



OPINION

# Opinion: How About a Little Respect for Hollywood Screenwriters?

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Pen Densham

The Oscars are coming! While the usual pundits are busy sharpening their predictions and betting on the biggies -- best actor, best director, best picture -- I would like to say a word for the oft-forgotten writing

nominations.

Scripts are the seeds of thought that movies grow from. Not many films get made without them (not ones you'd like to rest your eyeballs on, anyway).

Writers are like ancient monks, spending their lives hunkered down in lonely cells illuminating movies with their imaginations. They seldom get the attention they deserve, and yet they take enormous risks with their time and effort.

As few as one screenplay in a hundred gets made. Hollywood often undervalues writers, treating them more like handymen or plumbers, bringing them in to fix a loose end in a story, as if it were a leak. Studios like giving them explicit instructions and then fire the poor scribes when the story doesn't hold water.



Roadside Attractions

Lauren Sweetser plays Gail in "Winter's Bone," which is nominated for an Academy Award for best adapted screenplay.

Believe me, I am not complaining. I chose to be in this business with all its idiosyncrasies, both good and bad. Where else could a guy who left school at 15 write a script with his partner about Robin Hood and get paid a million dollars? But for every winner like our "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves," I have a shelf of unmade scripts that I've invested years into and equally believe in.

As a member of the academy, I am sworn to secrecy about my Oscar votes. Otherwise, men from PricewaterhouseCoopers will pursue me down alleys in Hollywood and beat me with their brief cases.

But what I can say about this year's writing nominees is that they point like a compass to the future of filmmaking. And that future -- for screenwriters and audiences -- promises to be amazing.

"Inception" by Chris Nolan breaks away from the repetitive comic-book brands that the studios have been clinging to. It's a daring experiment to make a megabudget adventure set inside dreams. The fact that it sold tickets like crazy at the box office means more

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creative ideas will follow. That's good for us.

"**True Grit**" resulted in an Oscar-winning role for John Wayne. This new adaptation by the Coen brothers is more faithful to Charles Portis' book, an entrancing Western about a 14-year-old girl hiring a grizzled, over-the-hill gunman to seek revenge on the man who killed her father. It has some of the best dialogue I have heard in years. And it signals that a long-abandoned genre still has some high-test oats in the old horse bag.

"**The Social Network**," written by Aaron Sorkin, crams more electrifying words in the mouths of its young actors than a fistful of '40s screwball comedies, while taking us into the mad, inventive, instant-tech world of Facebook. Who would have guessed that would be commercial? Another win for originality.

Not a gun fired, no chases, no sex! "**The King's Speech**" by David Seidler is just a wonderful old-time story. A commoner, from a land founded by convicts, is the only soul able to help the highest noble in England overcome disability and self-doubt at a time of great national crisis. A delight!

Another script equally outside the Hollywood box is "**127 Hours**" by Danny Boyle and Simon Beaufoy. Here, the writers trap us for that time period with the true-life experience of Aron Ralston, who had to cut off his arm off to escape from a rock fall that trapped him for more than five days. It sounds like it would be gruesome to watch, but really it's ennobling to see the courage that any one of us might have had to summon up to survive.

"**The Kids Are All Right**" by Lisa Cholodenko and Stuart Blumberg treats a committed, gay female couple as a normal family in this impressively warm story about their two children trying to discover the man who donated the sperm to create them. In a time when some groups still use gays as a political football, it is so cool to see the subject treated as just a normal part of the human love spectrum.

Among the other heartening, fresh storytellers is the nomination of "**Toy Story 3**," an animated movie lauded because it is just so darn enchanting.

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And my personal favorite script of the year is an underdog outsider movie, "**Winter's Bone**." This is a humanistic study of a courageous, rural teenager trying to hold her family together after her father's criminal behavior has brought them to the brink of disaster. It was made cheaply, outside the system, but has received note for its pure, deep dramatic power.

So, who is going to win?

I can say the expected Oscar winners are tipped to be "The Social Network" for adapted screenplay and "Inception" for best original script.

Who did I actually vote for? Well, I do love underdogs, outsiders and strong female characters.

Oops, there's a guy with a briefcase. ... Gotta go!

*Pen Densham is an active award-winning screenwriter, producer and director in Los Angeles. He and his [Trilogy Entertainment](#) partner John Watson are responsible for writing and producing some of Hollywood's biggest blockbusters, such as "Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves." Densham also revived both of his all-time favorite TV series, "The Outer Limits" and "The Twilight Zone." He is also an adjunct professor at the University of Southern California's prestigious [School of Cinematic Arts](#) where he handed out chapters of his book as he wrote it, claiming he is one of the*

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