *Batman Begins* is the worst perpetrator, which features the insane attempt at finding a loophole when Batman utters “I'm not gonna kill you. But I don't have to save you.”

The Nolan movies never really understood the deeper meaning of the code or the emotional and moral stakes it creates. Consequently, the deaths of the villains are never as meaningful as they ought to be. The idea of a story where Batman is pushed to the brink and finally corrupts his ideals should not necessarily be rejected wholesale, but that's not what those movies are. When Mathius dies at Rufus'

hand, it's massively significant. It's the apparent death of the dream Rufus has for himself. It's the ultimate indication of his ugly nature and the futility of his dreams of pacifism.

Meanwhile, in contrast to Rufus' descent into the muck and mire, Cyril journeys towards enlightenment and restoration through his experiences with Elizabeth. In living the life he resented Rufus for, Cyril comes to see the merit in it, and gradually discovers a talent for it dwarfing Rufus'. Elizabeth initially detests Cyril completely, loathing him for sending Rufus to what she's wise enough to know is certain ruin. Their partnership is tenuous to begin with, but Cyril slowly comes to respect and admire her. A key sequence focuses on the loyalists Rufus did battle with coming to Elizabeth when one of them is maimed by Reznick. Without Rufus there, and with Cyril ideologically resolved not to aid an enemy, she fails to save the man. Her fury and devastation over the moment begins the development of Cyril's unease with the war.

God of Toil uses a pair of ordeals to signal the apparent deaths of Rufus' and Cyril's previous personalities. In Cyril's case, it was the dissolution of his hate and anger. Just as he gains respect and pity for Elizabeth after Crag's death, he discovers the great secret of her life: she is a member of The Godkings. Elizabeth shares with Cyril her disillusionment with the royal way of life, how it isolated and imprisoned her. Cyril abandons her at first, but given time, he returns to her, letting go of his spite and resentment. Together, in saving a poor dying soldier's life, Cyril embraces the life and beliefs he once loathed Rufus for.

For Rufus, his ordeal comes with an extreme act of violence, a tragic surrender of his ideals. Prince Mathius confronts him, having deduced the truth about his sister Elizabeth from the sketches Rufus carried. The Prince demands to know where she is. In an attempt to extort information from Rufus, Mathius forces members of the Nameless to execute themselves, one by one. With Rufus reduced to a beast after years of debasement, the Prince takes a step too close. Rufus tears a hand free

from his chains and slashes Mathius' throat with talon like nails. Rufus savagely beats him to death with bare hands. Tragically, the act leaves The Nameless vegetative and as good as dead. For Rufus, finally indulging his dark side unintentionally dooms his brothers. This is the lowest he could conceivably sink. His pacifism is shattered, and he has nothing to show for it.

The third act then revolves around building up to an eventual showdown between Rufus and Cyril, one last great test for both of them to face. Seemingly morally defeated, Rufus journeys home. He carries the comatose Thomas along with him, caring for him, desperately but futilely attempting to cure him of his condition, and clinging to the hope that his arrival back home to Elizabeth will give them both a chance at healing.

Meanwhile, in Rufus' absence, Elizabeth has moved on, having started a new life with Cyril. She's pregnant, and the two of them are peaceful and happy. In town, Cyril hears the news: Prince Mathius was found dead, along with much of the Royal Guard. Cyril knows instantly what it means: Rufus has succumbed to the worst of his nature and is on his way home. Seeking to preserve his new life, to protect Elizabeth and their unborn child, Cyril resolves to venture out and confront Rufus, certain Rufus was irrevocably poisoned by his experiences and destined to nothing but destruction.

Initially, Elizabeth suffered from an unfortunate dearth of agency in the climax. Early drafts featured a series of events that essentially put the choice of who she'd love and spend her life with entirely in Cyril's hands. The creation of the sequence in which Elizabeth engages the Drunk she failed was a critical shift. In taking pity on a man whose goal was to hurt her, she reveals her true nature in Cyril's eyes. The fact that she would welcome Rufus back with open arms becomes an inevitability, and the question of who she'd “choose” immaterial. The focus of the climax was no longer only Cyril's concern over losing his new way of life. Now, Cyril also attempts to protect Elizabeth from her own kindness, and spare her the doomed proposition of helping a cause so lost as Rufus.

The confrontation between Cyril and Rufus serves as a resurrection, a second ordeal and a final test of their love, selflessness, and commitment. Hunting down Rufus and concealing his identity, Cyril accidentally shoots down Thomas on a dark night, believing him to be Rufus. Rufus witnesses the apparent murder, and it throws him into a rage, as savage and animal as the one that fell Mathius. Cyril attempts to fend him off, but is overwhelmed. It's only when discovering Cyril's identity, and the wedding band on his finger, that Rufus hesitates.

