

LIPKO PARK

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ABSTRACT

Lipko Park is a six-part TV murder mystery, based on characters from my actual family. My MFA thesis comprises the 64-page script for the one-hour Pilot Episode, the 21-page “Treatment” for Episode Two, and the 23-page “Series Bible” (which details the themes, characters, episode structure and tone, and outlines all six episodes of Season One).

Lipko Park tells the story of a 36-year-old named JOE and his relationship with his mentally ill, bedridden father, MAX LIPKO. Max was charged with the murder of Joe’s maternal grandfather in 1985, but was eventually exonerated due to lack of evidence.

The case went cold.

Now, 35 years later, Joe has been burdened with Max’s care. Max is holed up in a rented hospital bed in Joe’s spare room, paralyzed from the waist down. Joe is struggling with both the medical bills and the emotional drain of Max’s belligerent, manipulative personality. Joe decides to investigate the cold case himself, secretly intending to prove that his father *did* commit the murder and to get his dad out of his life once and for all.

With themes of landscape as metaphor, class struggle, doing the right thing versus doing the lawful thing, identity, and family as both a blessing and a curse, *Lipko Park* is part *True Detective*, part *The Night Of* and part something very personal.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisor and former professor Howard Wiseman for the sheer number of times I made him read drafts of the Pilot script and Series Bible, and for his tireless wisdom and insights into story craft, character, dialogue and structure. Every set of notes I received from Howard was incisive and inspirational. I rarely disagreed with them and, if/when I did, the disagreement invariably pushed me into fresh creative territory.

I am also grateful to my reader and former professor Tereza Barta, and to my former professor Rebecca Schechter. Tereza is a heart-on-her-sleeve dramaturge and gave me resonant story and drama notes. Rebecca is the high priestess of television storytelling and was formative in shaping this project in the early stages.

I would further like to thank the other colleagues and friends who have taken the time to read and comment on *Lipko Park* in its various incarnations. Prominent among them are Professor Amnon Buchbinder, my wife Day Helesic, my daughter Ava Dunnison, my sister Elaine Connolly, my creative partner Dwayne Beaver, seasoned story editor Rudy Thauberger, my classmates in Rebecca Schechter's Writing For Television course, and my agents Brent Sherman and Sohrab Merchant.

Last but certainly not least, I would like to thank Graduate Program Assistant Kuowei Lee. As fellow graduate students rightfully tell Kuowei on a daily basis, Kuowei is an instrumental resource, facilitator and academic coach, and we would be lost without him.

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INTRODUCTION

Lipko Park, a limited TV series, is a murder mystery based on the true story of my family. My **Thesis Proposal** was to research and write the script of the Pilot Episode, the Treatment of Episode Two and the Series Bible.

The **Genres** this story fits into are crime, mystery, Canadian historical drama and autobiographical memoir

Here's the mystery:

In 1985, a body washed up on a Vancouver beach.

The autopsy revealed that it was multimillionaire RON McCafferty. He had died a week earlier – from a .22 calibre bullet wound to the head, execution style. The bones of his right hand were significantly crushed, his torso had four additional bullet wounds and \$2,000 in cash was found stuffed into the breast pocket of the silk bathrobe still tethered to his body.

The murder was never solved.

Decades later, a TV editor named JOE pitches the mystery as an episode for the true crime series *We, The Jury*. The victim was Joe's maternal grandfather. Not only that but Joe's dad, MAX LIPKO, was charged with the murder and spent time in prison for it. Max was eventually exonerated due to lack of evidence – despite the prosecution being convinced he was guilty.

The victim's blood runs through Joe's veins. Does the murderer's, too?

Max is now an elderly, impossible sonofabitch, and is holed up in a rented hospital bed in Joe's spare room. The cost of Max's private nurses has put Joe in terrible debt. Joe believes that he and Max would both be happier if Max was in a home. But that would be even more expensive than

the nurses – *unless* Joe can get Max certified under the Mental Health Act, in which case the Ministry would step in and take over. Could digging into Max’s past provide that ticket?

The TV producers commission the episode, and Joe starts researching.

One of the first things Joe learns is that Max wasn’t the only suspect. The following is a diagram of Joe’s family tree, with the victim and multiple suspects identified:

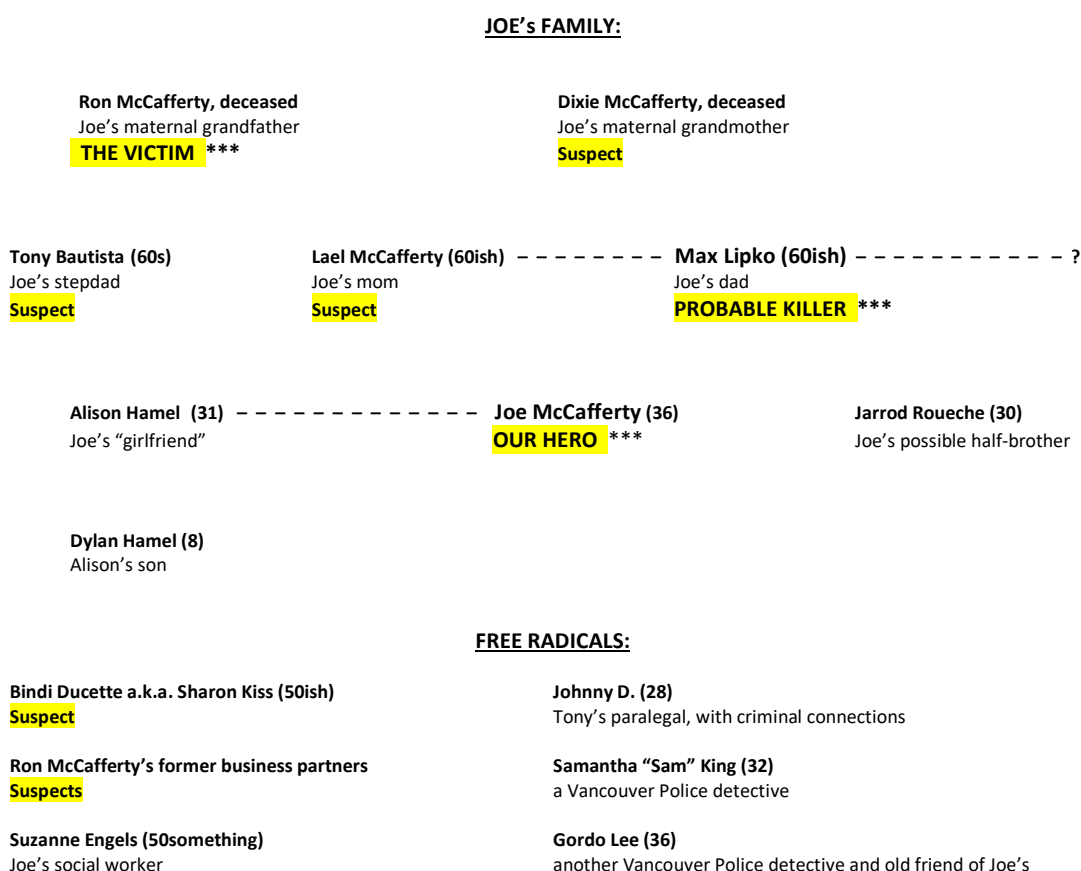


Image 1: Joe’s family tree

As Joe continues to dig, his spadework not only unearths dark family secrets – it triggers another murder.

*

On the surface, *Lipko Park* is a murder mystery with many twists and a shock of an ending. But it's also about Joe's drive to dig into his family history and deal with his grandiose, violent father. It's about how the black hole of Joe's family is the source of both his identity and his pain. He can never get away from it. He's always drawn back in. That's the problem with family: as hard as you might try, you can never divorce them. Nor can you kick their genes out of your DNA.

Or *can* you? Can someone successfully repress or control the undesirable traits they inherited from their parents – in this case mental illness, the “Warrior Gene” and a proclivity for violence? And if so, can they do it without also repressing the traits that make them emotionally available and socially ‘well-adjusted’?

THEMATIC & TOPICAL ORIGINS

I grew up on the West Coast of Canada, surrounded by larger-than-life characters and stories as big as the mountains. Some of my relatives were self-made tycoons; others did hard time in prison. But I've never seen anything like their incredible stories on the screen – which fuels my creativity as a storyteller.

