

Nicholas Meyer—The View from the Scribe

By Ray Morton

Some writers struggle in transitioning from one type of writing to another, but Nicholas Meyer has conquered many forms. Learn Meyer’s cross-format storytelling processes and what encouraged him to write his memoir, *The View From the Bridge: Memories of Star Trek and a Life in Hollywood*.



Writer-director Nicholas Meyer (Photo by Albert L. Ortega/WireImage)

When asked to name his profession, [Nicholas Meyer](#) identifies himself as a “storyteller.” It has never much mattered to him in which venue—books, movies, television, or the stage—those stories are told.

Meyer has repeatedly taken a free-range approach to creative expression over the course of a remarkable writing career in which he has authored novels, nonfiction books, stage plays, radio dramas, and reviews. Storytelling is what he does.

Meyer has directed a number of excellent films, but is perhaps best known for being an expert screenwriter who creates smart, sharply constructed, and enormously entertaining scripts filled with engaging characters and clever, literate dialogue. With the September 2009 publication of *The View From the Bridge: Memories of Star Trek and a Life in Hollywood*, Meyer has added memoirist to his considerable list of accomplishments.

Written in a witty, engaging style and chock-full of intriguing tales of Meyer's experiences in the Hollywood trenches—as well as insightful observations about art, craft and life—the book recounts Meyer's journey from a Manhattan childhood filled with books and music and movies, to the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, to a job in the New York headquarters of Paramount Pictures (that had him writing press kits by day and penning spec scripts at night).

A gig as a unit publicist on Paramount's 1970 smash hit *Love Story* led to Meyer's first script sale (to Howard Minsky, *Love Story*'s producer) and his first publishing deal (a “making of” book aptly called *The Love Story Story*). The money earned from those transactions financed a move to Los Angeles where Meyer began writing TV movies and low-budget exploitation features.

The long WGA strike of 1972 gave Meyer the time to write his first novel—the Sherlock Holmes-meets-Sigmund Freud adventure, *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, which became a best-seller and was followed by two more Holmes tales—1976's *The West End Horror* and 1993's *The Canary Trainer*—as well as the non-Holmes-related novels *Target Practice* (1974), *Black Orchid* (1978), and *Confessions of a Homing Pigeon* (1981).

The Seven-Per-Cent Solution served as the springboard for Meyer's jump into the screenwriting big leagues because he refused to sell the screen rights unless he was also permitted to later write the script for its 1976 film adaptation, an assignment that netted him an Academy Award® nomination. Meyer next wrote and directed (his debut) the classic H.G. Wells-meets-Jack the Ripper time-traveling adventure fantasy *Time After Time* (1979). He was then drafted to write (sans credit) and direct *Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan* (1982), the tremendous creative and commercial success of which revived the moribund franchise (which had stalled following the artistic failure of 1979's *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*). *Khan* led to a decade-long association between Meyer and the crew of the Starship Enterprise that saw him co-writing 1986's *Star Trek IV: The Voyage Home* and co-writing and directing 1991's *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*.

Throughout his involvement with *Trek*, Meyer continued to direct films that he wrote (*Company Business*—1991) and some that he didn't (*The Day After*—1983, *Volunteers*—1985, *The Deceivers*—1988), while also earning a reputation as an ace script doctor due to his (mostly uncredited) rewrites on films such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987). Since the early 1990s, Meyer concentrated primarily on screenwriting, with *Sommersby* (1993), *The Human Stain* (2003), and *Elegy* (2008) among his many produced credits. At the time of this interview, he has an

adaptation of Edmund Morris' *The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt* for director Martin Scorsese waiting in the wings.

Meyer spoke with *Script* about his new book, his work as a screenwriter, and the current state of the movies.

What motivated you to write this memoir?

Nicholas Meyer: The writers' strike. Every time the Writers Guild goes on strike, I write a book. We weren't allowed to write scripts and I had to find a way to keep cash in the pipeline, send my kids to school, blah, blah. My agent suggested I write it, and it was such a kooky idea that I thought "Why not?" I remembered a line from the movie *Ninotchka* that I always loved where Melvyn Douglas turns to Ina Claire—she's the Grand Duchess Swana and they're White Russians living exiled in Paris. He's sold her memoirs, *The Scandalous Life of the Grand Duchess Swana*, and he says, "Darling, we won't have to worry about our future if you're willing to let me raffle off your past." So I guess that was it.

You've written in so many forms. Do you find it difficult to go back and forth between them?

