

## Stay with me: choosing your protagonist

This session was written by Justine for The Script Factory's *I ♥ screenwriting course* presented at BFI Southbank, June 2013. The teaching points in this lecture are mostly illustrated with reference to the following four films:

*Argo* (dir. Ben Affleck, scr. Chris Terrio, 2012)

*Sightseers* (dir. Ben Wheatley, scr. Alice Lowe & Steve Oram, 2012)

*Up in the Air* (dir. Jason Reitman, scr. Jason Reitman & Sheldon Turner, 2009)

*Animal Kingdom* (dir./scr. David Michod, 2010)

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*Most films privilege one main protagonist through whose eyes we are asked to experience the story events. For a hundred minutes we get to see the world from a different perspective: sometimes one that chimes with our own experience but also often one that takes us far away from ourselves and offers a new, challenging or even disturbing point of view. In this session we consider how you chose and shape your protagonist to navigate through the story, how you convince the audience to see the world as they do and stay on their side even when their flaws and failings are exposed.*

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This session is about choosing the right protagonist for your story and helping to ensure that we engage with them and respond to them the way you intend us to. It's the first of two sessions that we are going to do today focusing on your main character. Lucy will pick up the theme this afternoon and talk about the way your main character changes over the course of the film.

Many of you won't have any doubts at all about who your main character should be and why the story is about them. That's great and don't worry, this session will still be relevant as there is plenty to say to you. However, there are lots of stories and even films in which it isn't actually blatantly obvious who the main character is or should be. In other training courses we have used the films *Little Miss Sunshine*,

*Notes on a Scandal* and *The Kids are All right* as teaching examples and when we ask the group who the protagonist is in those movies I promise you that at least half the class get it wrong. Why? Well, mainly because these films are dramas which invite us to engage with a range of characters; it is only natural that individually we latch on to the characters that we identify with the most and see the story through their eyes. It is also a sign of really good writing that we can watch the film and not immediately see the construction underneath. But interrogate more closely and you will see that these stories are highly constructed. Each does have a protagonist whose journey gives the story its shape and meaning. One key character who has a lesson to learn or a character trait to be tested. One who is given the most at stake.

Whilst there may be a number of characters in a film who go through the experiences together and are all affected, there always needs to be one character whose journey is prioritized, even just marginally, in order to allow your story to generate a meaning.

If you read about the facts of a murder in the newspaper you are nearly always left hungry for more information. Normally what we want to know is why did that happen and how could that happen? Our natural instinct is for human behavior to be explained, for some kind of meaning to be extrapolated from the bare facts. Quite obviously, the story of a murder will be entirely different if told from the point of view of the victim's family, the wrongly accused, the perpetrator or the police detective. But the objective facts of the case in and of themselves will always be unsatisfying if we aren't allowed to get under the skin of one of the key players and understand the sequence of events, choices, pressures and opportunities that led to their decisions and actions, to see how the world can make sense from their point of view.

In less high stake dramas the danger is that if you spread our interest too thinly and don't let us latch on to any one particular character then we become ambivalent about the outcome. This is where TV has an opportunity that film doesn't. It is now routine in TV drama to deliberately manipulate our sympathies and interest from one character to another over the course of a season or series – in *Homeland*, for example, Claire Danes is the protagonist, the title sequence clearly tells us that it is her programme, but for a long time in Season 1 we were all way more interested in

the Damien Lewis character and for a while in Season 2 we were probably most invested in the daughter.

But the structure of film, which is designed to tell a complete story in 90 or 100 minutes, means that we have to pick a side. Not necessarily the character's side we agree with – because sometimes the character who is right is also quite often dull. But we do need to pick whose eyes we see the world through and whose feet we walk through the story events with.