My father was a hoarder on a scale that makes the characters depicted in the reality TV series *Hoarders: Buried Alive* look like they've just entered the initial stages of the disease. This isn't a true drawing of his home, but it could've easily been a sketch of one of the less cluttered corners of his 6,000 square foot monster house:

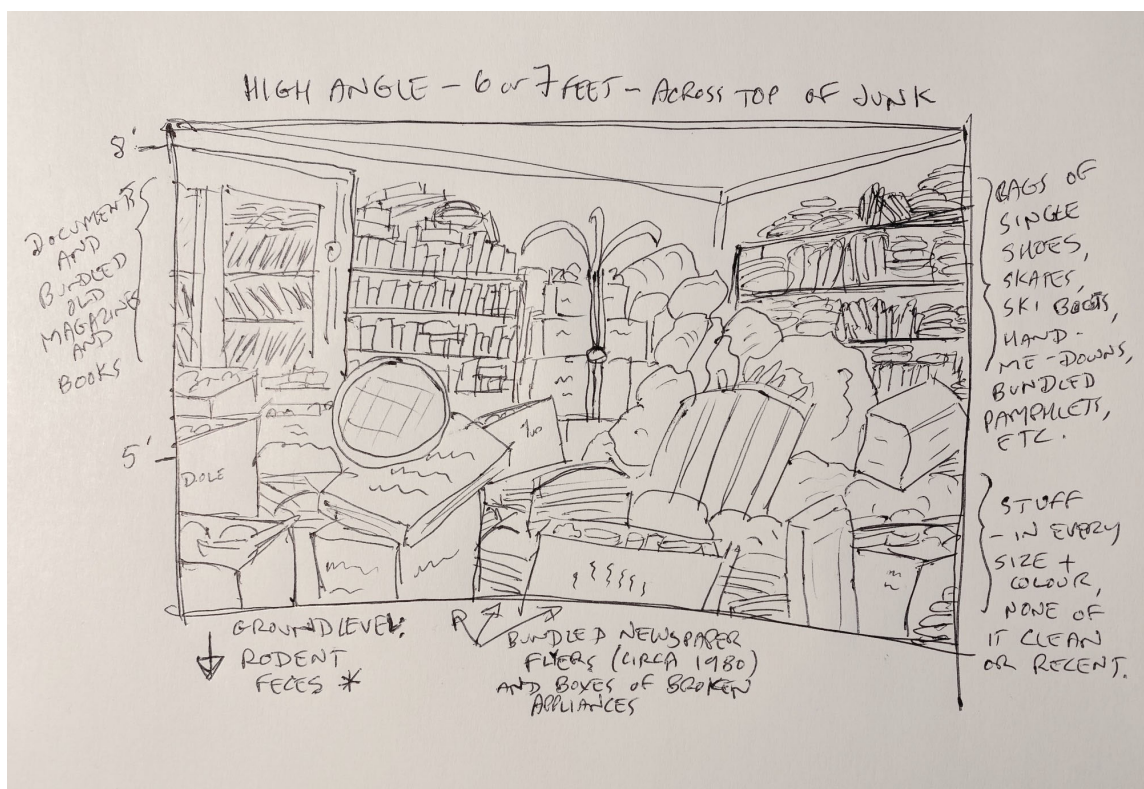


Image 2: Max's clutter, drawing by James Dunnison

He was also violent and anti-social (yet bizarrely loved to converse and sermonize on the phone for hours at a time), with a fetish for guns and ammunition.

When I was around 12, I realized that other kids in my dad's neighbourhood would change sides of the street as they walked past his home. And I understood why: anyone contemplating the hermit living in that house, which was a cornucopia of useless junk spilling right out onto the street, would've understood immediately that the resident was disturbed and to be avoided, the kind of individual who might walk into a school or post office and commit a mass killing.

A decade ago, I had the spark of a story idea based on my dad.

I was reflecting on the concept of "**involuntary memory**," as Samuel Beckett discusses at length in his critical examination of Marcel Proust's masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past*.

The unnamed narrator in *Remembrance of Things Past* dips a madeleine into his tea at the beginning of the book. The taste and smell of it suddenly trigger memories of his childhood in Combray, which he recounts in a vivid, marvelous flashback.

200 or 300 pages later, we come back to him dipping the madeleine in his tea and remembering.



Image 3: Photo of a madeleine dipped into tea, photo by James Dunnison

It got me thinking about my father, and how each of the “collectibles” he hoards might spontaneously spark his memories of both happier times and tougher times, and might even provide clues that help solve a murder mystery.

I wrote an outline for the idea and titled it *Collectibles*.

The concept kept drifting between front and back burners in my creative life – until a few years ago, when I decided to commit and fully develop it.

I wrote a sprawling, 102-page outline of a six-part murder mystery based on the premise. The spirit of that outline, and much of the content, remain true to this day. I had even started to explore the central theme: a character whose biggest fear was to turn into their emotionally disturbed, violent father, and how that sets them on a path to prove their father’s guilt in a murder, hoping to get him out of their life once and for all.

But I became increasingly aware that my outline was meandering and too dense. It wasn’t fulfilling on the kind of story I set out to deliver. Much of this was wrapped up my attempt to accurately portray and honour the characters in my family and their extraordinary stories, which often diluted or worked at cross purposes to the central plot.

I am a huge fan of crime fiction, both in literature and on the screen, and I ultimately hoped to incorporate elements of my life into a Nordic Noir-style thriller – not necessarily autobiographical in plot, but in location, character and theme.

My favourite writer of the genre is Jo Nesbo.¹

Nesbo's writing is like a fusion of the grittiness of Jim Thompson (*The Killer Inside Me*, *The Grifters* and *Pop. 1280*), the clever plotting of John le Carré (*The Spy Who Came In From The Cold*) and the precise prose and human observation of Canadian Nobel Prize laureate Alice Munro (*Lives of Girls and Women*, *The Progress of Love* and *Dear Life*).

But I hadn't produced anything with even a hint of the above. I kept re-reading what I'd written, double-thinking it, massively re-writing it, and hating the results. In short, I was stuck. I realized that in order to do my story justice, I needed to reach out for the kind of peer support, exchange of ideas, structure, deadlines and critical environment offered by York University's Graduate Program in Film.

I applied to York with my 102-page series outline. I began my studies in the Fall 2018 semester.

PROCESS

General

It has been a long and intense creative journey. Here's a pictorial representation:

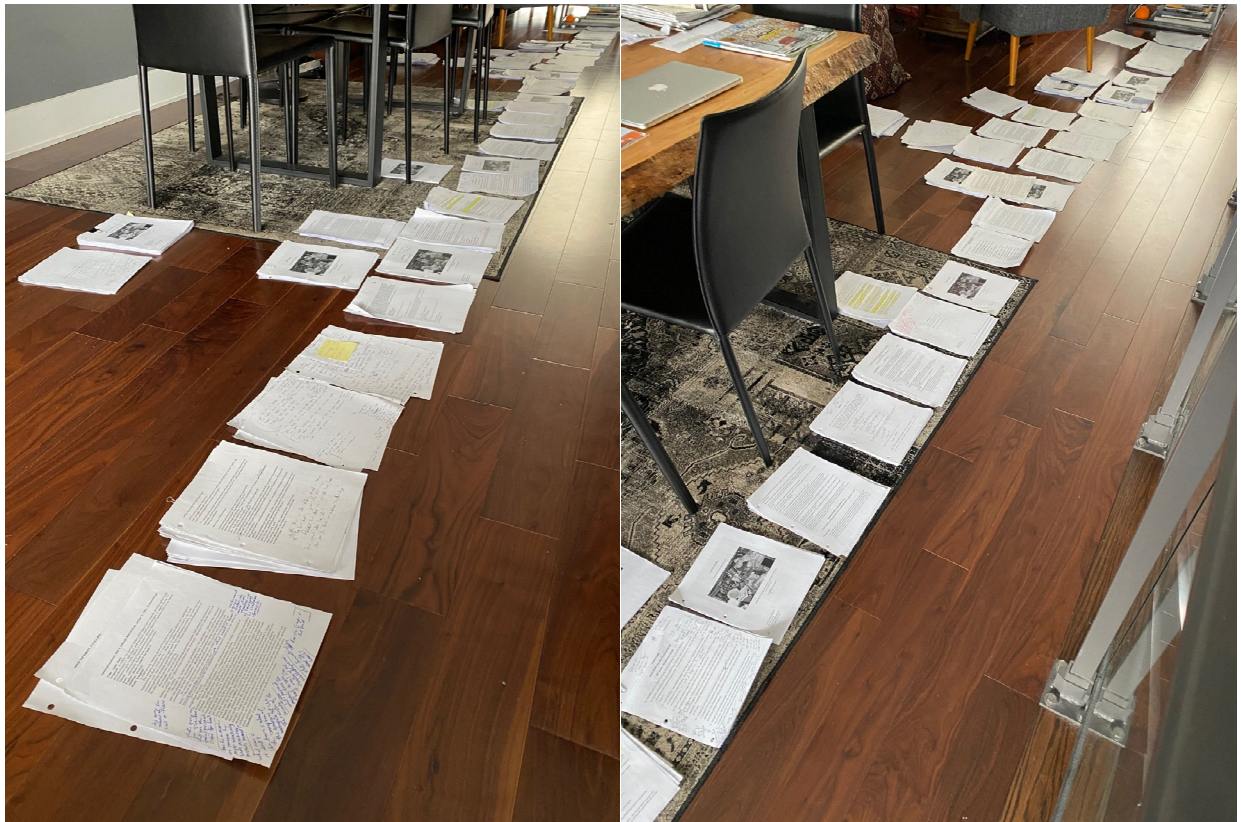


Image 4: Layout of drafts of “Lipko Park,” by James Dunnison

Each pile on the bottom (right) row represents a significant draft or stage of development. I count 27 of them. The piles above the bottom row represent other elements (notes, research, etc.) that went into that particular stage or draft.

