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The Comic Collection

Year Of Lodgment 2022

School of Language and Culture

A thesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Creative Writing

This thesis consists of practice-led research in the form of a full-length script for a feature film [or pilot for television, or play for the theatre]; plus a 6000-word essay (exegesis). A summary of the script is as follows:

The Comic Collection is a ninety-minute film dramedy. The script centres on the journey of Jaims, a thirty-something-year-old Organisational Operations Officer, who becomes the co-owner of a rough and tumble inner city comic book store. Forced to work alongside an eclectic group of freaks and geeks, she learns the true meaning of family, becoming a better person in the process.

The script is framed by an Exegesis which is a 6000-word essay on the subject of:

- (a) the genre of the script
- (b) the development process from synopsis to second draft

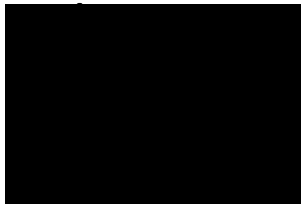
Table of Contents

Attestation of Authorship	1
The Comic Collection: Full Script	2
Exegesis	103

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:



EXEGESIS

Introduction

My thesis is creative practice as research, comprising a creative artefact; a screenplay, accompanied by a critical component; an exegesis. This conforms to Auckland University of Technology's guidelines for a *Format Three* thesis, as described in the Postgraduate Handbook (2021), which states

‘practice does not serve to illustrate theory but is more appropriately understood as the site of research; the exegesis relates directly to the practice-oriented work and as such does not have a research topic or question of its own; the purpose of the exegesis is to elucidate and clarify the relationship between the central concept, key contexts, relevant critical context.’ (pp. 109-113)

Accordingly, in my exegesis I provide a discussion that overviews the creative work, which will include:

- A review of key texts relevant to the development of the creative work, in the form of a comparative analysis.
- A synopsis of the creative component and an explanation of my intentions.
- A detailed description of the process and methodology used, and a reflection on the outcomes of this creative practice as research.
- Discussion of theoretical, historical, and critical context where relevant.

Part One - Comparative study

This section will compare and contrast six existing professional texts that have a similar central theme to the original film script: *The Comic Collection*, written for the Master of Creative Writing degree at Auckland University of Technology. Key elements of the scripts, such as the antagonists and protagonist, will be identified. The script's use of the key

elements to advance the central theme will be compared and potential reasons for these commonalities and differences will be theorised.

The Comic Collection is a ninety-minute film dramedy. The script centres on the journey of Jaims, a thirty-something-year-old Organisational Operations Officer, who becomes the co-owner of a rough and tumble inner city comic book store. Forced to work alongside an eclectic group of freaks and geeks, she learns the true meaning of family, becoming a better person in the process.

The central theme being investigated throughout the script is: *Investing in biological family vs investing in chosen family*. Six existing film scripts that share a similar central theme will be analysed and compared in reference to the original script *The Comic Collection*, throughout this exegesis. The scripts are: *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2* (Gunn, 2015), *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (Klones, 2002), *Hunt for the Wilder People* (Waititi, 2016), *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* (Kuswandi, 2021), *The Way Way Back* (Faxon & Rash, 2011) and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937).

Commonalities

Young Male Protagonists

Out of the six existing film scripts, five scripts: *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, *Hunt for the Wilder People*, *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* and *The Way Way Back*, have a male protagonist. Of those five male protagonists, four are younger than eighteen years old. *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*'s male protagonist, Quill, is thirty-four years old however, he carries a Walkman and writer, James Gunn (2015), has him refer to people as “dude” (p. 17), “douchebag” (p. 20), and “turd” (p. 20). These details help portray Quill as being developmentally comparable to a teenager. In this way, Quill is still very similar to the young male protagonists from the other four scripts.

