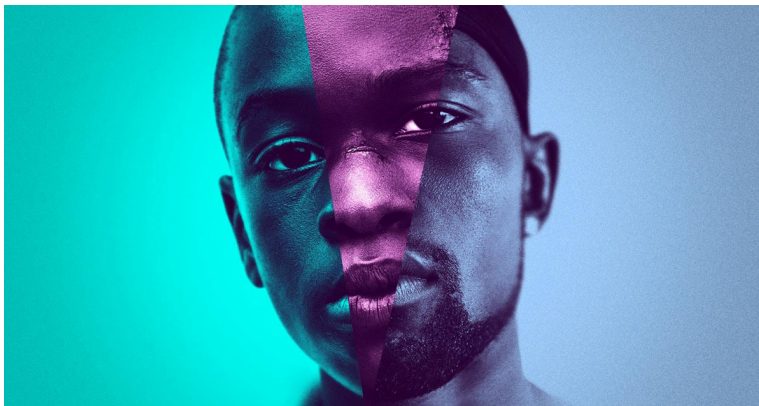



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# On Diversity in Storytelling


By Jonathan Williams | August 3, 2017 | Main, Screenwriting 101



Even in the face of a seemingly endless slew of reboots, remakes, franchises, and spinoffs, we are in the midst of an exciting time for movies. Diversity in mainstream filmmaking is reinvigorating what, for the past decade or so, has been an increasingly stale market. The arrival of *Wonder Woman* and soon *Black Panther* has reinvigorated what started to feel like an incredibly boring genre of comic book movies....the hero is always going to win out and save the day. And with *Moonlight* winning Best Picture, there is hope that Hollywood is finally beginning to get the message that diversity sells.

When I attended film school, we had a seminar with a Director whose recent film about a group of African-American women had become both a critical and box office success. Although I'm a member of the LGBTQ-community, I'm still very much a white male. The questions I had for this Director, who was also white, centered around the difficulties in writing characters that are a step away from our own racial or cultural identity. "I just grew up around women like that," was his response, which I still can't quite wrap my head around.

While it's possible this filmmaker was simply being honest, for most of us, such a fundamental question cannot be so easily hand-waved or dismissed. It must be treated with incredible care if writers are to effectively step outside their comfort zones and fully embrace diversity in their screenplays. Fortunately, it's something I've thought a lot about in the time passed since. And now, dear reader, I'm here to pass on that knowledge to you.



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**“The world does not come in one shape, size, or color, and there’s nothing wrong with drawing attention to that.”**

Incorporating diversity into your script must be a conscious effort, especially if you're a white filmmaker. You can't just fluff it off or blame the casting director or someone else. We, as writers, are the foundation of the story. We bear the torch – it's our responsibility to make sure its burning bright before we hand it off. Many times this means being as blunt as possible in your description of characters. If, in your mind's eye, a character's ethnicity is relevant, then state it. Don't explain why,



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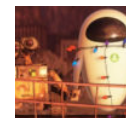
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and don't feel pressured to justify your decisions as if the only appropriate place to describe a character as explicitly "black" is in a script about the Civil Rights Movement. The world does not come here's nothing wrong with drawing attention to that. It's a fact of our natural, cultural, social-economic, and political reality and it should be reflected in the verisimilitude of the stories we tell.

And that's just the basics but it helps immensely. When you're finished with your scripts, it is highly recommended that you apply the **Bechdel test** on your female characters. What is the Bechdel Test you ask? The Bechdel Test is a common tool used in the industry as an indicator for the active presence of female characters in a film. This is a helpful tool for a writer. It challenges one to create and pursue different storylines for one's female characters in a way that, as a writer, causes one to examine the true purpose of placing a female character within a story and not simply just filling a need as the love interest.

Speaking of love interests, one note I always give to my friends is to actively try to gender bend their scripts. Obviously, this makes them a tad bit uncomfortable but sometimes I throw out, why couldn't this character be a woman? Or gay? I've encountered plenty of straight writers who are actively attempting to write LGBT storylines or love stories like *Brokeback Mountain*. This isn't to say they are wrong, but to some degree when they ask for my help or opinion I simply say to them, why not just write the love story as if it were you and a woman.

Unless it comes down to writing a love scene, most of the romantic business tends to be the same. Sometimes it helps to write whatever your "default" version is *first* then simply gender bend the characters later. Why not even go one step further. That great spy action thriller you're writing with that suave James Bond-like character? Why can't he be a woman? Try it – the results may surprise you. Sometimes diversifying and changing the gender isn't about always making something an issue. Your audience will relate to any character as long as they are well written and emotionally resonate. It will add another layer to your characters and give you more to explore. It will also help you to avoid common cliché's or tropes and provide a fresh point of view to your story.

### **“That suave James Bond-like character? Why can't he be a woman? Try it. The results may surprise you.”**

Point of view becomes even more important when it comes to notes. Surround yourself with diverse writers ones that not only you can trust but will give you a different perspective. I have female friends whom I can trust to call me out I've written a poor female character and friends of color who will point out the differences in their struggle if they feel like I've written a character in an insensitive or inaccurate manner. Can these conversations be difficult? Yes, but what I find is that there is a sense of respect those writers and friends have given me in an attempt to create characters that share their experience and the realization that we're all not as different as we pretend to be. However, in order to do this, you have to do your research.

Everything up to this point seems pretty obvious and simple. Right? Well, now it's time for the tough part. You have to do your research. And I cannot stress that enough. If you don't do your own research first you *will* come off as incredibly ignorant. In these times of high tensions and political divide, you as the writer need to make the effort to understand those differences and conflicts.

### **“You have to do your research. And I cannot stress that enough.”**

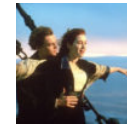
This doesn't mean you have to play the part of the activist. What I'm talking about are issues on a much smaller scale, but no less important. Things like, how women can experience sexism in the workplace that at times can influence their career decisions. For example, in the *Devil Wears Prada*, Andrea Sachs, Anne Hathaway's character makes the statement at a dinner with friends that if Miranda Priestly were a man, no one would have all these nasty things to say about her, they'd simply say that she's good at her job — I'm paraphrasing here but these little understandings make a big difference and seeing the world through the eyes of another is an eye-opening experience.

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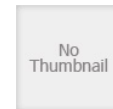
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ankly, at the end of the day, a female-driven story written by a woman will always have a much more resonant and detailed perspective than if a man wrote it. There are some stories that are not ours to tell, but that doesn't mean we can't diversify our stories. Our world is diverse.

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### “As writers, we delve into the human experience on an emotional level.”

In fiction, we strive for verisimilitude or the appearance of truth and reality. In our day to day we meet people from all walks of life of all different backgrounds and ethnicities so shouldn't our scripts reflect the same? It's time for us to think outside the box and like everything in Hollywood it starts with the writer. The doors are opening, Hollywood is slowly catching on, but if we don't continue to push and make a conscious effort to tell these stories and make way for these voices then the regression will set in and films like *Wonder Woman* and *Moonlight* will simply seem like a brief string of luck and it is imperative that we do not let that happen.

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