It's important to note that these piles only go back to September 2018, essentially since I began the graduate program at York University. Previous to that (as mentioned in my “THEMATIC & TOPICAL ORIGINS” section), I had been chewing on and developing this concept for a decade.

My first round of feedback at York was in response to my 102-page series outline and my MFA thesis proposal, and was given to me verbally by Amnon Buchbinder (my supervisor at the time) and Howard Wiseman (my reader at the time) in a café on Bloor Street.

Their main comment was that my central character, JOE McCAFFERTY, needed to be bolder and more in the driver's seat of the story. They suggested I look deeper into who he is as a person, asking myself these questions: Why do we like Joe? What are his strengths? Why do we follow him on his journey? Why do we buy into him emotionally? Why does Joe *need* to find out what happened and solve his grandfather's murder mystery (need versus want)? We discussed the movie *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and how the need of Mildred (played by Frances McDormand) vigorously drives the story.

We also discussed story structure, character arc and "The Hero's Journey," as defined in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. We focused mainly on three of the early stages: The Call to Adventure, Refusal of The Call, and Crossing The Threshold.

The topics covered and questions raised in this marathon conversation then haunted the next 18 months of my creative process – in the best way.

Also at this time, I had been developing a completely unrelated TV series (*My Little Eye*) in Rebecca Schechter's Writing For Television course. I was happy with the progress on *My Little Eye* but, after the conversation with Amnon and Howard, I realized how much work I had ahead of me on my thesis project, *Lipko Park* (formerly entitled *Collectibles*). I proposed to Rebecca that I drop the development of *My Little Eye* and instead use my time in her class to focus on *Lipko*. Thankfully, she agreed.

Rebecca's course consisted of breaking down and analyzing a vast range of contemporary scripted TV series and their screenplays, and generating our own original content. Of the nine writing exercises she assigned, the final six were to develop a single concept in the traditional stages of a professional TV show: a 1-page series Premise, the first draft of the Series Bible, a beat sheet for the Pilot Episode, an outline of the Pilot Episode, the first draft of the Pilot script and a second draft of the Series Bible.

Rebecca read the new 1-page series Premise (revised from my original thesis proposal to incorporate some of the feedback from Howard and Amnon). She thought it was "very compelling." She also strongly felt that while I should solve the cold case by the end of Episode Six (the final episode of Season One), I shouldn't be too quick to resolve any of the deep family issues by then – in order to keep the door open for a second season.

Howard Wiseman read the new premise as well, commented that it was "both fascinating and challenging in scope," and reiterated some of the structural points he had made earlier. He also planted a seed that would grow and eventually bloom in later drafts of my material: "Does Joe have his own murderous instincts, like his dad's?"

First Draft of the Bible

Rebecca's response to my first draft of the Series Bible was that it was a "well-written, well thought-out document" but it also contained "too much story for six hours." She encouraged me to trim or cut a number of the subplots and tie the A and B stories more organically together. She also suggested that I drop my homage to *Citizen Kane* from the beginning of the Bible and leave it for the Pilot script. This homage is a detailed, cinematic description of how Max's property, which he affectionately calls Lipko Park, would first be revealed to the audience – similar to

Xanadu's grand appearance in *Citizen Kane*. (On a thematic note: both use landscape as a metaphor for character. In *Citizen Kane*, the landscape tells us about the loneliness and excesses of Charles Foster Kane. In *Lipko Park*, it tells us about the neediness and mental illness of Max Lipko.)

Reflecting on both Rebecca's comments and Howard's previous notes, I started developing the idea that Max (Joe's father, and the primary suspect in the murder of Joe's maternal grandfather) should himself be murdered, but not until late in Episode Six, which would set up Season Two with a second mystery to be solved. If I wove Joe's own propensity for violence into Season One, then I could end Season One on the arrest of Joe as a suspect in Max's murder, and leave the audience with the questions, "Did Joe in fact do it (we now know that he's capable of it)? And if not Joe, then who?"

Sadly, it was around this time that Amnon Buchbinder had to withdraw as my thesis supervisor for health reasons. I had really valued his insights and profound understanding of story craft. Howard then became my supervisor and Tereza Barta came aboard as my reader.

First Draft of the Pilot Script

The next stage of development was the "Beat Sheet" for the Pilot Episode. A Beat Sheet consists of a beat-by-beat outline of the plot and subplots.

Rebecca, Howard and Tereza each weighed in with feedback.

Rebecca felt I had addressed many of the notes she had on the bible and suggested that in the next stage (the outline of the Pilot) I focus on whose "want" is driving the story. For me, it was clear: Joe's want drives the story. As a child, Joe wished Max would get into a car accident and die. As his present 36-year-old self, he's come up with a more proactive way to get Max out of

his life: he pitches his grandfather's cold case as an episode of the true crime series *We, The Jury*. He believes that by re-telling the story on TV, he can prove Max guilty of his grandfather's murder. (As a pop culture nerd, Joe is versed in the many films and TV documentary series that have had a direct impact on criminal justice, including Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* and Andrew Jarecki's *The Jinx*.) If Joe succeeds, Max will be arrested and imprisoned. Even if Joe doesn't succeed, but he manages to present a clear picture of Max's psychological imbalance and homicidal ideation, he can get Max certified under the Mental Health Act, at which point the Ministry will step in and take over Max's care. Further yet, even if plan B fails, the episode of *We, The Jury* will constitute a career bump for Joe and earn him enough money to put Max in a care facility. It's a potential win-win-win.

At about this point in my process, Howard and I began discussing "framing devices." To punch up the opening of the Pilot Episode and create a strong hook, I decided to start the episode with a flash forward to late in Episode Six, when Joe is trying to stop the blood gushing out of Max's slashed throat, and the cops burst in and think Joe did the slashing. I would then end the Pilot script with another flash forward, picking up where the first one left off: Joe gets thrown into a holding cell, stares in a daze at the crusted blood on his hands, and hopes this is all just a dream.

Howard also suggested some clever re-structuring of the Episode Two and Three outlines as they appeared in the Series Bible.

Tereza gave notes on the Premise, the Bible and the Beat Sheet for the Pilot as well. She only had two or three comments. She said she really liked the bones of the story but thought the *Chinatown*-esque motive for the murder of Joe's grandfather was a cliché and she'd seen it too many times. She suggested something else in its place (plot spoiler alert!): that what motivates LAEL (Joe's mom) to kill her own father (Joe's grandfather) is *a mother's rage*. Lael as a

teenager gets forced by her father to hide her pregnancy and put VALERIE (Joe's half-sister) up for adoption, because Lael's father feels she's shamed the family. Years later, Lael discovers that Valerie had been raised in horrible conditions and Lael had been kept in the dark, unable to do anything to help her.

I thought it was fresh and resonant, and it came organically out of the story elements I had already written. So I stole it. Then I worked in a catalyst for the actual shooting:

On learning of Valerie's fate, Lael confronts her father. Her father (McCafferty) responds like he always has – he tries to fix it by throwing money at it. Two thousand bucks to make Lael feel happy, to make it go away. Lael hits her breaking point. She kills her father with multiple shots from the .22 pistol. Then she shoves the two thousand bucks back into his silk bathrobe.