It is helpful to address the fact that the protagonists are predominantly male and young as separate factors when looking at how these similarities advance the central theme. To begin with, the low number of female protagonists in these films may have less to do with a conscious choice to advance the film's theme, and more to do with a larger observable pattern

within the film industry, in regards to gender representation. According to a report by The Centre for the Study of Women in Television and Film, only thirty-one percent of leads in the top-grossing films in 2021 were female (Lauzen, 2022). However, the percentage of female protagonists in the films being compared in this thesis is only sixteen percent. This lower percentage may be due to the fact that the dominant genre of the films in question is action-adventure. According to a study by Yang, Xu, and Luo (2020), when compared to all genres, the action-adventure genre has, in general, fewer female cast members overall. Digging deeper, they attribute the low number of female protagonists in film to the low number of female crew members involved in the making of films, in particular, female writers. They found in their 2020 study that “only 6.0% of directors, 9.7% of producers, and 12.2% of screenplay writers are female” (Yang et al., 2020, p. 12). Correspondingly, of the films being compared here, 0% of the films have female directors and 16%¹ have female writers.

In summary, this similarity is most likely not due to the fact that a male protagonist is a better choice when pursuing the theme, it is more likely that the low number of female protagonists may be due to the dominance of male representation within the action-adventure genre, compounded by a gender imbalance within the industry as a whole.

Having looked at why the protagonists may be predominantly male, the next task is to look at the potential reason why the protagonists are predominantly young. Having a young protagonist advances the central theme by creating high-stakes. Instinctually, a reader is likely to have the understanding that a biological family is supposed to provide for a child's basic needs. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs as an example, these would be their basic needs: physiological and safety needs, and their psychological needs: belongingness, love, and esteem (McLeod, 2018). It is devastating to imagine someone young not having these needs met by their biological family, and having to look for an alternative source to fulfil these needs. However, it is immensely satisfying to a reader when they are successful in this quest. The pre-loaded, high-stakes nature of family dynamics will be explored further in the following discussion about the scripts' antagonists.

¹ The screenplay for *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* was written by Steve Kloves. However, his screenplay is based on a novel by the female author, J.K Rowling. If the figure is adjusted to include Rowling as the writer, it goes from 16% to 33%.

Biological Family or Legal Guardian as an Antagonistic Force

Another commonality between the scripts are the antagonistic forces at play. In all six scripts, the legal guardians or biological family of the protagonist act as an antagonistic force. Similarly to the previous observation, regarding the choice of a young protagonist, the scripts are able to subvert the traditional expectation that biological family/guardians are supposed to provide unconditional love and act in a child's best interest. The subversion is created by having the antagonists commit an act of betrayal. In the scripts being compared, these betrayals fall into two categories: immediate betrayal and delayed betrayal.

The immediate betrayal is when a betrayal committed by the antagonist is established early on in the script and the majority of the text is geared towards the protagonist's attempt to avoid reconnection with the antagonist. In these examples, the immediate betrayal commonly involves a legal guardian, step-parent or a removed relation. For example, in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry is kept locked away by his aunt and uncle who pretend he does not exist and try to stop Harry from fulfilling his potential as a wizard. The character of Harry is pitched against multiple antagonistic forces, natural and supernatural, but constantly desires to achieve independence from his cruel relatives. In *Hunt for the Wilder People*, Ricky is a ward of the state. The state has ultimate control over Ricky's destiny and sees Ricky as a box that needs to be ticked, rather than a child who needs to be loved. Ricky is challenged to try to free himself of the power of the state and make his own choices. In *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Snow White's stepmother sends her into the forest to be killed by a servant and Snow White must survive multiple attempts on her life and create her own home away from home.

The delayed betrayal involves keeping the protagonist's hope alive for the majority of the script, before an eventual devastating action by the antagonist kills that hope. In all examples being compared, the long betrayal involves a biological parent. In *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens*, Ali moves from Indonesia to New York to finally find his absent mother. There is a triumphant moment when after searching long and hard, he finally finds her, then triumph turns to heartbreak when she rejects him. Likewise, in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*, Quill crosses Galaxies and finds his long-lost father who is eventually revealed to be a megalomaniac who only wants to use Peter for selfish means. Similarly, in *The Way Way back*, Duncan seeks to connect with his mother and stepfather who are more interested in

each other than him. In the moment when Duncan needs his mother to be on his side, she fails to be there for him, leaving him rejected and alone.

