

Stephen J Cannell Online Writing Seminar

Transcript of Live Question & Answer Session

MODERATOR: Claire E. White

SPEAKER: Stephen J. Cannell

DATE: 10/24/98

MODERATOR Good Morning everyone and welcome to the Stephen J. Cannell Online Writing Seminar!

MODERATOR Good morning Stephen, and welcome! Our first question is from Skye D: How did you get your start writing for television and how did you perfect your craft?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Good morning! I'm very excited to be doing this online seminar. I want to thank everybody for being here, and for agreeing to let me change the time. I had a personal situation that needed to be dealt with and this makes it much more convenient for me. I started writing for television shortly after college, however I didn't sell anything for over five years.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL During this time I held down a regular job working for my father. I would get home at 5:30, my wife would hold dinner and I would write till 10:30. I did this every day, Monday through Friday. A full day on Saturday and a half day on Sunday. My wife puts up with a lot, as you can see. At this time I had no agent and no way to submit my material.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I mention this because I know this problem confronts many of you. You must not be defeated by this "Catch 22". Nobody will read your material unless submitted by and agent. No agent will represent you unless you have already sold something.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL This hopeless circle will eventually be penetrated. You just have to continue working. (We can discuss how to break through in a minute) After five years, I finally got an agent and began to submit through her. I would tell her what shows I wanted to write for, and she would try and book appointments for me. However, it was very difficult for her to get anybody to read or meet with me. Because I had no credits.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL What I tried to do was keep her spirits high in the midst of all this failure. Instead of criticizing her and complaining about my lack of assignments, I went the other way. I would take her to lunch and tell her how much I appreciated the efforts that she was making on my behalf. I explained that I understood how difficult it was for her to find work for me and that I was just grateful that she was making such an effort on my behalf. The result of this was that she stayed energized about my career and wanted desperately to book meetings for me.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Most writers that I knew at the time constantly complained that their agent wouldn't return their phone calls or get them work. They used to say they were about to change agents. I would ask them what they told their agent when they spoke. The writer invariably replied, "I told them the truth; I need work, I can't pay my bills, my kids need new clothes, etc." I used to think no wonder your agent doesn't return your calls. Who wants a phone call like that? I mention this because I really believe that in all professional relationships you must maintain a positive POV not a negative one.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL After about a year of meetings set up by my agent I began to sell. It is interesting to note that in the beginning she could only get me one or two meetings a year and very quickly I began to sell every time I went on an interview. The way I accomplished this was when she told me she could set up an appointment I would ask her not to do it for a week or ten days. She would say, "Why? They'll see you tomorrow!" I would answer that I needed ten days to get ready.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I would then devote 8 hours a day to my writing, (I had to quit my job). Working on story ideas for the meeting. I would come up with five or six ideas that I had never seen before and I would develop them completely. All three acts, all scenes in each act worked out. (Even though television is written in four acts, the generic structure is three) Then I would come up with five or six "springboards". A springboard is an idea with a solution, no second act: a setup and a conclusion.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Then I would come up with five or six "what ifs". A what if is simply what it sounds like, what if Rockford's old girlfriend that he used to love and wanted to marry is suddenly wanted for murder? No solution, just an idea. Then I would go in a week or ten days after the meeting had been set and pitch these ideas, starting with the fully worked out plots and failing a victory, end up with my what ifs. I never failed to get an assignment. I was too damn prepared. There was no way I was going to leave that room without a contract.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Once I went through my whole list of stories and the producer refused them all for a variety of reasons, *e.g.*, it's in development, we did it last year, we're not doing shows like that, etc. When I was finished and turned to leave thinking I had completely failed the producer stops me at the door. "By the way, you've got an assignment." "Why?" I replied, "You didn't like any of my stories." "Because in thirty years of this business, I have never had a writer come to a meeting this prepared and now I want to find out how you tick." This is very important information. I did not know what my competition was doing. I assumed that they were all as prepared as I was. The fact is, none of them were. They were coming in with half-baked ideas: maybe one or two concepts, not developed at all.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Once I became a producer and saw the quality of the pitches coming back at me I was shocked. No wonder I had done so well. Shortly after that I was put under contract at Universal as a story editor. Then I became a writer/producer/creator and I was on my way. This is a long-winded response to your question, but I believe it is one of the most important pieces of information that I can impart regarding the sell.

