10-Great Books for Screenwriters Not About Screenwriting

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By: Jonathan James

As Screenwriter's many of us are book magnets. We jump from how-to book to how-to book looking for our version of *The Secret* that will allow us to finally break-in. From Robert McKee, to Syd Field, to *Save the Cat* I'm fairly confident to say we all have the same bookshelf in our homes. Though I have these, I personally stopped reading these tiring tomes long ago. I love reading but at the end of the day none of them present any new ideas in a way that will suddenly lead to my success.

That, dear readers, will only come with practice and experience; however, that doesn't mean you should stop reading. As writers it can be more effective to read books off the beaten track. Books that don't simply teach 3-Act Structure, rising action, and.....sorry I almost fell asleep there. The point is these books lie off the beaten path. They may not teach you 3-Act Structure but they will deepen your knowledge of the craft.
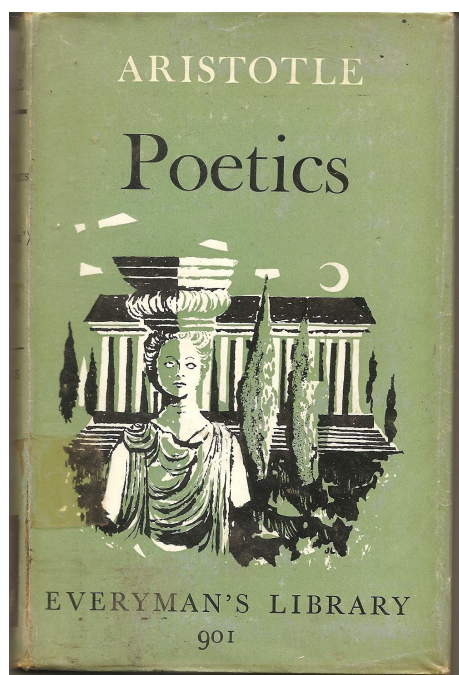
10. *Aristotle's Poetics*

The very basis and beginning of our dramatic structure starts here. Even before William Shakespeare stepped into the spotlight, Aristotle set the groundwork for how to structure and create a moving dramatic work. This, for some, can be a difficult read, but have no fear there are three great up sides to Aristotle's essay. First, it's short, the wording may create a slow read, but you needed worry about having to make it through an *Anna Karenina* sized text.

Second, it's free! You needed worry about shoveling $15 for this piece. Both iBooks and Amazon have the original text the lump sum of $0 or at worst 99-cents. The final perk is this, if you take a look at the original text and you're struggling through it never fear there is an easy solution – though this one you'll have to pay for. For your reference writer Michael Tierno has written a comprehensive book called *Aristotle's Poetics for Screenwriters.* Just like your well-worn copy of *The Writer's Journey* Tierno takes Aristotle's Essay and breaks it down piece by piece, explaining Aristotle's dramatic theories using well known films. So now you have no excuse to pass up this legendary essay.

9. *Mythology* **by Edith Hamilton**

Alright, there are probably a handful of Mythology books out there that you could recommend. Hamilton's book was my first introduction to the world of mythology. Obviously, there are other great books that cover more specific realms of mythology, I nearly squealed with joy when I discovered Neil Gaiman's recent book on *Norse Mythology*, but as a basic understanding of mythology Hamilton's book serves as a comprehensive guide spanning multiple cultures, Greek, Norse, Celtic, etc...

You can always delve deeper into more specific topics but this book will lay a nice ground work. Mythology is a great tool for a writer. These timeless tales delve deep into not only human psychology, but also the history of dramatic story telling. They can help you to break story ideas and structure in your own scripts by modeling or even adapting these timeless tales for a modern audience.
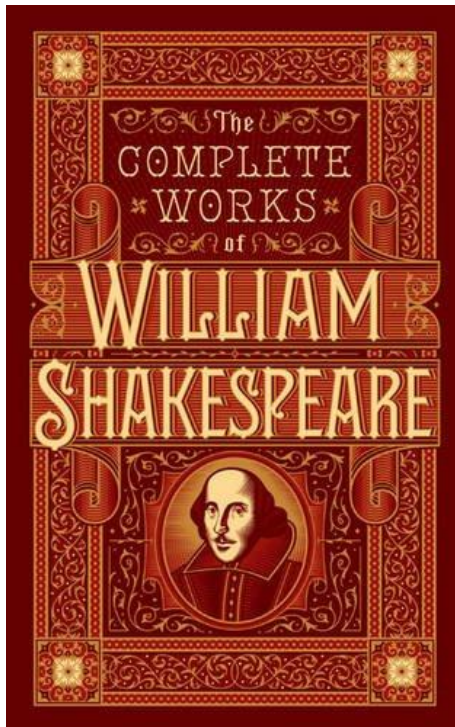
8. *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*

I say complete works because everyone has their favorites granted it's always useful to be familiar with the big pieces like *King Lear, Richard III, Macbeth,* and *Romeo & Juliette* there are many other treasures to be found within his work. I placed this here because one of the most useful pieces of advice I had heard from any screenwriter was from John Logan himself. When asked in an interview with BAFTA what advice he would give to emerging writers he simply replied, "Study your Shakespeare." Like Mythology and Aristotle, The Bard's tales have stood the test of time.