In each of these scripts, although the biological families/legal guardians are responsible for the well-being of the protagonists, they are also the antagonistic force that destroys the happiness that the young protagonists desire. This subversion of expectations can provide an unexpected and fresh approach to themes involving family bonds.

In the western world, the family unit has both social and political significance beyond the scope of this exegesis and upholds rules that are widely understood and accepted by western audiences, particularly as they pertain to parents and guardians and their children. These rules include that parents and guardians are responsible for the provision of love, safety and shelter, as well as the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual nourishment of children. Children must also respect their parents and guardians, and a parent's love is considered unconditional. Therefore, making a parent or guardian the antagonist and breaking these idealised rules, as previously discussed, can be agonising, and yet for many readers, highly relatable. The benefit of breaking common conventions, such as familial obligations, is that the script needs to do very little groundwork to set up or earn these expectations, beyond establishing the relationship of these characters as parent/guardian and child. The writer is able to swiftly create believable high-stakes by putting these relationships in jeopardy; expediting the storytelling.

Secondary characters: The ensemble as the new world

With the exception of *Hunt for the Wilder People*, the scripts all utilise an ensemble of quirky characters to represent both a new world and a new, unconventional family available to the protagonist. The strength of the bond between the protagonist and the ensemble is built by having them work together, often under high-stake scenarios or pitted against danger.

In *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens*, the ensemble is a group of Indonesian women who help Ali acclimate to a new city and take on the role of private detectives to help him find his mother. This journey bonds them, so when Ali is eventually rejected by his real mother, the ensemble has already established itself as a collective substitute mother figure; ready to step in and step up for Ali. Likewise, in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*, when Quill finally finds his long-lost father he is ready to leave the ensemble behind, but when his father betrays him, the

ensemble is willing to welcome him back in the unconditional way we would expect of a family.

Similarly, *The Way Way Back* and *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, build their ensemble as an acceptable alternative family, however, they additionally centre their ensemble in a dynamic location. In *The Way Way Back* it is a water park; this location becomes a safe harbour and a place of belonging when Duncan feels that he no longer belongs in his own family. In utilising the location, the waterpark becomes an inextricable part of the ensemble. Duncan's mother meets the waterpark, much as one would meet another person; in doing so, she discovers that it is full of people who love and look up to her son. It is a turning point that changes her from an antagonistic force back into a pillar of support. In *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, Harry escapes his neglectful guardians when he goes off to school at Hogwarts. Hogwarts itself is a place of safety that Harry greets like an old friend and is another space full of people who see Harry for who he truly is and value him; specifically, the ensemble made up of his two best wizard friends and his mentors. Likewise, Snow White finds a cottage that comes alive under her care and is the safe haven that contains the classic ensemble, the Seven Dwarfs, who become her friends and eventually her protectors when faced with the antagonist, the Wicked Witch.

In order to successfully advance the theme, the new group has to establish itself as a good or better replacement for the old world and a convincing replacement of the protagonist's previous iteration of family. They must offer hope, possibility and a chance for healing. The group must prove itself worthy of the protagonist, and vice versa. Additionally, these scripts also use the ensemble as a source of comic relief. The ensemble challenges the protagonist in order to create an opportunity for positive growth, while also functioning as a soft place to fall when the protagonist makes mistakes.

Script devices: Montage

Following on from the discussion of the ensemble, it is worth mentioning the use of montage that features heavily in *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens*, and is used multiple times in *The Way Way Back*. Linda Seger (2010), defines a montage as, "a series of short consecutive scenes" with the aim to "give important information and show the passage of time" (p. 114). Establishing believable close ties between the ensemble of secondary characters and the protagonist takes time. Using a script device such as a montage enables the author to compress that time and

speed up the connection. Weeks of bonding between the characters can be shown in under a minute. A criticism that might be made of *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* is that it overuses this device, especially in the second half of the film. The advancement of every significant relationship the protagonist engages in is told via montage; this happens with the ensemble, his crush and his mother, whom he is trying to reconnect with. In total, there are over ten lengthy montages. Because a montage is limited to a collection of moments and as Seger (2010) describes, “generally, they are underdeveloped scenes without dialogue” (p. 115), in many cases it can only achieve a surface-level exploration of the content. The risk is that the reader can feel cheated out of the emotional nuance that can be achieved in a full scene. In contrast, *The Way Way Back* employs only one montage to tell the story of a night of partying. This effectively streamlines the storytelling. It was necessary to show the progression of Duncan letting down his boundaries and truly enjoying himself and a montage was an effective way of doing this without having to labour the point.

