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Sawtell, Louise, Taylor, Staci and Jacey, Helen (2017) An Interview with Helen Jacey. *Networking Knowledge: Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*, 10 (2). pp. 14-18. ISSN 1755-9944

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# An interview with Helen Jacey

## ABSTRACT

Dr Helen Jacey is a screenwriter and script consultant, and teaches scriptwriting at Bournemouth University, UK. Her research interests include creative and critical approaches to screenwriting, screenwriting and gender, and screenwriting genre theory. Her book *The Woman in the Story: Writing Memorable Female Characters* (2010) was the first screenwriting guide for writers developing female driven projects. As a professional writer, she has written numerous film, television and radio projects for UK, US and European production companies and is currently developing a series of crime fiction novels, *Elvira Slate Investigations*. She is a story consultant for international filmmakers and film agencies.

Editors Louise Sawtell and Dr Stayci Taylor asked Dr Jacey a series of questions relating specifically to the themes explored by the special issue: gendered practices, processes and perspectives in screenwriting. The following are the insights generously offered by this leader in the field.

## KEYWORDS

screenwriting, gender, Helen Jacey, interviews, Jungian feminism, *The Woman in the Story*

## **What was it about the screenwriting discourse at the time that saw a need for you to write *The Woman in the Story* (2010)?**

On an international level in industry, organisations like Women in Film were obviously active and keeping the pressure on, showcasing female writers and directors. As a writer in early 2000s, Linda Seger's book *When Women Call the Shots* (1996), had a big impact on me as practically the only available, specific, industry-focused resource that spoke to feminism and writing/directing for women, as well as factors in the industry that influenced their stories. Otherwise, there was little mention of gender in most screenwriting guides. Some screenwriting guides had different objectives, perhaps equally motivated by the authors' experiences of a lack of useful and accessible resources for screenwriters. As a screenwriter who routinely chose female protagonists and whose stories were obviously affected by their experience of gender, as perhaps my career was, I wanted more. So, with my professional hat on I'd spotted a gap in the market, as I would be the first to buy a screenwriting book on female characters. When I pitched the book to [Michael Wiese](#), he said he had wanted to publish a book like this for many years, which felt serendipitous.

Kind of in parallel, my critical mind wanted to look in depth at a subject area I was interested in, Jungian Feminism. With a firmly practice-led hat on, I embarked on my own PhD in 2004, to undertake an exploration at the broadest level through practice about paradigms, and evolved into a focus about Jungian paradigms and feminist intentions. It was the Jungian Feminist psychologists (Maureen Murdock, Linda Leonard, and others) who offered a counter-narrative to the Hero's Journey model. Their work argued for gender considerations in the whole 'archetypal' mythological approach but they weren't adapted to screenwriting.

When writing *The Woman in the Story* (2010), I avoided giving a journey model that was based on archetypal principles (which is not to say they aren't valid for aiding creativity – they most definitely can be). I wanted to trigger thinking about gender and representation in the creative process of screenwriting with a more holistic and wide-ranging approach.

**Can you tell us about those screenplays that have used the strategies suggested in your book and/or seminar? For instance, how have screenwriters employed concepts such as layers of union or feminine superthemes?**

The book appears to be useful for all kinds of writers at all levels across the world, which is very gratifying.

I can see the approaches having an effect during my *Writing the Heroine's Story Seminar* with professional writers, because they workshop their projects during the two days. In the *Writing the Heroine's Story Seminar*, there can be big 'aha!' moments when doing the Metaphoric Wound exercise. It appears to be a useful model for linking character arc and theme to the deepest inner conflicts of a character. Regarding the Superthemes, these have generated some debate in Internet forums and professional writers have written to me, even using the SuperTheme system as a way of introducing their project's protagonist to me. Role-Choices have also proven useful as a way for writers to define their character's identity. Layers of Union is also eye-opening to writers because it shows the equally important flipside to conflict and stakes. In my experience, writers like exercises that help them brainstorm, and we also like typological systems as they present a framework that creative brains can dance between. Male writers have contacted me to say it has really helped them understand their female characters better.