At the outline stage, Rebecca Schechter gave me additional notes. She asked me to think about Joe's "Theory of The Crime" and whether it was shifting and evolving often enough, as per standard mystery tropes. She felt the first couple of acts could be tightened up, and more attention should be spent on what Joe does for a living and how much he worries about it. She also questioned whether or not it was a good idea to show the audience at the very beginning of Episode One that Max will eventually die a gruesome death. I wasn't convinced that that was a *bad* idea (mysteries frequently start with the body and then work backwards to the motive), so I stuck with the throat-slash scene but made it less conclusive that Max dies from the wound.

Then I began working on the script for the Pilot Episode.

My two favourite stages of writing are the conceptualizing at the beginning – all the big ideas and creative excitement – and then bringing it to life in the first draft of the script, with character attitude, behaviour, tone, dialogue and subtext. My least favourite stage is all the scrutiny,

discussion, re-thinking and re-writing that follows. It's a Sisyphean task and can be spirit-crushing.

Thankfully, Howard, Tereza and Rebecca were as generous in their support and enthusiasm as they were in their criticism. They each offered up different ways of looking at things and gave me countless examples of how other screenwriters had resolved some of the story problems I was struggling with. In fact, they did exactly what Amnon Buchbinder (in his essential book *The Way of the Screenwriter*) says he always tried to do when working as a script doctor or story editor: they helped the writer (me) find the story inside me that wanted to be told.

Key Changes in the Re-Writing Process

The following are summaries of the key changes to the many drafts of the Pilot Script, Series Bible and Treatment of Episode Two that have followed:

1. JOE'S MOTIVE TO VISIT LIPKO PARK IN THE "TEASER"

Originally, I saw Joe venturing out to Lipko Park at the beginning of the Pilot Episode as a spontaneous act, mostly just to get out of the apartment he's trapped in with his dad Max, and get some fresh air. But the action begged for stronger incentive and increased urgency, particularly to justify why Joe would make the trip late in the evening.

I consequently underscored Joe's financial crisis by adding the scene where he reviews his stack of unpaid and overdue bills. He asks his dad what happened to the income tax refund Max was expecting. Max says the government may have sent it to Lipko Park. As Joe heads out the door to Lipko Park, Joe tells Max that he's going to Lipko Park to look for the income tax refund and to take pictures of anything valuable he might be able to put on eBay – in particular that fancy glass cabinet Max told him was worth thousands.

I further added the playful (darkly funny) wrinkle that when Joe gets to Lipko Park and sees the vandalism, he's relieved that at least Max's prized glass cabinet has been left intact. Then Joe gets shot by the vandal's arrow, and the force of it sends him into the glass cabinet, smashing it to smithereens.

2. SUZANNE-THE-THERAPIST BECAME SUZANNE-THE-SOCIAL-WORKER

A couple of my readers noted that the character of Suzanne as written seemed to have more of a social worker's attitude than a therapist's, and that Joe's financial predicament would prevent him from affording a therapist in the first place.

Changing Suzanne into a social worker not only made sense, it helped me streamline Suzanne's functionality in the story. Suzanne introduces the Mental Health Act motive for Joe as a practical solution to his situation (and then Joe becomes intent on getting Max "committed"). The more nuts-and-bolts nature of social work – as opposed to psychotherapy – also allowed me to cut back on Suzanne's unnecessary confessional/expositional scenes with Joe, while it still provided a forum for us to glimpse Joe's interior life. Joe now mistakes Suzanne for a therapist and confides his deepest feelings to her anyway – until she rolls him back by pointing out that she's not a psychologist but maybe he should see one. This permits the necessary exposition to come out in a couple of heart-wrenching yet comically awkward exchanges.

3. JOE DRIVING THE NARRATIVE and CAUSE-AND-EFFECT

Every re-write addressed multiple aspects of character, theme and story structure. But at the centre of each revision was an ongoing effort to hone this as Joe's story, with Joe's wants and needs driving it, and with clear cause-and-effect. By cause-and-effect, I mean that something in Scene A propels Joe into Scene B; Scene B propels Joe into Scene C; and so on.

A few months ago I watched Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*. It's a brilliantly crafted black comedy thriller – with no beat wasted and nothing planted that doesn't develop and eventually throw fuel on the combustive story. It was one more reminder to me that the nature of the crime/mystery genre demands precise, building momentum.

I have a penchant for excessive detail and meandering subplots. I've had to work against these instincts to constantly re-examine what's essential to the central narrative thrust, and to buck any fun I might be having in exploring peripheral riffs on these characters and their individual stories.

4. ROLE OF DYLAN ADDED

The addition of eight-year-old DYLAN came out of various story conversations and reflections. Creating Joe's surrogate fatherhood of Dylan enabled me to show the caring, likeable side of Joe and also an aspect of Joe's character that played into the overarching theme – i.e. that Joe is determined to prove that fathers can be good guys, and that he isn't Max.

5. ROLES OF DETECTIVES GORDO LEE AND SAM KING AUGMENTED/ADDED

GORDO has been a fixture in the story since I first outlined it. But in recent drafts, his character evolved. He is now introduced in the hospital scene at the top of Act I. This killed several birds with one stone: he became not just Joe's old friend but the detective investigating the vandalism and arrow incident at Lipko Park; his friendship with Joe and position at the Vancouver Police Department became an organic source of exposition; and his concern about Joe's dysfunctional relationship with "girlfriend" ALISON (Dylan's mom) became a perfect catalyst for the introduction of SAMANTHA "SAM" KING.

Sam is a detective at the VPD too, and is Gordo's junior. Gordo thinks she and Joe would make a great couple. He assigns Sam to the cold case of Joe's grandfather. Sam and Joe grow close in Episodes Two through Six, as she helps him investigate the murder. They eventually become romantically involved, and a Sam/Joe/Alison love triangle forms.

I like Sam. I get a kick out of writing her, and she serves many narrative functions. She becomes Joe's investigative partner. She's a trained detective with access to police files. She brings some quirky humour and a lightness to the story (reminding Joe and the audience that nice, smart people and functional relationships do exist). She bonds with Joe over their commonalities (both were abused as children; both have an insatiable appetite for justice). And she listens to Joe and actually hears him, in stark contrast to Alison.

6. JARROD'S CHARACTER ROOTED IN "KING LEAR"

In one of our many story sessions, Howard Wiseman asked an inspired question: what if Jarrod, who will eventually be revealed as one of the vandals, wasn't simply Joe's illegitimate half-brother but a son of Max's who felt bitterly kicked to the sidelines, and who believed Lipko Park was his true birthright?

Howard was thinking of the Edmund character and his sibling rivalry with Edgar in *King Lear*. As synopsized by Wikipedia, Edmund "is the illegitimate son of the Earl of Gloucester and the younger brother of Edgar, the Earl's legitimate son. Early on in the play, Edmund resolves to get rid of his brother, then his father, and become Earl in his own right."

Modeling Jarrod on Edmund both strengthens and deepens the story: the vandalism at Lipko Park is no longer some random act; it's intrinsic to the central characters and their story thrust.

I immediately embraced the idea, and have introduced/planted it in the first season.

It will come to the forefront and play a major role in Season Two.

7. SUBPLOTS STREAMLINED OR CUT

Streamlining and cutting subplots has improved the prominence of the A story and tightened the pace. It also enabled me to plant Joe's interest in his grandfather's murder much earlier in the Pilot script.

8. FLASHBACK SEQUENCES CUT FROM PILOT; ADDED TO EPISODE TWO

The six- or seven-page scene-sequence flashback, prompted by Max's reminiscing about the love story between himself and Joe's mom Lael, seemed digressive and brought the Pilot script to a standstill. These scenes feel better motivated and more organic to the flow of Episode Two, and are now incorporated into that episode's Treatment.

9. RANDOM AND NOT-SO-RANDOM RESEARCH DISCOVERIES

As I was developing the Pilot script, I happened to read Bruce Springsteen's soulful autobiography *Born To Run*.

It turns out that The Boss and I (and Joe) share something in common: we grew up as Mama's boys in the shadow of larger-than-life, violent fathers. Springsteen's description of his childhood:

"... A world where men turned into gods and gods into devils ... and I knew it was real. I'd seen gods turn into devils at home. I'd witnessed what I felt was the possessive face of Satan. It was my poor old pop tearing up the house in an alcohol-fueled rage in the dead of night, scaring the shit out of all of us ... physical threat, emotional chaos and the power to *not* love."²

Another quality *Lipko Park* shares with both Springsteen's autobiography and the lyrics of his songs is the intentional mythologizing of a modern place that has rarely, if ever, been

mythologized. In Springsteen's case, it's contemporary New Jersey. In mine, it's the contemporary Canadian West Coast – where, as mentioned in my introduction, I grew up surrounded by stories “as big as the mountains.”