And you know, it isn't necessarily that easy to choose. As I divulged yesterday, Lucy and I are writing a script and in the early stages of our planning we spent a lot of time going backwards and forwards about who the protagonist should be. Without going in to too much detail, our story is basically about a lost daughter who returns to her family. Initially, it was the daughter who interested us most. We were fascinated by what kind of person she is, why she disappeared from her family and the mechanics of all that, why she decided to return now and the impact of her return. All really crucial stuff to sort out to establish the premise of the film. Without understanding what makes her tick there is no basis for the story (it is actually a comedy, not bleak and serious which it's probably coming across as now). But every time we tried to plan the screenplay with the daughter as the protagonist, the drama kind of petered out after the first act. We rather reluctantly came to the conclusion that actually it needs to be her mother's story. I say reluctantly because at that stage we had been working so hard to flesh out the character of the daughter that we hadn't given much thought yet to her mother, so she seemed – way back then – to be a less interesting protagonist. But presenting it as the mother's story opens up the opportunity for much more drama in the present because it is her world that is disrupted by her daughter's return. Equally the protagonist could have been a sibling or the father. It sounds so obvious now, but I've worked on enough screenplays to know that we are not alone in needing to process this out. The character who first intrigues you in a situation does not necessarily have the best story for the screen.

Which takes me to my first key point, which is this:

*The most interesting protagonist is usually the one who reacts to a situation rather than the one who creates it.*

I was quite surprised that the blurb for *Sightseers* on itunes seems to pitch it very much as Chris's story. It reads...

Chris wants to show Tina his world and he wants to do it his way - on a journey through the British Isles in his beloved Abbey Oxford Caravan. Tina's led a sheltered life and there are things that Chris needs her to see - the Crich Tramway Museum, the Ribbleshead Viaduct, the Keswick Pencil Museum and the rolling countryside that separates these wonders in his life. But it doesn't take long for the dream to fade.....

I don't know about you, but for me it was Tina I was most hooked by. It is the way that Tina reacts to the accidental murder of the litterbug that is surprising and interesting and confirms that it's her journey we are really going to be watching. Rather than being distressed as we would reasonably expect she determines that his death is not going to ruin her holiday and she seduces Chris back into a good mood. "Mint me" she says and then they proceed to have very energetic sex in the caravan at the trucker stop. Free from her miserable mother Tina becomes determined that nothing is going to stop their plans. And so when Chris subsequently kills Ian, we are invited to anticipate what Tina's reaction will be when she finds out....

I am at risk slightly of undermining my own point here because I think that *Sightseers* tries very hard to give both characters equal footing – unconventionally it is Chris's dream life that we see. But the point here is, the way the story hooks us is to do with Tina's reactions to what Chris does. Chris going around the country on his own killing people off for minor infractions would not be a solid premise for a film. Why? Because nothing changes for him, that's apparently what he did anyway.

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At this point it would be useful, I think, to clarify what defines a character as the protagonist of a film.

The most common understanding of the protagonist is that it's the one who drives the action. You only have to stop and apply that definition to a handful of films to realise that it's actually quite a limiting definition. Yes, we do generally want the protagonist to actually be actively engaged in something as we need events and actions to watch. There are, of course, many stories in which the protagonist is actively pursuing a goal, a personal dream or desire or a mission given by someone else. But there are equally many films in which the protagonist isn't powerful or free enough or confident enough to be the one who makes stuff happen. (I will speak a bit later about passive protagonists as they do exist and we put *Animal Kingdom* on our viewing list so we can't ignore them.) Most protagonists act as a **reaction** to events others have created. This is most obvious when you think about any high concept movie: James Bond can't save the world without an antagonist first threatening it. A situation is established that creates conflict for the characters to respond to. So rather than thinking about the protagonist as being the character who drives the action, it's much more helpful and accurate to think about the protagonist as the one who is required to, or chooses to, react to the situation they are in.

**To achieve meaning you have to choose which character's reactions the story will pivot around.** It is the cumulative effect of that character's reactions to their situation and the development of the plot that will ultimately give the story its meaning.