With that split-second opening, Cyril plunges his arrows into Rufus, grievously wounding him. Cyril, the defeated and exhausted Rufus at his mercy, hesitates too. In earlier drafts, Thomas, his consciousness finally restored through Rufus' healing, forced Cyril to have mercy. My initial love and pity for Rufus made me want his quest to have purpose on some level. In succeeding to restore Thomas, he would have proved in a tangible way some fundamental positive value. Yet in figuring out how to maximize the significance of Cyril's forgiveness, I eventually decided that the less functional value Rufus presented, the more substantial and commendable Cyril's mercy would be. Besides that, any indication of Thomas' survival would have given away the ending. It'd have became too easy to anticipate Thomas interfering and saving Rufus.

With Thomas eliminated, it better allowed the climax to prove Rufus and Cyril's character. Cyril, distraught and confused by Rufus staying his hand, asks him: if he told him Elizabeth was happy, that they both were, could Rufus stay away? In other words, could he do what was best for her at the greatest of all possible personal expense? There, after having gone so far and back and finally so close to finished, Cyril asks of Rufus the greatest of all possible sacrifices.

Perhaps my most vivid memory of watching a particular film for the very first time was seeing *It's A Wonderful Life* with my siblings one lazy Christmas Eve. I was 16 or 17 at the time, on the cusp of adulthood, and prone to sanctimony and self righteousness. Right or wrong, I felt unfairly punished

and excluded by the world for my gentleness and over inflated sense of morality.

Into that juvenile haze of fearfulness and self-pity stumbled *It's a Wonderful Life*. I had some vague sense of the film, cobbled together by reputation and decades worth of parodies. I quickly found my preconceived notions of the film as a cheery piece of Holiday fluff dashed. With its protagonist George Bailey, an ambitious dreamer such as myself, *It's A Wonderful Life* confronts my greatest nightmare. Time and time again, George's selflessness costs him the relevance and success he covets. Whether it be skipping college to run his father's business or giving up his honeymoon to help the town during a banking crisis, year after year George sacrifices more and more for a greater good, yet goes unrewarded and unrecognized.

George Bailey epitomizes the unrelenting self-flagellation of doing the right. One of the great functions of every story I write is making peace and finding solace against ugly truths, and there is no harsher reality to confront than the fact that sometimes doing the right thing means getting punished for it. True, genuine selflessness, the kind that expects nothing in return, not even karmically or metaphysically, is by definition self destructive. Unless, by some miracle, it perpetuates itself. That's *It's A Wonderful Life*. In the end, George's kindness finally finds its way back to him, and his community lifts him out of the pit his own decency dug him.

An underrated part of what makes that famous ending so uplifting is that George never expects to be rescued from his plight. As he rushes home to gleefully embrace his family, his sense of self worth restored by the Angel Clarence's revelation of the cruelty of a world without him, George still fully expects to go to jail due to unfounded rumours and the absent-mindedness of his uncle. George asks nothing. He simply does good, is grateful to have done good, and is willing to suffer for it. His selflessness is total.

On a much, much more subdued scale, the culmination of Rufus' arc mirrors George's.

Brutalized and debased for all his noble intentions, Rufus stares death in the face at the hands of Cyril, a man who once detested him. Rufus has given everything. His body, his beliefs, and his soul. All he has left is the dream of home. With heavy heart, Rufus agrees to leave, and finally, with that supreme act of earnest selflessness, he inspires a return. He finally wins the forgiveness and love of his enemy.

In this moment, Cyril proves his growth and character with the most selfless act of which he is capable: walking away, and allowing Rufus, the man he once hated, the man he was sure was incapable of redemption, the opportunity to go home. In winning Cyril's forgiveness, Rufus finally earns his peace. Cyril goes out into the world, finally able to find new and independent direction, and Rufus drags his weary bones home, unburdening himself of his famous spear, the symbol of his old self, the weapon so heavy only he could carry.

Cyril, in his discovery of the other side to his indoctrination, to new voices of dissent, is pulled between a life's worth of hate and a new chance at forgiveness, drawn away from violence and tribalism towards the peace he discovers at Elizabeth's side. Circumstances force both he and Rufus to sway precariously close to the dark, before being rescued, restored, and inspired by mutual selflessness.