Reflecting further on Springsteen's description of his father, on Max's comparable violent streak, and on the subject of murder, I started researching true-life testimonies of what it's like to be the offspring of a murderer.

The most compelling story I came across was captured in a 6-part autobiographical podcast entitled *My Father The Murderer*, written and narrated by Australian journalist Nina Young, whose own father served time for a gruesome murder. The podcast not only details the factual narrative of the homicide, it probes the impact that the murder and Ms. Young's father had on herself, her younger brother and the community where the crime was committed.

The podcast had a profound effect on me. It provided layers of psychological insight into the story I was trying to tell in *Lipko Park*. It also reminded me about the fact and fiction of MAOA, a.k.a. the “Warrior Gene.” This gene has been linked to antisocial and violent traits in adults. The protein it produces devours the neurotransmitters that control impulsive behaviour.

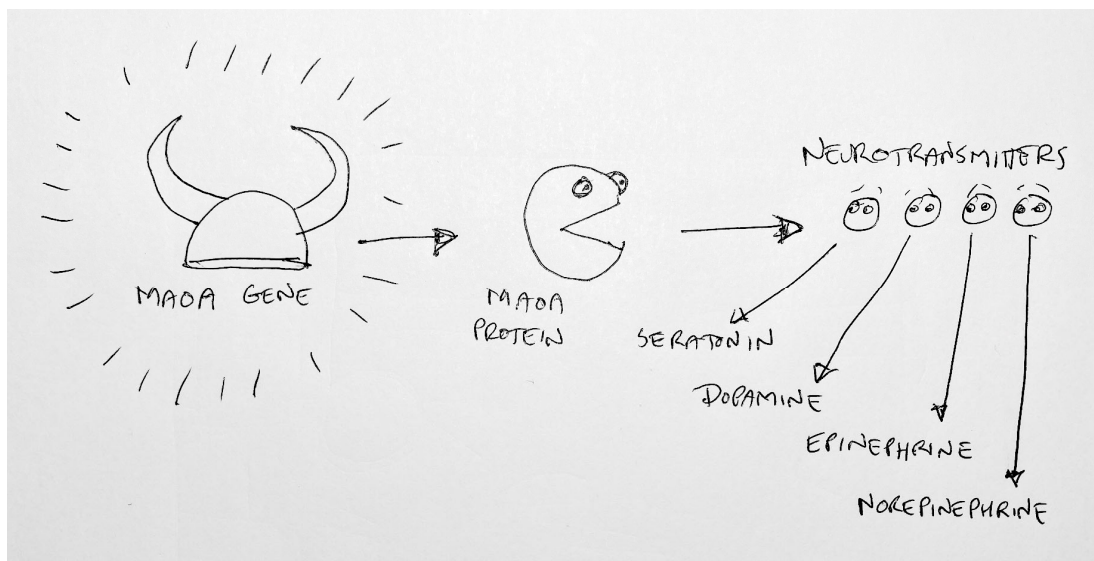


Image 5: Drawing of MAOA "Warrior Gene" impact by James Dunnison

Like Ms. Young and her father, members of my own family have tested positive for the gene.

My Father The Murderer became the most galvanizing piece of research I found. Eventually, it sparked the idea that crystallized the central theme of *Lipko Park*:

10. THE "WARRIOR GENE" AND THE LIPKO FAMILY'S BAD BLOOD

This is how it now plays in the story:

Suspecting that his father Max has the Warrior Gene, Joe gets himself tested for it. He tests positive. It devastates him. He assumes he inherited it from Max, which not only explains the abuse Joe suffered from Max in childhood, it makes Joe begin to fear himself, to fear his own potential for violence. It also convinces him to never have children, because 1) he'd be horrified to create a monster like his dad, and 2) he'd be horrified to become an abusive parent like his dad.

So Joe fears what is etched into who he is. He's threatened by his own identity, as manifested by his father. But his violent heritage is in him like blood. It's *right in his genes*. He realizes he can never escape it.

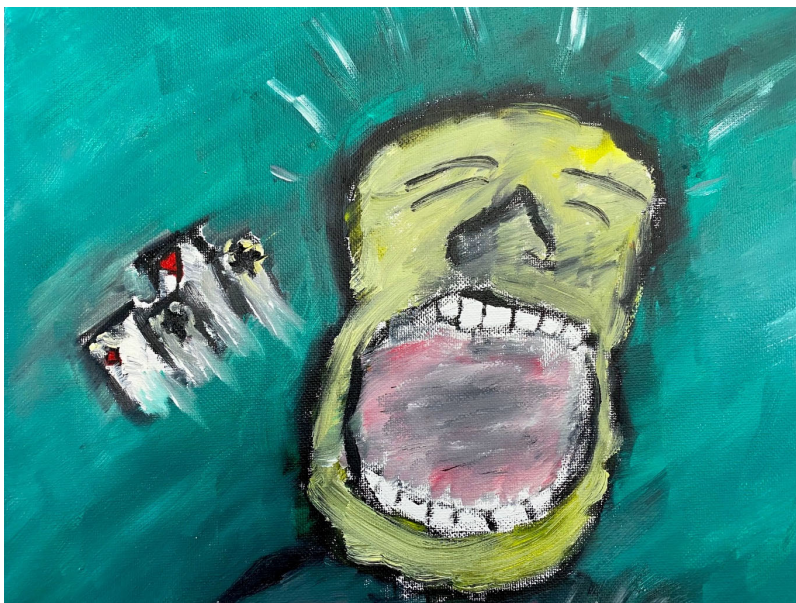


Image 6: "Of Luck and Love," painting by James Dunnison

That, in a nutshell, is Joe's demon. The monkey on his back.

Joe's character arc begins with him hiding, repressing and rejecting his demon, until he finally realizes – through the action of the story – that his path to freedom is to embrace it and come to terms with it.

11. JOE'S COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP WITH LIPKO PARK DEEPENED

The inclusion of the Warrior Gene component also heightens Joe's mixed feelings about Lipko Park – both his hatred of the place and his draw to it. On one hand, the house and grounds are haunted with the memories of Max's violent temper and the beatings Joe endured there as a kid. On the other hand, it keeps luring Joe back. It may, after all, contain the evidence that solves his grandfather's murder and helps Joe kick his dad out of his life for good.

12. JOE'S DREAM SEQUENCES AUGMENTED

The dream sequence revisions and expansions partly came out of the Warrior Gene component as well. In particular, the first one in the Pilot Script is now as much a flashback as it is a dream.

It introduces us to the world of beatings Joe received as a kid, with Max unable to control his angry impulses. It also sheds light on Joe's deep hatred of Lipko Park.

The three dream sequences in the Pilot Episode are clearly nightmares, as is the first dream in the Treatment for Episode Two. But I felt Episode Two begged for a lighter, more playful dream as well, especially as Joe's crush on Sam develops. Hence, I included the "Chagall-esque" dream in Act IV, which is an expression of Joe's bliss in the vein of *The Dude's* hallucinatory dreams in *The Big Lebowski*. It's motivated by Joe growing closer to Sam earlier that day.

13. GENERAL REBUILDING, HONING AND FINESSING

Each draft of the script, Bible and Treatment has also naturally brought about smaller changes and refinements. The following are some random examples, in no particular order:

- Countless dialogue adjustments for the purposes of naturalism, credibility, efficiency, pace and/or dramatic impact.
- Putting all of the Lael memorabilia at Lipko Park into a single box marked "Lael." It's a form of Pandora's Box, and the fact that Joe and Sam find it in the hidden closet – in an episode entitled "Skeletons In The Closet" – isn't a coincidence.
- Each Episode in the bible was given a title, and those titles keep evolving.
- Max's backstory about Jarrod was parceled out into different scenes, to make it feel less expositional.
- The murder of McCafferty is now reiterated visually throughout the Pilot script and the Treatment of Episode Two, both in flashback fragments and in crime scene photos. The intent is to keep it fresh in the audience's mind and to raise new questions about the details of the mystery.

- Joe's pitch of the true crime to his *We, The Jury* producers evolved into his disingenuous claim that "it's somebody else's story." When his producers find out that he lied/distorted, they fire him for lack of journalistic ethics. This becomes Joe's "Refusal of the Call to Adventure" stage, as defined in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero's Journey*. It leaves Joe feeling defeated and ready to abandon his quest. Then when Joe's mom briefly comes out of her demented fog and begs him to solve the mystery, it reinvigorates Joe and his hunger for answers. He "Crosses The Threshold," that other Campbell stage, fully committing to his journey.

