

Confronting the complex nature of screenwriting while developing my  
screenplay, *Little Bird*, from first to second draft.

Nicola Michelle

Faculty of Culture and Society

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The purpose of this exegesis is to discuss the aims, influences and discoveries that impacted the development of my MCW screenplay, *Little Bird*. It briefly reflects on, and examines, the approach I took when addressing my initial intentions for the story; the process of script development; learning about genre; using a narrative structure; dealing with characters; and additional influences that have informed my story. Each of these topics deeply affected the process of moving *Little Bird* from a first to second draft, and exposed me to the complex nature of screenwriting.

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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.

## Little Bird Synopsis

Please note that the following synopsis does not include the conclusion of the screenplay, as it is my hope that the screenplay is read prior to addressing this supporting exegesis.

As the Boretown locals prepare for their annual pig hunting competition, Lexie Morley, and her brother, Jake, head out for a late-afternoon hunt on their Grandfather, James,' property. After a long walk, Lexie and Jake spot a deer in a clearing. Lexie takes a shot.

Believing that Lexie has only injured the deer, the two of them set off to find the wounded animal. However, Lexie and Jake find no deer, only James' second wife, Jules, clutching at a bullet wound that has impacted her chest.

When Jules takes her last breath, Jake runs off to find their mother, Jackie. Lexie, still holding on to hope, searches the area for her deer. Suddenly, a figure appears and knocks Lexie out with the butt of a rifle, and Jules' body disappears.

The Boretown locals have been divided ever since Jules and James planted a small vineyard next to the town's main river. They want the grapevines out, and Jules to leave town.

However, when the locals, and stationed police officer, Officer Murphy, find out that Jules is missing, and has been potentially wounded, they set out to look for her. But when they find nothing, the locals decide not to continue the search and instead they turn their attention to helping James, and the rest of the Morley family, distract themselves from the possibility that Jules may be dead, in hopes that they may finally return to the way things were, and get rid of the vineyards.

Lexie struggles to deal with her confusion and guilt after shooting Jules, and those around her question her memory and the accuracy of her story regarding Jules' death. However, this does not stop Lexie from continuing her search, and pursuing the truth of what happened.

Lexie's search for answers takes an unexpected turn when she comes to learn that her mother, Jackie, hid Jules' body in an effort to protect Lexie and Jake from being charged with murder and going to jail. After failing to convince Jackie to go to the police and report Jules' whereabouts, Lexie becomes further isolated from her family.

After learning that the cops from the neighbouring town, Gracetown, are only interested in charging Jake with Jules' death and disappearance, no matter what, Lexie becomes even more determined to find Jules, in order to protect her brother.

During Lexie's final attempt to find Jules, she discovers the deer, and recovers her bullet from inside it.

Knowing she is now innocent of Jules' death, Lexie presents the bullet to her family, and attempts, once more, to convince Jackie to go to the police so they can locate Jules.

However, when Lexie discovers that it was Jackie who shot Jules, and that choosing to hide the body was not to protect Lexie or Jake, but to protect herself, Lexie is confronted with the choice of whether to protect her mother, or report her to the police.

## Intentions

The reason why I chose to write *Little Bird* was because I wanted to develop a story that explored a realistic female protagonist, who is dealing with trauma and guilt, yet is still determined to take responsibility for her actions, and stand by her morals. Secondary to that, I wanted to look at what happens to a family when their individual values clash, and the relationships within that family are tested.

Watching someone overcome their inner demon, or moral dilemma, or mental instability to reach their goal, is exhilarating for me. I enjoy watching characters being pushed to their breaking point, whether it's through a physical challenge, psychological, or emotional fall. Films such as, *127 Hours* (Boyle, 2010), *A Beautiful Mind* (Howard, 2001), *The Insider* (Mann, 1999), and *Brothers* (Sheridan, 2009), not only deliver the beauty of watching a protagonist work and struggle to pursue their goal, but also they focus part, or all, of the film on exposing the psychological effect these challenges have on the protagonist, and the supporting characters. I attempted to approach and deliver this idea of the inner struggle, for example, through Lexie's flashbacks, and change in behaviour. Although, I believe there is a lot more work to be done to fully achieve this aim in *Little Bird*, I was able to keep the idea present throughout the second draft.

