

# WHITE BEAR

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## **ABSTRACT**

*White Bear* is a feature film screenplay, developed and written over a period of four years. It tells the story of one woman's flight and subsequent fight to protect herself and her family from a controlling religious organization. Discovering the Church is holding her sister captive, protagonist Brie Demott takes her son and sets out into the unknown, seeking help from the outside world. In the end she must attempt the rescue herself. Though she fails to free her sister, in the process she frees herself. The story examines the nature of courage and fear through the journey and transformation of its characters. It explores the nature of control at the heart of a religious organization and the repercussions that the renunciation of belief has on an individual and their family.

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# CHAPTER ONE: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

## OVERVIEW

This contextual document provides an insight into the formation of the screenplay, from concept to completion. Since the submission of the thesis proposal, this project has undergone a significant change of direction that goes beyond the expected development of a story idea, and the catalyst for this change is explained in full in the first section of this essay.

The essay discusses my research prior to writing the first draft, along with key influences throughout the process. This includes various accounts of renunciation, found in autobiographies and described on the radio. I also had the opportunity to carry out an interview with an individual who recently left a controlling religious organization. There is a brief analysis of three films that are, in different ways, important to this project.

The writing process is outlined with a description of how and why certain elements of the story changed at various stages of the development. There is an examination of the major storytelling elements of *White Bear*, including character, antagonism and structure. This document is an honest account of the entire process that went into the creation of *White Bear*.

## **CONCEPT**

The initial concept for the project, outlined in my thesis proposal, was to craft a story about a woman running away from an abusive relationship. In a world where people are often encouraged to face up to their fear, I wanted to tell a story where running away is the courageous choice of action. I was inspired by a true story that I had encountered at a local charity, where a woman and her children escaped an abusive relationship by leaving the town she grew up in, but faced an uncertain future, having been relocated to another part of the country and prevented from contacting anyone from their old life.

I chose to tell a thriller, based on a similar premise. I would have a young mother on the run with her son. It would open with their dramatic escape and the reason for going on the run would initially be a mystery. It would appear that she had committed a crime as we would also see a law-enforcement officer tracking her down. The story would be structured as a cat-and-mouse chase and as the hunt escalated, the truth would be revealed: the officer hunting her down is her abusive husband. He is a man who lacks his own moral compass and so looks to his badge and his bible to reassure himself that he is in the right, that he is a good man. It was this story I presented at the graduate symposium. After a period of research and development, I launched into writing an outline and once this was approved, began a first draft. I was halfway through this draft when I had an experience that changed everything.

In Quentin Dupieux's film *Réalité*,<sup>1</sup> an aspiring screenwriter takes a break from writing his horror film about killer televisions to go to the cinema. He gets to the foyer and is taken aback. There is a film advertised with the same title as the film he is writing. He buys a ticket. The lights go down and with growing dread, he watches the opening scene of a film about killer televisions. The concept is exactly the same; in fact, the opening scene is exactly the same. It is his film. The distraught screenwriter runs to the front, stands in the way and shouts at the audience to stop watching the film, because he hasn't written it yet.

JASON  
I'm sorry. Listen to me! You can't  
watch this, you can't watch it now.  
This movie doesn't really exist!

*Réalité (2014)*

This happened to me. Sixty pages into the first draft of my screenplay, I went to see a film called *Safe Haven*,<sup>2</sup> a romantic drama based on a book by Nicholas Sparks. It was the exact film I was writing. It is the story of a woman on the run from the law, leaving everything she had known in order to escape domestic abuse. The second half of *Safe Haven* developed into a romantic drama, which was different from my story and given the subject matter, a very questionable choice. However the concept, the structure and the major plot points were the same. The big twist at the midpoint of *Safe Haven* was the reveal that the cop hunting down the main character was in fact her husband. As outlined above, this

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<sup>1</sup> Dupieux, *Réalité*.

<sup>2</sup> Hallström, *Safe Haven*.

<sup>3</sup> Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 33.

was the twist in my screenplay. Worse still, there were a few scenes in the first act that were identical. To me, this highlighted where my writing had fallen into cliché, or where I had made the obvious choice.

It is not uncommon for writers to find their original work is unintentionally one of many appearing at the time with similar ideas, a reflection of some form of cultural zeitgeist. Sharing a concept or theme with other works is likely, expected and does not necessarily detract from the commercial or critical worth of the project. After all, every writer brings their own unique perspective and voice to a subject. However, in this case, having watched *Safe Haven* I realised that this iteration of my project could not survive: my heart was no longer in it.