MODERATOR (MaxE) You have discussed listening to real people in order to create believable dialogue. However, isn't it body language that actually underscores the believability of dialogue in writing novels as well as screenplays?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Since, as a writer, you have no control over the actors' body language, forget about it. Your script has to work on paper. By the way, don't write screenplays where under each character slug you put some description as to how you want the line read. For instance, Dave, (sarcastically) "Of course that's what I mean." Actors and directors HATE this. All view it as insulting. The only time I ever see a dialogue plug is if it is possible that the line will be misunderstood. Also, it is important along these same lines, when you are writing not to try and be the director. Don't fill your scripts with a thousand shot angles. (Another neophyte mistake) Write in master scenes: INT RESTAURANT DAY. A run down diner filled with seedy people. Then, do your dialogue and if it is important that some piece of physical action occur, just write it as description. (E.g., He reaches into his pocket, removes the envelope and lays it on

the table.) Don't write: CLOSE SHOT his hand as it reaches into his pocket. New slug, MEDIUM CROSSING SHOT Table as he moves the envelope slowly from his pocket. EXTREME CLOSE UP THE ENVELOPE as it is pushed into frame. You'd be surprised how often writers do this.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Again, it infuriates directors and balloons page counts so the production department will tend to underschedule the day, which wastes money.

MODERATOR (AndreasK) When you are writing a teleplay, do you have the real locations in mind before you start or do you use a location manager to find them? For example, in the A Team pilot, where did you find the "church tower with a huge cast iron bell" and the old Mexican town?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Unless the project is location specific, like the Congress of the United States of America where you know what you're writing for, I make everything up in my head. And then the director and location manager will find something close to what I've written. Often they will improve on my idea and bring back photos and ask me to approve the change. The cast iron bell and church tower, they found. There must be thousands of those in Mexico.

MODERATOR Could you please give us some details of how a production company works and who the major players are on a TV show?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL In television, the executive producer/writer is in charge of the overall production. The studio will control budget and the executive producer is responsible to the studio that employs him to make the show for the pattern budget. The studio and the executive producer are responsible to the network to supply episodes that live up to the creative promise of the pilot.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Under the executive producer, there are usually several writer-producers. They write episodes and work with the production manager (called a UPN) to produce the show on budget.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The script goes to actors and if they have complaints or problems, the writer-producer makes adjustments, as necessary. He or she also rewrites the script for the board. A board is a physical piece of equipment that contains hundreds of cardboard strips. Each strip represents a scene. The director, the asst. director and the UPN arrange these scenes or strips on the board forming a production schedule of usually 7-10 days, depending on how the show is budgeted. The prepping director spends 7-10 days in prep casting, selecting locations, solving production problems, designing the shots and blocking on paper.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL After the director who is shooting ahead of him finishes show one, the prepping director for show two, now goes to the set and takes over the shooting company and shoots his show in 7-10 days, while director three begins his prep. And that's the way it works for 22 episodes without break.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The shooting company is divided up into departments -- hair & makeup, wardrobe, props, location, transportation, camera, electrical, etc. Each of these departments has a key who is in charge of his/her individual crew. It's all very organized and unionized. I hope that answers your question.

MODERATOR (JR Rasmus) Does your company respond to freelancers' query letters pitching TV movies or feature films? (Assuming it is submitted properly with self-addressed stamped envelopes, proper format etc.?)

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I have sold my production company and no longer am in the business of developing ideas for television, except perhaps for ideas that I write myself. I don't have a feature film operation. I am selling my movie ideas to the major studios.