My inclination is to say no—that I think as far as both content and form, I am refreshed by change. Just doing different things keeps me interested. In fact, I know that when I am writing screenplay after screenplay after screenplay, I do experience a kind of fatigue which I can only hope doesn't manifest in the work, but is certainly an impetus to vary the diet.

All of your scripts are so well structured. How much do you think about structure when writing?

Structure is the most important thing to me in a drama. For me to get going, I really have to have an over-arching conception of how the thing is supposed to work. And the details of it, I suspect, are much less important to me because I always think if I get that big thing right ... then I'm inclined to be much more comfortable doing what I'm doing. Once I know where I'm starting and where I'm going to end, the middle is going to take care of itself.

I think there also ought to be room ... for a kind of spontaneity. When I was at the University of Iowa, Max Shulman, who was a very well-known humorist of the time, came to visit at the Writers' Workshop. He'd written some novels and I remember somebody asked him, "Do you always have an outline when you write a novel?" And he said, "Of course! I would no more start a novel without an outline than I would start a car trip without a road map." I remember thinking, "God, it sounds like a potentially boring trip," because if you're completely bound to the road map, you would seem to deny yourself the possibility of a spontaneous or meaningful detour.

The analogy that I give myself [about outlining is that] once I have the over-arching thing, the rest of it is a little bit for me like headlights on a car at night, which is [that the outline] illuminates the next stretch of the road, but it doesn't illuminate the whole thing. You just make the assumption that by the time you catch up to where the headlights are, they'll illuminate the

next stretch of the road. You're trying to strike a balance between a structure that seems to accommodate the over-arching purpose of telling this story on the one hand and on the other to give yourself room or latitude to wander, to be spontaneous, and to fold all that stuff into the larger skeletal supports.

You've done a number of projects based on preexisting material. Can you talk about your approach to adaptation?

Well, my answer will be discursive because I think in the larger sense that some part of me does respond to the challenges and possibilities of adaptation rather than coming up with things out of whole cloth that are completely original. Not that I've never done it; just somehow, without being self-conscious or self-aware, where I seem to gravitate [in my career] has to do with adapting or extrapolating from something that someone else has created.

I think it always begins with love. When I did the Sherlock Holmes thing, [my feeling] was "I've read these stories, I've loved these stories, I wished these stories didn't end." [They] spoke to me in a very specific way. I knew, without being able to analyze it or tell you just what it was, how this was supposed to work. I was never terribly fond of any of the Sherlock Holmes movies—they always seemed to me to sort of miss what Arthur Conan Doyle was about. For example, I knew that Watson wasn't supposed to be an idiot—I always thought the movies got that wrong with Nigel Bruce, because I could never figure out why a genius would hang out with an idiot. So, I set out in a way, on a purely instinctual level, to rectify what I considered to be what they'd gotten wrong.

For *Time After Time*, a friend of mine showed me a story he was writing, and again, I would never have dreamt up H.G. Wells and Jack the Ripper in a million years. Funnily enough, he said his book was inspired by *The Seven-Per-Cent Solution*, so he was adapting me who was adapting him. But I liked his idea very much, and I started to play with it and I optioned it and that's how that worked.

Star Trek was interesting because I didn't know anything about it. I'd never seen it. I'd look at the guy with the pointy ears when I was channel surfing and I just kept going. But when somebody actually got me to sit down and said, "Here, pay attention to this," I started to think about it. The thing that unlocked it for me was when I had a midnight epiphany that this was Captain Horatio Hornblower, only set in outer space, and I thought, "Oh, I know how to do that," because I always loved Captain Hornblower, so ... I just put in the bells and whistles. Otherwise, it was very traditional in the sense of being sort of Hornblower pastiche.

But there are other things that you do—*The Human Stain* (an adaptation of Philip Roth's novel), for example, which was utterly mystifying to me [until] quite by accident—and I cannot stress what an accident it was—I was sitting in the bathtub and suddenly the structure revealed itself to me. So, it's an intuitive process and I don't know where my ideas come from; I only know when they come. They come when you're either falling asleep or waking up or sitting in the tub or doing the laundry or building model boats or working on plumbing. In other words, your hands are employed, but your brain is sort of free to float around.

Can you talk a little bit about your writing process?

