

# How They Write A Script:

## Richard Matheson

[Scott Myers](#)

Richard Matheson has written novels and short stories, as well as screenplays for both film and television. Notably he is among the few writers who contributed to Rod Serling's classic television series "The Twilight Zone" (1959–1964) almost as prolifically as Serling himself. He wrote about fifteen scripts for the original series and also contributed to "Rod Serling's Night Gallery" (1972), "Twilight Zone: The Movie" (1983) and the television reboot of "The Twilight Zone" (1985–1989).

He wrote for many television series including westerns such as "Cheyenne" and "Have Gun Will Travel" (both 1960) as well as "The Alfred Hitchcock Hour" (1962–1965) and "Star Trek" (1966–1968). He scripted made-for-TV-movies, too, most notably Steven Spielberg's "Duel" (1971) and "The Night Stalker" (1972) among others.

Films based on his stories include *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (1957), *The Incredible Shrinking Woman* (1981), *Stir of Echoes* (1999), *The Young Warriors* (1967) among others.

His novels include, "I Am Legend" (1954) "The Shrinking Man" (1956), "A Stir of Echoes" (1958), "Ride the

Nightmare" (1959), "The Beardless Warriors" (1960) among others.

His short stories include "Born of Man and Woman" (1950), "Third From the Sun" (1950), "The Waker Dreams" (1950), "Blood Son" (1951), "The Thing" (1951) among others.

These interview excerpts are taken from the excellent ["Backstory 3: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 60s,"](#) one of a 4-part series edited by Patrick McGilligan.



## ON THE EARLY DAYS AS A WRITER

I always knew I was going to be a writer. But I came from a background where you didn't consider being a creative writer as a logical means of making a living... After I got out

of college and was trying to write for a living, they'd say, "How long are you going to give it? When are you going to get a job?" A friend's mother, who was Irish, would ask me, "When are going to go to *woik*?"

At first I tried to get a job in magazines or newspapers when I got out of J school. I went back to New York, still trying to play the role of earning a living like a sensible human being. There was an editor of *Esquire* magazine whose name was Donald Berwick. He said to me, "Why don't you get a night job doing anything, and write in the daytime?" So that's what I did.

I always liked movies. Whether, in my teen years, I ever gave credence to the idea that I could actually write them, I don't know. But I corresponded with people like [the producer] Val Lewton when I was a teenager. I remember writing to him and telling him that I had figured out two of his secrets for scaring people: one was that you lead the viewer's eye to one side of the screen and then have something jump out from the other side; the other was an extended period of silence, suddenly broken by anything — like a horse nickering in the stable — that would make you jump out of your skin. He wrote back to me that he and his editors, Robert Wise and Mark Robson, were delighted I had been able to figure this out.

I lived on East Seventh Street in Brooklyn with my mother and I remember walking down the street one day and the wind was so cold and so loud I was screaming into it and I

couldn't hear my own voice. That was the day I decided I was going to go to California. It seems remarkable to me now, that I would have the chutzpah just to leave.

## ON HIS FIRST HOLLYWOOD WRITING GIG: "THE INCREDIBLE SHRINKING MAN"

My agent, Al Manuel, sold it ["The Incredible Shrinking Man"] to Universal. They just wanted to buy the book. I recognized that this was my chance — now or never — to write the screenplay. They probably figured, "Let him have his ten weeks; then, we'll have it rewritten . . ."

I took to it like a duck to water. I've always written visually when I write novels or short stories. I can see it as I write it; therefore, the reader can see it, and therefore, my prose transposes pretty easily to films. If you write that way, to me, it's just a question of learning the technique of film writing, which isn't that complicated. It will take you about maybe a week to learn it. I *over-learned* it. I wrote intricate camera descriptions, which was perhaps ridiculous. But I've always written detailed shooting scripts. To a lot of writers, it's a mistake. They always say, "Why bother? The director will change it." I do it anyway. It works out — sometimes.

