

The Protagonist's Journey

Scott Myers

The Protagonist's Journey

An Introduction to Character-Driven
Screenwriting and Storytelling

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This book is dedicated to storytellers

Foreword

To those about to have the pleasure of reading this book,

I've known Scott Myers personally for just over a decade. I know this because my inbox tells me that my first email to him was on May 14, 2011 to say that I had long been a fan of his blog and asking if there would be an opportunity in the near future to meet face to face. We got on the phone shortly thereafter, and his blog, *Go Into The Story*, was announced as the official screenwriting blog of the Black List mere months later.

As certain as I am about how long I've *known* Scott Myers, I have no idea when I actually became *a fan* of his, though I can be certain that it's some time after May 16, 2008, and it was near immediate. How was I not immediately going to be a fan of the kind of person who writes about screenwriting and goes all the way back to Aristotle's *Poetics* to try to understand where screenwriting exists in the history of storytelling?

In the years since, there are some things that I've learned about Scott that would be valuable for you to know as you read this book:

Scott Myers cares about screenwriting, and that's probably one of the larger understatements I've ever put to keyboard. After starting in May 2008, Scott didn't stop—once—until June 2020. 4,428 consecutive days of writing about screenwriting. Never once interrupted by “pneumonia, flu, hamstring strains, a chaotic variety of technical issues, world travel and confusing schedule changes, and various other roadblocks.” He *says* it's to make the point that “if I can write every day, you can write every day.” But let's be

honest: no one does anything for more than 4,000 consecutive days for someone else's benefit. No one. His point about your writing *easily* could have been made after 1,000 days, or 2,000 days, or after he broke Cal Ripken's Iron Man record at 2,632. But he didn't. He kept writing, every single day, about screenwriting, about storytelling, about character, plot, conflict, and the business of screenwriting, because he cares about it *deeply*. (And then a rotator cuff surgery did him in, but that's a story for another time.)

Scott Myers cares about screenwriters. The first year of any new venture is especially important, and that was particularly true of the Black List screenwriters lab when we launched it in 2013. The Black List Web site was already a wholly new concept in the film industry, and so inviting eight screenwriters selected from it to join us for an all expenses paid trip was a potentially make or break moment for my fledgling company. There's a natural instinct in those cases to shoot the moon by getting as many bold faced names as humanly possible (and to be sure, we did, eventually.) Scott's name, though, was the first on my team sheet, as they say in soccer, and it has been for every single lab we've ever done. I'm just not sure you can find someone more personally and authentically invested in screenwriters living up to the potential of their ideas, whatever form they take. "The streak" is evidence of that, sure, but it's never more clear than when you have the privilege of listening in on Scott working with screenwriters. I'm lucky to have that opportunity. Most of you never will, but fortunately, this book now exists.

Scott Myers cares about people. If it wasn't screenwriting, it would be something else. Which is to say that even if you take away the profound generosity of twelve years of literal non-stop writing about writing and making it available for free and the personal investment in the success of screenwriters that I've personally witnessed, I'd still just be thankful that Scott Myers is my friend. He cares *deeply* about other people. He wants joy for them, fulfillment for them, resilience for them, and he's willing to give of himself so that they can have it. It's there in his ribbing me about by beloved Los Angeles Football Club's utterly terrible record against his Los Angeles Galaxy. It's there in our trading articles about the US Mens and Womens national soccer teams. It's there in his pride in his sons and his wife's myriad very cool accomplishments in the world, and his patience, grace, and counsel when things are going sideways in mine.

And so a guide to storytelling through the lens of caring about people (even fake ones) probably shouldn't come as too much a surprise. Except that maybe it should be.

For years, I have encouraged Scott to monetize the gargantuan work that he does for screenwriters. A rough approximation of our conversations has

gone something like this: “What if we paid you to write the blog?” “No, that doesn’t feel right.” “Well can we build an infrastructure so you can put ads on the blog?” “No, that doesn’t feel right either.” “Scott, I respect the altruism, but you deserve compensation for this! It’s a lot of work.” “Maybe, but you should see the emails I get from writers expressing their appreciation for the blog. What better compensation is there than that?” “I get that, but... okay, if you ever change your mind, please let me know.”

Simply put, I am overjoyed that Palgrave Macmillan changed his mind. We are all better off for it. Screenwriters who want to explore a different way into telling the stories they want to tell. Film and television industry professionals like me who get excited about working with writers who can deliver good stories, well-told. Audience members like all of us who just want to watch something good. All of us will be better off for the book you now hold in your hands.