Chapter 6: Additional Research, Influences

When it came to research, I delved into what drew me to this idea in the first place, which was my dissatisfaction with the perpetuation of the almost eugenic framing of heroes in modern film. Films and stories like 2009's *Star Trek* or the *Harry Potter* series feature “hero of destiny” stories that glorify bloodlines, lineage, and predestiny carried on through parentage as supreme virtues. James T. Kirk, *Star Trek's* protagonist, is a complete washout in life, save for the fact that he had a heroic father who died as Kirk was born. Naturally, Kirk thus has uncommon untapped potential. Harry Potter has no memory of his parents, both of them having died when he was a baby. When he learns they were wizards who thwarted the supreme villain of the unseen world of magic, he is thrust into a fantastical world in which he is a revered celebrity. Neither of these characters have ever consciously accomplished anything. Yet through the achievements of their parents, whom they never even knew, they are deemed exceptional. Rufus functions as a rejection of that premise. Rumours of a magical bloodline are unfounded. In fact, his talents and inclinations are actually opposite to his Father's. Genealogy has nothing to do with who Rufus is. It is circumstance, experience, and relationships that shape him.

Expanding my understanding of the intricacies of fictional worlds on film was a must. The intention with *God of Toil* was never to create all that foreign a setting, so worlds that relied on theocracies, monarchies, or aristocracies as a form of government were where the research began. The Godkings wielding great power doesn't distinguish them much from other monarchies, other than the fact their sporting superhuman abilities makes their claim to divine right a bit more plausible. Films like *Braveheart, 300, Spartacus*, and *Gladiator*, which revolve around a sort of common man rebellion

against cruel dictator types, were useful references, but the themes of my screenplay required a greater emphasis on eventually rendering the Royal Family sympathetic. Films which could elicit pathos for their villains by putting their behaviour in the context of a greater good proved incredibly valuable. China's *Hero,* which focuses on the gradual revelation of the dignity and valour of a conquering warlord the protagonist seeks to assassinate, served as useful example.

The highlight of my research here was without a doubt *Harikiri*, one my new absolute favourite films. In it, a man attempts to avenge his son-in-law, who was forced to kill himself for a seemingly dishonourable attempt to extort some money out of a noble family. The whole film is a careful investigation of the intentions behind that initial disgrace, and a critique on the fluidity and complexity of morality and honour. One unforgettable scene features the protagonist Tsugumo discovering his son-in-law sold his sword long ago in an attempt to feed their shared family. To most Samurai, selling a sword would be looked upon as disgraceful. Yet Tsugumo begs his dead son-in-law's forgiveness. Tsugumo deems himself selfish, because he never thought or dared to go that far to save those dearest to him. His daughter and her children die, and Tsugumo rebels against the Bushido code and the culture he'd spent his life preserving, a culture that once made him a figure of reverence and a peerless warrior. It's a film where the moral high ground and our understanding of characters' righteousness flips completely. That's a dynamic *God of Toil* desperately sought to recreate.

War movies (or Anti-War movies) were critical as well. With Rufus loathing his status as killing machine, and sporting profound regret for acts he deems intense moral failures, Vietnam and Post-Vietnam war movies like *Platoon, Apocalypse Now*, and even *First Blood* provided useful insight on the emotional and mental state of a disillusioned soldier caught in an unwinnable war. Watching *The Best Years of Our Lives*, which focuses on soldiers attempting difficult readjustments to domestic life, was also a moving and useful experience, even though it didn't necessarily focus on the unethical

nature of war itself.

A great influence on the love between Rufus and Elizabeth was the troubled and unfulfilled romance between Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon.* They are a pair of great, famous warriors, revered and honoured across all China. Yet out of obligation to her fallen husband and his dear departed friend, as well as their status as defenders of justice and honour, their profound connection and mutual understanding remains unexplored and unspoken.

In Li's final moments, as poison courses through his body, he confesses his feelings to Yu. More importantly, he admits to enormous, crippling regret and shame. A man as great and admired as has ever been looks back upon his life as an utter waste because he ran away from what he wanted most. Yet it's too late, and now, on the brink of the afterlife he's spent his entire life preparing himself for, he wants nothing but to be by Yu's side for all eternity, even if it's as a doomed ghost.With Rufus and Elizabeth, I sought to explore the life Li and Yu wish they had. They eschewed their status and their legend to live quietly and modestly with one another.