In writing the script, I wanted to follow the structure of the book — which was sort of like *Last Year at Marienbad* [1962] — where you plunge right into the story and then have flashbacks. I had actually written the book manuscript the other way around, starting from when the main

character was big. But by the time he got to be small, maybe one hundred pages had gone by, and I thought, "Geez, this is real boring." So I restructured it. I did the same thing with *I Am Legend*. I restructured that book too, so that you were just plunged into the story, and the flashbacks brought you up to date.

In *The Shrinking Man*, the first moment is the spider chasing him through the cellar, instead of telling the whole continuity of how it happened; then, I could pick specific points along the way to fill in the story.

But [Universal] didn't do it that way. It's a straight continuity.

## ON WRITING FOR "THE TWILIGHT ZONE"

Nineteen fifty-nine — when Chuck Beaumont and I went in to see *The Twilight Zone* people. I had an agent for years and years who didn't do anything for me, and then I switched to Preminger/Stuart, so did Chuck, and suddenly we got phone calls for appointments. We both started working on *The Twilight Zone*.

Whenever I see one of my scripts for that show, it's always my dialogue — word for word. Respecting writers as he did, Rod let you do your own thing. It was really a nice experience. That was the first time I worked in television. I didn't know how nice it was. We would have three-day *rehearsals*, for God's sake, where we sat around tables with actors and directors, and discussed the show. That's still

pretty unheard of in television.

People always ask me why *The Twilight Zone* is still alive, and I always say, "Because the stories are so interesting." That's what I do. I tell an interesting story. I think that's why I'm still around.

I had never done a television script. Ordinarily, they would ask for an outline, or so I was told. But the first show I did, the idea I presented to them was so vivid that they said, "Yes, do it."

I just said, "A World War I airplane pilot goes through a fog, lands, and he's in a modern SAC base." They said, "Yeah, do it," because the image was so vivid. Then I had to figure out the story.

## ON WORKING WITH ROGER CORMAN

They were going to do "Fall of the House of Usher." I met with Roger — he was the first one I met with. It took a while before I met [the American International executives] Jim Nicholson and Sam Arkoff... You can't dislike Roger. You like him from the moment you meet him. I like him to this day.

I read some Poe when I was in college and when I was younger. It's just that I poured myself into "Fall of the House of Usher," the first one. I read the story. I really tried to get the whole essence of it. The outline I wrote was like a work of art. I took it really seriously.

I'm sure they only wanted to do one picture, and that was it. They had no idea it was going to turn out so well. Not only the script but [also] Roger's direction, and [the actor Vincent] Price did a nice job. It just kept running and running and running all summer. They were running it on double bills with *Psycho* [1960].

Probably the best of mine was the *House of Usher*. Pure Poe-try, should I say? The second one, *Pit and the Pendulum*, that's just a little short story which I had to make a whole picture out of. I had this idea for a mystery-suspense film, something I had never used before, and I just thrust it into that mold.

After a while, I couldn't take the AIP things seriously anymore. That oh-my-God-she-isn't-dead-she's-been-buried-alive sort of thing. How long can you be serious about that? *The Raven* was just an out-and-out comedy.

## ON WORKING WITH STEVEN SPIELBERG

*Duel* was his first film. I remember the producer, George Eckstein, saying, "Well, they stuck me with some hotshot director . . ." I was told that when they saw what he had been filming out in the desert, they wanted to cancel the film, but he was too far into it.

George Eckstein was the one who approached me. He became the producer, and I worked on the script for him. He had a terrible time getting it made. Apparently, at one point, they were going to try to make a movie out of it with

Gregory Peck. Only they couldn't get Gregory Peck. They tried for other directors, and they couldn't get one. They tried for other actors. Finally, they had to shut down *McCloud*, so they could use Dennis Weaver. I remember him, Eckstein, one day on the phone saying, "Well, I got a truck . . ." That's all he had at that point — a truck.

The only thing of mine I know he read is *What Dreams May Come*. My recollection is he called me one Christmas day — he and Amy Irving — after he had finished reading it. He thought it was wonderful. I asked, "Do you want to make a movie out of it?" We played around with the idea through the years. But he's always so busy.