MY BACKGROUND

Born with Dyslexia and Attention Deficit Disorder, I naturally ended up in the film industry.

I began my filmmaking career decades ago, as a learning-disabled teenager who convinced high school teachers to let me submit Super8 movies instead of essays. This passion for film landed me in the Film Studies program at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, where I did well academically but realized my true calling was behind the camera. I then transferred to the Cinema Production program at Concordia University in Montréal, with a minor in English Literature. During my time there, I made several experimental films, graduating with a BFA and the Astral Bellevue-Pathé Award for Outstanding Achievement in Filmmaking.

After graduating, I started writing screenplays. Furiously. I had two of my feature scripts optioned by production companies, had a radio play produced by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, was hired as a story consultant and script analyst, directed a couple of short dramas and worked as a professional 16mm and 35mm film and sound editor. Eventually, I apprenticed under Norman Jewison (*In The Heat of The Night*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*) as his “director observer” and wrote and directed my first feature film (*Stuff*) on mini DV with a budget of \$50,000. *Stuff* was a critical success and festival darling, and it launched my 18-year career directing scripted television (close to 100 episodes of everything from poignant comedy-dramas to werewolf and vampire series) for both Canadian and American broadcasters. I've also directed four documentaries, two of which I wrote. For examples of my previous work, please see my website: www.jamesdunnison.com.

Three years ago, I decided to take a break from directing other peoples' screenplays and get back to my own original work and voice, which is the reason I began writing scripts and making films

in the first place. I enrolled in the Masters in Fine Arts (Film) Program at York with a project-specific purpose: use the creative support and critical environment (and deadlines!) the University offers to develop *Lipko Park*.

The following is my professional and artistic curriculum vitae:

JAMES DUNNISON

Directors Guild of Canada #6100. Writers Guild of Canada #XG20-00075.

Selected credits as **WRITER/PRODUCER/DIRECTOR:**

- **I'M FINE** (2019), a short drama.
- **STUFF** (2000), a feature comedy-horror-fantasy.
- **ORGAN MUSIC** (2001), a short comedy-fantasy-drama. Voted *Best Film*, *Best Actress* and *Best Director* by the Film Critics Circle at the 2001 Northwest Film Festival, Washington State.

Selected credits as **DIRECTOR:**

- **CARTER**: 2 episodes of Season 1, Sony Studios (2017-2018).
- **BITTEN**: 8 episodes, seasons 1, 2 and 3. SyFy/CTV/eOne (2013-2016).
- **THE LISTENER**: 1 episode, season 5. Fox International/CTV (2014).
- **SATISFACTION**: Lead director, season 1. 2 episodes. CTV (2013).
- **SEED**: 8 episodes, seasons 1 and 2. Rogers/City (2012-2013).
- **ARCTIC AIR**: 2 episodes, season 1. CBC (2012).
- **LOST GIRL**: 1 episode, season 2. NBC Universal/Showcase (2012).
- **LESS THAN KIND**: 14 episodes over the 4 season run (2007-2012). HBO Canada. Dunnison won a *Canadian Comedy Award* for *Best Direction in a Television Series* for the episode "First Nighters" and was nominated for two *Directors Guild of Canada Awards* and two *Gemini Awards* for *Best Direction in a Comedy Series* for the show. Season 2 won the 2010 *Gemini Award* for *Best Comedy Series*. Season 3 won the 2012 *Canadian Screen Award* for *Best Comedy Series*.
- **TODD AND THE BOOK OF PURE EVIL**: The 2009 pilot for the Fearnert/CTV/Space series, which was greenlit for series production and was nominated for a *Rockie Award* for *Best Pilot* at the Banff World Television Festival. Dunnison directed 6 additional episodes and was nominated for a 2011 *Gemini Award* for his direction of the episode "Phantom of Crowley High," which also won a *Golden Sheaf Award* for *Best Comedy*.

- **HICCUPS:** Multiple episodes of seasons 1 and 2 (2009-2010). Dunnison won a *Leo Award* for *Best Direction* for his episode “Hot Luv.” CTV/The Comedy Network.
- **WALK THE DOG:** Nominated for *Best Direction – Film* at the 2008 Canadian Comedy Awards.
- **ROBSON ARMS:** Multiple episodes over all 3 seasons (2004-2007) – including the season premiere for Season 3 (“Mean Girls”), which was nominated for a 2008 *Directors Guild of Canada Award*. CTV.
- **BLOOD TIES:** 4 episodes, seasons 1 and 2 (2006-2007), including the Season 1 finale. Lifetime/CHUM City.
- **GODIVA’S:** 2 episodes, season 2 (2005). Dunnison was nominated for a *Director’s Guild of Canada Award* for his episode “Out the Door.” CityTV.
- **RAGE** (2004). Received the highest ratings for a one-hour documentary in Global Television’s history.
- **CALL ME AVERAGE** (2004). Winner of a *Special Jury Award* at the 2005 Yorkton International Film Festival, Honorable Mention at the 2004 Columbus International Film Festival and the 2005 *Leo Award* for *Best Documentary*. CBC.
- **PRETTY BOYS** (2002). A documentary that gets into the hilariously conflicted brains of male models in Milan, Italy. Top of the “critics’ picks” list at the 2002 Vancouver International Film Festival. Make Believe Media, CTV.
- **CRACK DOLL HOUSE** (2001), all 6 episodes of the series for CTV/The Comedy Network. A commission based on Dunnison’s original short comedy which won the *Grand Prize* by unanimous jury decision at the 1998 Cabbagetown International Short Film Festival.

Selected credits as **WRITER/DIRECTOR**:

- **CELLULOID DREAMS** (2002), a documentary on “dream logic” in the movies, featuring exclusive interviews with David Lynch, Guy Maddin and Jean-Pierre Jeunet. Independent Film Channel, Paperny Films.
- **POWERFUL LOVE** (1996), a short film and pool of TV commercials which were broadcast on every national Canadian broadcaster on World AIDS Day, 1996, and went on to win the *General Idea Award for Artistic Contribution to AIDS Awareness*.

IN DEVELOPMENT:

- **LIPKO PARK** (a murder mystery limited TV series), as creator/writer/producer.
- **HENRY**, a feature film based on Susin Nielsen’s 2012 Governor General’s Award-winning novel *The Reluctant Journal of Henry K. Larsen*. As producer/screenwriter/director. Received support from The Harold Greenberg Fund.
- **DIRTY WORK** (one-hour TV series), as co-creator/producer/director.

- **DISCIPLINE** (a 6-part TV miniseries), as co-creator/executive producer. Based on the true story of aberrant psychiatrist Dr. James Tyhurst.

OTHER

- Director-In-Residence at the Northwest Film Festival, Spokane, Washington (2001).
- Consultant and adjudicator for Telefilm Canada's "Screenwriter's Assistance Fund" and "Independent Feature Film Fund," 2001-2003.
- Script Analyst for Telefilm Canada and BC Film, 1992-1998.
- Published travel writer and photographer in Canada and the U.S., including a full-page feature article in the *Los Angeles Times*.
- Mentor for Director Observers. Previous shadows have included the celebrated documentarian Nimisha Mukerji (*65 Red Roses*).
- Chair of the Board, Stepping Stone Foundation, a charitable foundation that grants bursaries to single parent students at the University of Toronto.
- Fluent in French.

WHERE *LIPKO PARK* FITS IN RELATION TO MY PREVIOUS WORK

First and foremost, the subject matter of *Lipko Park* – a young adult dealing with dysfunction and/or mental illness in a parent – was also at the heart of my feature film *Stuff* and my most recent short film *I'm Fine*.

Stuff tells the story of a 20-something named Philip who accidentally murders his overbearing mother. Like Joe's father Max in *Lipko Park*, Philip's mother in *Stuff* is cagey, manipulative and a packrat, living like an animal in the corridors that weave through her mountains of worthless junk. *Stuff* may be a comedy (whereas *Lipko Park* is a murder mystery/drama) but they share common themes: familial enmeshment, and the struggle of parenting an ill and impossible parent.

I like to believe that *Lipko Park* picks up where *Stuff* left off and attempts to venture significantly deeper into the terrain.

Similarly, *I'm Fine* addresses the frustrating complexity of dealing with a parent who suffers not only from dementia but also from anosognosia. Anosognosia is a condition which causes an individual to be unaware that they're demented, and unaware of how that's affecting them. The individual neither knows nor believes that they're suffering from memory issues or incompetence.

I think it's easy to grasp how that would further complicate an already difficult disease.