A writer must write with all their heart. Brenda Ueland, a prolific writer and teacher of writers, observes that if the artist does not care about what they are creating, this will show in the quality or longevity of the work. “Advertising companies hire the very brightest, wittiest young people to write for them. Not one single sentence of it is worth repeating. Why? Because it wasn’t meant.”<sup>3</sup> I could complete my screenplay as it was and try and use it to fulfill my academic requirements for the program, but there would be no pride or joy in it. Although it would prove a time-consuming and risky option, I chose to begin my project again.

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<sup>3</sup> Ueland, *If You Want to Write*, 33.

I analysed my thesis proposal and the research I had carried out in preparation for the symposium. I realised it was important to reflect on the underlying themes and ideas that had compelled me to write the story in the first place. Eventually I stripped everything away, apart from the simple truth that I had always wanted the project to explore: what happens when you try to escape from everything you have known. When is it right to run and when is it right to fight?

This process of distilling down to the simple idea I wanted to consider was immensely helpful and allowed me to recognise the new direction my project should take. It involved a subject that I have long been fascinated with due to personal experience: religious organizations and the power they have over individuals. It struck me that leaving a cult or leaving certain strict religious organizations involves the type of transformative journey that I wanted to explore. It is an escape into the unknown that requires, in addition to the physical escape from a community, several stages of psychological escape for the individual. I wanted to craft a screenplay that would explore this strange experience, making it compelling and accessible.

“The business of art lies just in this- to make that understood and felt which, in the form of an argument, might be incomprehensible and inaccessible.”<sup>4</sup>

*Tolstoy – What is Art?*

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<sup>4</sup> Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, 97.

## CHAPTER TWO: RESEARCH

### PERSONAL ACCOUNTS

With a new direction in mind, I began my research anew. I sought out first hand accounts written by people who had abandoned or renounced the religious organization in which they had grown up. I came across two books which were particularly relevant to the idea I wanted to explore: *Beyond Belief*, a memoir by Jenna Miscavige Hill about growing up as a member of the Church of Scientology and her eventual defection, and *Infidel* by Ayaan Hirsi Ali, an autobiography which explores, in part, her shifting views on Islam and her eventual renunciation.

Hill was raised in the Church of Scientology, signing a billion year contract with the Church when she was only seven years old. She was part of the Sea Org, made up of the Church's most dedicated members. She left the Church at the age of twenty-one.

“At that moment, I decided I was done with the Sea Org. [...] All at once, everything that had been building for several years – it all just snapped. I wanted to be gone.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Miscavige Hill, *Beyond Belief*, 351.

I was struck by the immediacy of Hill's decision to take action when it finally dawned on her that she wanted to leave the Church. Although her discontent with various Sea Org practices had been growing for a number of years, up until this point she had remained fiercely loyal to the Church as a whole. When her parents left the Church she chose, against their will, to remain. Hill had no idea how she would go about leaving everything she knew, but she was determined to escape. She tells her husband, even though "Telling someone you are intending to leave is a 'suppressive act'"<sup>6</sup>. Hill's husband wants to leave the Sea Org through the official route, not wanting to cause problems for his family who are part of the Church. They try this but in the end, the couple's relationship with the Church breaks down entirely. In a chapter called 'The Real World', Hill describes her first few months living outside of the Church.

"Adjusting to life outside the Church was a lot more of a process for me than it was for Dallas. I didn't have a driving license and was not used to talking to Wogs."<sup>7</sup>

Hill is using the word 'Wogs' to describe people who are not Scientologists. I chose to use this idea in *White Bear*, with the main characters being afraid to speak to those outside the Church. It is another obstacle for a character entering an unknown world. It is also through dialogue with different people that someone

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<sup>6</sup> Miscavige Hill, *Beyond Belief*, 369.

<sup>7</sup> Miscavige Hill, *Beyond Belief*, 368.

may gain an alternative interpretation of their own experience: “Through their eyes, I slowly learned how weird my upbringing had been.”<sup>8</sup>

A recurring idea throughout Hill’s memoir is the idea of surveillance by the Church. In the Sea Org she describes a culture of informing on other people reminiscent of a paranoid communist state; where behavior the Church considers inappropriate is reported by other members and the offender chastised. The auditing sessions are recorded and the Church allegedly keeps records on all members. Hill draws attention to this omniscient presence when she is asked personal questions in an audit.

“As if having my most intimate moments exposed to Sylvia weren’t bad enough, I knew there were unseen eyes in the room with me. Most likely, there was somebody watching through the camera in the room or someone who would watch the video later.”<sup>9</sup>

This aspect of Hill’s experience would contribute to my design of the fictional religious organization in *White Bear*, with a system of surveillance and encouragement to inform on others.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s autobiography influenced *White Bear* in a more subtle way. It is a fascinating and informative memoir of Ali’s life beginning with a traditional

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<sup>8</sup> Miscavige Hill, *Beyond Belief*, 369.

<sup>9</sup> Miscavige Hill, *Beyond Belief*, 314.

