

Interview (Part 1): Michael Kujak

[Scott Myers](#)

My interview with 2021 Black List writer for his script *Follow*.



Michael Kujak wrote the original screenplay “Follow” which landed on the 2021 Black List. Recently, I had the opportunity to chat with Mike about his creative background, his script, the craft of screenwriting, and what making the annual Black List has meant to him.

Today in Part 1 of a 6 part series to run each day through Saturday, Mike talks about his background in journalism and how a night out drinking with a friend prompted him to follow his screenwriting dreams to Los Angeles.

Scott Myers: *First off, congratulations for making the 2021 Black List.*

Michael Kujak: *Thank you so much.*

Scott: *Let's learn more about your background here. Where'd you grow up? How did you find your way into writing as an interest?*

Michael: *I grew up in Bloomington, Minnesota, which is a suburb that's just south of Minneapolis. We're famous for Mall of America, if you've ever heard about that big monstrosity of a mall out there. I grew up there and got into writing in high school.*

I had one of those magical "Dead Poets Society" high school teachers, that was just a great influence on me. I found her in 10th grade. She had a creative writing class. I got really into that and basically took all her classes after that.

She helped guide me towards writing and didn't even see that I was necessarily talented or anything like that. She just saw that I was super into it and took it more seriously than the other kids. That's how I first started to get into writing in general.

I also didn't ever think of screenwriting or writing as a career. I don't know if that's growing up in the Midwest, or just everybody, but I was a responsible, practical kid. I never thought I would try to get into any of this. That was something crazy people did, to be an astronaut or something like that. It was just a wacky job.

Then I went to school for journalism. I thought, "If I can't write then that's the more responsible options."

We had a newspaper in Minnesota, maybe I could do that. I went to journalism school at University of Wisconsin, got into the newspaper there.

It's a good major for people who want to be into screenwriting because it teaches you to write on deadline and it teaches you to not be too delicate with your writing. You've got to write a few thousand words every single night before midnight and it teaches you a lot of good writing habits.

Scott: *You stand in the long tradition of journalists who became screenwriters, most notably Ben Hecht, the most prolific screenwriter of all time. Hitting deadlines and not being precious with words, those just slot right into being a screenwriter, right?*

Michael: *Totally. Just having that work ethic and being able to write out, do it every day, fit it in, and especially for aspiring screenwriters being able to write in the morning and late at night, on the weekends, being able to write at any time.*

That's been helpful as well because I've held a 9:00 to 5:00 day job for all the years I've been in Los Angeles, so being able to squeeze in the writing whenever I can, or at weird times during your schedule is also a helpful skill.

I spent all four years writing at the school newspaper, and it was...I don't even know if they have them in

colleges anymore. This was a daily newspaper. We put one out six days a week, we didn't on Sunday, but it was like get up before 6:00 AM. I didn't get home until midnight when we went to print.

It was pretty intense [laughs] for four years and by the end of school, I was pretty burnt out from journalism. I felt like a haggard old reporter, and newspapers were dying — this was like 2013 — or at least declining significantly.

Once I graduated, I had a part-time job. I was just living out the lease in my apartment before moving back home after college and was just bored at this part-time job. That's when I first picked up a notebook and just started doodling out the outlines for what were spec scripts. I didn't even know you called them spec scripts then.

So I started outlining episodes of these existing TV shows. Then before or after work, literally because I was used to being a workaholic from the newspaper and now having nothing to do, I would just type them up before after my part-time job.

Then by the end of summer, when I moved back home, I had five or six spec scripts of just existing TV shows. Literally hadn't shown them to anyone. Just had them buried in a drawer, not talking about them.

Then when I moved home, I was drunk at a bar with my

best friend, Rachel Scanlon. She admitted to me that she was thinking about moving out to Los Angeles and trying to be a stand-up comedian, which I knew she had always wanted to do. Again, I just didn't think that was something that responsible people do.

But when she admitted it, I was like, "Well, I actually have these scripts in a drawer that I haven't shown anyone. What if we saved up money over a few months and moved out there together?"

Somehow, we had a drunken handshake deal that night that ended up working out. We saved up \$5,000 over five months. Then on New Year's Day of 2014, moved out to LA.

Scott: *Score one for alcohol.*

[laughter]

Michael: *Green, creative, delusional, young millennial out to Las Angeles. Very broken record.*

Scott: *You're writing specs. Do you remember some of the TV shows you wrote the specs on?*

Michael: *Back then, I did a "New Girl" first. I did a high school reunion episode of New Girl. Can you imagine doing a high school reunion? It's never been done before in the history of television.*

[laughter]

Scott: *Never been done before.*

Michael: *Never. That's all I knew back then, I was in high school. I did a high school reunion. I didn't even know what it was like to be in my 20s, because I was barely out of college. I did a "Bob's Burgers." I did an "Archer." Just having fun writing them. It was a good way to get into it.*

Scott: *How did you learn screenwriting format and theory?*

Michael: *Over that summer, it was podcasts, looking stuff up online. You could Google screenplays. Google would have this archive of pilots that I remember looking up, and sample episodes of TV scripts.*

Once I got into it a little bit more, then I started discovering resources like your blog. "Go Into The Story", which was huge for me. There are tons of screenwriting books and screenwriting podcasts but to have a daily newsletter that you can wake up to, that was big for me.

Having a little nugget every morning, a piece of dialogue, inspirational advice from a great screenwriter.

Scott: *[laughs] Wow. That makes me feel great, honestly. So you're out in LA. By the way, how's Rachel doing with her comedy career? Has that taken off for*

her, I hope?

Michael: *She's doing great. She's much more talented than I am. She is flourishing. They've got a podcast. They travel across the country. It's called "More Than Friends with Ray and Kenz." They're two LGBT female stand-up comics. They do a bunch of shows. They're hilarious.*

We got signed by our agencies two weeks apart. She got signed by APA. Then two weeks later is when I got signed by William Morris. That was seven and a half years in. That's the answer, if someone asks how long does it take to get in? It's seven and a half years.

Scott: *It's interesting that you were writing a bunch of TV comedy scripts. The script you wrote, "Follow," which made the 2021 Black List, while it's got some humor in it, it doesn't fall into that genre.*

Michael: *Those, to me, were less intimidating because they were only 30 pages. Later on, you learn that comedy is the hardest one. Writing a 30-page comedy pilot is harder than anything, but when you're just starting out, you're like, "Well, it's only 30. So, I guess I'll try that."*

Once, I had been writing for years and found my voice a little bit more. It tends to be pulled towards either historical dramas or the horror-thriller stuff, which is more in the vein of what "Follow" is.

Tomorrow in Part 2, Mike discusses what inspired him to write "Follow," a combination of interest in the rise of social media "influencers" and stalker movies from the 80s and 90s.

Mike is repped by:

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