SAMPLE LESSON FOUR

Authenticity

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WRITING DRAMA FOR TELEVISION

BBC MAESTRO

Contents of the full course

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I veer towards authenticity because I think it can be quite inspiring to find the way things happen in the real world.

5. The Setting

LOOK AT THE REAL WORLD

You choose whether you set your character in a recognised real world or an escapist fantasy. Before I worked on police dramas, I met police officers in real life and learned the realities of investigating a crime from them.

TV is full of amateur sleuths, yet I've never met one in real life. But if you decide your protagonist is an amateur sleuth, there will be times when they will have to interact with the real world. They can't arrest a criminal or take them to court. The amateur sleuth must operate within a recognisable form of the criminal justice system.

So, it's important to look at the real world when writing and to speak to advisers, people from those worlds.

What other unusual occupations can you think of? How can they be made better or more convincing by having them interact with the real world?

> # When you're writing a script, you're painting a picture of what's going on.

OTHER TELLY

If you don't look at the real world, or use your own personal experience, I can guarantee there's only one other place you'll look for inspiration: television.

The problem there is that you'll not only borrow the good, but also the bad. You'll take things that don't exist in the real world, and transplant them into your show, not knowing if they're real or not. And, eventually, your idea will collapse under the weight of its own cliché.

When blending the novel and the familiar, you have to know if something is real or escapist, if it exists in the real world or is borrowed from another TV show.

You can then look at creative ways in which you can combine the real world with ideas borrowed from other TV shows. Show the audience something they're familiar with, create reassurance, before hitting them with something unfamiliar. But you must understand what elements of your story are derived from the real world and what comes from TV drama.

You could use the power of aesthetics to overcome TV tropes. A unique visual or storytelling style could elevate it, but if you want to create an original drama, to pitch it, and get people to understand how distinctive it is, aesthetics is the hardest thing to communicate.

Also, in the age of social media, if you make a TV show that contains errors, they will be exposed, and people will quickly form an opinion about the world you have created.

WHERE'S THE DRAMA?

How do you find the setting that is perfect for your characters and your story, that has high stakes and that finds that blend between the familiar and the novel?

There's a reason why there are so many police or medical shows. Look at some of those, find a niche, an area that hasn't been explored.

RESEARCH YOUR SETTING

You don't need to know everything about a setting to start. You can research online and gather facts and ideas. And if it feels right, make contacts with people who work in that world, and go and see for yourself. Ask them questions that can better inform your script.

Looking more closely at the real world will help shape the tone, style and aesthetics. And help you decide whether your show is set in the real world and it is authentic, whether it is a form of escapism or a combination of both.

So, what settings might work for you? Are they visual? Are they compelling? Will they provide you with endless story material?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Choose whether your setting is real or fantasy
- Either way look to the real world for guidance
- Your setting needs to be familiar and yet novel
- Try exploring a niche in an established setting
- Meet people who work in that setting
- Decide whether your tone and style is authentic or escapist
- Be aware if you're using TV tropes or real-world experience
- People will pick up on errors, and form an opinion about your world. Are you OK with the criticism you are likely to get? If not, change it

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