Introduction

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Hollywood is one place in the world
where you can die of encouragement.
—Dorothy Parker

This book answers the two questions we're asked most often by aspiring screenwriters at film and television workshops, lectures, and writers' conferences:

What's a treatment?
How do I write a treatment?

The answers provided in *Writing Treatments That Sell* are based on our own practical experience as screenwriters, literary managers, and producers (for TV and film)—as well as what we've learned from our development and editorial associates and clients at Atchity Editorial/Entertainment International, Inc., and AEI's Writers' Lifeline, Inc.

Our advice is descriptive rather than prescriptive, based on observations of industry practices rather than on philosophical principles. This means you should use what works for you and ignore the rest—because everyone who knows anything about show business knows that there are no hard-and-fast rules. Success comes through individual effort combined with access and luck (luck being just another word for timing). If you're serious about your writing career, you'll figure out everything

we say here on your own. We're just hoping to expedite your learning curve so you get where you want to go sooner rather than later—and with fewer painful detours.

The third frequently asked question that inspired us to write this book is "Why do I need a treatment?" The honest answer is "If you have already written a screenplay, or if you're very lucky, or both, you may not." But sooner or later, if you want to sell a story idea without writing the entire script, you'll need to know about treatments. If you're having story problems *now*, a treatment will help solve those problems. The two primary functions served by the treatment in today's entertainment business are *selling* and *diagnosing a story*.

Every storyteller dreams of seeing the characters in his story come alive each week on television or up on the silver screen. There's nothing more exciting! We've shared this happy experience with the writers we manage. A project called *Sign of the Watcher*, by Brett Bartlett, was rejected (under the title *Walk into My Parlor*) fourteen times in its first submission to buyers. AEI's Writers' Lifeline reevaluated Brett's story, used the treatment form to focus plot and characters, changed the title, and sent the treatment of the retooled story back out through Brett's manager-producer, Warren Zide. Several studios were intrigued enough by the treatment to request the full manuscript, which eventually sold to Propaganda Films for $750,000. Was refocusing the story easy for the writer? No. It took months of reworking the characters and action line and rewriting—dozens of times—the treatment we used as our selling tool. It was the roller-coaster ride of Brett's life. Brett's journey began with the excitement of a great story idea, the dream of seeing his story become a film, then passed through the fright of the dips and sudden turns of rejection and rewriting, to the exhilaration of having hung on to the end, a little out of breath, a bit bruised but, damn, what a ride! And Brett's not the only one who's taken this ride.

With the proliferation of channels and new cinematic

distribution media, new writers are in demand now more than ever before. The Writers Guild reported that between 1985 and 1994, screenwriting accounted for 393 millionaires. The highest-paid 25 percent of employed writers earned more than $575,000 each in 2000. "Writers' odds have never been better," according to Thom Taylor, writing in *ScreenWriter Quarterly*. But because an estimated 10,000 scripts are submitted to Hollywood every year, in those same nine years 90,000 scripts were read to produce those 393 big winners—and only 10 percent of the scripts submitted even get read. Those odds are 229 to 1. Still, we've always believed, and advise our writers to believe, that "the odds don't apply to us." We've written this book to help you stack the cards in your favor with inside industry information about the buying and selling of stories, and advice on how to use the treatment to accelerate your break into Hollywood.

Most people we know in the industry take their work very seriously. We certainly do. The game of creating images for the big and small screens is the most exciting one we know, and its players are intense. But though writing and selling your writing is a serious business with serious upside potential, don't get so serious that you forget the fun of creating. Creation, after all, is an adult form of play. Don't be so married to your way of playing that you can't consider making a change: a change that might sell your story, or that might sell it for more money. Keep yourself inspired by continuing to write while you market what you've already written; if one story doesn't sell today, it might tomorrow. And when you sell the first one for big bucks, all the others you've written suddenly become valuable commodities.

TREATMENTS AS CLIFFHANGERS

Treatments should feel like pictures rushing together to form a story in which you can see the characters and hear them speak. A treatment should never read like a synopsis, like dull beats of a plot moving forward, trudging toward a predictable outcome. When you're reading the pages, however simple, the thrill of the story must be captured. And how do you do that? You forget that you're writing a treatment and tell the story like a classic around-the-campfire cliffhanger—as if every event happened before your very eyes and you can't wait to share it.

The structure should reveal itself like the design of the master architect crossed with a clever composer. The beginning immediately captivates. Why? Because you know exactly where to start the story because you have thought about it very carefully. And you know exactly whose face has just appeared on the screen. The character's journey should feel random and spontaneous, as if rolling down a hill, not a step-by-step contrivance of events.

The energy of the beginning should carry us into the middle—and now you're in trouble. The subplot has to subtly kick in here, and its momentum carries us through to the end.

An architect's blueprint or a sheet of music is dull only to those who do not have the passion to appreciate its execution. These "treatments" of a breathtaking building or a moving symphony should be just as exciting as seeing the Pantheon or hearing the Ninth Symphony for the first time. And this is your job. When you tell your story, you'll be like the projectionist alone in the dark booth, until the lights come back on again and then everyone understands—finally—exactly what you wanted to say.