I have always been fascinated with family conflict and how this is presented in film. My film-family education started off with films such as, *The Lion King* (Allers & Minkoff, 1994), *What's Eating Gilbert Grape* (Hallstrom, 1994), *This Boy's Life* (Caton-Jones, 1993), *American Beauty* (Mendes, 1999), *About a Boy* (Weitz & Weitz, 2002), *Boys Don't Cry* (Peirce, 1999), and *Edward Scissorhands* (Burton, 1990). Although the content of each of these films is vastly different, they each struck a chord in me when it came to the theme of family, because it highlighted how dysfunctional yet loving, or hateful, a family could be. It also taught me early on, that people, no matter their role within family, are individuals with their own desires, values, intentions, and flaws. Some of the lessons I took away from these films over the years were, parents are not just there to serve their children; siblings can be dangerous to your emotional and physical wellbeing;

jealously within family is a killer; and your family may never understand you, but they'll try to love you anyway. These lessons, combined with the way these film-families were portrayed, became valuable when designing the individual members of the Morley family.

In *Little Bird*, I wanted to combine the female protagonist dealing with trauma, and guilt, and the family conflict. This is why I chose to have the victims, and the killers belonging to the same family, swapping positions and status, as the narrative progressed. By doing this, I was able to expand and combine both of my intentions for the story.



## The Process

Working through the scriptwriting process was all relatively new to me. I was aware of the need to write a premise, a synopsis, and a treatment before going anywhere near writing a first draft. However, I had never started a script this way, which is most likely the reason why I have always been stuck in the first draft of every screenplay I have attempted to write. Using this process was greatly beneficial because it gave me the possibility to explore many potential options for the story, and narrative, before I got stuck into the first draft.

My initial premise and treatment focused on a social drama about a lesbian couple dealing with a homophobic family. But I soon realised, I couldn't write that, because I believed the subject material was not something I could tackle as a novice screenwriter. Therefore, I quickly moved on to what was originally called *Timshel*, which was a much darker version of *Little Bird*, where Jules was held captive and eventually murdered in cold blood by Jake and Jackie, and there was absolutely no warmth within the Morley family, or hope for the future. I took this version through to a first draft before realising that I needed to go back to the premise and treatment, and review the story.

A lot of the changes made to the script, throughout the year, were to do with the feedback received from the various workshops held during each stage of the writing process. This was also quite new to me. It was terrifying letting a group of people read my unfinished work. However, had I not gone through this process with my writing peers, and mentor, I don't believe I would have fully acknowledged some important parts of my story that needed my attention during the transition from first to second draft. For example, in the first draft, it was too obvious that Jackie killed Jules right from the beginning because of her lack of warmth, and motherly care, and also, because she so blatantly hated Jules and her father, James. Although I was conscious of this issue while writing the first draft, it was not until I sat down with the group and listened to them expose it and rip it to pieces that I realised it was not something that I was going to get away with.

Unfortunately, I am a binge writer, and I don't often review my premise, synopsis, and treatment, until the entire draft is done. This is not a practise I want to carry forward, as it creates unpredictable material, and results in a lot more time spent rereading, rethinking and rewriting. Because of the approach I was taking to the drafts, I often became disheartened by the idea of having to create a complex, interesting and challenging story, and I questioned whether I was actually capable of writing *Little Bird*. However, when I reviewed the premise, synopsis and treatment, it didn't help because so much had changed, and all these pieces of paper were now irrelevant. The entire process felt overwhelming and far too big to tackle, because I was also being confronted with lessons in genre, structures, characters, emotional lines, actions lines, etc. To escape this trap I kept falling into, I turned to the films that have always comforted me. Two of these films are, *The General* (Bruckman & Keaton, 1926), and *City Lights* (Chaplin, 1931). For me, these two films are a comfort as a writer because they are so simple, yet beautifully complex, and the story is so sharp. For example, in both films, the protagonist's goal is clear, the sequence of events gradually increases the conflict and challenges the protagonist faces, they are funny, they are sad and they are silent. Using these films, mainly for moral support, I was able to simplify my process and understand what is required, in order to tell my story.

## Genre

“Never assume that because you’ve seen films in your genre you know it.”

(McKee, 1998, p.89).

When I was first asked, “What genre does *Little Bird* belong to?” it was too early for me to tell and in all honesty, I didn’t know enough about genre. Therefore, I responded, “Well, it is a suspenseful-domestic-crime-mystery-drama-whodunit-thing.”

Before I started developing *Little Bird*, I had not often examined films, as a writer, by their genre. Nor had I learnt how intricately designed some films are, based on the conventions and expectations of a specific genre, or group of genres. I was very naïve. For a while I thought perhaps, because I have watched so many films over the years, I subconsciously understood all the conventions of genre, and that I really did know a lot about it already. Although, in some respect this could be argued as true, I came to learn that there is a significant difference between recognising conventions of genre when you see them in film, and actually putting them into practise, on a conscious level. Therefore, due my new beginnings as a writer dealing with genre, I struggled to articulate clearly what exactly defines *Little Bird* as belonging to a specific genre, or sub-genre.

