

PREFACE: FROM PAGE TO SCREEN

BY GEORGE R. R. MARTIN



George R. R. Martin on the *Game of Thrones* set in Belfast.

David Benioff and D. B. Weiss are brave men or mad men. They'd have to be to take on a job like bringing *A Game of Thrones* (and the rest of my massive epic fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*) to television.

There is no more hazardous task in Hollywood than trying to make a popular or critically acclaimed book into a television series or feature film. Hollywood Boulevard is lined with the skulls and bleached bones of all those who have tried and failed . . . and for every known failure, there are a hundred you have never heard of, because the adaptations were abandoned somewhere along the way, often after years of development and dozens of scripts.

Now, a story is a story is a story, but each medium has its own way of telling that story. A film, a television show, a book, a comic, each has its own strengths and weaknesses, things it does well, things it does poorly, things that it can hardly do at all.

Moving from page to screen is never easy.

A novelist has techniques and devices at his command that are not available to the scriptwriter: internal dialogue, unreliable narrators, first-person and tight third-person points of view, flashbacks, expository narrative, and a host of others. As a novelist, I strive to put my readers inside the heads of my characters, make them privy to their thoughts, let them see the world through their eyes. But the camera stands outside the character, so the viewpoint is of necessity external rather than internal. Aside from voice-overs (always an intrusion, I think, a crutch at best), the scriptwriter must depend on the director and the cast to convey the depths of emotion, subtleties of thought, and contradictions of character that a novelist can simply tell the reader about in clear, straightforward prose.

There are certain practical challenges as well. A television drama has a running time

of sixty minutes (for premium cable) or about forty-five minutes (for a network show). There's more flexibility with a feature film, but even there, you had best come in around two hours. Go over three hours, and the studios are certain to start cutting. But most novels simply have too much story for these time frames. Produce a direct scene-for-scene, line-for-line adaptation, and you'll end up with something too long for either flatscreen or Cineplex. And the problem is compounded when your source material is an epic fantasy. *Lord of the Rings* was broken into three volumes because the book that Tolkien delivered was three times as long as most novels published in the 1950s. And my own books, like almost all contemporary fantasies, are a deal longer than Tolkien's.

Budget and shooting schedules also have a major impact on what can and cannot be done when moving from page to screen. It is easy for someone like me to write of a stupendous feasting hall with a hundred hearths, large enough to seat a thousand knights, each in his own heraldic finery. But pity the poor producers who have to reproduce that on screen. First, they have to build this gigantic set, with all those hearths ("Do we really need a hundred? Could we have, say, six?"). Then they have to find a thousand extras to fill those benches. Then they have to set the costume designer to work sketching out a thousand heraldic surcoats, after which they need to fit the extras and sew the costumes and . . . well, you get the idea. Alternatively, the producers can try to do it all with CGI. A wonderful resource, CGI, but that's costly and time-consuming as well. And the budget is the budget, whether it is one million dollars or one hundred million.

Over the course of my career, I've worked both sides of the great divide between page and screen. When I first broke into print in the early 1970s, it was as a novelist and short story writer, working exclusively with prose. By the 1980s, some producers and studios

had noticed me, and I had my first experiences with my work being optioned, adapted, and (in a couple of cases) even filmed. I started writing scripts myself in the middle of that decade, initially for the CBS revival of *The Twilight Zone*, and I found myself adapting stories by other writers. I went on to work for three years as a writer/producer on the television series *Beauty and the Beast*, and then for five years in development (more commonly known as “development hell”), writing television pilots and feature films, most of which were never made.

All told, I spent the best part of a decade in Hollywood. I think I did some good work, but coming from the world of prose, as I did, I was constantly smashing up against the walls of what was possible in film and television. “George, this is great,” the studio would say, whenever I turned in the first draft of a new script, “but it would cost five times our budget to shoot what’s on the page. You need to lose ten pages . . . cut twelve characters . . . turn this huge battle

whole imaginary world and a cast of thousands. Absolutely unfilmable, of course. No studio or network would ever touch a story like this, I knew. These would be good books, maybe great books, but that was all they’d ever be. (Ah, the irony . . .)