—Victoria Wisdom, agent and partner,
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We start, in chapter 1, by examining exactly what a treatment is and how it's used in the industry to make a sale and/or to lay out a story. Here we also differentiate the treatment from its cousins the synopsis, the outline, the beat sheet, and the

coverage. Chapter 2 discusses original treatments for motion pictures, emphasizing the dramatic elements that effective treatments contain: hooks, climaxes, protagonist, conflict, action, scenes, theme, and character. We offer a summary outline of the motion picture's three-act structure that reminds you to ask yourself: Who's my protagonist? What's her problem? How does she overcome it?

Treatments for television, following their own special rules and with their distinctive seven-act structure, are the subject of chapter 3, in which we also consider television's need for subject matter to fit demographically specialized audiences. Chapter 3 also shows you how a television movie deal works, and how to get from treatment to deal. In chapter 4, we present the *bible*, as the treatment for a dramatic television series is known in the industry. Chapter 5 scrutinizes the writing of treatments "based on" true stories, "inspired by" true stories, and "from" true stories, and also tells you how to find and secure the rights to a true story. Adapting a novel to film is the subject of chapter 6, which offers, as an example of the adaptation treatment, *Shadow of the Cypress*, a modern retelling of *Jane Eyre*.

Once you know what a treatment is and how to write one for every occasion, *Writing Treatments* moves in chapter 7 to the crucial questions, Who are the buyers? and What are they buying? We deal here with both the complex and unpredictable television markets and the more stable feature film market. In presenting the latter, we tell you how to distinguish between *in-house production companies* and *independent producers*, and what to ask of each as you approach them with your story.

This leads naturally to a question we hear repeatedly: "How do I protect myself?" Chapter 8 answers the question both technically—by outlining copyright law and Writers Guild of America registration procedures—and practically, by letting you know what the actual industry practice is when a story is submitted for consideration. Our industry glossary will help

you interpret terms such as *turnaround*, *buzz*, and *right of first refusal*; and understand exactly what *option* and *high concept* mean. *Writing Treatments* concludes with a list of recommended further reading, which includes the sources we've drawn on in preparing this book.

Two final pieces of introductory advice: In learning about all the trees in the entertainment industry woods, don't lose sight of the woods themselves. As several coaches before us have pointed out, assuming timing is on your side, there are only two important considerations in making a solid sale: *concept* and *castability*. You have to have a great idea, with a "wow factor" of 7 to 10 (on a scale of 10), if you want to break into show business in a big way. *High concept* means an idea so clearly focused that it can be expressed in few words, like "Jurassic shark," the pitch we used to sell Steve Alten's *Meg* to Walt Disney Pictures and Doubleday-Bantam. The second element is *castability*, which simply means creating a protagonist that every top star in the business will want to play. Focus on those two, and, with the help of the practical techniques presented in this book, you will find your way into the fold.

Our second piece of final advice is *Maintain your optimism*. According to Jack Valenti, entertainment copyrights—which begin with you, the writer—were worth $89 billion in 2001. Optimism is the only faith capable of sustaining the daily ups and downs of the screenwriter's life; besides that, it's the attitude your successful entertainment industry colleagues will recognize as their own, and for which they'll respect you the most. You'll succeed in this business if you believe you'll succeed, and after you make an irrevocable commitment to continue writing and marketing your stories until your success is acknowledged by both buyers and audience. See yourself receiving that first Emmy or Oscar. And don't forget to send us our commission!

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The Nature and Role of the Treatment

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I read part of it all the way through.
—Samuel Goldwyn

The key to closing a deal in Hollywood is getting a *player* (as deal makers are called) to read your work. Since the entertainment industry is so personal and depends on access to buyers—like a vice president at a network, a development executive at a star's or director's production company, or the president of a studio—the sequence of events by which a seller convinces a buyer generally begins with a chance encounter or a telephone conversation that conveys urgency. Ideally, the buyer responds by saying, "Okay, send it over."

"Promise me you'll read it yourself."

"I promise," the buyer lies, or maybe even means it at the time. "How long is it?"

"Three hundred pages."

"Do you have a treatment?"

"Yes."

"Good. Why don't you send that along, too?"

Because the buyer rarely has time to read a screenplay or a novel without knowing what he's about to read, the treatment very often becomes the most important tool in the selling sequence.

KENNETH ATCHITY · CHI-LI WONG

WRITING TREATMENTS THAT SELL

How to Create and Market
Your Story Ideas to the
Motion Picture and TV Industry

SECOND EDITION

An Owl Book
Henry Holt and Company · New York

Henry Holt and Company, LLC
Publishers since 1866
115 West 18th Street
New York, New York 10011

Henry Holt® is a registered trademark of
Henry Holt and Company, LLC.

Distributed in Canada by H. B. Fenn and Company Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Atchity, Kenneth John.
Writing treatments that sell : how to create and market your story ideas to the motion picture and TV industry / Kenneth Atchity & Chi-Li Wong.—Rev. Owl Books ed.
p. cm.
"An Owl Book."
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-8050-7278-0 (pbk.)
1. Motion picture authorship. 2. Television authorship. 3. Treatments (Motion pictures, television, etc.)
I. Wong, Chi-Li. II. Title.
PN1996.A84 2003
808.2'3—dc21 2002027556

Henry Holt books are available for special promotions and premiums. For details contact: Director, Special Markets.

First Edition 1997
Second Edition 2003

Printed in the United States of America
5 7 9 10 8 6

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