The films that influenced the development of *Little Bird* fall under a similar description of genres as the one I had initially given *Little Bird*, as mentioned above. Those films are, *Winter’s Bone* (Granik, 2010), *At Close Range* (Foley, 1986), *The Godfather* (Coppola, 1972), *Lone Star* (Sayles, 1996), *Mystic River* (Eastwood, 2003), and *Shadow Dancer* (Marsh, 2012). From my reading, I found that film reviews, dvd covers and websites, agreed that each of these films were from the drama genre, but in addition had genres such as, crime, thriller and mystery & suspense attached. Yet not every resource acknowledged the same additional genres for each film, for example websites such as, rottentomatoes.com, had labelled *Mystic River* as a drama and mystery &

suspense film, whereas IMDb.com had the same label, but also added crime and thriller to the list (retrieved July 2014).

The writer and editor for the website Filmsite.org, Tim Dirks, summarises the drama genre as being...

“... serious presentations or stories with settings or life situations that portray realistic characters in conflict with either themselves, others, or forces of nature. A dramatic film shows us human beings at their best, their worst, and everything in between... Dramatic films are probably the largest film genre because they include a broad spectrum of films.”

(Dirks, T. “*Filmsite: Drama Films*. Retrieved 27/06/2014)

This definition is closest to my understanding of the drama genre. Using this definition, I researched further and discovered a sub-genre of drama called, the domestic drama. Robert McKee explains the domestic drama genre, as narrowing the dramatic focus from the social drama which “identifies problems in society... then constructs a story demonstrating a cure,” and reducing that even further down to, “problems within family” (1999, p. 82). The films I used to help understand the domestic drama genre in relation to *Little Bird*, are Lasse Hallstrom’s 1993 film, *What’s eating Gilbert Grape*, Elia Kazan’s *East Of Eden* (1955), *In a Better World* (Bier, 2010), and *Still Alice* (Glazter & Westmoreland, 2014). I found these films useful when looking at the way family is presented, how the relationships are established and how value clashes can cause conflict.

Using films such as, *Winter’s Bone*, *Mystic River* and *Shadow Dancer*, as mentioned previously, I examined the relationship these dramatic stories had with crime, as I felt *Little Bird* belonged to crime genre more than the mystery & suspense and thriller genres. In each of these films, the crime is presented differently, however most contain a detective, a criminal, a murder or potential murder, and mystery. What they also have in common is that the crime is committed within, or by family, or by what the characters consider as family. For example, *Winter’s Bone* follows a young girl, Ree, who acts as a detective, as she tries to uncover the whereabouts of her father, who has been murdered by her local relatives (Granik, 2010). Whereas, *Shadow Dancer*, is about a young

woman, Collette, who is a member of the IRA, and becomes an informant in order to protect her son. Collette functions as a detective, by helping the authorities keep track of IRA plans. However, she is also considered a criminal in the eyes of the IRA and her family (Marsh, 2012). In *Little Bird*, Lexie acts as both a detective and a criminal also. She is a detective-figure trying to find Jules' body and she is also a criminal, dealing with the responsibility of accidental murder.

Although I still have a lot to learn about genre as a scriptwriter, through learning about the drama genre, domestic drama and using the films to identify elements of the crime genre, I was able to identify *Little Bird* as a family, crime drama.

## Structure

I used the “conventional narrative structure” to compose *Little Bird*, which employs the classic three-act formula (Aronson, 2010, p. 45). Traditionally, the conventional narrative chronologically follows one protagonist on their journey towards a goal, which is constructed within three-acts. I have summarised the key ingredients for the three-act structure below, using Linda Aronson’s interpretation as a guide (2010, p. 45-60):

### ACT ONE

- Normality
- Disturbance and Plan
- The First-act Turning Point

### ACT TWO

- Complications and Surprises
- The Second-act Climax

### ACT THREE

- The Climax
- Resolution

This basic model granted a smoother path for writing *Little Bird*. It gave me the grounding I needed to focus on the dramatic tension and key changes in relationships without having to confront the complications that would arise from a more complex narrative structure. For example, I had considered using the “multiple protagonist narrative” to deliver the story from both Lexie, and Jake’s perspective (Aronson, 2010, 207-241).

