

Route 7 Review

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REVIEWS

Three by McBride

Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless
Vintage Original, 2012
\$15.00

Hawks on Hawks
University Press of Kentucky, 2013
\$19.95

Into the Nightmare
Hightower Press, 2013
\$38.50

Over a career spanning six decades, Joseph McBride has published an impressive collection of nonfiction books, covering topics as diverse as baseball, Frank Capra, *E.T.*, and the Ramones. A successful screenwriter, as well, he penned the original screenplays for the camp comedy *Rock 'n' Roll High School*, the slasher film *Prom Night*, and the professional wrestling drama *Blood & Guts*. He's also appeared on screen himself with roles in the low-budget satire *Hollywood Boulevard*, the auto-race adventure *Cannonball!* and Orson Welles's unreleased *The Other Side of the Wind*.

Now a faculty member in the Cinema Department at San Francisco State University, McBride draws liberally upon his experience as a writer, actor, and teacher for *Writing in Pictures: Screenwriting Made (Mostly) Painless*, a how-to book that presents readers with, in McBride's words, "a methodical, step-by-step process that walks you through the different stages of writing a screenplay." Rather than insisting upon the importance of developing new material for movie narratives—the route so frequently taken in popular screenwriting manuals—McBride encourages his readers to adapt works of literature for the screen, particularly short fiction. "I have found that plunging headlong into writing an original screenplay is

not the best way to learn the craft," he explains. "It's hard enough mastering the basics of screenwriting without facing the simultaneous challenge of coming up with a usable, well-structured, original story." To demonstrate his approach, he leads us through his reworked version of Jack London's tale of a man dying in the Yukon, "To Build a Fire," crafting a script in stages that eschews abstraction and expository prose and instead exploits crystalline imagery and compelling action sequences—the definitive traits of good cinematic storytelling.

What further separates *Writing in Pictures* from similarly-themed books is McBride's readiness to draw upon his own experience, chronicling his sometimes painful evolution from earnest neophyte to in-demand screenwriter. As a student at the University of Wisconsin in the mid-sixties, for example, he watched *Citizen Kane* more than sixty times and typed out a copy of the film's shooting script on his own typewriter, an exercise that significantly broadened his understanding of and appreciation for Orson Welles's masterpiece. "Internalizing...a script in this way, to make its style second nature as you learn from your master(s)," he advises, "is something I'd recommend to any young writer."

As a reporter for *Variety* in the seventies, McBride met, befriended, and interviewed several noted film directors, among them Europeans figures likes Jean Renoir and Fritz Lang and the American Howard Hawks, one of Hollywood's most versatile and talented moviemakers. Despite an oeuvre that included screwball comedies like *His Girl Friday* and *Bringing up Baby*, commercially successful westerns like *Red River* and *Rio Bravo*, and the remarkably poignant adventure movies *Only Angels Have Wings* and *Sergeant York*, Hawks was no longer getting offers from the studios when McBride made his acquaintance. Fortunately, the director was gracious in his retirement, and he enjoyed talking to journalists about his career. McBride explains in his introduction to *Hawks on Hawks*, a collection of interviews he conducted with the director from 1970 to 1977: "Hawks was both bemused and gratified at the surge of attention paid him...when the new generation of young film buffs and filmmakers, led by the influential

figures of the French New Wave, discovered him and championed his ability to bring personal expression to commercial filmmaking.”

An essential text for everyone interested in Hollywood history, *Hawks on Hawks* was first published by the University of California Press in 1982—five years after the director’s death—and now, thanks to the University Press of Kentucky’s Screen Classics series, the book is again available. Illustrated with photo stills that trace Hawks’s career from his breakthrough gangster picture, *Scarface*, up to his final production, the John Wayne western *Rio Lobo*, *Hawks on Hawks*, like so many of the director’s movies, is at once thoughtful, entertaining, and thick with hard-boiled quips. Hawks in these pages speaks from the position of someone who has nothing to fear professionally, and his observations about many of the people with whom he worked—William Faulkner, Howard Hughes, Marilyn Monroe, Humphrey Bogart, Rita Hayworth, Kirk Douglas, and Angie Dickinson—tend to be shrewd and candid, often cutting.