Let's consider *Argo*. This is a film with a very active protagonist. Tony Mendez absolutely drives the action and it is his ingenuity that creates the fake movie plan that secures the safety of the 6. In terms of the film's meaning or message you can argue that the film celebrates his proactive intelligence, knowledge, resourcefulness and ability to make stuff happen. But the meaning of the film is not just that 'by being clever and creative you can outwit hostile enemies'. It's way more subtle and clever than that. At the heart of the film is the message that 'someone has to take responsibility however high the potential cost'. At every pivotal point in the film, Tony's REACTION is to take on that responsibility: from speaking out against the bikes at that first meeting and not keeping schtum like he was supposed to; to finally

deciding that he was going ahead with the mission even though the CIA had pulled the operation.

Other characters in your story might be responsible for the events which occur. Other characters may also have significant journeys and be equally affected by the story events - you only have to look at *Argo* to see a situation which could actually be told from the POV of many of the characters involved and still be entirely gripping. Choosing one protagonist doesn't mean that you can't have other characters with significant screen time and whose point of view we understand. But choosing one protagonist allows you to interpret the story events, to offer your audience a satisfying subjective experience.

And if we are going to be philosophical about it – however empathetic with other people we are, we are all the protagonists of our own lives and we experience life subjectively - film allows us the opportunity to stand in someone else's shoes for a while.

To give you an example of a story without a clear protagonist and the problems that causes, let me tell you the story of Goldilocks. Are you sitting comfortably, then I'll begin. This is the story as it's told in a picture book from Marks and Spencer.

In a house in a wood lived three bears; great big daddy bear, medium-sized mummy bear and little tiny baby bear.

One day, mummy bear made porridge but it was too hot to eat so they went for a walk in the wood while it cooled down.

Also in the woods that day was a girl called Goldilocks. Goldilocks came across the house and went in. she saw the porridge on the table and started to eat from the biggest bowl.

"Oh, this porridge is too salty!" she said.

So she tasted the porridge from the medium-sized bowl.

"Oh no, this porridge is too sweet!" she said.

So she tasted the porridge from the little bowl.

"Yum, yum, this porridge is just right," she said happily and she ate it all up.

After eating all this porridge, Goldilocks saw the chairs in the sitting room.

She sat in the first chair

"Oh no, this chair is too high!" she said.

So she sat in the second chair.

"Oh, that's one is too low!" she said.

So she sat in the small chair.

"Oh, this one is just right!" she said.

But just as she settled down into the chair to rest, it broke into pieces!

Goldilocks went upstairs to the bedroom.

She got into the first bed.

"Oh no, this bed is too hard!" she said.

She got in the medium-sized bed, "Oh no, that one is too soft!" she said

Then she tried the last bed.

"Oh this one feels just right!" Goldilocks said and then she fell asleep.

While Goldilocks was sleeping the Three Bears came home.

"Someone's been eating my porridge!" said Daddy Bear.

"Someone's been eating my porridge!" said Mummy Bear.

"Someone's been eating my porridge!" cried Baby Bear. 'And eaten it all up!'

"Someone's been sitting in my chair!" growled Daddy Bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair!" said Mummy Bear.

"Someone's been sitting in my chair!" cried Baby Bear. "And now it's all broken!"

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed!" said Daddy Bear

"Someone's been sleeping in my bed!" said Mummy Bear

"Someone IS sleeping in my bed!" said Baby Bear.

The Three Bears went to look in the bedroom.

Goldilocks woke up and saw the Three Bears.

She was so scared that she jumped out of the bed and run down the stairs. She rushed out of the house and ran away into the forest.

The End.

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What does that story mean?

In the way I read you that story, it starts off as Goldilocks story, then switches to the bears' point of view.

If we wanted it to be Goldilocks story and make her the protagonist – what would her story mean? A CAUTIONARY TALE perhaps?

To make that a more satisfying or compelling story - what maybe would we need to know about her at the beginning? That it's a habit of behaviour. That she takes risks or doesn't respect boundaries – i.e. that she has a dangerous trait that needs to be corrected.