It was about the time *A Clash of Kings* was published that we first began to hear from producers and screenwriters interested in optioning the series (*Clash* was the second volume but the first to hit the best-seller lists). I was skeptical. My agents and I fielded a few phone calls, took a few meetings, listened to the proposals . . . but I remained dubious. They were all talking about doing *A Song of Ice and Fire*—all of it, all seven books, including the ones I had not written yet—as a feature film. No doubt they were inspired by the huge success of Peter Jackson’s *Lord of the Rings* films and hoped to duplicate that. I had been inspired by Jackson’s work as well, but I knew the same approach would never work for my own fantasies. My series was too big, too

when it came to producing quality, adult television. But it couldn’t be as a movie-for-television or even a miniseries. It would have to be a full-on series, with an entire season devoted to each novel. The only problem was, HBO had never done fantasy nor shown any interest in the genre. It would never happen.

And then I met David Benioff and Dan Weiss, at a lunch set up by my agent Vince Gerardis at the Palm in Los Angeles. It started as a lunch and ended after dinner, and it turned out that David and Dan had the same dream I did, of doing *A Song of Ice and Fire* as a series on HBO. “You’re mad,” I told them. “It’s too big. It’s too complicated. It’s too expensive. HBO doesn’t do fantasy.”

The two madmen were undeterred. They loved the story and were convinced that they could bring it to the screen. So I let them try.

Best call I ever made.

As I write, the first season of *Game of Thrones* has come and gone, to great popular and critical acclaim, including Emmy® and Golden Globe® nominations, and wins for Peter Dinklage for his performance as Tyrion Lannister. Writers, producers, directors, costumers, special effects designers, stuntmen, and many more have been recognized for their outstanding work by their peers. Filming on the second season has been completed, and the new episodes are now in post. And the series and the books alike have become a part of our cultural zeitgeist, with references and tips of the hat from other shows as diverse as *The Simpsons*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Castle*, and *Chuck*.

No one is more pleased or astonished than I am. Pretty damn good for a story that I was once convinced could never make that jump from page to screen.

How did they do it, you ask?

Bryan Cogman has been part of this journey from the very beginning. He was the first person David and Dan hired when they got the green light, and he’s lived most of the last few years in Westeros. I’ll let him tell you.

Like David and Dan, he knew this job was dangerous when he took it.

— GEORGE R. R. MARTIN

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scene into a duel . . . get down from twelve matte paintings to two. . .” Et cetera.

And I would. That was the job. But I always preferred those early, unproduceable first drafts of mine to the final shooting scripts, and after ten years in the industry, I was tired of reining myself in. It was that, as much as anything else, that led me to return to prose, my first love, in the 1990s. The result was *A Game of Thrones* and its sequels (five books published to date, two more planned and on the way). I had spent years pitching, writing, and developing concepts for television, all eminently doable for TV budgets. Now I wanted to put all that behind me, to pull out all the stops. Huge castles, vast dramatic landscapes, deserts and mountains and swamps, dragons, dire-wolves, gigantic battles with thousands to a side, glittering armor, gorgeous heraldry, swordfights and tournaments, characters who were complicated, conflicted, flawed, a

complex. Just one of my volumes was as long as all three of Professor Tolkien’s. It took three films to do justice to the *Lord of the Rings*. It would take twenty to do *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and there wasn’t a studio in the world mad enough to commit to that.

Still, the conversations did get me thinking about how my story could possibly be brought from page to screen. Television was the only way to go, I realized. Not a network series; that would never fly. Network budgets were simply not high enough, and their censors would choke on all the sex and violence in the novels. At best you’d get bowdlerized versions, weak tea instead of strong mead. A long miniseries might work, something on the order of *Roots* or *Shogun*, but the networks weren’t making those kinds of epic minis anymore.

It would have to be HBO, I decided. The people who’d made *The Sopranos*, *Deadwood*, *Rome*. No one else even came close