MODERATOR (GregL) If the format is for 3 Act structure, how do you change the style to fit in commercials for a 4 act show?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Good question.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL All dramas are generic three-act structures. Use the structure I put in the preliminary material (lecture). Television series, however, are broken into 4 acts -- often with a teaser or a tag included, making 5 commercial breaks.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL This is obviously because networks need to sell products. What I usually do is write a long first act, a third of the story. My first acts will often go 20 minutes on the air. My second act, taking me to the network break at the 1/2 hour is usually act two which is a little shorter than act one. Act three, which is the solution of the problem, I will break into two parts ... creating a moment of jeopardy at the end of act three before starting act four. Sometimes this changes depending on the story I'm telling. But it is still a three-act structure.

MODERATOR (W Hinkson) What does the term "hold for a beat" signify? As a measurement of time, is that so many seconds? How many?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL It simply indicates to an actor that I intend to pause. It is not necessary to do that. I find that I tend to do it too much. Sometimes when I'm writing and I'm pausing myself for my next thought, I'll inadvertently stick that in. I try to pull them out when I'm editing. Some of them escape. There is an advantage to using that in the event that you don't want the dialogue to follow abruptly. It's really in the actors'/directors' hands -- it's as long as they want it to be -- or sometimes not at all.

BREAK

MODERATOR Ok, we're back! Our next question is from KathleenM: I was a P.A. on *Renegade* and would like to ask a question I never asked back then. When you are busy on the set of a show, do you still set aside time each day to write? Do you write every day without fail, or do you take days off, (without feeling guilty)?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I never to my remembrance wrote while I was acting on *Renegade*. The reason I didn't do this is that I write from 5:00 AM to 11 or 11:30 AM every day. I have been doing this for twenty-five years. I find that if I write at other times I'm not as good. I believe that it is important to write at the same time every day so that it becomes a habit in your life. If I am doing something else that will not allow for this, such as acting/directing/vacationing etc. Then I don't write and I don't feel guilty. I would imagine that in a year there are probably thirty to forty days that I'm not writing.

MODERATOR (GaryF) Could you please discuss POV in a novel vs. a screenplay scene? For example, if the *Rockford* pilot was a novel, would you write the first scene from Jerry or Harry's POV?

MODERATOR NOTE: POV is point of view :)

STEPHEN J. CANNELL POV, when it is not being used as what the character sees in a screenplay, relates to which character is telling the story. In *Rockford* I pretty much told the story through Rockford's eyes. As a result, Jim was in almost every scene: a backbreaking proposition for any actor. Since the detective genre was generally an "I" narrative in novels, I would attempt as much as possible to do an "I" narrative on that show. However, I did take the license of showing you what the heavies were doing occasionally, and would cut to them, usually in acts two and three.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL They would only be alone on screen for two or three times in an hour without Rockford being there. I found it a good tool to start our dramas with some precipitating event. This allowed my first act to start with energy. Remember, ACT ONE defines the problem and can be a slow act, if you're not careful. This precipitating event is often a crime committed by the heavies without the hero's presence, e.g., Sara Butler's father is murdered.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL If I were doing *Rockford* as a novel, I would choose one of the characters in scene one. Harry or Jerry and tell the story from his POV either as first person narrative or third person where you can also go into the head of a character and explore his/her thoughts.