Differences

Setting

Despite all having an element of adventure, the six scripts being compared vary greatly in the worlds in which they are set. *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2* is set in space, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* is set in a fantasy world where magic and wizards exist, *Hunt for the Wilder People* is set in rural NZ, *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens* is set in Indonesia and New York, *The Way Way Back* is set in Massachusetts, USA and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is set in a fairy-tale land. There are many factors that may influence the setting of a script. A noticeable pattern in the films being analysed is that the setting of the scripts reflects the nationalities or location of the writers.

While predominantly set in space, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2* is the story of an American fish out of water. To keep the element of his American home alive the protagonist carries around a Walkman full of American music, which he introduces to his intergalactic friends. James Gunn, the writer of *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2*, is American, as are the writers of *The Way Way Back*, Nat Faxon and Jim Rash. The writing pair, Ginatri S. Noer and Muhammad Zaidy, who wrote *Ali & Ratu Ratu Queens*, which is set in New York and Indonesia, are Indonesian. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, which is set in both England and a wizarding realm, is a little more complicated. The novel which was the source material for the script is written by J.K Rowling who is English, however, the script is written

by American, Steve Kloves. The theme that these scripts share in common relates to the internal machinations of the protagonists and their interpersonal relationships, rather than the external reality they exist in. Because of this, you could put them in any location and the location itself would not necessarily significantly impact the theme, as observed in this set of examples.

Tone

Wilson (2020), describes tone as: “the mood or attitude that you’re writing portrays through the choice of words you use” (para. 3). He follows this with: “The tone is important in screenwriting because it gives a message to the audience about how they should feel about what’s happening” (para. 5).

Tone can be comedic, serious, cynical, reverential, tragic, sensitive, romantic or vulnerable, to name only a few examples. Much like setting, the tone of the six scripts varies. The theme in question is inherently full of dramatic tension and like setting, tone is an external factor so it impacts how the theme is delivered. Aside from witty or dramatic dialogue which transmits the tone, clues can be in the script's description of the action. Looking at a few examples from the scripts illustrates how this can be done. *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* has a comedic, exciting tone. Gunn (2015), has written the action lines so they are full of activity, for example: “WHAM! A LARGE ASTEROID SMASHES THROUGH the stern of the Milano” (p. 21). Additionally, Gunn (2015) has purposefully written action descriptions to evoke comic vignettes such as: “A group of pilots have gathered around the Mean Pilot, rooting him on, like kids at a video arcade” (p. 22). *The Way Way Back* has a vulnerable tone. The action is described by Faxon and Rash from Duncan’s point of view, it is full of descriptions that evoke the emotional state of the scene: “The Driver looks right at Duncan, enjoying the awkwardness. Duncan doesn’t know where else to look” (2011, p. 4). *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* has a serious, dark, and exciting tone. Kloves’ description of the action is to the point and delivered in short bursts: “As Harry leaps for the windowsill, Uncle Vernon CHARGES FORWARD and SNATCHES his ankle. Harry tumbles into the darkness, one hand gripping Hedwig's cage, the other reaching out and... CATCHING Ron's at the last possible second” (2002, p. 11).

Key commonalities and differences with the original script: *The Comic Collection*

The key commonalities between the analysed scripts and *The Comic Collection* all relate to the relationship lines. *The Comic Collection* utilises the ensemble to provide a strong choice for a new family and a new world. The antagonist is a biological relative of the protagonist, her father. Montages are also used to compress time and speed up storytelling, although, in *The Comic Collection*, they are referred to as a series of shots.

