

## **7. The Curious Case of the Missing Stories**

The idea that we don't have enough good stories for the big screen, or at least can't develop them, is one that will face stern objections. The notion that we are unique and that our "Great Kiwi Stories" are unique goes to the very heart of our identity. The uniqueness of our stories has become an oft repeated mantra – a validation of our own culture, an argument that justifies the tax payer's support of our industry, and a marketing tool internationally.

So here's a question designed to provoke:

***What New Zealand film of the last 10 years has simply astonished you for its sheer virtuosity of story-telling?***

I'd say the lead contender is "In My Father's Den". For sheer power I'd say "Whale Rider".

The vast majority of great New Zealand stories told on film have not of course been generated by film makers. The role of story originator in the vast majority of good kiwi films has rested with the novelists from whose books the film scripts have been adapted. The simplest and most obvious reason why we are running short of good film scripts now may be that we have to a large extent already fully mined the New Zealand literary canon of the works that were suitable for adaptation. The situation we are facing now is therefore one where we need to generate the stories we need to make films from within our own field of endeavor, and that faced with that challenge we're not doing all that well. However I'm not sure that in the current times our novelists aren't in a similar situation to our film makers.

So here's another question designed to unsettle:

***What are the New Zealand novels of the last 10 years have simply astonished you for their sheer virtuosity of story-telling?***

For my money I'd say Elizabeth Knox's "The Vintner's Luck" is the one novel to have come out of NZ in the past 10 years that has demonstrated an undeniable, and internationally recognized, virtuosity of story-telling. Unfortunately the film of the book has not been a success. There have of course been some other very good novels to have come out of NZ in the past ten years. Patricia Grace's "Tu" must count amongst them and Lloyd Jones's "Mister Pip" (which I have not read but which I understand is in development for filmic adaptation).

However it might be a good exercise at this point to meditate upon the recent New Zealand novels that have changed your life... that have blown your mind... that have matched the achievements of writers from previous generations that defined our culture...

***Our novelists, I believe, are in a similar predicament to our film makers, and there is another parallel between our film and our literary scenes worth noting.***

Over the past decade or so the world of New Zealand literature has received more financial support – from government and from private benefactors – than ever before. We now have prestigious courses that take the most talented aspiring writers in this country each year and place them in a supportive environment where they are taught by some of our most distinguished writers to develop their work. There are now, literally, hundreds of writers who have been through these courses. They are every year

writing with the benefit of residencies, grants, scholarships and prizes, more generous than were ever available in previous times. And if we were to apply similar questions of cultural relevance that I posed of our films in the section “New Zealand Film Now” to our novels from the past decade, we might get some similarly unnerving results.

***It is a hard fact to consider is it not, that there are works from times past, when our country was not nearly as “sophisticated” or as “cultured” as it is now, whose achievements tower over the one’s of our current era?***

***Right now our stories aren’t our biggest strength. They are our biggest weakness.***

We have world class directors, cast and crew, equipment, post production facilities and locations and we work in a time when our industry is being more generously financially supported than ever before. We live in a time when the techniques of script writing are being taught more widely than ever before, and the support for the general development of our screen writing culture through organizations such as Script2Screen is more generous than ever before. And we also live in a time when the importance of stories is recognized like never before. In fact the only thing we don’t have right now is the stories.

In the absence of great cinematic stories demanding to be realized, our film industry sometimes seems like a mighty orchestra with talented singers and musicians, fine instruments of every description and a series of talented conductors who stand poised to call forth great blasts of mighty theme, except that... we forgot quite what the music is for, and the composers have again delivered sheets of poorly composed gibberish. So in frustration the conductors strut about shouting meaningless instructions, and the musicians obsessively polish their instruments, and play scales. The relevant authorities conduct policy reviews and international gurus are called in to dissect the work of the poor composers whilst the conductors worry publicly about the state of the industry and privately about their own careers.

Who could blame the audience in this situation, so painstakingly lured over so many years, if they became increasingly restless, and slowly started to fade away?

It’s tempting to blame the writers. But there’s no reason to think our writers aren’t as talented as anyone else in the industry, or in the world for that matter. I think the problem’s one that’s a bit bigger than can be laid at the door of any one particular specialty. Besides, don’t we all - regardless of our specialty – carry a responsibility for our own stories?