Well, it really depends. If I'm adapting a book, one of the things that I have been doing for years now—just as a way of familiarizing myself with the material and memorizing whatever it is—is I start by getting out a legal pad. I read page one and I simply write down a sentence or two about what happened on page one, and then I go on to page two and so on. At the end of every day, I transcribe my legal pad notes into a computer, at which time I'm also rewriting and embellishing them from my memory of the book. This routine has nothing to do with the screenplay. It's a way of forcing yourself into a rather intimate conjunction with the book. I'm learning it [and] all along the way I'm playing with the problems in my head that are being posed—"Do I really need this?" "Do I want that?"

When I'm [ready to begin writing], what's really important to me is "What is the first thing you want to see in this movie? What is the first image?" And once I've got that image, then: "Okay, what do I want to see next?" And so on, keeping in mind as these images are unfolding the overarching structure that you had in your head.

When you began directing, did that have any influence on the way you wrote scripts?

I became much better in terms of understanding the relationship between words and pictures. And I became much less profligate with words—particularly spoken words—once I understood how much disproportionate time they were capable of taking on the screen. [There is a] relationship between words and pictures in movies—and I'm not of the school that believes that words don't have any importance. I think they have enormous importance, but I think if you are not careful and use them injudiciously, what would work on the stage, where the words come first, [the effect of those words] can be dissipated, their potency eviscerated, if too many of them are employed, rather than just very, very specifically used.

I always use an example from a movie called *The Sundowners*—a Fred Zinnemann picture about [Australian] sheep drovers. A drover and his wife pull up next to a railroad station in the outback in a buckboard and there are three lines of dialogue. The man says to the wife, "You stay here and I'll get paid," and he leaves. The woman sits in the buckboard when a train pulls into the railroad station in front of her, and there's a lady in the train powdering her face in a compact. She's wearing a silly city hat, and she looks out over the rim of her compact and sees a lady her own age staring at her from a buckboard, someone wearing a silly city hat—and who doesn't have makeup but has the dust of the trail on her face. These two ladies stare into each other's lives in a series of close-ups. Then the train goes chugging along, the woman returns to her compact, and the husband comes back to the buckboard where, in addition to the dust of the trail, he now sees two tear streaks coming down the cheeks of his wife. He says the second line of dialogue: "What's the matter with you?" There's a long pause and she says, "Nothing, really." And he sees that something is the matter and puts his arm around her and they drive away. That's screenwriting. Every line of dialogue in that scene lasts—it has its purpose. It's wonderfully economical.

How have movies changed since you began writing, and where do you think we're headed?

I don't know where we're headed, but I'm very disappointed in where [movies] are now. We're very, very frightened to make movies about people, and we're very, very frightened to make movies that have a narrative. [The studios] are frightened of story. It's as though you're putting demands on an audience that is so attention-challenged that no shot can last more than four seconds, and God forbid, there's any content that deals with anything that is about anything except self.

I think part of [the problem] is that a lot of the public are so frightened. The world we live in seems to have progressively become so terrifying—vanishing polar bears, global warming, terrorism, the economy—that nobody wants to see a movie where real people are struggling. Studios respond by saying, “Okay, we'll make videogames, we'll make franchise things, but we won't make a movie about sheep drovers in Australia, that's for goddamn sure.” Studios used to make movies about anything. There was enormous variety, and audience would come out for different things. Then, once the sort of marketing people took over the function of what movies got made, then it just became what movies you can market and the bandwidth got a lot narrower. Movies now only seem to fit into genres, and they're either based on theme park rides or wind-up toys or videogames—or they're slasher movies or they're teen gross-out [comedies]. And the studio will spend \$200 million to make some comic book that doesn't cross over, but they'll give away *Slumdog Millionaire*. It seems to me to be a self-fulfilling prophecy of lowering expectations and playing to the lowest common denominator, which makes it not a very interesting experience to be a moviegoer—I mean, if I have to see the car blow up one more time, I'll scream.

On the other hand, the idea that movies may be branching out to different venues and there may be ways of bringing down the costs and the distribution may open up the content possibilities. And I'm hoping that that's going to be the case because a lot of times you look in multiplexes and they're all playing the same movie ... and then when [quality] movies do show up, [audiences often] don't come out for them. It's almost like people say, “Well, I'd rather sit in my home and use Netflix or whatever than actually go out,” but to me watching a movie on TV is like being kissed over the telephone. I want the theatrical experience. I want the popcorn. I want to sit there with a bunch of other people and I don't know them, they don't know me. The phone is not to ring while I'm there, no one's to knock on the door, the kid isn't crying, and I will sequester myself for the essentially fragile experience which is an artistic encounter. Comedy or drama—it doesn't make any difference to me. I just want to be taken on a journey and be absorbed in human beings and their dilemmas as depicted.

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