

# The Screenwriters Bible

## Save the Cat premise 1: Monster in the House

In his highly acclaimed book about writing screenplays, *Save the Cat*, Blake Snyder lists ten different premises, claiming that all movie plot lines fit into this. We asked writer and film enthusiast **Dave Hopwood** to take us through the ten premises with an eye for the parallel story in scripture.

The first premise is *Monster in the House*: The frightening intruder who invades a confined area and must be beaten for good to prevail. *Jaws* would fit into the category, as would *Jurassic Park*, in fact most monster movies. Also films like *The Day After Tomorrow*, where the monster is the environment. But a movie like *Fatal Attraction* would fit too. Glen Close invades Michael Douglas's life as a result of a disastrous one-night fling and begins to dismantle his family. The intruder does not need to be a supernatural one, just a powerful, destructive force.

This made me think immediately of David and Goliath.

If we take the Biblical account from 1 Samuel, chapter 17 and approach it through the door of the *Monster in the House*, where might it take us? Well, Goliath could be a vindictive intruder who invades a family home in order to rob or destroy. The very thing that happens in *Firewall* when Paul Bettany invades Harrison Ford's house and holds the family hostage in order to force the father figure Harrison to offload millions of dollars into Bettany's account.

So, who will stop the predator? The story of David and Goliath is known precisely because it is the young David steps in when all the other older Israelites refuse to step up. So perhaps, in our intruder scenario, it's not the father or older members of the family who defeat the monster, but the youngest member. Boy or girl. Approach the story of Goliath through this door and it might take you in unexpected directions.

## Save the Cat premise 2: Golden Fleece

This is the quest, the search, the mission, the plan to pull off that perfect robbery. The journey to sort out that major problem. Think movies like *The Italian Job*, *Argo*, *Star Wars*, *Fellowship of the Ring*, *Reservoir Dogs*. And lots of road trip movies too. It's important about these kind of movies feature growth points along the way. Our hero must face problems on his or her journey. How will these affect them?

Come at the story of Nehemiah through that door and where does that take you? The man we learn of in the book of Nehemiah is sent on a one way road trip to rebuild his ruined hometown. Or take a look at the story of Ruth and Naomi, the refugee couple returning home to rebuild their lives and find a husband for Ruth, told in the book of Ruth. Or what about the account of the general Naaman, going to see Elisha for a miracle cure? What

matters here is not merely getting the golden fleece, but what happens to the hero on the way. Who do they meet, what problems do they encounter, and how does it change them?

Naaman goes to meet miracle man Elisha but instead finds himself having to deal with his servant. What does that do to him? And instead of a miracle cure it's a dip in the local polluted river. What quest might Naaman go on today to find healing? And who might he have to deal with on the way? And what might he have to do to really be healed?

Nehemiah returns to his home to rebuild his life and along the way the lives of others, but he encounters all kinds of resistance in the process: check out 2 Kings, chapter 5.

People are opposed to change. They are suspicious. How do they deal with this? What will it do to them?

### **Save the Cat premise 3: Out of the Bottle**

This is the 'wish fulfilment premise'. An example of this is Jim Carrey as Bruce in *Bruce Almighty*. He loses his job, his dignity, his faith, his purpose. If only life could be easier and he could have everything he wants. If only God would answer his prayer. So God does, and the answer is completely out of the bottle and out of the world. Jim Carrey also stars in another 'out of the bottle' story as small-time loser Stanley Ibkiss, in *The Mask*. If only he had more confidence, more attitude, more ability... which he finds by the ton when he puts on an old green mask that he found in the river.

What wish fulfilment scenarios might you find in the Bible? There are many mother's longing for children. Hannah longs for a child, and promises to dedicate him to a life of service to God (1 Samuel chapter 1). Abraham and Sarah long for a baby, but that requires stepping out into the unknown. And having received their wish what responsibilities come with it? And who is ultimately responsible for their child? (Genesis, chapters 15-21) Samson's parents long for a child too. But their boy turns out to be wild and angry and promiscuous. (Judges, chapter 13). Wish fulfilment always reframes the original challenge for the protagonist, for the family.

There are lots of examples of the wish fulfilment story in accounts of the life of Jesus; blind men receive their sight, widows and sisters see their men resurrected. We do not always learn what happens next, giving lots of room for creative retelling. Sometimes we are given the outline of the story that unfolds next. In John, chapter 5 a man sits by the pool of Bethesda for thirty eight years, hoping to get to the water. How hard has he tried to find a cure? What's happened to him while he has waited year on year? When he meets a miracle-working rabbi he is instantly cured. What now? How much does he change? Will he leave his friends at the pool?