The first notable difference between *The Comic Collection* and the scripts being compared is that the protagonist of *The Comic Collection* is female, as is the writer of the script. In keeping with the research on gender mentioned previously, if a script is written by a female it appears that it is more likely to have a female protagonist. The discussion of the protagonist's gender may be less significant than it appears, as aside from gender, the protagonists share many of the same qualities such as loneliness, determination, and stubbornness. Their journeys are also similar, as they must all let go of an imagined ideal to accept a new reality.

As previously mentioned, all of the scripts are set in different locations. Likewise, *The Comic Collection* is the only script set in urban Aotearoa. The closest in setting is *Hunt for the Wilder People* which is set in rural Aotearoa. A reason for this difference may be that there is a strong practical reason for a script written in New Zealand to be set locally, such as the potential for funding. In Aotearoa, many films are funded by the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC). Writers may be familiar with the funding criteria, one of which is that a film should have “significant New Zealand content” (New Zealand Film Commission, 2021, para. 19). If a New Zealand writer sets their film in New Zealand, this goes some way to fulfilling one of the main criteria for funding; increasing the chances of the script eventually being turned into a film. Although this is a practical consideration rather than an artistic one, it is realistic to believe that it may impact a writer's choices and should therefore be taken into account when looking at potential reasons for the difference existing.

In conclusion, there are many choices a writer makes in regards to the key elements that advance the theme of a script. The examples explored here, highlighting the commonalities and differences, are but a few of many. What is most notable is how different each film is despite the shared theme, showing that a similar theme does not guarantee a similar movie.

PART TWO - Overview and reflection

Synopsis

The generally accepted idea of a synopsis... deals in WHO, WHAT and HOW, but also establishes the other major characters and their lines of conflict, what is at stake for these characters, the setting in time and space, and the major turning points of the story. The last is crucial; the key element of any synopsis is a clear indication of the story's structure. That is, how the story begins, develops and ends. (Brindley, 2009, p. 4)

The Comic Collection is a story about Jaims, a thirty-something-year-old lone wolf who has recently moved to Auckland to pursue her career as an organisational occupations officer. After her estranged gambling addicted father, Albert, goes missing at sea, Jaims discovers that she has been named co-executor of his comic book shop along with his eclectic group of staff: Cosplay, Jareth and Mani.

Saddled with the store and its staff, Jaims realises the store is in debt to a couple of underground loan sharks who are eager to get their money back. After a confrontation that involves several smashed windows, Jaims promises the loan sharks that she will be able to pay back the loan in a month's time.

In an attempt to deal with the anxiety brought on by the overwhelming presence of her father in his comic book store, Jaims attends a local Gamblers Anonymous meeting and ends up angering the participants, one in particular called Rocky. She meets a stranger there who reminds her to make the best of what she has, so she throws herself back into the challenge of running the shop with gusto.

Jaims and the staff utilise social media to create extra income and a buzz around the shop. In doing so, Jaims and the staff begin to bond. Just as things seem to be going well both financially and with the staff, Albert turns up wanting to reconnect with Jaims. There is only one catch, she is not allowed to tell anyone he is alive. Jaims rejects Albert numerous times, accusing him and his gambling addiction of ruining her life, and finally tells him she wishes he was dead. The next day a body turns up in a local park, terrified it is Albert, Jaims finds Albert and lets him back into her life.

Albert tries to convince Jaims that she should sell the shop without telling the staff. The staff raise enough money to pay off the debt, but in doing so have fundamentally changed the shop, the staff appear discontented and seemingly sick of each other. Seeing this, Jaims decides to do as her dad suggests and secretly gets them to sign a sales agreement.

Jaims meets Albert and a buyer at a local bar with the sales agreement, but Jaims realises she cannot betray her staff and tries to pull out of the sale. However, as she does she gets an emergency message from one of the comic book store staff. Jaims excuses herself and calls the staff member, while she is on the phone she realises the buyer is Rocky, from the Gamblers Anonymous meeting. She realises that she is not attending the sale of the shop; her father has tricked her into giving the shop over to repay a gambling debt. Jaims runs back inside to stop the deal, but Rocky and her father are gone.