Colleagues in academia across the world have told me the book helps many of their students, not only on their own student scripts, but also in critical and reflective dissertations where it has been used as a paradigm to discuss the reading of scripts and films but also to aid reflection on their own writing. Again, SuperThemes and Metaphoric Wound come up as favourite exercises with students.

**As you know, this special issue is called *Gender and the Screenplay*. Do you think, though, that screenplays can be gendered? What might they look like? How might they read differently?**

I'd like to ask the question what does an ungendered screenplay look like! We all carry around our own gender baggage in life and in our writing. A lot of writers think they aren't influenced by gender and that there is no difference in how they treat the characters. But often a gender bias does play out in storytelling principles and how we use them. Most feminist writers can spot what they feel is misogyny or double standards at work in characterization. Since my book is based on the premise that gender plays out quite powerfully in female character representation (and ditto male characters), I'm of course fairly committed to the principle that screenplays can be gendered. At the most basic and obvious level gendering operates in character and representation choices made by the writer. The character's journey, how they speak, how they feel, how they behave, the choices they make, the agency and POV they have, can all be influenced by their gender and the values the writer attaches to gender. We may be unconsciously playing out, as writers, how we affiliate to certain genders, or not. You only have to examine characters from a typological perspective to see how gendering is functioning at the level of character – what roles is the writer giving to which characters? Defining creative and dramatic elements, such as Journey models, and conflict and its counterpart 'union', as masculine and feminine can be useful for writers because it can help them work out any insidious or unconscious attitudes they might have about gender which are playing out in their screenplay.

Overall, I feel the gendering of the screenplay reflects the writer's vision and aspirations for the project, i.e. artistic imperative meets worldview meets industry positioning. Writers who question key creative and

dramatic elements from a gender perspective are more likely to subvert and disrupt convention and cliché. Who, in terms of characters, we give point of view, agency, charisma, darkness and even the nebulous concept of 'triumphant' arc resolutions, can be very gendered issues!

Frequently, writers tell me that they have the most issues with female protagonists in development because of the likeability factors affecting agency, traits, speech, sexuality, age, etc. When the screenplay is read, developed in collaboration, the gendering of the screenplay evolves as the writer makes sense of the notes of those who may project their own attitudes and values that shape gender assumptions. The consideration of audience something that effects the screenwriter and the process, in terms of the gendered audience liking or not liking certain ways of being in characters, is another factor.

Ultimately, gendering of the screenplay is a fluid and context-driven process that commences at the point of conceptualisation and evolves through the project's development. I'm really interested in the choices we make as writers in creating characters.

**What drew you to the work of [Ida Lupino](#) in your recent chapter in *Women Screenwriters: An International Guide* (2015)?**

I first discovered Ida Lupino through Lizzie Francke's book *Script Girls* (1994) and my own research into the 1940s for my forthcoming crime fiction series (*Elvira Slate Investigations*). Lupino was talented, very driven and a trailblazer, working to make a difference in Hollywood as she was fed up with the roles offered to her as actress. Wider research on the 1940s brought her back into my orbit, and I studied some films that she produced/co-wrote/directed with her company The Filmmakers. I found them emotionally compelling and enjoyed their intensive depiction of life spiraling out of control. Lupino's characters feel fresh and original with a big focus on internal conflict; they have relentless point of view and undertake somewhat dark journeys where self-empowerment or mutual support are the only way out of misery. For Nelmes' and Selbo's Guide, I mapped her characterization against the Role-Choice system in my book. I am very interested in how reading scripts from the position of writer opens up new possibilities for exploring storytelling. As a writer, I felt I could connect with Lupino's work for its contemporary relevance to emotion and empathy.