So enjoy, and remember what Scott would tell you: Read scripts. Watch movies. Write pages. And remember: This is just one point of view on how to write a screenplay. The right way is, ultimately, whatever way works for you.

Sincerely,
Franklin Leonard
Founder, The Black List

Preface

This book is the result of over three decades of my work as a screenwriter and educator. Since 1987 when the spec script *K-9*, which I co-wrote, sold to Universal Studios, going on to become a hit movie with two sequels, I have written over thirty film and television projects for nearly every major Hollywood studio and broadcast network. Through my blog GoIntoTheStory.com, named Best of the Best Scriptwriting Website by Writers' Digest, I have interviewed hundreds of professionals in the film and television business, and interfaced with thousands of writers. After teaching screenwriting as a hobby since 2002, I am now an assistant professor at the film school at DePaul University. During that time, I have taught countless writers from beginners to advanced, undergraduate, and graduate students. Based upon my experience as a writer and educator, here is what I have discovered: The best writing is character-driven writing.

The Protagonist's Journey: An Introduction to Character-Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling is aimed at students of the craft who want to go beyond formulaic approaches which reduce story structure to plot. Plot is essential, but it is only half the story. For it is the world of characters and their inner lives which gives meaning to the events they experience. Indeed, it is by engaging characters, getting curious about them, and following their lead that plot comes to life. In the words of that age-old adage: Character equals plot. I believe that to be true.

This book is divided into three parts. Part I explores story as Narrative Imperative, how there is a profound connection between the psychological

state of the Protagonist and the unfolding plot. The journey the Protagonist takes is the journey they *need* to take. Part II examines the Family of Characters, five archetypes seen with great frequency in movies and television series—Protagonist, Nemesis, Attractor, Mentor, Trickster—and how this assembly of a story's characters exists to support the Protagonist's physical and psychological journey. Part III presents a proven professional approach to Breaking Story through a series of character development and plotting exercises resulting in a scene-by-scene outline.

Theories explored here are influenced by Aristotle, Joseph Campbell, and Carl Jung, but are also grounded in my many years of experience as a working writer and teacher. The content in these pages has been road-tested in workshops in the United States and Europe, as well as what I have learned as a mentor at multiple feature writer labs under the auspices of the Black List in Los Angeles. In addition, the theories and practices detailed here served as the inspiration for story development classes in the B.F.A. and M.F.A. programs in screenwriting at DePaul University.

As I often remind students and writers, there is no right way to write. Every writer is different. Every story is different. It is incumbent for each individual to find their own way into who they are as a writer and how to best navigate the story-crafting process. That said, a character-driven approach engages the writer with the very individuals whose story it is: the Protagonist and the characters with whom they intersect.

Thus, we start our journey in these pages with a mantra I coined many years ago: Begin with character. End with character. Find the story in between.

Chicago, Illinois
June 2021

Scott Myers

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My thanks to DePaul University for its backing of this project, including a generous research grant in combination with a paid leave. This allowed me to analyze hundreds of movies and television series, and organize the structure of the book. My special thanks to the university's David Miller, Dean of the College of Computing and Digital Media, and Gary Novak, Director of the School of Cinematic Arts for their continual support during my time as an assistant professor at DePaul. I am grateful for my colleagues in the program, especially the screenwriting faculty, who daily demonstrate their commitment to academic excellence and serving the needs of our diverse and talented student body.

My thanks to Dr. Linda Venis, former Director of the UCLA Extension Writers' Program, David Sontag, former Director, and Dana Coen, current Director of the Writing for the Screen and Stage program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My years teaching at these institutions not only helped me explore much of the content of this book, but also grow as an educator. I thank Tom Benedek, co-founder of ScreenwritingMasterClass.com, a unique educational resource for writers we launched in 2010. Tom was the very first screenwriter I met in Los Angeles and we have been friends ever since. Of special note, my thanks to Franklin Leonard, founder and CEO of The Black List, and the entire Black List team for the opportunity to help create, shape, and grow their annual feature film writer labs, both as a mentor and workshop facilitator. To all the students I have taught over the years, I appreciate the opportunity to explore your creativity with

you and how the theories and practices encompassed in this book evolved through our conversations about the craft.

There are hundreds of screenwriters, filmmakers, television writers, and producers I have either interviewed or gotten to know through my role as host of the blog GoIntoTheStory.com. I am grateful how our talks have contributed to my ongoing education about the writing life. In addition, I appreciate the many opportunities I have had to share my passion for character-driven storytelling as a presenter, panelist, moderator, and master class teacher with programs such as the Austin Film Festival, the London Screenwriters' Festival, and the Willamette Writers Conference.

