



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER STUART BEATTIE

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“Writing that first draft, to me, is the best part. It’s the one time when nobody’s going to mess with you and you get to do what you want to do. Everything before then, everything after then, is all answering to other people and satisfying their bizarre whims.”

Stuart Beattie

EXCERPT FROM STUART BEATTIE'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: *When you sit down [to write], do you differentiate between [writing] a smaller film or a giant blockbuster film like a "Pirates" or a "Collateral?"*

STUART BEATTIE: No, I don't. I just think story is story. I like all kinds of films, so I want to tell all kinds of stories. I've written animated musicals and I've written Rwanda genocide. It's just whatever tickles my fancy, and I don't know what that is from one thing to the next. I just know what I think is a good story when I see it.

DE LUCA: *Do you admire the careers that have been more eclectic, less focused on one genre?*

BEATTIE: I hate the whole pigeonhole thing. When I'm looking for projects, I really look to do something that I've never done before...because I never want to be boxed in. I think the writers who do only one kind of thing, they can do it well but after a while they get bored and they look for something else to do. It's natural.

DE LUCA: *Do you begin with an outline?*

BEATTIE: I like outlines a lot. I usually try and do a five-page outline. Act One is one page, Act Two is two, three, four, and Act Three is page five. I know if I can boil it down to that essence, then I've got what is the story, and it's not confused with a bunch of muddling subplots. I don't like to do the 40-page outline. That takes away some of my creativity in the moment of writing the script.

DE LUCA: *Is that five-pager something the studio never sees?*

BEATTIE: No, I give them everything. Because I've sat in too many rooms with people where we've both talked for an hour about what we think is the same film and then I deliver a draft which is what I think we talked about and they're like, "What the hell is this? We didn't talk about this." Two people can sit in a room and talk about about completely different movies and not know it.... Half the job of screenwriting today is communication in a room. You've got to be able to convey your vision, convey your ideas and make people believe in what you're doing.

QUIZ:

As you watch the interview, see if you can answer the following questions.

1. Where is Stuart Beattie from?
2. Beattie says he worked as a studio “reader.” What does a reader do?
3. Who does Beattie say was his favorite screenwriter when he was trying to break in?
4. What real-life experience was the inspiration for “Collateral?”
5. Does Beattie choose to work in only one genre? Why or why not?
6. Do Beattie recommend working from an outline?
7. Beattie says, “Half the job of screenwriting today is communication in a room.” What does he mean?
8. Beattie says he strives to keep his stories as simple as possible. Why?
9. What script does Beattie say is his best work?
10. Why does he say you need to have “more than one egg in your basket?”
11. For Beattie, which is most difficult: original writing, rewriting, or adapting work from another medium?
12. What common writing mistakes did Beattie see when he was a studio reader?
13. What are Beattie’s “Five Basic Rules of Screenwriting?”
14. Why do studios sometimes skip the “Why” when deciding to make films?
15. How does Beattie say he ultimately measures the success of his work?

Bonus question:

16. What are “Fiend” and “The Last Domino?”

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Stuart Beattie says he decided to write a pirate movie despite the genre being “out,” or unfashionable. Can you name any other once-popular genres that are currently “out?” What about some that are “in?” Can you think of any that were “out” and have come back “in?”
2. Beattie describes the jazz club scene in “Collateral” as being one that “turns on a dime” from being about one thing to being about another. What seems to be going on at first, and what changes? Using just a few sentences, can you invent and describe a scene that at first seems to be about one thing, and then is revealed to be about something else?
3. Beattie says research helps him get into the mind of a character he wouldn’t otherwise understand. Imagine you were going to write about someone from another culture, or someone with a very unusual job. What kind of research might you do to get into the mind of this character? What would you need to know before writing a story set, for example, during the French Revolution?
4. Beattie says he tries to avoid being “pigeonholed” as a writer. What does he mean? Does any one film genre most appeal to you as a writer? Is there another genre you can imagine writing? In just a sentence or two, sketch a very simple story. Does the story most naturally seem to be a comedy or drama? Can you imagine telling it as the other, instead? What other genre (like action, thriller or fantasy) do you think the story might fit into? Describe what choices you’d make to tell the same story in two or three different genres.

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