My original title for *I'm Fine* was *You Don't Remember That You Can't Remember*. I've now used that title for an interactive storytelling project I put together in 2019, using the application Twine (<https://twinery.org>). Each story beat in *You Don't Remember That You Can't Remember* leads to multiple choices, each of which takes you either back to an earlier point in the narrative

or to another story beat and group of choices, which then also eventually take you back to an earlier point.

The following is an example of a beat/question and the multiple choices you can click on to continue the narrative (taken from *You Don't Remember That You Can't Remember*):

“You’re chillaxing, listening to your favourite music. You hear a sickening thud. Your elderly mother has fallen in the upstairs bathroom. You race upstairs to ask her through the locked door if she’s okay. “I’m fine!” she shouts and tells you to go away. But she has Alzheimer’s and is legendarily proud. The last time she fell, she was hospitalized. Do you:

“Reason with her to get her to open the door?

“Question her about the nature of her injuries?

“Decide there's nothing you can do for the stubborn old lady and leave her be?”

Ultimately, the content and the form of *You Don't Remember That You Can't Remember* are a commentary on the endlessly cyclical nature of Alzheimer’s disease – which debilitates both the person suffering from it and their caretakers.

It isn’t a coincidence that my father was a mentally ill hoarder and my mother currently suffers from Alzheimer’s, vascular dementia and anosognosia. These topics and associated themes have been a focus of mine for years.

Another element that appears commonly in my work is fantasy, or dream life. My feature film *Stuff* has several sequences in which the audience isn’t sure if the action is occurring for real or just in the head of the character. Motivated by the intensity of the character’s feelings, these sequences are hallucinatory and playful, but they also strive to capture a more expressive version of the character’s emotional state than anything achievable in a “naturalistic” scene.

Because I had made *Stuff*, the Independent Film Channel approached me to make a documentary on fantastic cinema. I chose to narrow the focus to “dream logic in film.” The result was a one-hour documentary entitled *Celluloid Dreams*. It featured exclusive interviews with David Lynch, Guy Maddin, The Brothers Quay and Jean-Pierre Jeunet, and it illustrated our conversations with clips from their films.

The gist of *Celluloid Dreams* is that by disrupting perceived reality, the filmmaker or storyteller can achieve a deeper, more visceral and ironically *truer* truth, just as we do in our dreams. This concept has its roots in the Surrealist art and filmmaking movement (1920s – 1950s), whose most prominent figures were Salvador Dali, René Magritte and Luis Buñuel.

More than just an intellectual curiosity, this is a passion of mine. It springs from the fact that I have an extremely active and vivid dream life. (I remember one of my school teachers telling me we only dream in black and white, and me thinking, “Well that’s just horse shit, and my dreams are living proof.”) It also explains the number of dream sequences I’ve layered into *Lipko Park*.

The crime/mystery/thriller genre is another passion of mine, particularly when the story involves a criminal and/or homicidal relative. This is on full display in *Lipko Park*, in my feature film *Stuff*, and in each of the three other miniseries I’ve had in development for the past few years: *Henry*, *Dirty Work* and *Discipline*.

OTHER INFLUENCES

My creative work has been influenced by a host of films, filmmakers, authors, screenplays and novels. I'm a devoted student of each of them.

The writing of crime novelist Patricia Highsmith has significantly informed the style, tone and content of *Lipko Park*. Like Jo Nesbo, Highsmith's plotting is masterful and keeps you on the edge of your seat, yet the storytelling is also fundamentally character-driven and never veers from naturalism or psychological credibility. This likely explains why she's had several of her novels adapted for the screen.

I went through a Patricia Highsmith phase in my mid-twenties, and go back frequently to her work for a hit of crystalline prose and brilliant story craft. Alfred Hitchcock's adaptation of her novel *Strangers On A Train* deserves all the praise it has received. The other stand-out adaptation is Wim Wender's *The American Friend*, which was based on Highsmith's novel *Ripley's Game*. A few years ago, I watched it for the third time at The Park repertory cinema in Montréal. I'm not sure if it was the expression on my face or something I muttered, but when I was leaving, the theatre owner somehow noticed how much the film had impacted me (again!). He said, "I know! It's a perfect movie, right?!"

Reading *The Talented Mr. Ripley*, the first novel in the *Ripley* series (collectively called the "Riplied"), was another utterly indelible experience for me. Highsmith manages to put you into the head of a homicidal sociopath (Ripley) and get you to actually root for him. It's morally complex and makes you feel sick to your stomach, page after harrowing page. But it's also gripping – impossible to put down. (Unfortunately, the 1999 movie adaptation by Anthony Minghella was miscast and painfully disappointing.)

Novelist Jim Thompson has also influenced my work. Stephen Frears' *The Grifters* (from Thompson's novel of the same name) is notable, but I feel the most faithful Jim Thompson adaptation is Bertrand Tavernier's *Coup de Torchon*, which took Thompson's labyrinthine, disturbing, darkly comic novel *Pop. 1280*, and set it in French West Africa without sacrificing one iota of the spirit of the original book.

Of the Nordic Noir film and television I've studied, the two productions that have most influenced me are the *Department Q* series of feature films (in particular the first of the bunch, *The Department of Lost Causes*) and *The Bridge* limited TV series. This comes back not simply to brilliant plotting and reinventing the crime genre, but to depth-of-character and psychological authenticity.

Both the *Department Q* films and *The Bridge* share similar themes with *Lipko Park*, not the least of which is class struggle. And like Max and Joe, the characters in these productions have complex, often enmeshed relationships with each other. On one hand, this helps them solve crimes. On the other, it interferes with their ability to.

HBO's miniseries *The Night Of*, written by Richard Price, has those same qualities and also a similar tone and feel to *Lipko Park*.

In terms of *Lipko Park*'s many dream sequences, I've taken inspiration from a number of sources. At the forefront is my own active dream life. Other sources include David Lynch's *Lost Highway* and *Mulholland Drive* (for dream logic that makes your hair stand on end), Emir Kusturica's *Time of The Gypsies* (for its magic realism – which seamlessly and soulfully weaves fantasy into the dramatic through-line), and the Coen Brothers' *The Big Lebowski* (for the pure glee, creative whimsy and spectacle of The Dude's dreams).

Lastly, I'd like to tip my hat to François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. Like *Lipko Park*, *The 400 Blows* is autobiographical memoir. I believe that's one of the reasons that viewing the film is such a direct emotional experience – as if you're seeing the action unfold in front of you for the very first time, no matter how many times you've watched it. Truffaut captured something genuine, fresh and often gut-wrenching about the essence of his childhood. It's a model I hold close to my heart.

*

The following is a list of other key films and TV series I researched (ones not mentioned in the body of this paper) and which had an impact on my process:

On the subject of a difficult or dysfunctional parent/adult child relationship: Noah Baumbach's *The Squid And The Whale*, Richard Brooks' filmed version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Tim Burton's *Big Fish*, Lisa Cholodenko's *Olive Kitteridge*, Howard Hawks' *Red River* and Elia Kazan's *East of Eden*.

As for recent crime drama TV miniseries: Allan Cubbitt's *The Fall* (which also has a dysfunctional surrogate parent/lover element), Veena Sud's *The Killing* and Jed Mercurio's *Bodyguard*.

FORM, THEORY AND ARTISTIC GROWTH

Without a doubt, I've grown artistically while completing this MFA Film program at York. All of the analysis, assignments and discussion in my course work has expanded my horizons, and the feedback and support from my professors and fellow students have been instrumental to the creation of *Lipko Park*. I could have never brought the project to its current state on my own.

While it's true that I entered the program with a rich and seasoned career behind me – as a script analyst, a screenwriter and primarily a director – the program re-grounded me in the basics of story craft and gave me new perspectives on how to approach it.

Part of that involved revisiting and digging deep into some of the seminal tomes on dramatic structure, including Aristotle's *Poetics* and Syd Field's *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, and then applying their principles to my own work.

A couple of millennia after Aristotle defined the properties of plot, character and the three-act structure, Syd Field published his modern version of it in *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. Field redefined Aristotle's "beginning, middle and end" as Setup, Confrontation and Climax/Resolution. He posited that each of these three acts be set apart from each other by a "plot shift" or "reversal" that thrusts the plot in a new direction. The Setup introduces the main character and their situation, and launches the dramatic premise (the character's objective and what is at stake). The Confrontation sets the character on their journey to achieve their objective and introduces obstacles (preferably difficult or seemingly insurmountable), with rising dramatic tension. The Climax/Resolution begins with a crisis for the character (all seems lost), builds to a final climax/confrontation and ends with a resolution (the character either succeeds or fails in achieving their goal).