If drama is conflict, than the pure, basic conflict of a fight scene should be supremely dramatic, a significant and emotional experience. There's nothing more boring than a fight scene that delays the narrative, especially when they're so capable of not only culminating a sequence, but driving it. *Rob Roy* features a masterful fight scene in its climax. In the finale, a magnificent and moving story is told almost wordlessly in the midst of a few minutes. The whole film may as well serve as preamble. Tim Roth and Liam Neeson play a pair of characters as opposed as possible in appearance, background, personality, and honour. Throughout the entire film, they skirt in and out of each other's paths, their face off delayed. The despicable Cunningham, Roth's character, eludes his comeuppance, until he willingly engages Neeson's Roy in a duel. Cunningham, a foppish and elitist Englishman, seemingly justifies his cruelty and entitlement with his swiftness and skill. The low born and graceless Scotsman

Roy can't so much as a lay a finger on him, swinging clumsily and absorbing countless wounds. Eventually, Cunningham sets his sword atop the the shoulder of a Roy he believes defeated, and taunts him. Roy grabs Cunningham's blade in his bare hand, and as Cunningham tries to wrestle free, Roy rises up and cleaves him nearly in half.

There are a thousand sword fights as well choreographed as the duel in *Rob Roy*. What elevates it is the way it tells the whole story of the film in microcosm. It leads the audience to believe in the inevitability of its antithesis: Cunningham is superior, and his breeding and class render him unaccountable to lesser peoples. From that potential nightmarish conclusion, so real within that fight, the film rescues us with Roy's triumph, offering an exhilarating catharsis born out of Roy's character and profound endurance in the face of unfathomable suffering.

Rufus, Reznick and Mathius were characters for whom expressive approaches to combat were styled. As an adult, Rufus fights defensively, always doing his best to minimize the damage he inflicts upon his attackers. Reznick, twisted, beastly, and hateful, fights with fury and abandon, like a fierce, rabid animal. Mathius, meanwhile, engages in combat while not engaging, creating distance and never demeaning himself. Thanks to his powers, he never sullies himself with so much as lifting a sword with his hand. Like Cunningham and Roy, all three are emphatically distinct from each other.

Physical danger has been depicted with such frequency in film that it has lost its immediacy and become unreal. Fight scenes must have risks and danger beyond the corporeal. Choices, styles, and method should be expressive. With Rufus, a character was designed for whom every blow thrown was a moral failing. He is disgusted with his status as warrior supreme, and wishes no harm upon even his greatest enemy. In every encounter, his life as well as his soul is at risk, and protecting one means endangering the other. Thus there exists a deep, personal tension with every choice he makes. No matter what he does, he faces a severe, agonizing failure.

Chapter 7: Final Thoughts

Writing *God of Toil* was an absolutely joyful experience. My education as a writer has been spent dreaming myself capable of something like this. This is the sort of thing I'd have been embarrassed to write for much of my life. My stories so far have been by rule modest, grounded in more reputable genres and respectable influences. I've been running away from stories like this throughout my adult life.

God of Toil isn't exactly the type of screenplay that could be produced tomorrow. Of the four original features I've now written, it's certainly the most unlikely to catch the eye of the other independents and starving artists of the world. Maybe it could have a life as a Graphic Novel miniseries. Maybe interests in original, ambitious properties will emerge. Maybe years from now, I'll develop into a hot commodity.

None of these possibilities, however, compelled me at all to write this story. My sole purpose was creating something as new and important to me as possible at this moment in my life. This is the best story I'm capable of right now because it's what interests me the most. My life has always existed along side these genres, these themes, and these archetypes. I've taken everything I love in the world, everything I believe in, and condensed it here. The result is something, for all its ambition, for all its outlandishness, I believe to be important and valuable.

Every writer who puts pen to paper or fingers to keyboard has some delusions of grandeur. They think they're important, or at the very least, they hope what they have to say is. In my case, that narcissistic impulse frequently butts heads with self loathing, and that sometimes means work more compromised or defensive than it should be. I've spent a lot of my life chipping away at my own

overactive senses of shame and guilt, and I think I'm happier and more positive every day for it.

Nothing matters to me more than story. As I see it, meaning can not exist unless we imagine our acts as causal links in a narrative. In this massive black void that is our universe, story shapes and defines everything. Purpose, direction, hope, memory, everything. Especially these sorts of grand, mythic tales. They're more than just wish fulfilment. These are the stories that reach the most and most endear themselves to people. People define their identities by them. I once had a Batman T-Shirt for every day of the month. People do the same with *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, and countless others.

Writing *God of Toil* was an experience and pleasure I'm grateful for. The love I have for it is so complete that whether or not other people share my passion for the material is immaterial. *God of Toil*'s characters, themes, and world will summon me back to them some day, I'm sure. That passion matters. That's worth sharing.

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