It took a lot of time and manipulation to condense *Little Bird’s* normality down to 18 pages. As Aronson states, “Set-up problems are normally cause by writers spending too much time on the normality” (2010, p. 69). This is certainly something I experience in the first draft. I had a lot of ‘set up’ material. I had 25 pages. This was too long, it was slow, and contained too much information for the

audience to take on board before the story **really** began. For example, in the first draft I had used two days in the story to set up Lexie's relationship with her family, Jake's bad behaviour, James and Jackie's history, the locals protesting the grapevines, and the general layout of the town. All of these aspects were relevant and important, but I found that a lot of the scenes I wrote were repeating the same piece of information, only in a different version. Therefore, when it came to the second draft, I focussed on getting the information across more efficiently, condensing it down to one day, and moving all the less important information into the second act.

The first draft of *Little Bird* contained a heavy amount of back story within the second act, relating to Jackie's conflict with her father, James, and his second wife, Jules. The script became overwhelmed with scenes returning to this back story, and frequently distracted me from the main narrative taking place in the present. I had to get rid of it and find another way to communicate the family's history. I was able to shed some light on the past through dialogue, and the nickname "little bird," which James uses to refer to Jules. This process took a lot of time to figure out, not only did I need to think about what was said and how people's behaviour, specifically Jackie and the locals, informed the audience of this back story, but I also had to be mindful of when this information was delivered. I chose to place the back story information throughout the script and use it during moments when the characters reminisced. For example, when Sally and Jaynee talk to Jackie about James moving on so quickly with Jules after his wife, Jackie's mother, died. I do not particularly like using dialogue as a tool to deliver the back story, as it feels forced and a little patronising. However, it has to stay, at least until I've done more research, and have a better understanding on how to approach and deliver back story in a present day narrative.

Throughout the screenplay, Lexie has recurring flashbacks about shooting Jules, and the deer. Many of these present themselves in her dreams, and the traumatic event is often distorted. I decided to use flashbacks, not only as a tool to remind the audience of important information, such as Jules' gold ring, but also to make it clear that Lexie was suffering from trauma and guilt. I felt it would be more

realistic for Lexie to be struggling with this antagonistic force, while trying to remain proactive about finding Jules. In a way, these flashbacks become part of the driving force for Lexie to uncover the truth, because they act as a reminder, and they only come to an end once she has found her deer, and the bullet.



## Character

Developing the characters for *Little Bird* was the most exhilarating part of writing for me. I chose to have a female protagonist, a female lead-antagonist and a female victim, purely because I want to see more women on screen, in all types of roles. However, creating Lexie and Jackie, and giving them room to evolve, was the most challenging aspect when working on character development.

Earlier on in the year, I watched Elia Kazan's 1954 film, *On the Waterfront*, and although I found it captivating, I was furious by the end of the film, and I decided to be very conscious of what my problem was with this film when addressing the relationships between the female and male characters in *Little Bird*. My issue with *On the Waterfront* was to do with the way in which Eva Marie Saint's character, Edie, was portrayed throughout the film. From the very start we were introduced to this head-strong, staunch young woman who had the ability to compete with Marlon Brando's character, Teddy. But the moment came where Edie finds out that Teddy was involved in her brother's death, and when she goes to confront him, something very wrong happens. Teddy kisses Edie. At that moment, Edie instantly becomes this conveniently passive, flimsy female who forgets all about **her** goal and just submits herself to Teddy. I remember saying out loud in the cinema, "What?! Are you kidding me!?" I was so enraged that film could portray women so simply. *On the Waterfront* is 60 years old this year and female characters have changed over that time, but not enough. Therefore, the aim for *Little Bird* was to create female characters that are emotionally vulnerable, but still have the will power to stand by their values and their goals. There are men, such as Jake and James, who are present in the story and do hold an emotional influence on Lexie and Jackie, and the other female characters, but they have little to no power when it comes to changing the female's values or goals. At least, this is what I was trying to achieve in *Little Bird*.

It was a challenge to keep Lexie active after I made the decision to keep feeding the idea that she is dealing with trauma and guilt. I didn't want her to be passive. However, Lexie continued to fall into that trap during the transition from the first

to second draft. I can't say how many different versions of act two I had tried out because of this. The first draft consisted of Lexie doing next to nothing, apart from crying and complaining about someone not doing the right thing. During the feedback sessions it was noted, on several occasions, that my peers didn't care how Lexie felt, they only wanted to know what she was going to do next. I was all for that, right from the start, I just didn't know how to get that going and keep her feelings present too, because I felt that it was important to have both. In the end, I just had to accept that there still remains a great amount of passivity from Lexie towards her situation, but I do believe she is more proactive than she ever has been in taking responsibility for Jules, and her family.