Jaims returns to the comic book store to find that it has been burned down by the loan sharks. Jaims is forced to admit that she lied to the staff and tricked them into signing the shop away, the staff tell Jaims they will never trust her again and they part ways.

Jaims goes back to working as an organisational occupations officer in a corporate office, but then the staff turn up and tell Jaims that Albert told them everything, including how he manipulating Jaims. They beg her to come back with them to be part of their family and Jaims agrees. Jaims and the staff start a new comic book stall at a local market, it is small but thriving, as are they.

Ultimately the story explores family bonds, and more specifically, how we define family; whether family is defined by biological connection or connections to communities we choose for ourselves.

World of the story

McKee (1998) defines the world of the story as its ‘setting’:

A story **SETTING** is four-dimensional – period, duration, location, level of conflict...
PERIOD is a story’s place and time... **DURATION** is a story’s length through time...

LOCATION is a story's place in space... LEVEL OF CONFLICT is the story's position on the hierarchy of human struggles. (pp. 68-69)

Truby (2007) observes that, "creating a unique world for the story — and organically connecting it to the characters — is as essential to great storytelling as character, plot, theme, and dialogue" (p. 145).

The world of *The Comic Collection*:

The Period that *The Comic Collection* is set in the present day. The duration is several months. The location is a small comic book shop in urban Auckland and the primary conflict is the inner world of Jaims as she struggles to both define and accept 'family'.

The secondary conflict is the tension between old and new. Within the walls of the comic book store it is as if the clock stopped in 1952. The shop is devoid of the trappings of the modern world; there is no Wi-Fi, Eftpos, or computers. Time is counted by a grandfather clock, sales are cash only, the financial records are kept in a handwritten ledger and mobile phones are confiscated at the door. The mantra 'personal connections only' sums up the ethos, along with the writings of sociologist Sherry Turkle (2011), that the digital world enables the creation of surface-level connections and in the process disrupts the deeper connections. Yet, outside of the shop walls the digital world of Wi-Fi, Instagram, Tik Tok and Facebook is in full swing. Social media is thriving and is becoming a necessary tool for both communication and commercial success. The clash of the old-fashioned methods and the modern world is causing financial stress for the store as it limps along, outpaced by technology. The cast of characters not only live inside these clashing worlds but fight to integrate the old with the new; to varying degrees of success.

Theme

Sandler (2007) defines theme in relation to the *central conflict*:

The theme is the central conflict in your story. It's what the story is about... What it's about is not what happens... What it's about is the emotional issue – the theme... The plot (what happens) is the unique way you have chosen to illustrate the theme (what it's about). (p. 61)

The theme of *The Comic Collection* is: *Investing in biological family versus investing in chosen family*. The intention of writing a script that examines this theme was to explore the construct of family. Oxford's free English dictionary, Lexico (n.d.) defines family as "A group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit" (para. 1). And "All the descendants of a common ancestor" (para. 3).

However, there are many groups of people who define family not by the strength of the biological connection, but by the strength of the interpersonal connection. This is often referred to as a *chosen family*. In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counselling*, Gates (2017) defines chosen family as: "Nonbiological kinship bonds, whether legally recognized or not, deliberately chosen for the purpose of mutual support and love" (pp. 240-242). The LGBTQ community was the first to coin the phrase chosen family (Gates, 2017). It arose out of experiences of individuals' life choices not being supported by their families. This resulted in the negative experiences of rejection, disconnection, lack of familial support, as well as the positive experiences of finding the equivalent supply of support, acceptance and connection within a community, or chosen family. However, accepting a new paradigm such as a chosen family over an entrenched societal paradigm such as biological family is only half the battle, the route to finding and maintaining this family is the other half of the battle and can be difficult.

At the beginning of *The Comic Collection*, the protagonist, Jaims, has little connection to her biological family. Her mother has passed away and she is estranged from her father who is now missing and presumed dead. The complicated nature of her family life has caused her to avoid connection and live her life as independently as possible. This is reflected in her job as an Organisational Occupations Officer; a role that involves the active dissolution of belonging, in the context of employment.