So if we were developing the story as a cautionary tale it might go something like this:

Once upon a time there was a spoiled little girl called Goldilocks. She had rooms stuffed full of toys, her parents threw parties for her every weekend and sought to respond to her every whim. Bored of their enormous high-tech mansion with its swimming pool, tennis courts, stables, home cinema and fairground, Goldilocks decided that what she really wanted was a cute little cottage in the woods. For the first time ever her father said no. Outraged and defiant, Goldilocks ran away determined to find a cute little cottage for herself....

The point is that if we want this to be a cautionary tale then the way we are introduced to the protagonist should CREATE ANTICIPATION THAT HER WAY OF LIVING CANNOT BE SUSTAINED OR IS GOING TO GET HER IN TROUBLE.

The story I read to you ends with the bears never seeing her again – but it would be good to end with Goldilocks to confirm that she has learnt her lesson – or not. Certainly, we would want to know what effect this encounter with three bears in a pretty thatched cottage has had on her.

Another option would be to develop this story as a tragedy.

Perhaps Goldilock's motivation for going in to the bear's house is that she is tired and hungry and has nowhere else to go?

You can probably think of other ways of spinning this story. Certainly, you can make one of the bears the protagonist. But the point is that to make the encounter between Goldilocks and the bears meaningful, we need to position the event in the CONTEXT of one key character's life – so we can chart what effect it has on them.

Forget Goldilocks – let's apply this to your scripts:

If you are trying to decide who the protagonist should be in your story then go back to what Lucy said about structure yesterday and think about the crisis point in your story, the confrontation at the end of the second act. Who does it belong to?

Who is perhaps facing the biggest challenge at this point in the story?

Who is going to have to change their way of thinking or their way of doing things?

Who is most under threat?

What does their reaction to the crisis mean?

Once you've decided and you know whose story will render an interesting universal meaning out of the material, then we need to think about how you shape that story to ensure that the meaning you want to deliver is communicated.

Basics first: how do we meet your protagonist?

Our default position is that the protagonist is the first character we should meet. This blatantly isn't always the case but at script stage it is useful if you can introduce us to your main character first because script readers can make unhelpful assumptions. A

better principle to follow, however, is that when you are introducing us to a large number of characters at the beginning of your movie, make sure that the protagonist is the one who feels most knowable.

It may be the one character we meet in more than one sphere of their lives and, in particular, the one whose domestic or home life we see. The protagonist doesn't have to actually be the first character we meet, but if not, it's likely to be the first character we meet in a known world that we understand. It's routine in detective stories that we meet the detective doing something domestic – it's a way of signalling our shared humanity, that this is someone with the same basic needs as all of us, be that sleep, coffee in the morning, or a decent parking place, it's an invitation for us to start to identify ourselves with that character.

Lucy will talk this afternoon about character journeys but for now the important point to make is that in a film in which there are many players you need to give us a very quick handle on the type of person that your protagonist is and what drives them. An over-riding characteristic that allows the audience to 'get' them very quickly – even if you will later challenge those initial assumptions. I read a lot of scripts in which the protagonist is actually the least clearly defined character for the first half of the story. Secondary characters whose role in the story is more functional are often more immediately defined and the risk then is that the protagonist is uninteresting by comparison and we don't want to engage in their story. Prior to the inciting incident you need to ensure that your main character is consistent in their behaviour and reactions. Complicate them later when the story has taken them in to unfamiliar territory.

J in *Animal Kingdom* is theoretically a tricky character to engage with because he's so passive. But the way we are introduced to him just sitting on the sofa next to his dead mother watching TV while he waits for the paramedics makes that passivity a deliberate defining feature of his character rather than just an accidental by-product of the plot being driven by other characters. It's one of the most fabulous opening scenes I have ever seen and one of the most unsettling.

In the first act you are getting out all the necessary story information but at the end of that process you need to ensure that the dramatic question raised belongs to your protagonist. Whatever the situation, whether it's a threat to the world or a threat to a relationship you need to make it **personal** to your chosen protagonist.