MODERATOR (SeanF) How do you map out your stories beforehand? Do you use lists, outlines, 3x5 cards etc.?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL There are numerous ways that writers plot stories physically. I prefer working them out verbally with another writer. Or if I am alone, thinking at my typewriter putting down ideas thoughts, character moves, complications, etc. Then I arrange them into the correct sequence, making a beat sheet which just tells me which scene goes where. I don't want to attempt to write the dialogue or subtextual elements on the beat sheet. It just says: Opening Murder, Rockford hired by Sara, Argument over money, Restaurant, Lunch, Exposition, Bank Calls, Sarah Has No Money etc. I go through each act this way.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Some more on that subject: other writers I know use 3x5 cards which they put on a bulletin board. On the top of the bulletin board they'll put Act One, Act Two, Act Three, Act Four, as a tag. Then they will write cards that they know they will need to tell the story: Opening Murder, Rockford confronts Jerry, etc. Then they will put those cards up on the bulletin board under the act where they belong. For instance, the Opening Murder and the Hiring Scene are obviously Act One moves.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Rockford Confronts Jerry is an Act Two or Act Three move, probably Act Two. It will be put in that column. Then, as more beats are added the scenes change positions inside the acts. Both techniques work very well. Just choose the one that works best for you.

MODERATOR (SkyeD) Every producer I have met says he/she is not racist or sexist. But, why are there so few women or minorities on writing staffs in TV? I've seen producers' faces change so many times when I walked in the door and they realized the person who wrote the spec scripts

they loves was both black and female. When I got my first staff job, I didn't set foot on the lot until the first day of work for fear they would change their minds if they saw me in person. Comments?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL There is no accounting for how some people think or feel or react. Obviously what has happened to you is criminal. My feeling has always been good writers are the treasures of our business. Some of the best writers I ever worked with are women: Juanita Bartlett, Babs Greyhowsky etc. At one point on my action shows (which were thought to be male oriented), I had 40% of my screenplays written by women. It makes no sense for a producer to punish his or her show over ethnic, racial, or sexual classifications. But people can be strange.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL My advice to you is not to get bitter or angry, despite the fact that this is so unfair. Anger and bitterness will only make you less attractive to an employer. Keep smiling, keep punching and you will get where you want to go. I am a white Anglo-Saxon male which puts me in a classification which is favored. However, I also have severe learning disability. I can't spell, I read slowly, I flunked three grades before I got out of high school and was probably the least likely of all the people I know to have accomplished what I have. How did it happen that I succeeded? I simply refused to fail.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Racially, again there is no way that we can change the way people think. There are obviously inroads being made but there are fewer African American writers by far than there should be. In the last several years, I'm seeing more and more African American writers. Not only on black half-hours, also in features. Since Hollywood is one of the most liberal communities I believe that good work will WIN in the end.

MODERATOR (Yedidah G) In a screenplay or teleplay do you feel you have more freedom for omniscience than with novel writing?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL No, I believe it's just the opposite.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL In a screenplay, everything has to come out of a character's mouth. We have to devise artificial constructs to allow characters to say things to one another that in real life they probably would never say. For instance, in *Jerry Maguire*, Jerry has to tell Tidwell (Cuba Gooding) something he doesn't want to hear. So the writer has Tidwell bag on Jerry about his relationship with his wife. Jerry gets angry and shouts back, "You want the truth? I'll give you the truth. The reason nobody wants you is you're just a money player. Always complaining etc." The anger allowed him to shout something at Tidwell he otherwise would not have said.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL If we were doing this in a novel, all of this would have been easily accomplished by simply having Jerry look at Tidwell and think all these thoughts. That doesn't mean it didn't make a great scene -- it did, but using omniscient author in a novel is one of the great tools of writing unavailable to a screenwriter.

MODERATOR (GayD) How would you advise an unknown writer with a complete and professionally written script, to market the work? What are the options?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The first thing that you must do is attempt to get an agent. Again, this is that terrible Catch 22. However, remember all of us, myself included, have faced this problem. Most production companies have a rule that they won't read unsolicited material (not submitted by an agent).