Muslim childhood in Somalia. Ali became increasingly devout in her teenage years whilst living in Kenya. She describes how, influenced by a new teacher, she started to change the way she dressed.

“I began to experiment with the headscarf. I wore it long, so the shape of my neck and shoulders could not be seen. I wore trousers under my school uniform, to hide my bare legs. I wanted to be like Sister Aziza. I wanted to be pure, and good, and serve Allah.”<sup>10</sup>

Ali becomes the only girl in her Nairobi classroom to wear the *hidjab*. Reading her autobiography, there is a sense that because she aspired to be devout, her disillusionment with the leaders and some of the teachings at the time of her religion, when it comes, is all the greater. I realized that the woman in *White Bear* should also be a devout follower, up until the story begins. Her renunciation of the organization, should be completely unexpected.

Another valuable source of information and opinion was Ernie Rea’s BBC weekly radio show *Beyond Belief*. Each week it features a multi-faith discussion on an aspect of faith. One episode focused on the consequences of abandoning a faith for those that leave and for those that are left behind. In the discussion it is noted how, as in the betrayal of God by Lucifer, the idea of betrayal runs very deep in many religions. Douglas Davies, a Professor in the Study of Religion in the

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<sup>10</sup> Ali, *Infidel*, 85.

Department of Theology and Religion at the University of Durham, observes how the sense of loss that comes along with the idea of betrayal is intense and in many cases, to leave a religious group has consequences for one's family relationships.

Ernie Rea interviews a woman named Rachel, who is a former Jehovah's Witness. She explains how it was extremely difficult to leave. She purposefully broke rules in order to be kicked out, "I had to do something to get me out and get my children out in one fell swoop",<sup>11</sup> but the Elders were persistent, claiming it was just a phase and posting leaflets and passages of the Bible through her door until finally she was 'disfellowshipped'. Soon after, Rachel was disowned by her parents. This tragic final step appears to be a frequent accompaniment to renunciation.

Rea observes how some religious groups will cut off both friends and family who renounce their religion. He observes, "Life for the so-called betrayer can be very difficult indeed".<sup>12</sup> In a strict, insular group, a breach of the rules will break the strongest bond: family.

Davies recollects an encounter he witnessed in Jerusalem; he was being shown around Mea She'arimin by an ultra-orthodox Jewish man who had left that particular community. They passed by a woman and her children without

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<sup>11</sup> Rachel, Interview by Ernie Rea. *Beyond Belief*. BBC Radio 4, 6 June 2013. Radio.

<sup>12</sup> Rea, *Beyond Belief*. Radio.

receiving any kind of acknowledgement. They walked a short distance and then the man explained, “That was my wife and two children”.<sup>13</sup>

I had the extraordinary opportunity to interview an individual who had recently left an evangelical Christian organization after being a key member for thirty years. It was a fascinating and illuminating discussion; I heard a detailed account of their experience within the organization and the psychological process they had to go through in order to leave.

There were several elements of the individual’s experience that I drew upon in my first couple of drafts of the *White Bear* story. A culture was described where people would ‘fall out of favor’ with the Church. There would be periods of time where they would frequently receive calls asking the individual to help out in various sessions, for example leading sessions or playing in one of the Church bands. One day the phone would simply stop ringing. You are important to the organization only for as long as you are useful to the organization.

There was one detail of the individual’s experience that was the opposite of what I had come to expect. The organization appeared to demonstrate a complete lack of concern for the welfare of individual members, so long as the overall organization was continuing to operate and grow. To lose the loyalty of a few people that disliked the way it was being run was of little concern to the Church. It would in fact make the organization stronger, stripping away any dissenting

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<sup>13</sup> Davies, *Beyond Belief*. Radio.

voices. I asked how the Church had responded to their individual crisis of faith and their decision to leave. The interviewee smiled at my naiveté. The Church had made no attempt to engage with them, to answer concerns or encourage them to stay.

In terms of *White Bear*, I would have to consider how I would create a character that any religious organization would realistically be motivated to go to great lengths to retain. Which members would be important to any religious organization? Those with power, fame, money or influence. These are the people that can damage the reputation of an organization. I would have to create a character with some intrinsic value to the Church she had grown up in.

One of the aspects of the religious organization that caused my interviewee to begin to question their loyalty, regarded aspects of the mismanagement of the organization's finances, including the amount that the leaders and preachers of the 'not-for-profit' were being paid. The organization sounded like a shrewd business, with a management focused on growth and expansion rather than developing individuals' relationship with Jesus. Of course they could argue that an increase in membership will result in more souls 'saved'. Perhaps, but is undeniable that an increase in membership will also result in an increase in turnover.