In *Argo* the dramatic question isn't 'will the six get out of Iran?' it's 'can Mendez pull off this Canadian Film crew plan to get the six out of Iran?'

O'Donnell says to him "If you can make the movie thing credible we'll take it to the Director. Don't fuck up. The whole country's watching you. They just don't know it yet." It's a specific commission that allows us to anticipate the structure that will follow which Lucy detailed for you yesterday.

Using dialogue is probably the most effective way of highlighting what the dramatic question of a film is. It can be a challenge, like in *Argo*, or a declaration of intent from your protagonist - "I'm going to make that girl fall in love with me", "I will prove them wrong" – At spec script stage it does no harm to be quite on the nose about it and it will help you to ensure that you have clarity about that beat. Make it subtle and sophisticated and hidden in action and subtext later on.

Talking of which, let's look at *Animal Kingdom* where it is a bit trickier. As Lucy explained yesterday, the bulk of the story isn't about J but rather about the demise of the Cody family. The end of the first act is when Baz is shot by the police. What follows then is a sequence in which we follow the immediate aftermath of that shooting from J's point of view. The camera places us with him as he watches the uncles take in the news. Then he tries to stay at Nicole's where he verbally distances himself from his family by saying twice "I didn't know him very well". What follows next is a very small but powerful scene in which J and Nicole are asleep on the sofa and Pope carries Nicole into the bedroom. Pope has caused Baz's life to be taken away from his wife and kids and without waiting a beat he is taking Nicole – happy to destroy or wreck J's life next. But J wakes up and stops him and we are invited to think that Pope has to back down from whatever he was thinking about doing with or to Nicole.

The dramatic question that is very subtly being presented here is “will J be brought down by the family in the way that Baz has?” The following scene is about Mama Smurf claiming J back into the family fold by sharing her regrets over the petty fight that stopped his mother talking to them all. But we already know from J’s voiceover that his mother kept him away from the family because she was scared of them and this scene prompts us to remember that this is not a good place for him to be, that his mother was right to keep away.

It’s subtle and it works. The key device that *Animal Kingdom* uses to keep J at the centre of the story is to ensure that we always spend time with him. Even if events are largely driven by other characters in your script, make sure that we always return to your protagonist to process the implications or effect of those decisions or actions on the main character. Keep them at the centre of our interest.

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When you are working out how to present your dramatic question it comes back to the most important question in all script development decisions – which is what’s at stake?

Make sure that it is the stake for the protagonist that we are invited to care about most.

Sometimes to give your protagonist more at stake or more specific stakes than other players in the story you may need to develop a wider story for the protagonist. What else is happening in their life that compounds with the broader story events and creates the personal stakes?

As ever, I like to default to *Jaws* – Chief Brody has moved the family to Amity in order to be safe. On a dramatic level the story is about catching the killer shark but the meaning of the story is a more personal one about Brody learning that to be safe you have to take on your fears and not hide from them.

In a detective thriller – what the detective most obviously wants in the story is to solve the crime and bring justice and this will drive the main dramatic events. But quite often he also wants something else in his personal life that ups the stakes. It's a last chance scenario, or the chance to redeem a past mistake and it's this character journey that the meaning of the story will normally come from rather than the solving of the crime itself.

You are always balancing two different drives within your story. The dramatic events and the progression of the plot on one level and the meaning generated by one character's experience of and reaction to those events on another.

It may be helpful to ask this question: what would the trajectory of your protagonist's life be if it wasn't interrupted by this story at this time? Without overly complicating things how can you use that to feed in to what's at stake and justify why we are focussing on that particular character's reaction to these story events.

So, we've set up a dramatic question that is personal to our protagonist and it is then how that dramatic question is answered that will generate the story's meaning. Which, by extension means that the protagonist is the character we need to end the story with. If other characters are also on a journey in your film then make sure that you complete their stories first. It sounds obvious, but if you are writing a plot driven story in which a lot happens at the climax of the film it is quite easy to lose sight of your protagonist, to forget to keep the audience firmly rooted in the protagonist's shoes by going through those events with them. Most importantly, we want to walk away from the action with the protagonist, because we need time to absorb what effect those events have had on them.