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The reason for this is it screens out 99% of the writers -- the theory being if you haven't been able to convince an agent to represent you, you probably aren't very far along in your career. Secondly, agents discourage frivolous lawsuits on ideas that are in the public domain. The way to get an agent is to write the WGA (Writers Guild of America) and ask for their list of agents.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL They will send you a listing. Start sending your manuscripts out. **DON'T BE DISCOURAGED!!** These people don't want to represent you. But eventually, somebody will. You have to be persistent. One of the best ways to get an agent is to hang with other writers -- especially in the marketplace -- L.A. and N.Y. Some percentage of your friends who have read your work and know your style will eventually find representation. When that happens, you simply tell your friend, "Get your agent to read my script or I'll kill you!" You'd be surprised how we can help each other over this hard hurdle.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Once you have an agent, things become easier. Your agent is aware of the marketplace who is buying what, what shows are open, what shows are willing to take a chance on new writers -- and now your career can move forward with a little better navigation.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Again, it is very important not to quit on your dream. This is a frustrating period early on. And with no feedback and no encouragement, it's easy to quit. It took me five years. Anybody could be able to beat that.

MODERATOR (JeffreyE) How much of the backstory for each character do you create before writing a script or a novel?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The more you know about the backstory about a character, the better off you are. When I have not done adequate work in this area, I'm often stressed to see that my character or characters are shallow. Remember, it is the flaws in a character that make him/her -- not the strengths. You must know those flaws and you must know why the character has them. And this, generally, is part of his/her backstory.

MODERATOR (VirginiaK) How do you know if an agent is decent, even if he/she is listed?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL You never know exactly who your agent is until you form your relationship. That's why I gave such a long first answer. It's critical to have a positive relationship with an agent. At the beginning, beggars can't be choosers. If Dracula is registered at the WGA as an agent, and is willing to represent you, sign up.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL You need to have an agent in order to be considered a professional by this town. If you find that you cannot establish the correct relationship with your agent, then I suppose it's worth looking around for another. It's just, I believe, that you can make your agent into a cheerleader for you if you approach that person correctly. Stay **POSITIVE**.

BREAK

MODERATOR Ok, we're back for our final hour with Mr. Stephen Cannell. This last hour we will be focusing on novel writing. (SallyS) When writing a novel, what is your approach? How many drafts? I loved *King Con*! Did you actually know someone like the con artist hero, Beano Bates?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The person that I knew like Beano was Jim Rockford. I had written five or six Big Store cons for the *Rockford Files*, and became familiar with the terminology and methodology of confidence men while writing those episodes. It occurred to me that with the exception of the movie *The Sting* there were no Big Store Cons in literature and film, to my knowledge.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I believe they are very interesting and entertaining, so I thought it would be fun to write a novel about a Big Store. A Big Store, for those of you who don't know, is a con where you set up an environment that is so big and completely convincing, with hundreds of extras etc. When you walk the victim into the store there is no way that he/she will believe it is just a scam.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The con I used in *King Con* is a mineral rights scam which involves setting up a phony oil field and a phony oil company in an office building. Selling the mark on the idea that he/she is buying an undiscovered oil field. It was a lot of fun.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I work my novels out very completely before I start writing. In the case of *Riding the Snake* I actually spent a week after I had plotted the three acts and wrote a 70 page narrative only for me.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The purpose of writing this was to make sure that the story I had structured was solid. When you write a 70 page presentation narrative you will definitely find story holes, if they exist. The reason I do this is that my process requires daily forward momentum. I want to write a chapter a day, ten pages. I don't want to end up in a situation where I have to throw away half-a-dozen chapters because my story was ill-conceived.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL As far as drafts are concerned, I write chapter one, send it to my assistant to be retyped Then the next morning I read that ten to fifteen pages and do a pencil revision. Then I send it back to be retyped into the computer and I write chapter two, which is another ten to fifteen pages.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The next morning I get up, I read chapters one and two, do pencil revisions, send them back and write chapter three. The following morning, I leave chapter one behind, pencil revise chapters two and three and write chapter four. I continue in this fashion for ten to fifteen days, at which point I should have 150 pages of what I will now call the Rough Draft. Even though I have been through each chapter twice, heightening, brightening etc. Then I leave the novel for awhile, maybe a week or two. I write a TV script, a movie, do research. When I come back, I read the 150 pages in one sitting.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL It surprises me sometimes what I've done! Then I continue with the same process; three fifteen-day sessions should get me a 450 page First Draft manuscript. Then I go into the next stage, which is rewriting any problems that I see and doing close hand edits. I also put the book out to two or three people whose opinions I trust to read and give feedback.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Then I begin the second draft, utilizing the notes I feel are valid. I polish and polish and polish until I think I have on paper what I want. That's pretty much the way I do it.