Members were encouraged to give ten percent of their earnings to the organization. They were encouraged to attend Church events that had to be paid for. And they were encouraged to give their time to the Church, freely of course. Although I was hearing about a specific religious organization, it reminded me of a pervasive truth that I would also include in my fictional Church: religious organizations rely on the financial support of the very people who look to them for guidance.

“He loves you. He loves you, and He needs money! He always needs money! He's all-powerful, all-perfect, all-knowing, and all-wise, somehow... just can't handle money! Religion takes in billions of dollars, they pay no taxes, and they always need a little more.”<sup>14</sup>

George Carlin – *You Are All Diseased*

## FILMS

Due to my longstanding interest in the subject of religions and cults, many of the novels, plays and films I have read and watched over the last twenty-seven years will have no doubt also informed the telling of this story. There are, however, three films which had a direct influence on this project: *The Lives of Others*,<sup>15</sup> *Martha Marcy May Marlene*<sup>16</sup> and *Room*.<sup>17</sup> I learnt a great deal from carrying out

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<sup>14</sup> Carlin, George. “You Are All Diseased”. HBO, 6 Feb.

<sup>15</sup> Henckel Von Donnersmarck, *The Lives of Others*.

<sup>16</sup> Durkin, *Martha Marcy May Marlene*.

<sup>17</sup> Abrahamson, *Room*.

a close analysis of each, and have outlined below the particular relevance they had to *White Bear*.

The protagonist of *The Lives of Others* is an agent of the Stasi, the secret police of the German Democratic Republic. It is set in a world of repression, interrogation and informants. Like Brie in *White Bear*, he is a character who begins on the inside of a tyrannical system and begins to see the true tyranny of its nature. Over the course of the film we witness the gradual transformation of his character.

The opening of the film is a sequence crafted to show Captain Gerd Wiesler to be a loyal and meticulous officer of the State, he interrogates a suspect in a cold and effective manner, and uses a recording of this interrogation to teach the methods to new recruits. He is established as ruthless and entirely merciless. An inquisitive student gets a red cross drawn by his name. We understand that this is a system you do not question. The film is the story of how and why a loyal soldier could become someone who disobeys the state and protects those who are rebelling against it.

As an audience, our enjoyment comes from watching his transformation. But it is only realistic because it is gradual. His first transgression against the State is minor, and scene-by-scene this escalates, until he is taking dramatic action in

direct disobedience of the State. We see the change from the initial seed of doubt at the end of the first act, to the total rebellion at the end of the second.

In *White Bear*, Brie's realisation that she is operating in a cruel system occurs in a much shorter time, over the course of the first act, and so I realised that it was important to have the seed of doubt in her mind present and noticeable from the opening scene. In a room full of people swept away by the charismatic leader of the Church, Brie is alone in her silence. Her doubt grows along with her disobedience during the first act, leading up to the dramatic revelation of her sister's imprisonment, and her first major act of defiance, leaving the Church.

The story of a young women trying to escape from a cult in *Martha Marcy May Marlene* is an obvious point of comparison with my project. In an interview the film's writer/director Sean Durkin stated, "When I make a film, I think about things that scare me. My exploration of those things is to try and wrap my head around them and confront them."<sup>18</sup> It is a similar motivation that led me to explore the experience of leaving a religion.

The *Martha Marcy May Marlene* screenplay is a master class in realistic dialogue and effective story structure. The film opens with Martha's escape from the cult. It is then carefully structured so that as we get to know the character and realise how troubled she is in the present, whilst flashbacks reveal her increasingly disturbing experiences within the cult.

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<sup>18</sup> Elder, *The Best Film You've Never Seen*, 197.

*Room* is the story of a mother and son kept prisoner in a shed, based on Emma Donoghue's novel of the same name. The young woman, Joy, abducted as a seventeen year old, is kept in a garden shed where her captor repeatedly rapes her. Her son Jack is five years old and the story is told from his perspective.

I saw the film in January 2016, during the final rewrite of *White Bear*. There are several points of comparison between the two stories of mother and son, but the most striking was the way Donoghue gave as much time to the journey of the characters after their dramatic escape.

When *Room* opens we see their life in captivity and are gripped and uplifted by their eventual escape. But that is not the end of the story. Freedom from their physical prison comes halfway through the film. For Joy especially, the struggle continues. Joy found mechanisms for bearing life as a captive but now she must face the shock of dealing with life after her traumatic and mentally scarring experience. Only at the end of the film, do we get the sense that Joy is on her way to becoming psychologically free. Orson Welles is rumoured to have observed that if you want a happy ending it depends, "of course, on where you stop the story." *Room* could be a story with a happy and straightforward ending, if the climax was a mother and son escaping from their captor in a dramatic and uplifting sequence. By continuing the story beyond the fairy-tale ending,

Donoghue's presents a more realistic and therefore unsettling reflection on human suffering.

