

Ann MacNaughton shared her extensive experience as a writer and story editor with a Vancouver audience at the recent *Trade Forum*. Her credits include story editor on E.N.G., *My Life as a Dog*, and *Danger Bay*; writer on episodic TV including *Riverdale*, *Street Legal*, and *Road to Avonlea*; and co-producer on *Traders*. Writer Michelle Demers hooked up with Ann after the *Forum* for an informative look into the world of story departments.

Michelle Demers: Tell us about the road here.

Ann MacNaughton: I started at Harlequin Enterprises in the editing department then moved over to Film and Television—there were two of us—when they were producing *Leopard in the Snow*. While that was in post I was trying to develop other properties for film and possibly television. They never did make another project, but that kept us busy for at least two years.

After that I went to CBC for 6 years as an in-house story editor on various dramatic series. That's really where I learned the craft of dramatic structure, simply by developing and watching a whole bunch of scripts being produced. There's nothing like that kind of experience. And you meet so many people at a place like the CBC. I'm so sorry they don't do in-house production anymore; there's nothing like that in Canada now. You can intern on a series, but that's one series, one type of production.

MD: What are the various functions of a story editor, whether it be a series, *MOW*, or feature?

AM: On long-form your job is to help the writer realise the best script that the producer can produce within his/her limitations; so you are the mediator between those two often conflicting goals. What that usually requires first is a detailed analysis so you understand the project, then you ask questions of the writer; you discover—and often help the writer discover—what it is they are writing about, using structural techniques you've learned along the way.

Series story editing is an entirely different kettle of fish. First and foremost you are a writer, starting as a staff writer then going up various levels of responsibility. On a TV series the story department writes the "novel" of the series for that season, then breaks it down into episodes, which in multi-character drama have to be satisfying dramatically in and of themselves, but also have to help build the characters' developmental arc over the series.

MD: In all of that are actors' schedules, contractual obligations....

AM: Absolutely. The stars always get the A plots; but who gets more A plots, or do you balance them all equally? There is a rhythm to the season just as much as to an episode. And you may have fifteen 7-day shoots, but have to build in seven 6-day shoots; you may have one actor guaranteed four days per episode, another only two days. You may be allowed no more than fifty extras per episode, or more than two extra locations outside the studio sets. All these have to be factored in, and one thing you learn as you go along is how to internalize those limitations so they feel less like limitations and more as the ground you must be creative upon.

MD: With all this groundwork laid, how is it that a series often ends up in a crisis where they're several scripts behind schedule or even without the next episode?

AM: People generally miscalculate how long it takes to write the first set of scripts, then the turnaround between the first and second set. And production realities set in; something that

looked perfect will develop a last minute snag like the actor is unavailable or doesn't like his lines, a pivotal location fell through, an executive changes his mind—all these demand turn-on-a-dime rewriting that tie up members of the story department trying to develop the next bunch of stuff. There can be death mines anywhere.

MD: Including nepotism. How do you deal with that, both creatively and politically?

AM: I try to see it as a creative challenge. If subjected to it, you might as well accept it as a given as there's very little you can do about it. The thing you do is try to minimize the damage. If it's a writer you try to forestall problems by helping them work out the story so it works well enough for you to rewrite it. With actors you figure out what it is they can do, then put them in scenes where they can perform that function or, if need be, which can be cut.

MD: What about using outside writers?

AM: Multi-character, highly-arc'd serial dramas are next to impossible to bring writers into without a great deal of time being spent bringing the writer

up to speed with the characters and what beats have to be hit to build the rest of the season. If you have to bring in writers, you try to select episodes that don't have many series arcs in them, or you simply ask for well-crafted stories set in the series arena and add the arcs yourself.

Other series, like *Wind at My Back*, where the stories are more stand-alone—a set of characters are defined but it's not about their progress through the season, and the world is distinctive but not inaccessible—are much more easy to plug into for an outside writer. Half-hours are another thing, and children's shows.

MD: How do you choose an outside writer?

AM: It might be someone the head writer knows, or the network wants you to try out, or it's someone whose work you admire, or you've read a good sample script. You then usually give them the particulars of the story and what you need out of it, because you've planned it into the series mix already.

MD: What would be your advice to someone wanting to break into a story department?

AM: Try to have your work read by someone there. Also, be aware of any internship programs, then convince the person who has the power to make you the intern, usually the creative producer. That's by far the easiest way. But you need to have written something that shows you can write, a spec script of a series and something else that demonstrates what kind of writing you would do on your own.

MD: Film is a collaborative process. Have you ever had anything so destroyed you didn't want your name attached?

AM: Yes. But you can't always assume it's anyone else's fault. Things that read really well sometimes just don't play. Watching what you've written produced is very instructive and humbling. You

always see things that you could have done better, things you could have done without saying, where you've been too obvious or where you were unclear. It's constant feedback and it's done.

MD: Have you ever worked on a show at the expense of your artistic integrity?

AM: Yes. I've worked on shows solely to gain experience, and the thing I learned was that you can only work like that for so long without it affecting your creativity. I left a show once because I was having nightmares about the content I was writing.

On the other hand, I have found that no matter what the show, you can do very good writing. That's the subversive challenge of it: to write whatever show you're writing extremely well. And that's gratifying. You can find a creative satisfaction in writing almost anything.



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- Ann MacNaughton