Great dramatic pieces that tell timeless stories and are part of the great history of drama as a writer of dramatic pieces you owe it to yourself to know these great works. Thankfully, if you find the dialogue a little too difficult No Fear Shakespeare books are always available. If you are not part of the former group The Bard's tales are free online. See you don't need to give Robert McKee $150 for a seminar to learn the art of drama.

That being said, many writers and actors agree that while reading Shakespeare is essential the only way to fully grasp these tales is through performance. Just like our own screenplays Shakespeare's work was meant to be performed and once again there are hundreds of films that have adapted Shakespeare's work and taped performance. Or if you're in the mood for a little fresh air, almost every city has free or low-cost performances of Shakespeare plays in the park.

### 7. *Owning Your Own Shadow*

Most writers are inherently interested in Psychology. And why not? Part of knowing and understanding how people tick and why people do the things they do allow us to write exciting and interesting characters. However, there are so many books on Psychology the question becomes, where do you even begin or what is even useful to you, the writer. Robert A. Johnson's *Owning Your Own Shadow* in which Johnson further explores Carl Jung's theory of the shadow, the darker, unacknowledged part of ourselves.

This may sound like a self-help book, but Johnson frames the shadow in terms of story and character. This is a great tool for getting inside your character's head and making them even more complex. Especially when more often than not while a character will experience exterior conflict your primary arc represents the struggle within them.

6. *The Comedic Toolbox*

The tragic thing about comedy is it's one genre no one thinks they can write. We all at some point think "I'm not a joke writer I can't write comedy." The truth is that there are different types of comedy there are jokey comedies, physical comedies, and character based comedies. *The Comedic Toolbox* is a helpful solution to your comedic anxieties, while it won't teach you how to be a comedian this book helpfully walks you through the many ways you can tickle your audience's funny bone.

As I've found, you'll never know you're good at something until you've tried it. I've seen relatively unfunny friends writer hilarious scripts. As long as you're self-aware to what makes you laugh, this book will help guide you through the rest.
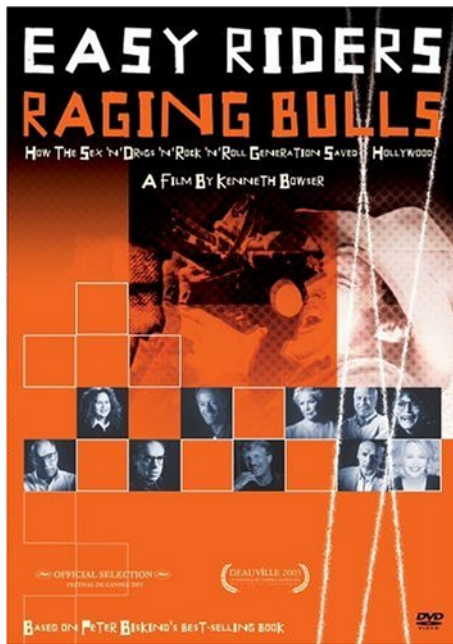
**5.** *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*

No matter what your interest in film is, this book is an absolute must. Recounting the rise of legendary filmmakers like Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg, and many others who rose to fame through the late 60's – early 70's this book recalls the makings of such classics like *Apocalypse Now, Harold and Maude, Raging Bull,* and many more. For a writer it is enthralling to see how some of the most heralded filmmakers of our time broke the rules and created the films that resonate with us today. Between happy accidents to improvisational techniques this book is a great read for anyone trying to break into the business. Not because it shows you the way, but because it teaches us that sometimes its better to ask for forgiveness than permission.
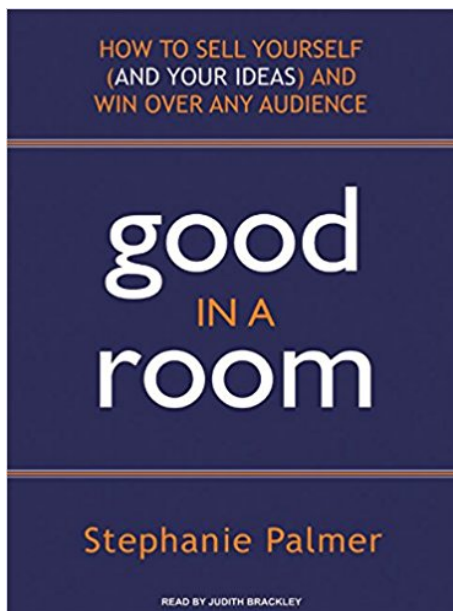
4. *Good in a Room* **by Stephanie Palmer**