Peter is the disciple most prone to the wish fulfilment premise – he constantly wants to go that bit further – but it can land him in deep water, literally (Matthew chapter 14)

### **Save the Cat premise 4: Dude with a Problem**

Snyder describes this as ‘An ordinary man or woman finds themselves in extraordinary circumstances. And the normal day, week, month turns unexpectedly astonishing and possibly terrifying. *Schindler’s List*, *Die Hard*, *Frantic* and *Titanic* all fit this premise. How will Oscar Schindler respond when the evil Amon Goet starts killing his Jewish friends? What will cop John McClane do when he discovers his wife’s workplace has been overtaken by terrorists?’

Daniel is a high ranking politician / civil servant and so is most certainly ‘a dude with a problem’ when he is shoved into a den filled with hungry lions (Daniel chapter 6). Peter is told by Jesus to feed a few thousand people when he has no proper catering facilities (Luke chapter 9). Gideon, a complete weakling, finds himself taking on the mighty army of the Mideonites (Judges chapters 6 - 7). Esther must infiltrate King Xerxes’ harem and foil the plot to destroy the Jews (Esther). The Bible is full of these situations.

How might we retell Esther’s story today? What might be her terrifying problem, and why is she the one to solve it? What risks will she take and what will she become as she tackles the myriad of problems along the way?

We can also reset the story of Daniel. As a dude with a problem how is he shoved into a hostile environment as a result of his lifestyle - A tough job situation? Is he in a hard neighbourhood or perhaps a kidnap situation? How will he survive, and more than that, can he rise above the difficulties?

### **Save the Cat premise 5: Rites of Passage**

Life transition stories. Think *Stand by Me*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*. Those times when we grow up a little more as a result of events and circumstances. The sensitive times, often painful too. The coming of age times, the mid-life crises, the onset of age.

Thinking Biblically, you have Mary, the young girl suddenly finding herself pregnant by divine appointment. Needs to do some growing up fast. Has to face her family and the gossip going around. And in Judges chapter 6-7 Gideon is the youngest guy in town. Is he up to the job of becoming the man and facing up to the threat of the Midianites? And Samson. After a life of playing the spoilt brat, how will he adapt now he’s facing captivity and death?

And Joseph, sold into slavery and offered sex by his employer's wife. Two certain *grow-up quick* experience.

To return to David and Goliath (1 Samuel, Chapter 17), let's turn the camera on the young hero. David feels he's bulletproof, defeats the giant and everyone loves him. He doesn't yet realise it but this is the best day of his life. The king's daughter falls for him. The king's son becomes his best mate. Everything is just dandy. But he's no longer the anonymous shepherd boy. Everyone knows his name, they sing about him. How does he cope? Can he grow up quickly enough? The king becomes jealous. Steps between him and the girl he loves. Things turn violent. Suddenly he's a rebel on the run. Other rebels want to join him. How will he come out of all this?

Suppose David is a junior lawyer in a successful firm. Suppose he unexpectedly wins a big case. The boss loves him and he starts dating the big guy's beautiful daughter. The case he won makes headline news. But it's too much too young. The boss wants to manipulate his new star for his own ends. What will it do to him, the boss and the girl he loves?

## **Save the Cat premise 6: Buddy Love**

It's a two guys, two girls, or a girl/guy thing. *Thelma and Louise, Bonnie and Clyde, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. Fairly obvious really. Two people thrust together in a story. Could be friends, husband and wife, lovers, even enemies. Often the buddies hate each other at the beginning and the adventure brings them round to needing, liking, appreciating and/or loving the other.

The Bible has plenty of double acts – think Paul and Ananias, the guy who was the first to trust Paul after his conversion on the road to Damascus. Or Paul and Barnabas. Or Paul and Silus. All of those are in the book of Acts, or going right back to Genesis you have Adam and Eve, and Abraham and Sarah.

Matthew and Peter, followers of Jesus, are from opposite sides of the fence. Matt is a collaborating, pencil pushing, taxman, Peter's a tough talking, loyal, fisherman. What will happen when they are thrown together as mates of Jesus. What will happen when they are paired up and sent out to on a mission together? Naomi's is Ruth's grizzled, bitter mother-in-law, Ruth her long-suffering daughter-in-law. Both are broke having lost everything. What will become of their precarious relationship when they take a journey back to Naomi's home? Will Naomi stop her bellyaching? Will Ruth's patience last the trip? (the book of Ruth)

## **Save the Cat premise 7: Whydunnit**

These stories all about discovering just how bad or good someone can really be. It's quite obviously not so much about the mystery of 'who' but 'why?' has someone done that. Think of political thrillers like *JFK* or *Nixon*. Or dark thrillers like *Mystic River* or *Gone Baby Gone*. Could we be this good or this bad? It throws the question over to the audience. What would we have done?