My thanks to Lina Aboujeb, executive editor, and Emily Wood, editorial assistant for their patient oversight of this project for Palgrave Macmillan. Also to Sebastian Smith, who designed and created the Family of Characters illustrations, Lisa Rivero, who handled the book's index, and Trish Curtin, who was kind enough to copyedit the entire manuscript. A special acknowledgment goes out to Jule Selbo, Ph.D., professor of screenwriting at California State University, Fullerton for introducing me to the Palgrave Macmillan editorial team.

Finally, a personal note of gratitude to my family. To my brother Sam Myers and his family for their support and the use of their Hovland, Minnesota cabin for a writing retreat; to Will and Luke Myers for reading the manuscript and providing their insightful feedback; to Rebecca McMillan for listening to me year after year as I worked through the ideas that eventually resulted in the writing of this book. My family has made considerable sacrifices as I have devoted countless hours to studying, writing, and teaching, day and night, weekdays and weekends. My endless thanks for their patience, encouragement, and love.

About This Book

Character drives plot. Based on this principle, this book walks aspiring writers through the fascinating world of character-driven screenwriting. When a writer engages their characters, they start a process which naturally leads to the story's structure and everything else that makes for a well-written narrative. Exploring the protagonist's journey and their "unity arc," Myers explains how a family of characters surrounds the protagonist and influences their transformation process. This easy-to-follow guide features activities that will help writers of any level develop their stories from concept to scene-by-scene outline. Based upon a popular workshop Myers has led with over a thousand writers at all levels of experience, this book is a must-have for screenwriting students, both undergraduate and graduate, and those looking at advanced story development.

Scott Myers has written over thirty projects at nearly every major Hollywood studio and broadcast network. He hosts GoIntoTheStory.com, which *Writers' Digest* named "Best of the Best Scriptwriting Website." An assistant professor at DePaul University, USA, Scott is a graduate of the University of Virginia and Yale University Divinity School, USA.

Praise for *The Protagonist's Journey*

“My training as a film and tv writer consists of one online class I took with Scott as my teacher. And the lessons I learned from him have lasted me to this day. Scott is a brilliant guide for anyone looking to get into screenwriting. Regardless of the genre, budget, or style of the film—character is everything. It is the bedrock of all drama, laughter, love, passion, and loss. Get to know your characters well enough—and they tend to tell you the story they want to be in. Scott’s book is an indispensable tool for unlocking scripts through character and a great tool for any screenwriter.”

—Lisa Joy, *Westworld*, *Reminiscence*

“*The Protagonist's Journey* is a remarkable book. Scott Myers is an extremely rare creative talent, a gifted writer and a brilliant teacher. You can learn so much from him. This is a special book.”

—Shane Salerno, *Armageddon*, *Avatar 2-5*, New York Times bestselling author, *Salinger*

“Scott Myers’ love of film, of story, of film characters and his mastery of the art and craft of screenwriting are well-reflected in his wonderful new book, *The Protagonist's Journey*. Myers sets forth a clear path to impactful screenwriting in this illuminating guide for storytellers at all levels for bringing honest human emotion to the lives of their on-screen characters. Effectively citing accessible examples from film and TV, this book demonstrates how the interrelationship of character and plot functions in the script form. Scott

provides a concrete set of tools – a clear, concise methodology for the craft and effective ways to use character, emotion, human behavior to build story.”

—Tom Benedek, screenwriter, *Cocoon*; Professor of Screenwriting,
University of Massachusetts at Amherst

“*The Protagonist's Journey* is a superb resource for writers: sharp, engaging, and brimming with insight. Scott Myers illuminates techniques for character development that not only kickstart creativity, but enable writers to deepen their work and to craft gripping, emotionally satisfying stories. A gem.”

—Meg Gardiner, author of the best-selling UNSUB novels

“Scott Myers’s analytical gifts deftly lay bare the narrative underpinnings of movies that we love. *The Protagonist's Journey* is foundational for screenwriters, and even certain fiction writers. Myers illuminates a core principle of writing for the screen: All story rises from character. Bookstores have been too well-supplied with “paint-by-plot-point” screenwriting manuals that encourage schematic writing and single-trait characters. For me, it’s a keen pleasure to see Scott Myers’ fresh approach. He profoundly understands that the most essential thing in a performance-based art is our experience of the central character’s personal transformation, and what is gained and lost—inevitably—along the way. Myers draws from a broad grasp of classic, Aristotelian story-telling, as he expands our own understanding with deep insights that he has gleaned from masters of mythology and human psychology. What a resource this book is! I’m envious of the lucky writer who’s just starting out, with this book on their nightstand.”