This all sounds simple and smart for the structure of a feature film. The problem is that I'm not writing something that's roughly 90 minutes long and intended to be viewed in a single sitting. I'm writing something that's six hours long, is made up of six separate parts, is serialized (i.e. is one continuous story) and will likely be viewed in six different sittings. Furthermore, each of these hour-long parts has a "teaser" and five acts, not three.

So the challenge is to apply Syd Field's three-act structure to all six hours of the over-arching story, while at the same time creating each episode as its own compelling entity. Each episode needs to end with a reversal, crisis or "cliff hanger," to keep the audience captivated and keen to see the following episode. Moreover, each act of each episode should ideally do the same thing for the same reason (to keep the audience engaged over a commercial break – depending on the platform). And each episode requires its own climax, which – in reverse order to Syd Field's three-act construct – then leads to the crisis or reversal at the end of the episode. And naturally, the final episode requires a denouement.

This exacting structure demands great rigour. In a story like *Lipko Park* (the writing of which has been my own Hero's Journey), I found I could best achieve it by focusing on Joe's drive to achieve his objective (solving the mystery and getting his father out of his life), coupled with clues and revelations that Joe uncovers on his quest, which keep the audience off-balance by taking the mystery in fresh and unexpected directions.

The other key element of this is cause-and-effect. Again, this is not a new dramaturgical concept. It just requires serious diligence, and it made me a far more disciplined writer. To quote

Aristotle:

“A whole is that which has a beginning, a middle and an end. A beginning is that which does not itself follow anything by causal necessity, but after which something naturally is or comes to be. An end, on the contrary, is that which itself naturally follows some other thing, either by necessity, or as a rule, but has nothing following it. A middle is that which follows something as some other thing follows it.”³

But in effective screenwriting, cause-and-effect is required not just between acts or episodes, but between each and every scene. In other words, to reiterate what I wrote in my “Process” section:

“Something in Scene A propels Joe into Scene B; Scene B propels Joe into Scene C; and so on.”

As a last note, I’ve had extensive experience directing both comedic and dramatic TV series, in both serialized and episodic formats. The cliff hanger ending isn’t a requirement of the episodic format, of course, but otherwise all of the above structural rules apply – be it a comedy or a drama. The main difference between comedy and drama series, apart from tone, is that comedies tend to be half-hours and dramas tend to be one-hours. But the bones of good storytelling are universal. They go back to Greek Tragedy and Aristotle.

Studying my Masters and writing *Lipko Park* have made me all the more appreciative of the writers of the better shows I’ve worked on. They make the rocket science of scripted TV drama seem effortless.

ETHICAL ISSUES

The biggest ethical issue I've grappled with is one that many artists have to deal with in their work: stealing/basing the material on intimate and messed-up moments from years of personal history, and then reinventing them to serve my TV series. The problem, of course, is myriad: Would my friends and family members be mortified if they ever vaguely recognized themselves on screen?

Am I merely exploiting them for my own drive to get this story out there and into the world? Have I done them justice, or have I turned them into caricatures or wisps of who they actually are – oversimplifying or obfuscating their complexity, both good and bad?

Will I compromise my family's and friends' trust, love and friendship?

All is possible.

But ultimately, I have fictionalized and also invented scenes, characteristics and moments that are based on a lived reality, rather than a direct replica of it. This is far from pure autobiography – despite its resonances in my life and in my story.

I also take heart in the fact that when my dad stumbled out of the Vancouver premiere of my feature film *Stuff*, he was still laughing. The parent in *Stuff*, a hoarder and an emotionally disturbed bully, was clearly based on him. And yet, between bursts of laughter as he exited the cinema, all he could say was, "That was pretty good. But did you have to include so fucking much swearing?"

Verbatim. Now *that's* the stuff of real life.

I have also grappled with language, especially when it comes to what I believe a character might actually say, or how I imagine them speaking – despite potential political incorrectness and/or offensiveness.

I paid careful attention to not be gratuitous or needlessly offensive, while trying to truthfully portray characters like Max who are from a different generation and don't have the faintest inkling of what political correctness means. I felt a responsibility as a writer to be accurate and get it right while still being sensitive to the audience.

My real dad spent a year working with Aboriginal Peoples in a small community in Haida Gwaii when he was in his 20s. He taught grades one through six in a one-room school with neither electricity nor running water. He loved his time there. He felt he'd been adopted into the community. And, just as Max lies to Joe, my dad felt compelled to lie to me throughout my childhood, telling me I was part "Native American" – except that my dad's word was "Indian."

On one hand, I want the characters in *Lipko Park* to be true to the characters they're based on (who mean no harm but are simply from a different era). On the other hand, I find using the word "Indian" to describe Aboriginal Peoples incredibly offensive, as do most people in my generation. I settled on "Native American" in the dialogue as a compromise. I'm conflicted, but ultimately trying to be respectful both to Aboriginal Peoples and to who the characters in *Lipko Park* actually are.

A couple of the other characters are based on members of my family with criminal baggage and, once again, I have taken fictional license in order to achieve a truthfulness and an authenticity in the storytelling.

CONCLUSION

Here are a few famous quotes about the writing process:

“Writing is one percent inspiration, 99 percent perspiration.”

“Writing is the art of re-writing.”

“Writing is about getting into a swamp. And it’s the writer’s swamp.”

– the late, great Canadian screenwriter Sharon Riis

“There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed.”

– Ernest Hemingway

These quotes are famous for good reason: they resonate with truth. And they decidedly reflect my own process in developing *Lipko Park*.

You will find a whisky in your local liquor store called Writer’s Tears. Most writers I know have a bottle of it displayed on or near their writing desk. My guess is that they keep it there for solace – not necessarily for the caramel-coloured booze inside, but for the notion that if somebody was clever enough to call a whisky Writer’s Tears, then there must be a community of other writers out there pushing a rock up the same slope as they are.

It’s a lonely craft. You sit in a darkened room by yourself and stare at a blank page and a flashing cursor, sometimes for hours. You go on this interminable roller coaster ride of reading what you wrote one day and thinking it’s brilliant, then re-reading it the next day and thinking it’s garbage. And in the end, you have no one to blame but yourself.

As detective Paul Holes and investigative journalist Billy Jensen say at the end of every episode of their excellent cold case podcast, *The Murder Squad*: ... “Keep diggin’!”⁴

My journey on *Lipko Park* has been full of surprises, missteps, discoveries, speedbumps, disappointments, U turns and personal and creative growth. I know it's far from over. I may have finally produced a Pilot script and Series Bible that I'm happy with, but if it ever gets bought, I will eventually need to write the next five scripts for Season One and then the six scripts for Season Two.

In my introduction to this paper, I stated that my central thematic question was “Can someone successfully repress or control the undesirable traits they inherited from their parents – in this case mental illness, the ‘Warrior Gene’ and a proclivity for extreme violence? And if so, can they do it without also repressing the traits that make them emotionally available and socially ‘well-adjusted’?”

Does *Lipko Park* answer that question?

I like to believe it does. Or at least it provides one possible answer: the key to liberation is to embrace and come to terms with your demon(s). That's what Joe finally does, and he achieves a state of inner peace, however briefly.

FUTURE PLANS FOR THIS PROJECT

A script, a Treatment and a Series Bible are obviously not ends in themselves. The purpose of writing any TV series is to get it produced.

On that note, I recently shared *Lipko Park* with my agents, Brent Sherman and Sohrab Merchant at The Characters Talent Agency in Toronto. They responded enthusiastically. We're currently putting together a list of TV production companies we like. The idea is to pitch the development executives at those companies and if/when I find a suitable match, partner with the company and pitch the series to appropriate broadcasters and streaming services.

If *Lipko Park* receives a green light for development, the next logical step is to hire a "writers room" to help me put more flesh on the bones of Season One and hopefully then get a green light for production.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Director Thomas Alfredson (of *Let The Right One In* fame) made a \$34 million US screen version of Nesbo's novel *The Snowman*, produced by Martin Scorsese, which is widely considered a disaster. Alfredson himself has come out and apologized for it publicly. If you want to see a more worthy screen adaptation of a Nesbo novel, see 2011's Norwegian film *Headhunters*, directed by Morten Tyldum.

² Bruce Springsteen, *Born To Run* (New York: Simon & Shuster, Inc., 2016), 15-16.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics* (translated by S.H. Butcher), (Salt Lake City: Project Gutenberg, 2008), 10.

⁴ Holes, Paul and Jensen, Billy, *The Murder Squad* (47 episodes), (Washington, DC: Exactly Right Media, 2019-20).

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