## CHAPTER THREE: STORYTELLING

### THE WRITING PROCESS

"I love deadlines. I love the whooshing noise they make as they go by."

Douglas Adams – *The Salmon of Doubt*

Distractions come in many forms. It is imperative for a writer to find a strategy for guarding the time that should be devoted to writing. William Blake used to say when his energies were diverted from his drawing or writing "That he was being devoured by jackels and hyenas".<sup>19</sup> Unable to work full time on writing *White Bear* due to various work commitments and paid opportunities, the second version of the screenplay was written over a period of two years.

My writing process has five distinct stages. I start with research, where I find and analyse ideas around the subject matter and the themes I want to explore. I then begin to jot down ideas about possible characters, what's going on inside, what they want and what they need. I consider setting and the type of obstacles that they will face; at this stage I'm not certain on any definite elements of the story, everything is in flux. I try to avoid becoming fixed on any plot point, or being tempted into problem solving and reverse engineering, which rarely creates masterful storytelling.

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<sup>19</sup> Ueland, 11.

When the characters and the central journey of the film is mapped out I then begin work on a beat sheet. This is a very simple list of the plot points, simply written with little detail or embellishment. A beat may be as simple as “Zach persuades Brie to come home”, or “Oscar loses his toy tiger”. It describes the point of the scene, whether that is to reveal something about a character or to move the story on. Once the story is mapped out in beats, I can get a sense of the shape of the story and can easily make adjustments. It is at this point that I think deeply about the structure of the story, how to tell the story in an engaging way.

The beat sheet is then expanded to an outline. I use cue cards for this, writing the beat at the top of the card and then developing ideas below for the scene or sequence. At this point I am inventing visually interesting ways of the beat playing out, keeping in mind the finished film that would result from the screenplay I am crafting. When each beat has been developed into a scene or sequence I am happy with, I type up an outline. My outlines can vary in nature depending on the project, in the case of *White Bear*, it was about ten pages long, a written description of each scene, with only a couple of key lines of dialogue included. I work on the outline until it feels like a strong story and then sit down to write the first draft.

Writing the first draft, I stick closely to the outline and only go off track briefly if a striking idea emerges. I have a tendency to want to rewrite the first act several

times, which is why it is often the strongest part of the first draft. However, this can often be time badly spent when the entire draft organically without revisions, it is a better starting point for the rewriting process, described below.

“The best analogy of rewriting I know is creating a sculpture. The sculptor starts with a big raw piece of marble. The sculptor’s job is to find the sculpture in the raw stone, just as your job is to find the final script in the raw pages of your rough draft.”

Tom Lazarus – *Secrets of Film Writing*

The rewriting process on *White Bear* created three distinct drafts, each with a markedly different plot. Each draft was written from scratch, which is a time-consuming way to develop a project but allows the script to evolve to its full potential without being restricted by a writer’s natural reluctance to let go of their previous work. This development process is illustrated below where I have chronicled the evolution of *White Bear*’s “inciting incident”.

## **INCITING INCIDENT**

An inciting incident in a screenplay is the structural term for the pivotal moment in the first act that dramatically alters the protagonist’s change of course; it is the moment when they leave their ordinary world. John Yorke describes the structural function of the inciting incident: “All stories involve characters being thrown into an alien world – a place that represents everything outside their

previous existence.”<sup>20</sup> It is going into this world that allows them to change; “Here, in the forest, they must find themselves anew.”<sup>21</sup>

The inciting incident can be a huge, visually dramatic moment, such as the tsunami hitting in J.A. Bayona’s 2012 film *The Impossible*, or a seemingly low-key moment such as Captain Gerd Wiesler being given the order to begin surveillance on George Dreyman in *The Lives of Others*. It is the moment where the premise of the film begins, where the dramatic question is raised.

In the very first draft of *White Bear*, when the script was still a cat-and-mouse chase of a woman on the run from her husband, the film opened with Brie taking Oscar from school and making their escape. The incident that caused her to run was uncovered gradually throughout the first act. In *Safe Haven* the backstory was revealed using the device of flashbacks. This meant that we joined the character once she already had left her ‘ordinary world’. With this structure, it is a delicate balancing act to reveal enough information for clarity but withhold enough to keep the audience intrigued.

In the first draft of *White Bear* with the new focus, the inciting incident was Brie finding out that the Church were going to require all children to attend Church boarding school. As she herself suffered abuse at the school, although she had continued in the Church and kept silent over the abuse, she refuses to expose

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<sup>20</sup> Yorke, 28.

<sup>21</sup> Yorke, 28.

her child to the same risk and so leaves the Church to protect them. There were several problems with this idea. As my supervisor pointed out, it felt contrived; surely Brie would have known that this moment would come. In addition, the idea that Brie suffered abuse in the Church as a child presented a number of questions that the draft failed to fully explore. What affect on her adult self would the childhood abuse have had? Why would she have remained in the Church for all those years?