And that's a principle to apply throughout your film. Make sure the protagonist is the character we go home with. And by that I mean that we need intimate time with a character. Any time we spend alone with a character invites us to process their inner conflict. What are they fearing? What are they regretting? What are they deciding to do? What tension are they experiencing?

Allowing us to spend real time with a character is your most powerful tool to getting us on to a character's side, even if that character isn't one who we would naturally want to identify ourselves with.

It is shocking how easily we can be manipulated into supporting a character in their flawed endeavour. We talked yesterday about how we are seduced by Ryan Bingham's voiceover in to believing his lifestyle choices are pretty good. One of the key tricks to doing this is to not invite a counter argument. You need to omit the voice of reason. Apologies here, I am going to use *Little Miss Sunshine* again because it is such a brilliant example and I hadn't really thought about any of this until I noticed what that film does. In the first act when the family are deciding whether Olive can go to the pageant or not they get so caught up in the impossible logistics of the trip that **no-one mentions** it might just simply not be a very good idea to go. And because the conflict of getting this entire dysfunctional family across state in a VW van with a dodgy shift is so absurd and such a major undertaking, we the audience, are bamboozled also into forgetting the obvious. Because we know it's mad for this chubby seven year old to enter a beauty contest! But we temporarily forget that problem and get caught up in solving the transport issue and as soon as we've started to wonder whether they can make it there in time, we're hooked into that journey. Our attention has been cleverly diverted from the blatantly obvious. If any one member of the family had actually voiced doubts about Olive's participation in pageants then the whole premise would have fallen down because as audience we would have remembered ourselves and thought, that's just so dumb and morally quite questionable, but we aren't reminded to think that until we actually get to the beauty pageant.

In *Up in the Air*, the voices of reason are Ryan's sisters. His high flying, no strings attached lifestyle immediately loses its allure when his sister Kara says "you basically don't exist to us." Of course: he's an arse! To stop us thinking that too early on and risk us not engaging with Ryan's journey we only get the briefest of introductions to his sisters. We don't meet them properly until we get to the wedding where his whole philosophy of life is brought crumbling down. If the sisters were more active characters in the story early on it would damage our relationship with Ryan. So

instead of pitting Ryan's point of view against anyone who can properly defeat it, for the main journey of the film Ryan is pitted against Natalie, whose own approach to life is naïve and warped. Whereas Ryan is rejecting a committed relationship and a family as unwanted burdens in life, Natalie assumes an automatic right to a good relationship and a perfect family and she has a planned trajectory for her own life. They both have a lesson to learn.

Limiting the point of view is, of course, something that movies do all the time. When we are watching a car chase in an action film we don't think for a second about the people in the other cars that are crashed into. If, for example, you are writing a romantic drama in which a family man falls unexpectedly and desperately in love with a woman he meets on a business trip and you want us to believe this is true love then we probably don't want to even see his family back home and we certainly don't want to spend any time thinking about the point of view of his eight year old daughter. It would stop us indulging in the romance or believing that it is true love. It would be an unhelpful reality check. To keep us caring about what you want us to care about, be very careful of drawing attention to anything else in the story world that might actually matter more.

There are other useful things you can do to get us on to a difficult character's side.

- 1) Show us what makes them right – It's what Robert Mckee call the centre of good. What trait does your character have that sets them apart from others – a strong work ethic, honesty, fairness? In *Drive*, Ryan Gosling makes his money as a getaway driver, so he's not exactly an admirable hero. But what we learn about him early on is that he doesn't carry a gun, that he spells out his terms to clients very clearly and always sticks to them and he's a hard worker in his legitimate job. He is set up as less bad than those around him.
- 2) You may also think about what makes the character vulnerable? – what flaw do they have that may lead to their undoing? What big mistakes are they in danger of making? Any vulnerability we witness in a character invites us to care about them.