MODERATOR (JaredR) Do you find writing novels to be more difficult than writing screenplays? Why or why not?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Writing novels and screenplays share many similarities. Dialogue, story structure, and discipline (which is an important acquired attribute) are all pretty much the same. However, at this point in my career, I prefer writing novels. The reason is that they are more complete projects and I can invest more of my energy and skill in one piece of work.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I love writing screenplays and I love the collaboration that occurs when you produce a movie or TV show. Actors, writers, producers coming together to do something you all believe in. It's a team sport.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Novel writing is a much lonelier profession; however you get to play all the instruments. I'm lucky that I get to do both.

MODERATOR How do you feel about using a "book doctor" that you pay to critique your work? It seems like there are a lot of people who scam writers out there.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I would suggest that you become your own "book doctor". It's important that you establish authorship and control over your work. I have people who help me with editing using a second set of eyes to catch word repetitions, sequencing problems etc. But this is not book doctoring. This is editing.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL That is, I think, a perfectly acceptable thing for a writer to do. But you must teach yourself to control and delineate your own manuscripts, this is part of the fun. Don't use a ghost.

MODERATOR Your characters always seem so alive to me. When writing a novel, how can you describe a character to the reader, aside from just giving a physical description?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL A lot of a character is in attitude. How does a character present herself/himself? The reader in a novel will supply almost everything if you give them the right handles. Wheeler Cassidy in *Riding the Snake* is described as 38 years old and handsome with curly black hair. A bad boy look that women find irresistible. Not much of a description. What makes Wheeler the character that he is, is the way HE THINKS. His sense of dismay over his life as a drunk at the Country Club bar. His sense of personal failure.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL These are really the things that define him as a character. You should experiment and see what you can do to bring your characters to life. I find that sometimes in description picking a very small but vivid detail is often very effective. IE "His face was flat, expressionless, as if he'd been hit with a shovel at birth."

MODERATOR (SableJ) Do you ever use in a screenplay or a novel, dialogue that you've overheard in, say a restaurant?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Almost never.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I usually can't remember it, for one thing! However, I will sometimes hear an expression -- a street expression -- that I have never heard before and jot it down and add it to a dictionary of street terms that I'm constantly building. Also names -- I'm always looking for names. There are all kinds of great street dictionaries, medical, military dictionaries on the Internet and in some bookstores; I talk about this in the downloadable Lecture.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL They're very helpful for writing characters from those specific disciplines. Also look for resource books. For instance, I have a medical book that gives pictures and definitions of every organ in the body, so if I'm writing an autopsy, and the doctor is speaking into a microphone, I'm using correct medical terms for the body that I'm dealing with.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I also have a book that has pictures and the names of every medical instrument known to man. If I'm cutting bone in an autopsy, I want to be able to say the coroner is using a Striker 500 rotating autopsy saw. This gives credibility to your work and/or your dialogue.

MODERATOR (AndreasK) For your novels that will be made into movies..do you write the screenplay first or the novel? When you write the novel, are you considering how it will play on the big screen?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I never worry about the movie when I'm writing the book. A novel is a novel. A screenplay is a screenplay. Don't get the two mixed up. You shouldn't be writing a novel so you can get a screenplay assignment.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Your work should have its own integrity. If I had never sold one of my novels to the movies, I would've been disappointed, but not devastated. I am writing novels because I love to write novels.