No matter how good your script is, if you can't pitch it well no one will want to read it. I, personally, hate pitching. A lot of writers do, but there are those unicorns out there who can sell a script simply by a great pitch, even if the script is terrible. It is simply a reality that it is easier for an executive to hear your pitch rather than read your script. It saves everyone time. Palmer was once an executive at MGM and has heard a lot of pitches. She lays out plainly what makes a great pitch and what has caused her to say "No" to many a great idea. The great thing about this book is that it is incredibly useful both within and out of the film world.

Being able to pitch anything is a successful skill to have in your back pocket. Sure you can pick up any public speaking self-help book to help with your pitching skills, but *Good in a Room* frames such techniques within the studio system and within palmer's own experiences in entertainment that is both useful and timeless for any writer needing to pitch a project. If you're still skeptical Palmer writes frequently on her blog of the same name (goodinaroom.com) with some great advice to writers demystifying many of Hollywood's assumptions, myths and rumors. If you're hesitant to buy the book, her blog is the place to start.
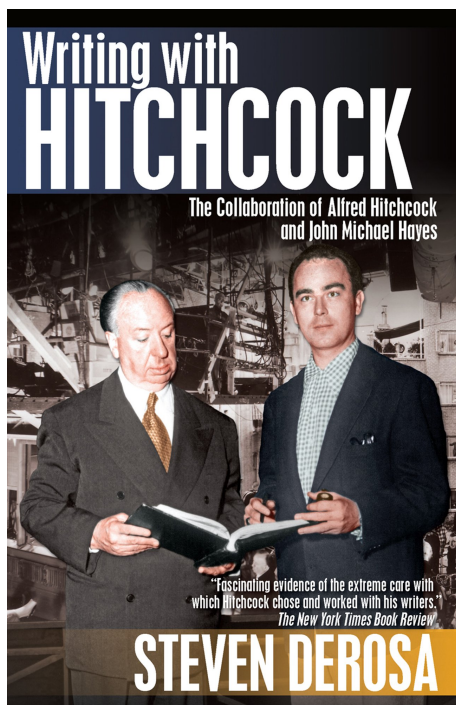

3. *Writing with Hitchcock*

I stumbled upon this one at a used bookstore. John Michael Hayes was Hitchcock's go to writer on several films, most notably *Rear Window.* Like William Goldman's *Adventures in the Screentrade,* Hayes' book tells of his adventures working alongside the Master of Suspense himself. While Hayes provides some helpful screenwriting tips and there are especially some great pieces of advice that he received from Hitch himself, this book, for any screenwriter with a love of Hitchcock is incredibly entertaining to read as well as insightful. I'm surprised to find more writers have not discovered this book.

Perhaps because the over shadowing of Truffaut's epic interview with Hitchcock becoming the go to book for those looking to explore the mind of the legendary director, but where Truffaut's book focuses more on craft Hayes' lesser known work focuses on Hitchcock's insatiable hunger for a great story and his cleaver and insightful techniques for getting around censures to create some of the most iconic scenes ever to grace the silver screen. Don't worry though there are plenty of

juicy and amusing tales of Hayes' story meetings with Hitchcock where he witnesses not only the director's impeccable taste first hand, but his infamous hunger. This is a great book not only for writers to learn from a master storyteller like Hayes, but for those who love to hear tales about the golden age of Hollywood.
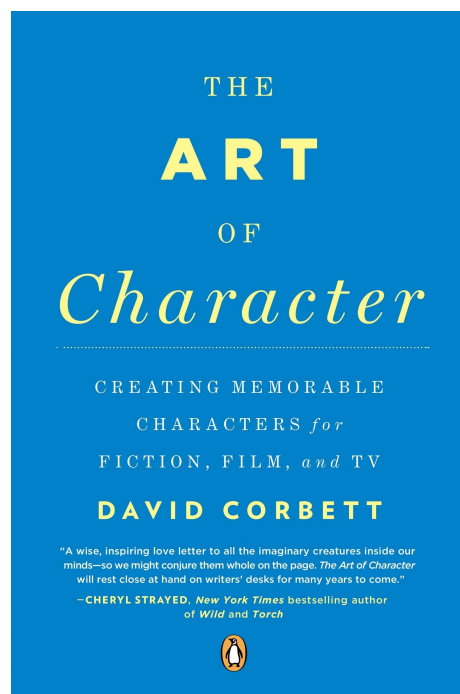
2. *The Art of Character*