3) What makes the character enjoyable to watch? - we might not want to share a lift with a character but you can convince us that we want to see them on screen. Wit, intelligence, charm, are all traits that are routinely used to get us on board with actually quite despicable characters. But equally, characters who march to a different beat, who disregard convention, are attractive as the rebel.

I want to think just briefly about the relationship we have with the Cody family in *Animal Kingdom*. I think it's quite a complex relationship. It's definitely not as simple as we're on J's side against the rest of the family. As a family we meet them at a particularly vulnerable time and we spend a lot of time with them: they have redeeming features in that there is a camaraderie between the brothers, they take care of their mother, accept J quite readily and so it is possible to feel quite sympathetic towards them. As movie goes we have become used to caring about the criminal protagonist. The writer/director specifically wanted to avoid glamorising the family and to do so he made sure that they weren't the victims in the film. To mitigate against our potential sympathy towards the Codys he shows us Nic's family. A very ordinary, very real family whose daughter has been killed. This is not a movie world inhabited only by corrupt cops and desperate gangsters, it's set in a normal Melbourne suburb and there are people like us caught in the cross-fire and that's where our sympathy should be.

Now I promised I would say something about PASSIVE PROTAGONISTS so I should do that. Although to be clear, I am not advocating that you all go out and start writing passive protagonists! J is a passive character for a large part of the movie. But what that voiceover at the beginning of the film achieves is to establish that beneath the passive exterior is someone who is keenly observing what is happening, and that he has real insight into what makes the other characters tick. So then, throughout the movie, whenever the camera is on Jay just standing in the corner of the room, silently watching, we know there is more going on beneath the surface than meets the eye. He's processing. The protagonist who stands as a close observer of events but doesn't actively participant in it all can be a very powerful

choice, especially if you want to extrapolate a reflective meaning from the events that isn't immediately obvious. In the Coen Brothers film *No Country for Old Men* the protagonist is Tommy Lee Jones, the sheriff. This is his voiceover that starts the movie.

I was sheriff of this county when I was twenty-five. Hard to believe. Grandfather was a lawman. Father too. Me and him was sheriff at the same time, him in Plano and me here. I think he was pretty proud of that. I know I was. Some of the old-time sheriffs never even wore a gun. A lot of folks find that hard to believe. Jim Scarborough never carried one. That's the younger Jim. Gaston Boykins wouldn't wear one. Up in Comanche County.

I always liked to hear timers. Never missed a chance to do so. Nigger Hoskins over in Bastrop County knowed everybody's phone number off by heart. You can't help but compare yourself against the old-timers. Can't help but wonder how they would've operated these times.

There was this boy I sent to the gas chamber at Huntsville here a while back. My arrest and my testimony. He killed a fourteen-year-old girl. Papers said it was a crime of passion but he told me there wasn't any passion to it.

Told me that he'd been planning to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again.

Said he knew he was going to hell. Be there in about fifteen minutes. I don't know what to make of that. I surely don't.

The crime you see now, it's hard to even take its measure. It's not that I'm afraid of it. I always knew you had to be willing to die to even do this job -- not to be glorious. But I don't want to push my chips forward and go out and meet something I don't understand.

You can say it's my job to fight it but I don't know what it is anymore. More than that, I don't want to know. A man would have to put his soul at hazard. He would have to say, okay, I'll be part of this world.

It's an odd film because we do lose sight of Tommy Lee Jones for much of the movie: Woody Harrelson seems to take over as the protagonist until he meets a gruesome end and, as a result, many people were understandably confused about what the film meant. Because they missed the point that this is a story being told by an old sheriff at the point of retirement, who is no longer wanting to contemplate the evils that man can commit against each other. I love that justification he gives for not getting involved: that to do so would mean putting his soul at hazard to say ok, I'll be a part of this world.

To conclude, choose protagonists whose reaction to the story situation generates the most interesting or most truthful meaning. Let us walk in their shoes for ninety minutes. If necessary, manipulate us into seeing the world as they do – we will all be richer for it.