Biblically you could consider dreamy Joseph's brothers. Genesis chapter 37 tells how, tired of Joseph's pronouncements and his relentless cocky attitude they see a chance to get rid of him. Begin the story at the end, with Joe forgiving them and then flashback to their crimes. Would we have sold him into slavery? Could we forgive them for doing it?

Abraham banishes Hagar to a life in the wilderness in Exodus 21. Why would he do that, especially after she gave birth to his son?

David sends Uriah, one of his best generals, to war, hoping he'll get killed. Why on earth would you do that? (1 Samuel, chapter 11) What leads us to make these kind of decisions?

## **Save the Cat premise 8: The Fool Triumphant**

Think Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Buster Keaton. The great heroes of silent comedy. And more recently *Forrest Gump*, or *Happy Go Lucky*. The idiot that disarms us. At first they are put down and rejected and laughed at, but then they prove to be the hero. The true human being calling us into a better version of humanity. Sometimes the fool has an accomplice, someone who understands what's going on and sees it from the inside. And always the fool is attacking an institution in some way.

This is the big one Biblically. As Paul himself wrote – God has chosen the foolish things, the foolish people, to confound the wise. The disciples on the day of Pentecost appear to be drunk, but these backstreet boys suddenly speak with authority and wisdom like Ghandi or Nelson Mandella (Acts, chapter 2) Think of Tamar the 'prostitute' in Genesis, chapter 38: she poses as a prostitute to unmask her father-in-law. Think Nathan the prophet, (2 Samuel, chapter 12): telling silly stories about sheep, in order to hold up a mirror to his king.

And ultimately – think Jesus. Though he often impressed people with his wisdom, he regularly went out of his way to look the fool, so he could sit down in the dirt with other fools and help them up. And in dying, looked to all the world like, in the words of the Beatles, *The fool on the hill*.

## **Save the Cat premise 9: Institutionalised**

A complex mixture. Movies that celebrate being a part of something. But also expose the weaknesses of a particular organisation, and show us what we lose by totally abandoning ourselves to it. *MASH, The Godfather Trilogy, The Commitments*. These are films about 'the group' or 'the family' or 'the band' and what it means to be a part of them.

These movies ask tough and penetrating questions and there are plenty of places to consider starting material for an 'Institutionalised' story. What does it mean for the disciples to enter Jesus's group of close friends? What does it mean for various characters Jesus encountered, Mary, Martha, Tax collectors, prostitutes, generals, leaders, traders and fishermen.

In the book of 1 Samuel 21 the future King David gathers a group of disaffected men around him whilst on the run in the wilderness. He's learning about leadership as he does it. What does it mean for his men? In the story of the Lost son (Luke 15) a lad runs away from the family home but then hits trouble. His older brother stays at home yet also has his troubles – arguably even greater ones.

St Paul spends most of his letters attempting to address these issues of being part of something. The churches he helped establish were forever going off the rails, coming unstuck.

In the book of Acts Peter has the job of inviting outsiders into the 'the group' after seeing a vision. That's disruptive. What will the group look like then? (Acts , chapter 10)

## **Save the Cat premise 10: Superhero**

There are more and more of these movies out there. Marvel and DC comics are turning the comic book into big screen fare all the time. *Superman, Spiderman* and *Batman* are all perennial favourites. But there are other hero movies too. *Gladiator* or *Indiana Jones*. These are stories about 'extraordinary people finding themselves in an ordinary world'.

Again we can look at the life of Jesus through this lens. How does he cope with being different? With the powers he has? His forty days in the wilderness are a testing of the kind of superhero he might be.

In the Old Testament we have Samson and his strength (Judges, chapter 13) , Solomon and his wisdom (check out 1 Kings , chapter 3 and following), Esther and her beauty (Esther). We encounter Elijah and Elisha with their miracles (1&2 Kings). Noah with his boat. and Moses, the friend of God (Genesis). What happens to these people and the world around them?

We have Mary too, with her unusual 'superpowers' - extraordinary humility and trust. (see either the accounts of Matthew or Luke) How does she get on? And when her miracle boy grows up and goes through changes, what becomes of her?