When I started writing I loved to create worlds and exciting storylines. It wasn't much later that I learned the essence of a story is not the world, the plot or even the concept but it is the characters within them that make a story truly exciting. Grasping and understanding character was one of the hardest lessons I've learned in writing. Thankfully I discovered David Corbett's *The Art of Character.* I can't tell you how many teachers I had spout the normal manta of "a character has a *want* and a *need"* and that's what makes a good character. This is almost too simple. Corbett breaks down a characters complexity.

From the simple wants and needs to the importance of a character's contradictions to their end goals. I've done a lot of coverage on scripts that lack great characters. It is quite possibly one of the most common problems in scripts. This book is a great tool to helping writer's understand not only what makes a great character, but how to put those elements to use in the context of your own story.
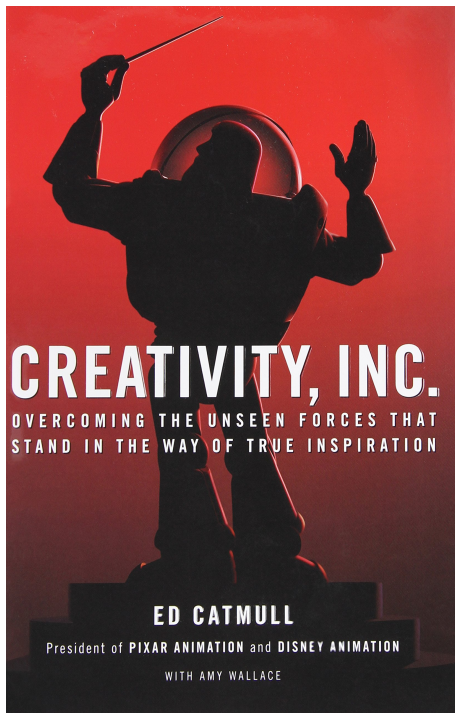
1. *Creativity Inc.*

Whether you agree or disagree that Pixar is currently going through a rough period, the truth of the matter is they have still been responsible for some of the greatest and most moving films of the past ten years. This book by one of Pixars founding members offers incredible insight not only into the rise of the beloved studio, but how they managed to create and form incredible films like *Up, Finding Nemo, Wall E* and *Inside Out.*

One thing I love especially, and quite frankly, I don't think is talked about enough is the importance of failure. Through the book you see how Pixar supported their creatives and allowed them a safe place to fail, all the while encouraging a better and higher standard of storytelling. The beauty of this book is that it is great for all creatives whether you're a writer, director, executive, or aspiring APP developer the story of Pixar is one that meshes creativity with developing state of the art technology.

Catmull candidly admits his and Pixar's failure under the mounting pressure to create more and high quality stories under what he references to as "The Beast" – which is the price of success when both audiences and Disney demand more and the compromises, both good and bad, that come with paying that price. On top of its creative advice it is a great book for teaching us all creative how to manage the rarely taught business aspect of the business in the way only Pixar has managed to.

It is an exciting read for sure and starting off we all experience failures, but it is learning how to pivot and learn from these experiences that make this book an essential for any creative looking for both creative and financial success in their industry.

How NOT to pitch:

Describe the plot of a successful movie terribly.

WeScreenplay
3 hours ago

A good way to learn to pitch is by learning how NOT to pitch.

We'll start:

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, a restless farm boy joins an insurgency group after being radicalized by an old man.

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ALSO ON WESCREENPLAY

WISC '15 Finalists Announced!

2 comments • 2 years ago•

> Matthew Sidney Long — Yaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayyyyy...!!!Thanks #WeScreenplay!#SCHIZO

5 Reasons Rotten Tomatoes is Great for Screenwriters

1 comment • 3 months ago•

> antonio ingram jr. — I really do appreciate you guys sharing this about Rotten Tomatoes. Especially when it comes to these terrible (for the most part with an exception to a few) big budget films. …

WISC '15 Semi-Finalists Announced!!!

5 comments • 2 years ago•

> gaby karlkvist — Congratulations to all of the semi-finalists, especially a great big shout out to my very talented nephew Will Maurer!!!! I am so proud of you! I knew when you were about 5 …

Diverse Voices Spring 2017 Semi Finalists

5 comments • 4 months ago•

> TychoB — Congrats to all the finalists!

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