The issue with the inciting incident was indicative of the major problem with the screenplay at this stage. The nature of the antagonism lacked nuance. The level of evil in the Church was extreme and the people working for the Church lacked dimension. The nature of the conflict was entirely external, and therefore Brie's journey lacked the internal conflict that would have created an interesting and believable character who changed over the course of the story.

The inciting incident in the next draft was the moment that Brie realised that it was her husband who had informed on her to the Church (about forbidden medication she was taking). Feeling betrayed and knowing the Church will take her child away from her while she completes their detox program, Brie takes Oscar and runs. The reveal at the crisis point at the end of the second act of the film is that it was not Zach informing on her, it was her own child. In this moment she realises that she must escape the Church for good and rebuild her relationship with her child. But this concept and structure also proved

problematic; Brie as a character is far too passive. It will be obvious to the audience that she should leave the Church within the first ten minutes of the film. For the main character to then spend the entire film realising this for certain will be a frustrating experience for an audience.

In the final draft, the inciting incident is of a very different nature. When it happens, Brie decides *in that moment*, to leave the Church. Her decision to take Oscar with her is because she knows she must leave this world and never return. The opening ten pages lead up to this moment in the form of a mystery: where is her sister? The inciting incident answers this question and kicks off the story. The film opens with Brie worried about Paige, her younger sister, who is not turning up to Church events. When she investigates further, she discovers that Paige has not been home for weeks. Brie is understandably concerned, and at first worries that Paige went off with a 'MOP', (a person outside the Church), a man she had begun seeing in secret. Brie discovers Church monitoring equipment in Paige's house. The Church must have been aware of the relationship.

Brie sits down with the Church and they explain that Paige voluntarily opted to have Church purification treatment at The Retreat, a Church facility outside Anchorage. Brie is reassured, until the final moment of the interview when Brie realizes she is being deceived, they are trying to reassure her to end her investigation. She steals a high level Church security pass and sets off for The Retreat to find out for herself.

The inciting incident occurs at The Retreat, where she finds her sister held prisoner by the Church. What she sees confirms her fears, that senior management of the Church are aware of her imprisonment and complicit, as is her husband. As Brie has grown up inside the Church, the world outside of the Church that she must now enter is foreign to her. She must engage with the 'mops' and ask for their help. Brie and Oscar's comfort in the rule-governed world of the Church causes them to struggle with any action taken in the outside world, where she is unsure how to function. The inciting incident launches Brie on her journey into the unknown. Mike and Ray, both 'MOPS', represents the unknown world, who live outside the rules of any religion or society. Ray works at the edge of the world, on the Prudhoe Bay Oil Field and lives in Deadhorse, an unincorporated area with under 50 permanent residents. Mike, a truck driver, spends his time on the highway. Both men are itinerant workers, without roots or community. And Brie, having left her community, realizes she too is truly alone.

MIKE

You shouldn't be putting trust in  
strangers.

BRIE

Strangers is all there is.

*White Bear*

## THEME

There is one scene of the screenplay that has remained a constant throughout all the drafts of *White Bear*. It is the scene that gives this project its title, where Oscar encounters the polar bear. The importance of the bear is thematic; it represents the struggle to know whether the correct response to danger is fight or flight.

The polar bear is a wild animal that lives in one of the most hostile environments on Earth. For Brie and Oscar, their trip into the frozen North is a journey outside their world of programs and rules. On their journey, Oscar reads about the rise in hostile bear encounters in North America and tips on how to survive a bear attack. It explains that the correct response depends on the color of the bear. If a black bear attacks, you should make a lot of noise, appear as large as possible and stand your ground, however, if a brown bear attacks, you should drop to the ground in the fetal position and wrap your hands behind your neck. It does not mention what you should do if the bear is white. When Oscar faces the polar bear, he has no rules or instructions to follow and his fear is absolute.

Oscar's experience with the white bear illustrates how in a world without rules and instructions it can be difficult to know the right course of action. The correct response to danger can be to fight, to fight, or not to act at all. The world outside of a religious organisation has far less rules and it is a place when every individual must locate their own moral compass and make decisions alone.

## **CHARACTER**

Brie has been brought up in a controlling religious organization. Discovering the Church is holding her sister captive; Brie takes her son and sets out into the unknown, seeking help from the outside. In the end she must confront the organization herself. Brie fails to free her sister, but in the attempts, she frees herself.

Brie is not a hero with a thousand faces but she is a character with many names. For the first time in my writing career, the name of my protagonist has changed in each draft. I realise now, reflecting on the entire creative process, that the changing name was indicative of my search for the character. Each draft I would hope that I had found her and when I realised that she was still unclear and her inner life a mystery, I would try a new person in the next draft. Only in the final draft do I feel like I have discovered the person who will remain the protagonist of this story in all future script development. Early versions of this character were passive and bland until the final draft when I realised that Brie is a warrior. Even if not yet fully realised in the screenplay, her internal journey is clear to me.

