

## Television is done differently across the pond — and some U.K. writers are thankful

**AMERICAN TELEVISION IS** the best in the world, right? Shows like *The Wire*, *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under*, *Deadwood*, *Battlestar Galactica*, on and on — each one a wonder of extended storytelling. If good writing is about the writer's voice, then these supremely accomplished shows must have a set of supremely accomplished voices.

We in the U.K. often envy the production system that makes this possible. We've heard of "team writing" — even though most of us are foggy on how that actually works. We have images of writers united in a communal creative frenzy. We've heard of "breaking the story," with everyone building the detailed structure of every episode. We believe eventually the showrunner takes the episode in hand and polishes it so it fits like a jewel alongside other finished jewels.

The assumption among many of the British story editors I talk to is that if we could only adopt a similar system of team writing our shows would be as good as the best of the U.S. crop. Possibly true. But more likely, we'd have to get ourselves some very different writers.

A few years back I was writing regularly on *The Bill*, a long running, bi-weekly po-

lice procedural show here in the U.K. The show was languishing, as they do, so they sent in a new exec with a new broom. He called in the writers, maybe 100 of us, everyone who had written an episode in the last year or so. He told us how from now on we'd be "team writing."

The guy next to me, a man with many years of top-quality work behind him, listened to the pitch, and said, very quietly to me, 'Yes, but that's the bit I like doing on my own.' He walked out of the meeting and he walked off the show.

The team writing really went no further than this: a group of, say, eight writers would communally sketch out the serial storylines over their eight-episode block before going off and writing the episodes on their own.

I wasn't a fan of the new system — it felt to me that many of the subtleties, the interesting quirks that could have enriched the serial stories, were getting smoothed out in the process of pleasing the committee in the room.

The public didn't agree, and the show's ratings went up, possibly as a result of the new emphasis on bigger story content that started by, literally, blowing up the police station and building from there.

But over the next year or so the attrition rate among those 100 writers was incredible. Sacked or walked (both applied to me at different times), many of them hated the new system, and the exec ended up having to find a whole new raft of writers in what was a very tumultuous time.

If you're curious about how things are done in the U.K., there are essentially two television-writing processes — one for high-volume shows like *The Bill* and *Eastenders*, and another for smaller boutique shows like *Spooks* (*MIS* in the United States) or *Trial & Retribution*. Each of these models leaves a lot of room for the indi-



vidual writer's voice.

*Eastenders* is a popular British early evening serial that airs four half-hour episodes a week and regularly tops the ratings. In the high-volume model, a monthly story conference deals with a month's worth of episodes. Each core writer (those with contracts guaranteeing a minimum number of episodes a year — say 12 —

and a fat loyalty bonus) comes away with stories to write up as one- to three-page treatments.

The story team combine these stories into a single story document, which is then divided into episodes.

A commissioning meeting for every block of a fortnight's episodes follows. It involves the writers and script editors for that block, the researchers, the script producer and the series script editor. The series producer and the executive producer may look in.

The writer goes home to work alone and four weeks later delivers the first draft. Notes come back from the editorial team within three days; the writer has two weeks to deliver the second draft. Same process, and the third and theoretically final draft is delivered 10 days later. The exec reads the first and third drafts. That third-draft script, with only minor changes, is what gets shot.

There's a different process for the lower-volume boutique shows, which air maybe six or eight one-hour episodes a year. (Some make it to 10 or 13 episodes, but the standard 22-episode run of the U.S. show is practically unknown over here.)

To begin, writers pitch story ideas in a couple of paragraphs, usually by e-mail, and then talk them through over the phone with the script editor. The writer might get called in for a face-to-face meeting where the script editor(s) and producer talk through the ideas with you and decide which is the favorite.

If one gets picked, you write it up to, perhaps, three pages. They comment, you tweak it a couple of times, and they ask you to write a more detailed treatment, taking into account whatever serial story elements

they're giving you. Upon delivery of this, money changes hands for the first time — usually 10 percent of the final script fee. (Not ideal, as you've normally done a great deal more than 10 percent of the creative thinking by then. The rest of the fee is staged according to the delivery milestones you agree to when you sign the deal.)

Eventually you get to the point where they ask you to write a first-draft script. You deliver that, and the script editor, the producer and maybe the exec producer give you notes on how they think the thing could be better.

You rewrite and deliver, over and over, never getting away from the basic assumption that it's your episode still and you're the one to make it work.

Eventually, four, five drafts in, you get to a point where the notes are lighter, slighter, down to refinements of surface texture, the odd cut.

Then they stop, and you've finished.

No polish. No complete handover to the show runner to get it into line.

Your episode is there — and if you've been lucky you see a clear progression from your initial three-paragraph pitch to the hour of television they're about to shoot.

I would hate it to be any other way.

Shows like *The Sopranos* and *Doctor Who* (Russell T. Davies' dramatically rebooted version of the old family favorite science fiction show) are the supreme expression of one person's voice. They represent one person's vision, as modulated through the sensibilities of the different writers and the production team.

This can lead to sensationally good TV. But there is a dark side.

I think the dominance of the showrunner is part of a cultural drift we've seen for years toward stadium-style entertainment. It operates all over — in sport, music, movies, fine art, whatever. Millions of people passively watching the activities of a tiny elite.

American TV may truly be the best in the world. The writers get paid many times more than we do in the U.K., so they're not poor in that sense.

But when a writer's voice gets overwritten by the show superstar's voice, and that is considered a legitimate part of the game, I get uneasy.

I'm a writer because I have things I want to say. I didn't become a writer because of the money, or the social side of the team process, or to help some other guy say what he wants to say.

In Britain we have a less industrial style of production so things don't need to be so homogenous. We still have faint remnants of a theater-based respect for the dramatist's voice. And most writers in the U.K. still see writing as something you do alone, at home, so attempts at full team writing seem to struggle to get off the ground.

All these things mean it is still sometimes possible for me to get a version of what I want to say out to an audience.

That's priceless. 

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