The script explores Jaims's struggle to reconnect with the concept of family and define it in her own terms. The script follows the journey she takes to ultimately accept a community as her chosen family while leaving the door open to a connection with her biological father.

Protagonist

Aronson (2010) writes that "Conventional narrative is all about the protagonist's journey" (p. 78) and goes on to list these identifying markers of the protagonist:

The film is the protagonist's story, the protagonist is who the 'film is about'... The protagonist drives the action that makes the decisions. The protagonist is not passive and reactive...The protagonist is the person whose head we are inside, whose shoes we are in and with whom we identify...The protagonist is central to the film's dramatic highpoints. (p.78)

Aronson (2010) also writes:

The story cannot start until the protagonist is identified and shown in their normal life (into normality), and the story cannot move forward until the disturbance fractures the protagonist's normality and forces them into a course of action...Interestingly, establishing the protagonist early is the mark of successful films across all cultures. (p. 78)

The protagonist of *The Comic Collection* is Jaims, she is the active decision maker driving the action forward and she is central to all the dramatic highpoints of the script. When the story begins, her ordinary world is defined by order and autonomy. She is disconnected from her biological family and is not consciously in search of replacing those bonds. The disturbance that fractures her normal course of life and propels her into action is when she inherits her estranged father's comic book shop. She is forced to operate in a chaotic environment, in collaboration with the existing staff. It is in this situation that her want and need become apparent. Above all, Jaims's want or external goal is to rid herself of the comic book shop. Initially, Jaims takes action and uses the strategies already within her wheelhouse to assert dominance over the existing staff. When this does not work, she is forced to collaborative with the staff, which she accepts as a short-term solution until she can find someone to buy her out of the store.

However, Jaims has a competing need; the need for family. This need finds her bonding with the existing staff, who are a pre-established chosen family. While this bond is essential for Jaims's growth as a person, it disrupts two things. Firstly, it disrupts Jaims's want as bonding with the group affects her decision-making. Where she used to be cut-throat and objective, Jaims starts to prioritise the staff's feelings and desires. Secondly, Jaims's presence disrupts the functionality of the comic store family dynamic and new tensions arise that put a strain on the group.

Once these conflicts of interest have been established, new pressures are placed on Jaims that raise the stakes and propel her into increasingly difficult decision-making scenarios. Just at the point where Jaims is starting to build meaningful connections and collaborative goals with the staff - the established chosen family - her biological father is brought in. His arrival sets up potential for the growth of a father-daughter relationship, however, he arrives with his own goal, one that is in direct opposition to the goals that Jaims has newly established with the staff. This places Jaims in a loyalty bind between two different conceptions of family. The climax of the script asks Jaims whose interests she will protect, those of her biological family or those of her found family. In having to choose between the two she risks losing one or both and failing to fulfil her need for family entirely.

Antagonist

Antagonists are commonly thought of as individuals. MasterClass (2021) maintains that “In storytelling, the antagonist is the opposer or combatant working against the protagonist’s or leading characters’ goal (“antagonizing”) and creating the main conflict” (para. 2). However, McKee (1998) distinguishes between the protagonist and the ‘forces of antagonism’:

“Forces of antagonism” doesn’t necessarily refer to a specific antagonist or villain. In appropriate genres arch-villains, like the Terminator, are a delight, but by “forces of antagonism” we mean the sum total of all forces that oppose the character’s will and desire. (p. 318)

Borrowing from McKee’s definition, the antagonistic forces at play throughout the script are:

Firstly, the staff. Initially, the staff impede Jaims’s goal of immediately selling the store, however, when the loan sharks enter the story, this forces Jaims and the staff to work together toward a new goal; to raise enough money to pay the loan sharks. Jaims and the staff are then united and no longer impede each other. Secondly, the loan sharks. The loan sharks operate with the threat of brute force. They provide the element of the ticking clock, and the threat is kept alive symbolically by the appearance of crochet-covered bricks that serve to remind Jaims and the staff of the pressure they are under to pay back a loan within a timeframe. The loan sharks exist within the action line. Thirdly, Jaims’s father Albert. Albert is a man who is still battling demons. While he genuinely wants to connect with his daughter, he is also motivated to interact with her because of his gambling addiction. The strategies he uses to manipulate Jaims are intellectual, he uses reason and rationality to reverse the emotional

decisions Jaims has made while growing into a more well-rounded version of herself. He essentially attempts to revert Jaims back to the person she was at the beginning of the script: rational, unmoved by emotion, and business-minded. Albert's antagonistic pressure is applied via the relationship line.