Brie is somebody who has been imprisoned her whole life, but never realised and because of the self esteem and responsibility is has given her, she has been a willing prisoner. She is somebody who has always found it easy to follow the rules and she fulfils the role of the pious female, obedient servant, and obedient wife. Her sister Paige is her foil, someone who has always struggled to follow

rules and challenged authority. Paige is a victim in need of rescuing, until we find out that she had decided that she does not want to be rescued. This is a crushing moment for Brie, who has overcome obstacles and sacrificed her own freedom in order to free her sister only to be rejected. Having endured the brutal treatment program, Paige has come to find safety in the world of rules that she had previously fought.

I wanted to explore what would happen if something personal (in this draft the disappearance of her sister) made Brie begin to question the truth, and then have her witness something that would in a single moment, force her to make the realisation that would otherwise have taken her another ten or twenty years, if ever.

Zach is a man who follows rules and enforces them. He is proud of Brie for being a rising star in the organization and when Brie starts exercising independent thought, he seeks to quash her behaviour, which he dismisses as an overreaction. Their relationship and the change it is forced to undergo over the course of the story reflects the painful tearing of the bond between partners and family members I read about in my research of renunciation. In the end, Zach chooses the Church over his family.

Oscar is a child in a very adult world. He has been brought up to follow rules and has absolute trust in Brie and the Church at the beginning of the story. He has

been taught to fear the outside world, and fear people who are not part of the Church. Brie, although in the process of renunciation herself, seeks to protect Oscar from the painful experience of learning the truth. Childhood is the stage of socialization when a person acquires the norms and values they will likely have for life. Many people remember the day they found out that Santa was not real; the scale of this revelation would throw Oscar's whole existence into question.

"The obsession with children, and with rigid control over their upbringing, has been part of every system of absolute authority. [...] If religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason, we would be living in a quite different world."<sup>22</sup>

Christopher Hitchens

Oscar has not yet attained the age of reason and he has been taught not to question. But this is in a way a coming-of-age story for him. Oscar's protected upbringing has made him obedient and he likes things to be ordered, the alternative scares him. He loves animals, carrying his toy animals with him wherever he goes, but is terrified of the real thing; they are far too wild and unpredictable. Oscar's character arc is a gradual realisation that he does not need to be afraid of everything, and to do this he has to experience real danger. By the end of the story, Oscar has learnt, through his experience in the outside world and his brief burgeoning friendship with Ray, to overcome irrational fears.

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<sup>22</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 220.

The relationship between mother and son in *Room* has a number of differences to the mother and son relationship in *White Bear*. Joy makes up a fictional reality, that the room they live in is all that is real, to prevent her son Jack from having to comprehend the reality of their bleak situation. In *White Bear*, Brie also avoids telling Oscar the truth, and faces the consequence of keeping him in the dark. In *Room*, when Joy tells Jack the truth, there is initially conflict between them, as Jack stubbornly refuses to accept his new reality. This conflict is dealt with in a few scenes and then we see Jack accept this new information and adjust his worldview accordingly. This allows Joy, with Jack's help, to escape.

## **ANTAGONISM**

Early drafts of this story suffered from insufficient antagonism. There were several reasons for this. The Church leaders were one-dimensional and my protagonist lacked internal conflict. Brie's objective was weak and the action she took was in response to obstacles created by external sources that often felt contrived. Without clarity on Brie's inner world, I would not be able to create internal or external conflict that would ring true. This would be my focus before I wrote my final draft, I thought deeply about who Brie was, what her objective was and what action she would therefore take. I gradually began to understand Brie's inner world. Brie's internal conflict arises because she is torn between opposing ambitions: Brie wants to leave the Church, but she does not want to live in the unfamiliar outside world. Her objective is to free her sister, but she wants to avoid the punishment of the Church.

Brie's internal conflict arises because she is torn, wanting to carry out action but without the consequences. Only in the final act does she find the courage to stop fearing the outside world and the repercussions of her activities against the Church.

The external conflict comes from the people that make up the organization, including her husband, who want to keep Brie and her sister under Church control. One of the many insightful notes I received on a draft regarded Brie's relationship with the Church; the importance of conveying a sense of what the Church provides for Brie, the positive aspects of the antagonist, whether that is community, guidance or such like. In the final draft I developed the idea that the Church gives Brie self-esteem, clear rules and a straightforward sense of purpose. She must work through each color to progress and in the opening scene we see that she is being rewarded for her progress and her dedication.