This tendency is apparent, for instance, in his recollections of Dean Martin. In the late-fifties, Martin was trying to free himself from his popular image as a lounge singer and light comedian in the hope of landing work on serious film projects with serious directors. This chance came to him in 1958 when he was cast by Hawks to play an alcoholic lawman in *Rio Bravo*. Hawks recalls: “You have to have good people to play a drunk. Because you could get some people to play a drunk and it nauseates you. Dean Martin was pretty good, but people didn’t give him enough help in doing it. He could do anything you wanted him to. I hired him because an agent wanted me to meet him. And I said, ‘Well, get him around here at nine o’clock tomorrow morning.’ The agent said, ‘He can’t be here at nine.’ So he came in about 10:30, and I said, ‘Why the hell couldn’t you be here at nine o’clock?’ He said, ‘I was working in Las Vegas, and I had to hire an airplane and fly down here [to Los Angeles].’ And that made me think, ‘Well, my Lord, this guy really wants to work.’ So I said, ‘You’d better go over and get some wardrobe.’ He said, ‘Am I hired?’ And I said,

‘Yeah. Anybody who’ll do that ought to get a chance to do it.’ He came back from wardrobe looking like a musical comedy cowboy.”

Despite his standing as one of the deans of film scholarship in the U.S., McBride considers writing about the movies, rather surprisingly, something of a sideline. His true calling, he states repeatedly in *Into the Nightmare*, is the assassination of JFK and what he thinks was the failure of the federal government to adequately investigate and punish the perpetrators of this monumental crime. McBride, in other words, is a conspiracy theorist, and he uses *Into the Nightmare*—an expansive, densely-researched reconstruction of the assassination and events immediately following it—to articulate his findings. “This book,” he tells us, “is the impassioned account and record of my fifty-year journey of discovery and understanding of what happened in Dallas... in November 1963 and what those events mean to our country. Rather than hiding behind the mask of the objective historian, a pose modern history has taught us is illusory at best, I will tell this story from my own quirky vantage point, that of a young Kennedy campaign volunteer whose refusal to accept the official lies about his candidate’s murder has led me to spend much of my life investigating the case.”

In particular, McBride explores and challenges the widely-shared assumption that a single gunman with leftist sympathies, Lee Harvey Oswald, shot the president from the Texas School Book Depository. Rather, Oswald was caught up in a vast intrigue, McBride argues, and he was deliberately fingered as the president’s killer, and was then killed himself to help a faction of schemers establish a less democratic form of government in America. To cast as much doubt on Oswald’s culpability as he can, McBride gives considerable space to a Dallas police officer named J. D. Tippit—who was killed in a gun battle just forty minutes after the president’s shooting, allegedly by Oswald. Frequently regarded as a blameless victim murdered in the line of duty, Tippit, McBride speculates, may have actually been a player in the conspiracy, and his murder—perpetrated by yet another in-

trigger—was arranged in order to solidify the public’s perception of Oswald’s guilt. Throughout the book, as well, McBride speculates on the possible reasons *why* Kennedy was killed. Did Lyndon Johnson perhaps see the death of the president as his best way to attain the White House? Or did government officials, unhappy about JFK’s plans to diminish American “neocolonialist war-mongering” in Southeast Asia, elect to have him eliminated? These possibilities are so troubling—and the author writes about them with such conviction and anger—that we leave *Into the Nightmare* anxious and unsettled ourselves, alert again to the gravity and tragedy of a young president’s long ago death.

Much like the filmmakers he admires most—Orson Welles, Howard Hawks, Frank Capra, and John Ford—McBride invests his work with elements of himself: his convictions, his doubts, his obsessions. He’s the literary equivalent of a cinematic *auteur*, producing work that hangs in the liminal space between compelling entertainment and deeply personal art. This approach can be demanding on the reader—given the breadth and intensity of his ideas—but more often than not it makes for prose that is provocative and invigorating.

Which topic, we wonder, will he take on next?

—Stephen B. Armstrong

Beat Happenings

Jonah Raskin

American Scream: Allen Ginsberg’s Howl and the Making of the Beat Generation

University of California Press, 2004

\$42.00

Allen Ginsberg

Wichita Vortex Sutra (CD)

Ginsberg Records, 2013

\$8.99

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