Dramatic Tension

In *The Comic Collection*, inner conflict is employed to create tension. This means using Jaims's competing internal motivations to build dramatic tension. The shape of the battle between the competing motivations is what creates her character arc.

Marks (2007) describes the journey of a character from point A to point B as the 'transformational arc of the character':

In effect, it is a second line of structure that is wrapped within the structure of the plot. It is, quite literally, the story that is found inside story. When it is well used, it is the driving force of the entire drama... [The arc] expresses the natural rise and fall of a dramatic structure, which always begins with an escalation of tension and is resolved as the tension deescalates. In a story that fully utilises the power of the transformational arc, this tension serves not only to solve the conflict of the plot, but also to pull the protagonist toward internal renewal and higher consciousness – which is the essence of the transformational process. (pp. 6-8)

Dunne (2016) describes how suspense is generated by building up to a 'crisis' that the character faces:

The heart and soul of a dramatic story is the crisis that the main character faces near the end of the journey. This is usually when the character must make the most of the difficult decision of the story... [But] it is not a choice between good and evil. Such a choice would be easy... Rather, a crisis decision forces the character to choose between two evils that cannot both be eliminated (by choosing when you enable the other) or between two goods that cannot coexist (by choosing one, you lose the other). (p. 197)

It is important to acknowledge that there are multiple sources of pressure that create dramatic tension within the script. Externally there is the ticking clock pressure, which is "essentially a time limit or deadline that adds constraints, obstacles, and a very definitive moment in time in

which our protagonist must act” (Forward, n.d, para. 2). The ticking clock in this instance is provided by the loan sharks, who issue a repayment deadline which instigates the plot question: Will Jaims and the staff find the money to pay back the loan and save the shop?

But more significantly, this is a story in which the central character fundamentally changes. Jaims’s transformational arc takes her from lone wolf to team player. She goes from considering individual success as the top priority to prioritising the well-being of the group as a whole. The conflict being dramatised and generating tension is internal. Will Jaims accept family into her life and if she does, which iteration of family will she prioritise?

A simple way to track this journey is to look at four key images from the script. The first image establishes Jaims’s starting point in her journey; the opening scene of the script. It describes a solitary figure, sitting at a makeshift desk in a makeshift office. The location is large, sparse, and sterile, establishing that she has no consistent presence in this space. There is an absence of colour, grey dominates the space both in mood and tone. This image of solitude is symbolic of Jaims’s inner world, she is emotionally alone, independent, and without a sense of belonging.

The second image is again at a table, a picnic table in the comic book store when she is pulled into playing a board game and is suddenly surrounded by life, interaction and chaos; the antithesis of where she is in the first image of the script. She is still in her stiff work clothes which are at odds with her surroundings, indicating that she does not immediately fit into this scenario. This image shows the possibility of what Jaims might have if she chooses to embrace this group.

The third image is of Jaims and her father, sitting opposite each other at Jaims’s kitchen table, it is the first time Jaims lets Albert into her world. She is sharing both her space and herself. It represents what she might have if she chooses to embrace her father.

The fourth and last image of the script is emblematic of Jaims’s ultimate decision. Jaims is again at a trestle table, echoing the first image of the script, but this time she is surrounded by the family she has chosen. She is dressed in a colourful superhero t-shirt with a business blazer over top and is no longer alone, as she is now a fully integrated person, internally and externally. Each of the key images tracks not only Jaims’s character arc but also the theme of the script, with the aim of delivering a cohesive story and a sound structure with which to start the next draft.

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