—Robin Swicord, *Little Women*, *Memoirs of a Geisha*, *When They See Us*

“When Scott Myers talks about screenwriting, I listen. So many writing guides focus on structure, but Scott persuasively preaches that well-drawn characters drive our best stories. In *The Protagonist's Journey*, Scott gives us practical steps to shape powerful narratives around protagonists, offers a multitude of teaching illustrations from great movies, and gently invites us into this process he understands so well. It’s a terrific book I can’t wait to share with my students.”

—Greg Garrett, Author of *Bastille Day* and four other novels, and of *A Long, Long Way: Hollywood's Unfinished Journey from Racism to Reconciliation*; Professor, Baylor University

“I’ve been reading and learning from Scott’s column for years now, but *The Protagonist's Journey* is his greatest achievement yet. It offers a smart, comprehensive guide to writing memorable characters and, most of all, reminds

us that characters are why people seek out stories and characters, not plot, remain with audiences long after the credits roll. An essential read.”

—Brad Ingelsby, *Mare of Easttown, Out of the Furnace, Run All Night*

“In a sea of great books about writing, *The Protagonist's Journey* stands out. Scott Myers has a gift for distilling information into its purest and simplest form, and this book is no different. We’ve seen so many books on screenwriting being framed through the lens of structure, and it’s refreshing to see someone tackle it from the most fundamental part of story: Character.”

—Scott Beck and Bryan Woods, *A Quiet Place*

“Finally, there is a screenwriting book that focuses on the most important and most overlooked element of good storytelling. The characters really are everything. *The Protagonist's Journey* gives you the tools to craft emotional, character-driven stories that are the bread and butter of any professional screenwriter. If you want some genuine screenwriting advice, look no further than Scott’s book.”

—Stephany Folsom, *Toy Story 4, Paper Girls*

“If characters are the lifeblood of stories, *The Protagonist's Journey* takes you directly into the heart of the matter. As inspirational as it is informational, Scott Myers has created nothing less than a path for writers to immerse themselves in the lives of their characters and enable them to drive the story-crafting process.”

—Don Winslow, author of the best-selling *City on Fire, Broken, The Border, The Force, The Cartel*

“In his decade of teaching, culminating with this book, Scott has pulled off a remarkable feat. He’s made a complete compendium of the screenwriting craft while continuing to encourage the antithesis of formulaic writing.”

—Peter Craig, *The Hunger Games: Mockingjay, Top Gun: Maverick, The Batman*

“The chicken or the egg equivalent for screenwriters (and all storytellers) is what comes first: Plot or character. What should come first is reading Scott Myers’ book, *The Protagonist's Journey*. It’s a rare gem. A book that focuses on character development, and how characters impact the plot. Each chapter provides specifics of character using modern film and tv references. Too many

books teach structure with the protagonist as an afterthought. *The Protagonist's Journey* is a must-have, must-read for all screenwriters, and a must-teach for all screenwriting professors.”

—Keith Giglio, screenwriter, *Reba McEntire's Christmas in Tune, A Cinderella Story*; Professor, S.I. Newhouse School, Syracuse University

“Scott Myers is a canny and thoughtful teacher of the craft of screenwriting, and brings all of his impressive knowledge, insight and experience to *The Protagonist's Journey*: this book is full of essential lessons for the novice, and crucial reminders for the professional.”

—Javier Grillo-Marxuach, *Lost, The Dark Crystal, The Middleman*

“You can tell from reading the first chapter of *The Protagonist's Journey* that it was written by someone who knows how to communicate with an audience as varied in its interests as its abilities. With years of storytelling experience behind him, Scott Myers has written a book easily graspable by the beginning writer but complex enough to interest even the most sophisticated of writers. Everyone setting out to write narrative—whether screenplay, novel, or even history—will want to have Myers’ book along for the ride.”

—Becky McLaughlin, Professor of English, University of South Alabama

“Every movie lives or dies by their characters and no one understands that better than Scott. Whether you’re a seasoned screenwriter or writing “fade in” for the first time, *The Protagonist's Journey: An Introduction to Character-Driven Screenwriting and Storytelling* is required reading. The perfect torch to navigate the dark abyss that is crafting a screenplay. A masterclass.”

—David Guggenheim, *Safe House, Designated Survivor*

“Scott Myers has distilled his years of successful screenwriting and teaching into convenient book form. Scott’s approach is a refreshing move away from static formulas and toward character-driven decision-making. Practical exercises provide strategies for brainstorming, breaking story, and creating characters with nuance and depth. Examples from accessible contemporary film and television run throughout Scott’s text, making this a book students will truly connect with. *The Protagonist's Journey* will likely be widely adopted in screenwriting courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels.”