That ["Amazing Stories"] was after the *Twilight Zone* movie and "the gig of the season," as my agent called it. It was a lot of fun. In the beginning, a bunch of us met in a huge conference room at [Spielberg's production company] Amblin. There was food on the bar counter, and after working about three hours, we had a delicious meal on the patio. And the meetings themselves were a ball. Steven was usually there; [the Amblin executives] Frank Marshall, Kathleen Kennedy; [the supervising producers, Joshua] Brand and [John] Falsey; David Vogel, the producer; [the consulting writers] Bob Zemeckis and Bob Gale; [the story editor] Mick Garris. We'd sit and discuss ideas. I guess I did well, because I became the creative consultant for the show's second season.

I remember an idea I came up with in one meeting. The

premise was that, in the future, a spacecraft would come down and the aliens would examine this strange environment. Then, when they took off, the down angle would reveal gradually that it had been Disneyland. I came up with the notion that in the space craft, the aliens would remove their helmets and big ears would pop up, and we'd see that they were giant mice; they were turned on because they had found the source of their god. I remember Steven slowly laying his face down on the table — he was so amused by the notion. Unfortunately, it was never made.

## ON OLD AND NEW HOLLYWOOD

My recollection is that the people I met back then were all older than me. They had been in the business for quite a while. They had experience. They had credentials. Nowadays, you meet the young executives, young producers, young agents, and their credential is that they went to Yale Law School. I don't know how good they are, or how much they really care.

Actually, I don't feel the same way about films that I used to. No, I don't mean films; I mean the film business. I still love films. It's a wonderful medium of expression; nothing like it. But the business . . . I just haven't been able to beat it. I should have gone into production, directing, some inside job. I had an agent once who said that if I went into film production only to protect

my scripts, I'd be making a bad mistake. I can't think of any

other reason to go into film production, at least for me.

But I didn't do that — my own failing — I'm a loner who likes to sit in a quiet, isolated room and write. The hurly-burly of the business would have been too much for me. When I first started in it, I was only twenty-nine years old, and I was popping Valiums like candy then. *Now . . .*

Anyway, it was my own fault. I can't blame the business for being what it is.

## ON STORY IDEAS

They always say you should be able to tell any good story in two or three lines — or even one sentence. You couldn't categorize my work that way completely. And you can't say, "This is a story about Lawrence of Arabia . . . "; that's such an expansive character. But give me virtually any film or story, and I can probably reduce it to two or three lines. And I hope my films fit into that category.

Through the years, I have been able to get more and more into character, but I never went into stories based on characters. I went into stories based on a story idea. Then I put characters in the story that I hoped would be believable and realistic in real life and maybe move you. But I'm a storyteller. The story is the thing. They can put that on my tombstone: Storyteller.

When I was writing short stories, some of my ideas would come from other books because I read omnivorously.

Someone would mention something in a short story, totally overlooking what they had said, and I would pounce on it like a tiger. For example, there's a section in *Wild Talents*, one of Charles Fort's books, [New York: Garland, 1975], where, in several paragraphs, he describes, literally, a sequence that I made a whole short story out of. I couldn't believe when I wrote it that nobody ever latched on to the connection. He said in future times, psychic girls would fight wars; they will visualize terrible things happening to soldiers. And I got a great story out of that.

Most of my ideas have come from films. When I lived in Brooklyn, I went to see a *Dracula* film and the idea came to me: If one vampire was scary, what if the whole world was full of vampires? That became *I Am Legend*.

Another time, I went to see a comedy with Ray Milland and Aldo Ray [*Let's Do It Again*, 1953]; and Ray Milland was leaving an apartment and he put on Aldo Ray's hat and it came down way over his ears. At that second, I thought, "What if a guy put his own hat on and that happened?" That's where I got the idea for *Shrinking Man*.

And most of the ideas come from *bad* movies. Because if they're good movies, you're absorbed and not distracted. If it's a bad movie, if you're a movie buff, you stay and watch anyway. But as you're sitting there, you drift off. Something will happen [on the screen] . . . and it will spin off [in your mind] into something else.

When you're reading a story, I think, if the story is really boring you, you will stop reading it. You have to concentrate or stop. In a movie, you don't have to concentrate. You can just sit there. Things will come into your eyes but not really into your brain. And you drift off in a different direction . . .

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