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ALSO IN THIS ISSUE: STAY, PROOF, BEE SEASON, WAITING..., THE GREATEST GAME EVER PLAYED

Seeing Things from the Other Side of the Fence

"I LIKED IT, DIDN'T LOVE IT"
by Rona Edwards & Monika Skerbelis
Lone Eagle, \$18.95

If any phrase in Hollywood has the unique property of being both a relief and a source of panic, that phrase would be "in development." This is a vague, hazy place, sometimes beautifully close to "in production," other times veering rapidly downward towards "development hell." In their new book, *I Liked It, Didn't Love It* Rona Edwards and Monika Skerbelis are your guides through that Dantean locale. Both women have a long history in Hollywood—Edwards ran John Larroquette's production company and produced movies for ABC, VH-1, and the SciFi Channel; Skerbelis spent over a decade as an executive story editor for Universal Pictures. Their combined development experience and knowledge are offered up in an often humorous format to help make sense of the madness that is above-the-line filmmaking.

Know that this is not a book about screenwriting, or even aimed at screenwriters. This is a book for aspiring development directors, a beginner's guide for those who want to climb the ladder that ends somewhere near the word "executive." That being said, *I Liked It, Didn't Love It* is a phenomenal tool for any writer seeking some insight into what goes on in development departments, and how they can be better prepared for their forays into it. Knowing what your work will be subjected to once it leaves your hands can only better prepare you and your script to withstand the trials and tribulations you both will face.

The book begins with some wonderful and interesting background on Hollywood, film technology, on how the majority of the movie industry ended up in Los Angeles, and how the idea of a "screenwriter" came to exist. This alone is almost worth the cover price. There are also anecdotes and excerpts from the '10s, '20s, and '30s about "picture plays and how to write them." It's almost

funny how many of these "period" hints are going to sound painfully familiar to anyone who's attended a workshop or seminar in the past five years.

Several chapters of terms, definitions, and charts familiarize the reader with the often confusing and haphazard chain of command that most screenplays have to pass through and, eventually (if all goes well), work within. The book slows here, and forewarned readers with no lofty ideas of producer-hood may want to skip ahead. Those brave of heart may forge through and find a small tidbit or three, but it's debatable if they're worth the challenge of the hunt. On the other hand, writers should be taking notes and highlighting chapters 6, 8, 10, and 11. These chapters, more than any others, offer a rare view of the screenwriting process from another perspective.

Chapter 6, "Agents & Managers and the Deal," is full of tips and information intended for producers, but much of the information Edwards and Skerbelis give out is more than useful for screenwriters. There are clear definitions of agents, managers, and lawyers, how they'll work for you as a writer, and the unique role they each play in the development process. One very noteworthy section is "A Week in the Life of a Spec Script," which gives a behind-the-scenes look at the wheeling and dealing your work goes through during a bidding war, and all the plates a good representative manages to keep spinning during this time.

Chapter 8 is called, simply, "The Writer," and begins with these simple words that every suffering scribe wants to hear: "The screenwriter is the backbone of the industry. Sometimes they are cast aside too soon, replaced by others, used and abused...but without them, there would be no movies. Writers are the ones who start out with a blank piece of paper and fill that page with story. From that one blank piece of paper is born a screenplay." While many of the hints herein are aimed at producers dealing with writers, it's useful to see things from the other side of the fence. Suggestions are offered for dealing with defen-

sive writers, and it can only strengthen your work and your reputation to be prepared for dealing with these suggestions ahead of time. The authors also offer points on how writers can respond to (and even refuse) development notes, dealing with rewrites, and learning to pick your fights with a film studio: "Writers tend to forget that the studio or indie finance company is ultimately footing the bill and if the buyers can't get what they want, why should they pay for it?"

The question that kicks off chapter 10 is "If there are only seven plotlines, how come I have so many stories?" This chapter focuses on helping aspiring producer-types to track down new ideas and stories to be developed by screenwriters, with suggestions including brainstorming, the Internet, fiction and non-fiction books, historical events, comics, and...obituaries. No, really. While some ideas are common sense, a few are quite clever.

Chapter 11's "The Art of Pitching" is, again, aimed at development and producer types, but most writers need to learn these skills, too. "You have to know how to whet people's appetite with a well-told tale. You have to know how to sell an idea." The three-page sidebar "Ten Things to Think About Before Pitching" is solid information that can make this book a worthwhile purchase on its own. After all, how many writers would consider ending their pitch to be a vital part of their presentation? Yet Edwards and Skerbelis show that the end can be just as important as the hook.

I Liked It, Didn't Love It is an easy few hours' read, with much of the important information conveniently highlighted and sidebarred for reference. Each chapter uses familiar films to illustrate points, gives a nice conclusion, and even one or two exercises for honing the skills and suggestions it puts forward. But several passages will be dry and painful for those with no aspirations beyond screenwriting (and perhaps even for those who so aspire).

However, if your script is ready to be shown, consider making this the next book you pick up. It may very well be the thing that gives you that keen inside edge over the other writers who just pitched before you. ☐

