



Learning from the Masters

AN INTERVIEW WITH SCREENWRITER CALLIE KHOURI

QUIZ & SUGGESTED EXERCISES

(RECOMMENDED FOR HIGH SCHOOL & COLLEGE STUDENTS)

“Part of being a writer is getting yourself quiet enough and out of the way enough that the character can just speak. If you make yourself available, you can just sit down, open the floodgate, and it’ll be there.”

Callie Khouri

EXCERPTS FROM CALLIE KHOURI'S INTERVIEW:

MIKE DE LUCA: *Had you written many screenplays before “Thelma & Louise?”*

CALLIE KHOURI: I hadn't written anything. That was my first one.

DE LUCA: *Was there pressure after “Thelma & Louise?” Scoring so big with the first one?*

KHOURI: Yes. I would be lying if I said there wasn't, somewhere in my mind, I was gonna have to – and now for my next trick. And it did take me a really long time [to write a second screenplay]. I think [you couldn't repeat] the cultural phenomenon that was happening at the time “Thelma & Louise” came out. The first wave of women senators started getting elected, the Anita Hill thing was happening, there was a lot going on.

DE LUCA: *Did you sense that cultural shift, and that's how the idea came to be, or you just happened to be in the culture when it was shifting and “Thelma & Louise” followed?*

KHOURI: The latter. I was responding to something for myself, after doing years of music videos, just seeing women...where it was four solid years of head shaking, of like, “I didn't march for this.” So in some respects it was a response to that, and just saying, “I want to make something that I want to see.” And I felt like the idea was so strong that I could write it without knowing what I was doing.

DE LUCA: *In your career, was there a moment when everything clicked, and you thought, this is my career, this is going to work for me?*

KHOURI: No.

DE LUCA: *You haven't had it yet?*

KHOURI: Haven't had that yet. I'm always looking for an escape route.

QUIZ:

As you watch the interview, see if you can answer the following questions.

1. Where is Callie Khouri from?
2. What characterizes the “Southern sensibility” she says she is hired to apply to scripts?
3. Why does Khouri say writing for a studio like being asked to write about someone else’s mother?
4. Why does she say writing for hire is dangerous for a writer?
5. Does she outline before writing? Why or why not?
6. How many scripts had Khouri written before “Thelma and Louise?”
7. What made adapting “Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood” so difficult?
8. What real-life experience inspired “Thelma and Louise?”
9. How did Khouri’s experience as a Sundance juror help her appreciate concise and precise writing?
10. How does she get “unstuck” when she’s writing?
11. How can having the writer present on-set or at a read-through benefit a production?
12. What does Khouri think about the “A Film By” credit?
13. Why does she say Hollywood is more about business and less about movies?
14. What does she find different about writing a TV pilot and a feature script?
15. What is the best piece of advice anyone gave her about writing?

Bonus question:

16. Who did Khouri originally want to direct “Thelma and Louise?”

SUGGESTED EXERCISES:

1. Callie Khouri says her experience as an actor and hands-on producer helped her when she began to write. How did it help? Can you think of other job experiences that could be useful to a beginning screenwriter?
2. Khouri says that writing for hire can be dangerous for a writer, and later counsels that it’s important to write what you believe. Do you agree that working for other people can cause a writer to lose touch with his or her convictions? Why or why not?
3. Khouri says that she is often hired to bring a casual eccentricity to underwritten characters. How can this benefit a script? Can you think of some film characters that could be described as eccentric? Think about someone you know in real life who displays interesting or unusual habits or behaviors. List some of his or her quirks.
4. Khouri looks at a soldier’s dog tags and conjures up the pain of a mother who has lost her son. Can you come up with your own story, using the same object as a source of inspiration?

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