MODERATOR (SableJ) Mr. Cannell, how do you feel about comparisons for descriptions in novels? E.g., "The room in the light of the setting sun looked like a Maxfield Parrish painting."

STEPHEN J. CANNELL It is not the way I write, but if it's the way you write, and it accents your voice as a novelist, then by all means, do it. We all have to develop our own style.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL There are no rules for this sort of situation. Most of the rules in writing deal with structure and character arcs, etc. Style is style. Remember, when Picasso switched from representational painting to abstract, everybody thought he was crazy. Nobody had painted like that before. Now you can't afford those paintings unless you're Rupert Murdoch. Don't be afraid to blaze your own trail. But before Picasso painted abstracts, he knew how to paint an apple that looked like an apple.

MODERATOR (HelenM) Would you please comment on the balance between dialogue and narrative in novels? I enjoy dialogue which moves the story forward, but there are times when narration is needed. Any guidelines for this?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The mixture between dialogue, narrative and description is always the choice that the writer has to make. I read an author not too long ago who refused to let his characters speak. Instead of saying, "Get out of here, dammit! I never want to see your face again!" he would say, "David told the man to leave and never come back," refusing dialogue in favor of narrative.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The result of this was he placed a curtain between me and his character because he never let me hear the character speak. I read three chapters and set the book aside. His choice to favor narrative obviously appealed to him -- but not to me. We all have to make this choice. I believe, as you do, that dialogue is one of the more interesting aspects of writing. I think writers who choose not to use dialogue are afraid to commit to the sound of the characters.

MODERATOR (CaroleG) Would you please comment on the abundance of metaphor in your novels and how that metaphor may be transferred to the screen later?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Again, metaphor and similes are novel writing tools, much more than they are screenwriting tools. They are generally used in description and not in dialogue, because people don't speak in metaphor and simile. Or if they do, generally we write it as a mixed metaphor so that it doesn't sound "written". Therefore, when I have adapted my novel to screenplays, I leave my metaphors and similes behind.

MODERATOR (DanD)How important is a character "arc" or character development during the course of a novel?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL I think it's critical that a character be on a journey. In all of my books, I have started with the flaws overpowering the central character and taking my characters on a journey that helps to rehabilitate those flaws so that they move on at the end of the novel. Wheeler and Tanisha are both disenfranchised characters at the beginning of *Riding the Snake*. Wheeler is a country club bum. Tanisha is isolated from both her South Central neighborhood and the police department where she works. Through the drama, they find their strengths and become better people. The same is true in *King Con*, *Final Victim* and *The Plan*.

MODERATOR Ok, that's all the time we have for questions. I'd like to turn it over to Mr. Cannell now for his closing remarks. Stephen, what thoughts would you like to leave our participants with?

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Well thank you for spending this time with me. The most important thing that I can say at this point is that writers must write. I can't stress enough how important it is to try to write every day.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL Your writing muscle gets stronger with exercise just as your arm muscle gets stronger with exercise. It happens slowly -- but it happens.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL The other most important thing that I can say is DON'T GIVE UP when you encounter rejection. Rejection, unfortunately, is part of the writing process. For every novel accepted or screenplay bought, there are thousands that are passed on. THAT DOES NOT MEAN THAT YOURS WILL NOT BE BOUGHT. If you write every day, your work will grow. And soon the quality that you display will begin to be the countervailing force. Quality always wins in the end. You have to work diligently and be smart about your marketing. Unfortunately, writers have to also worry about selling.

STEPHEN J. CANNELL It would be nice if that weren't so, but even I, after 30 years, still have to try to steer my projects into the right place in the market. You must not rely only upon agents and third parties. Keep working, enjoy the process of writing. Don't try to be brilliant, just try to entertain yourself -- and you will find that great things will happen. See ya at the Academy Awards!

MODERATOR Thank you Stephen!

MODERATOR Thank you and good afternoon!! Thank you again to our audience! We hope to see you all at future Live Events!