Jackie was the most difficult character to write. Initially, Jackie killed Jules in cold blood, she had no relationship with James because of her resentment towards Jules and the grapevines, she was highly manipulative, had little care for Lexie's wellbeing, and had ultimate control over Jake. However, I didn't want her to be a neglectful, slightly psychotic mother because it was too easy and too obvious. Therefore, the challenge was to develop Jackie as a mother who loved her children and put her family first, yet was able to commit murder, and allow Lexie and Jake to suffer the responsibility of Jules' death.

One example of how I attempted to understand Jackie and justify her actions was to address the question - would a mother be capable of hiding a body to protect her children from going to jail?, because the goal was to make sure the audience believed Jackie hid Jules' body to protect her children, right up until Lexie finds the gun. I'm not a mother, I couldn't honestly say yes or no to the question. Therefore, to figure this out, I rang my mother and asked her whether she would hide a dead body to protect me, she responded by saying that, "it would really have a lot to do with the circumstances." Even though my mother never fully answered my question, just by listening to her talk about it I quickly realised that she might not hide a body because it's morally wrong, but she is certainly capable of it, if it meant protecting me. I asked various other mothers and grandmothers, of all ages, and they all came back with a similar response. This feedback was exactly what I needed to feel comfortable moving forward when addressing

Jackie's ability to hide Jules' body in order to protect Lexie and Jake, and whether the audience would believe it.

Lexie and Jackie have come a long way. They have truly been my main focus during the development of this script. I have spent hours playing with these two characters, and learning about what they are capable of doing or saying. Even as the narrative and the setting changed, they still remained and adapted to these changes. However, I still feel that I need to spend more time with Lexie and Jackie. Although I am happy with where they are at in the second draft, I know there is a huge opportunity to really build these two into strong, morally conflicted, and complex characters.

## Other Creative Influences

Prior to writing anything for *Little Bird* I read John Steinbeck's 1952 novel, *East of Eden*, and I was fascinated by the concept of "timshel" which was the original title of my screenplay. The definition of timshel is explained by Steinbeck's character, Lee, during a conversation regarding the Old Testament:

"The King James translation makes a promise in "Thou Shalt," meaning that men will surely triumph over sin. But the Hebrew word, the word *timshel* – 'Thou mayest' – that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. That says the way is open. That throws it right back on a man. For if 'Thou mayest' – it is also true that 'Thou mayest not'..."

(Steinbeck, 2000, pp. 369-370).

This resonated with me and became a huge part of the development of *Little Bird*. I chose to have Lexie, Jake and Jackie connected, in various ways, to the same crime in order to expose this concept of choice. Although I find the idea of timshel is a lot more subtle in my second draft compared to the first, it is still actively there. For example, Lexie continuously seeks justice and is willing to take responsibility for Jules, whereas, Jackie is determined to hide and deny her involvement in Jules' death. Which leaves Jake, who is in between. On the surface Jake is a destructive, naughty kid, but underneath he is driven by what he believes is good and the right thing to do. Although in the novel the two siblings, Aron and Cal Trask, are not dealing with murder, they are confronting the idea that they have a choice to be good or bad, and that whatever they choose will have an impact on their family. I believe this is what Lexie, Jackie and Jake are facing throughout *Little Bird*, and they do, by the end, make their choice.

I rely a great deal on music to find and explore story. I find music guides the mood and tone of a story and the relationships between characters. For *Little Bird* I found the dramatic energy in Lexie, Jackie and Jake's relationship through the Dublin-based rock band, Kodaline's song, *All I want* (Long Man, 2012). Although the lyrics have next to no relevance in defining the relationships between these three characters, the strength and build-up of the melody supports my vision for their conflict and value clashes. In addition to, *All I want*, I used Matt Corby's

song, *Brother* (Umstrum's Channel, 2012) to visualise Lexie's reaction to the deterioration of her relationship with Jackie and Jake, as she discovers the truth about their involvement with Jules' death and disappearance. Lastly, the song I used to identify with Jackie and her motivations was Mumford and Son's song, *Dust Bowl Dance* (Bingophobic, 2009). This allowed me to frame Jackie's thoughts and feelings towards Jules, James, and the locals. Overall, music has become an extremely useful tool for me to remain focused and to remind myself of what I am trying to do or say with these characters, and the story itself.

## Conclusion

Developing *Little Bird* from a first to second draft was a challenge, due to the complex nature of screenwriting. Although my initial intentions for the story and the characters remained relatively intact, I was frequently forced to adjust my expectations for the outcome of *Little Bird*. This was because, throughout the writing process, I was confronted by lessons in script development, genre, narrative structure, character, and outside influences. Each of these challenges greatly impacted the changes made in *Little Bird* when moving it from first to second draft, and will continue to do so as I move forward as a writer.

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