The Church claims to be guiding people towards inner truth. There is an obsession in the organization with honesty and seeking out dishonesty. People outside the Church are called 'mops' because they are seen to be full of the lies they have soaked up from society until their lives are saturated with dishonesty. Lies permeate every fibre of their being. They are filthy "Murderers Of Purity". The sessions with Church members focus on truth extraction and clarification. However, similar to the idea of the confessions in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*;

guilt is assumed and so the act of confessing to dishonesty becomes more important than the truth itself.

When I carried out the interview in my research process, the individual who recently left a religious organization suggested various methods these organizations use to stop people questioning them. One is to keep people busy. If the members are caught up in meetings, groups and events they will not stop to reason why. The second is to give people positions of responsibility; if you feel like an integral part of an organization you will be less likely to question its motives. It is because of this that I chose to make Brie the person carrying out the purification sessions in the final draft, rather than the person being purified. She has become part of the Church machinery and so to leave the Church is to leave part of herself behind.

## **STRUCTURE**

“Storytelling is the knack of swiftly seizing the imagination of the audience and never letting them go.”

Alexander Mackendrick

I have been interested for many years in the underlying structure of storytelling, from Mackendrick’s description of dramatic structure using fairy-tales<sup>23</sup> to Tom

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<sup>23</sup> Mackendrick, *On Film-making*, 76.

Lazarus' concept of 'Rising Action.'<sup>24</sup> For this project I carried out in depth research on the subject and used this knowledge at every stage of the writing and rewriting process. Below I have outlined the structural pattern that emerged in *White Bear*, using the reference points from Amnon Buchbinder's *The Way of the Screenwriter*.<sup>25</sup>

### **Set-up**

Brie is introduced; we see that she is a successful and important member of a religious organization. Her husband Zach and son Oscar are also members of the organization. She is concerned for her sister Paige who has not been seen for a while.

### **Catalyst**

Brie discovers that the Church was monitoring her sister, but she is reassured by the Church that her sister has chosen to undergo a detox program.

### **First turning point / Main tension**

Brie discovers that her sister is being held against her will by the Church and that her husband is complicit in her treatment. Brie realises that she and her sister must leave the organization. She needs someone to help rescue her sister. Taking Oscar with her, she sets off for Deadhorse, where Ray (her sister's 'mop' boyfriend) lives.

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<sup>24</sup> Lazarus, *Secrets of Film Writing*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Buchbinder, *The Way of the Screenwriter*, 86-110.

### ***Breakthrough***

Ray refuses to rescue Brie's sister fearing the consequences from the organization, who have already made his life difficult. He fails to shoot the polar bear that has come into Deadhorse, forcing Brie to literally take matters into her own hands, taking his gun and shooting the bear before it reaches Oscar. She decides to rescue her sister with the help of the police.

### ***Ordeal***

Zach arrives in Deadhorse, having received a call from Oscar. Zach forces Brie to return to the Church. She goes back, with the intention of rescuing her sister and leaving the Church together. However, she finds her sister has been 'purified' by the Church and refuses to leave. Brie is now alone, held against her will, with Zach and the Church in charge of Oscar.

### ***Second Turning Point***

Brie undergoes "treatment" from the Church, their cruelty escalating. They make her confess with Oscar watching. She is told that if she leaves the organization, they will make sure she never sees her son or her sister again. Brie decides to leave the Church, even if she will be alone- she cannot live a lie anymore.

### ***Crisis and Climax***

In a humiliating public ceremony they grant her permission to leave, in disgrace. We see her shunned by the entire community that applauded her in the opening scene.

Brie returns to the Church. She reveals that she has the evidence to significantly damage the Church. She has been using their own methods against them, recording everything that has taken place since her return. She asks for her son.

### ***Resolution***

Brie and Oscar are free of the organization and have a happy if solitary existence. In the final scene, Brie's sister turns up to join them.

## **FEMALE CHARACTERS**

"I try to write parts for women that are as complicated and interesting as women actually are."

Nora Ephron

It is a truth universally acknowledged that female characters in films are frequently one-dimensional and included to reveal something about the male protagonist. Leading undergraduate screenwriting tutorials at York University I had the opportunity to read a large number of short film proposals and was shocked at how this trend continues in the minds of smart, creative young people in 2013. The majority of female characters in their stories were merely devices to further the story of the leading man: wives, girlfriends, daughters, and prostitutes. Out of fifty stories, there was a handful where the protagonist was female.

I feel a responsibility to write scripts with female leads who are, as Nora Ephron says, as complex as real women. I say Brie is a warrior, but that suggests strength without complexity. Over the course of the story she goes on the journey that will allow her to become a warrior and a freedom fighter. It requires her to face up to the truth. My earlier statement should have this qualification: Brie *becomes* a warrior. She has to change, and she is able to change: that is what makes us human.

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