**Given the theme of this special issue, what gender-related issues have come up for in your role as a script consultant?**

I don't think there are any 'regular' issues; every project is different. However I'm frequently offered female driven stories to work on, because writers or teams simply want a new set of eyes at key stages on the whole project, or they like the approach in the book and would like my input as part of development. Sometimes there can be a focus on strengthening the identity of the protagonist or secondary female characters. Helping writers to avoid stereotypes; generally encouraging the writers or team to let rip when it comes to dimension, personality, agency, POV, and pushing the boundaries of female characterisation in general.

**In your chapter on 'bromance' in *Screenwriters and Screenwriting: Putting Practice into Context* (2014) you propose, 'Whilst critical discussion of male identity and narrative is well established, there has been far less transfer of these ideas to the creation of male characters in bromance films, specifically within a screenwriting context' (p. 240). Can you tell us about the different challenges in writing the man, and the woman, in the story?**

That's a pretty big question! As far as I know, there isn't a guide for writers yet on how to create memorable male characters, or avoid masculine stereotypes in male characters. Male characters have still got plenty of new places to go in story, as gender roles are increasingly mixed up and subverted. These places aren't the same as the open fields of female characters, but they are as interesting. For instance, explorations of male vulnerability, emotional neediness and helplessness on screen are still quite rare - likewise, different types of failure and inadequacy in males and females. Some writers feel female characters carry most of the gender baggage, because women are still defining their roles and identities as carers, mothers, wives, earners etc. and often feel pressured to make them nicer and less potentially threatening to the audience. The male character can feel easier to write because he travels lighter, because we still don't have the same expectations of men and women, even today. Male characters can often have more fun. A big challenge for writers is finding the unique human being behind all the gender baggage, which can get in the way of character development - we can get hung up on it. At the same time, writers try to be aware of sex and gender double standards, so there are a lot of competing processes!

**At the time of writing [2017], here in Australia, funding bodies are currently debating quotas for women in key creative production roles in filmmaking, including screenwriters. Some believe this is a good initiative and others are concerned that this does not address the ingrained systemic challenges. What are thoughts about quotas and gender equity?**

Ideally we wouldn't need quotas but while statistics point to perennial inequality then they seem like an effective and practical measure to increase opportunity, alongside other interventions that support systemic changes such as education and training; from my position as a writer and someone who works with writers on character, if quotas directly improve the chances of female and BAME [Black, Asian and minority ethnic] in getting commissioned leading to more positive and diverse role models on screen, then I can't really see a downside of trying them out.

**We eagerly anticipate reading the very recently released [second edition](#) of *The Woman in the Story*. What changes or additions can we expect?**

Thank you! As female protagonists are getting more numerous, bigger and better, the book has been completely revised. It has some fresh approaches, case studies and new topics such as developing female protagonist biopics, thinking about heroes and heroines journeys for all protagonists, applying the Metaphoric Wound to TV series, and I've also added a few new SuperThemes, such as 'Felonious Femininity', to mirror the changing faces of femininity on screen. Likewise, I've added new case studies throughout based on some great female characters I have loved. It has a new Foreword by Hollywood producer Susan Cartsonis, and will be published in February 2017.

**In the seven years (at the time of writing) since the publication of *The Woman in the Story*, which produced screenplays, in your opinion, have successfully incorporated 'memorable heroines'?**

From TV, [Orange is the New Black](#) [2013], the US prison series is full of brilliantly complex female characters who are unforgettable as individuals and as an incarcerated sorority. I'm also a big fan of [Insecure](#), with its complex study of female best friendship. [Norma Bates](#) in [Bates Motel](#) [2013] is a fascinating and complex character, the overprotective and over-attached mother who ironically fails to protect her son. In film, [Eye in the Sky](#) reveals a compelling military female under intense pressure. In film, a completely different mother is found in Amelia, in [The Babadook](#) [2014]. In general, the rise of fascinating mother protagonists and mother-daughter relationships in stories from [Brave](#) [2010] and [Maleficent](#) [2014] to [The](#)

[Dressmaker](#) [2015], [Wadjda](#) [2012] and [Wild](#) [2014] heralds a new dawn of female-centric storytelling. The feminist vigilante mission of the vampire in [A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night](#) [2014] is refreshing.

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