—Theo Lipfert, Professor, School of Film & Photography, Montana State University

“A fresh (and refreshing) way to look at storytelling. Scott expertly crystallizes the most important concept in screenwriting: that character and story are one

in the same. I'll be keeping this book nearby so I can easily crack it open next time I'm stuck on a script."

—David Rabinowitz, Academy Award, *BlacKkKlansman*

"Screenwriting is not an innate skill (I wish) but story sense is, and every human has it. In this book, Scott mercifully provides an entrance to the craft of screenwriting through our natural sense of story and human behavior. Follow your protagonist, and her wants, needs, skills and deficiencies will lead you where your screenplay needs to go, so the book shows us. In guiding the reader/writer through understanding their protagonist, Scott shows us how to better understand ourselves, the #1 skill no screenwriter can go far without."

—Liz W. Garcia, *The Lifeguard, Cold Case, Memphis Beat*

"*The Protagonist's Journey* is a focused, well-written, and welcome insistence on character development as the primary source of storytelling energy. Using Aristotelian logic, Jungian psychology, and Campbellian mythology to comprehensively explore and unlock the secrets of effective, character-driven screenwriting, Myers not only provides his readers with a clearly defined map on how to properly navigate story, but reveals, to this author's approval, that plot without person is a journey to mediocrity."

—Dana Coen, Co-Executive Producer, *JAG*; Director, Writing for the Screen and Stage Program, Professor of the Practice, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

"*The Protagonist's Journey* is a nod of respect to the craft of screenwriting. Equal parts contemplative and practical, Myers' straightforward approach turns dense concepts into readily accessible ideas."

—T. J. Newman, author of the best-selling novel *Falling*

"Scott Myers understands the craft of screenwriting. *The Protagonist's Journey* is an excellent resource for writers seeking to create more multilayered, evocative characters in their storytelling process."

—Scott Derrickson, *Sinister, Deliver Us From Evil, Dr. Strange*

"Building on his vast expertise as a writer and a screenwriting teacher, with *The Protagonist's Journey*, Scott Myers provides a comprehensive, contemporary standard work for screenplay analysis and its application, focusing on the core belief: that character is plot and plot is character."

—Carolyn Große Hellmann, Head of Serial Storytelling / Professional Training Screenwriting, Internationale Filmschule Köln

"We care more about the person driving the car than we do the road they're on. All too often, plot and so-called plot points become the drivers of narrative. What results are cruise-control stories that are formulaic and predictable. What Scott instead does here is guide the reader through an inside-out approach, starting with the unique wants and needs of the main character, and how the actions they take to fulfill them are what keep the reader turning to the next page."

—Chris Sparling, *Buried, The Sea of Trees, Greenland*

"Scott's book gives clear and valuable guidelines to develop organic stories that are driven by complex, empathetic characters. This is a much-needed book in a field that has long been centered on plot. Whenever I feel lost in a script, I will go back to *The Protagonist's Journey* and use it as my compass to find my way through!"

—Alireza Khatami, Award-winning writer-director, *Oblivion Verses*; Assistant Professor, Ryerson University

"With *The Protagonist's Journey*, Scott has unlocked a whole new way of telling stories by focusing on characters and the psychological forces that drive them to action. It not only changed how I viewed my current work-in-progress, it also inspired a few brand new ideas along the way."

—Mickey Fisher, *Extant, Reverie, Jack Ryan*

"Maybe you have an interesting character, or a compelling premise, and then what? If you've ever struggled to integrate character with plot, *The Protagonist's Journey* is for you. Scott Myers holds an unwavering lens on character (protagonists, supporting character archetypes, nemesis) and then leads us through an actionable framework for creating transformational plots. The result is an essential read for any professional writer, teacher, or student who wants their stories to journey purposefully."

—Ryan Woldruff, Associate Professor of English, Central Methodist University

"Scott brings vast experience and skill to *The Protagonist's Journey*. Brimming with examples from film + TV, this book will help any aspiring screenwriter to level up their script mechanics from the inside out. Recommend!"

—Jessica Bendinger, *Bring It On, Stick It*

"Every book can offer something. Some offer more. Way more. And *The Protagonist's Journey* is one. Scott has a profound understanding of craft and most importantly, the ability to convey his deep knowledge in a way that

people REALLY get it. He is a master of story and HOW story works. We have had over 1,000 speakers pass through the London Screenwriters' Festival in the past decade and Scott remains in the top three. He is that good and this book is a steal."

—Chris Jones, Founder, London Screenwriters' Festival

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