

## NOW SHOWING

RON ELLIOTT

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## ABOUT THE BOOK

*Now Showing* contains five very different stories adapted from screenplays written by Ron Elliott:

- Zac takes his girlfriend into the desert outside Kalgoorlie and tries to win her heart again with the aid of a rifle.
- Simon picks up some low-rent killers in his taxi, one of whom was his high school nemesis. He tries to save an overweight jockey, the jockey's wife and himself without the aid of firearms.
- In 1991, the internet hatched, but for Adam it fails as an aid to finding the girl of his dreams. Trapped in a block of flats with urban terrorists, a prostitute, a madman and his canary, Adam struggles to be a man.
- Dave is a luckless gambler who takes a case of uncut diamonds across Europe pursued by a burgeoning number of international police, criminals and beautiful women.
- Daniel and Helen have two beautiful children and a thriving business. They also have Amis, a psychopath fixed on destroying every part of Daniel's life.

Each story has been written (in the author's words) to 'amuse, enthrall and excite in equal measure'.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ron Elliott is a scriptwriter, director and academic, and author of the novel *Spinner*. His directorial credits include a feature film, *Justice*, and episodes of ABC programs such as *Dancing Daze*, *Relative Merits* and *Studio 86*. Ron has written for *Home and Away*, *Minty*, *Wild Kat*, *Ship to Shore* and many more children's television series. In 2001 he wrote the AFI nominated telemovie *Southern Cross*. Ron is currently a lecturer in Film and Television at Curtin University.

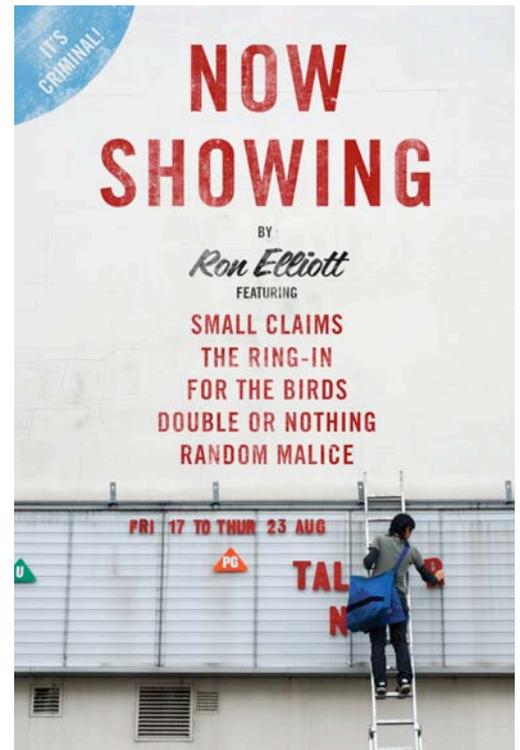
## INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

**Is each story still recognisable as its film script version? And do these stories still feel 'like' films?**

As I described in the introduction to *Now Showing*, I think there are many parallels between film and prose. I find myself agreeing with Robert Drewe, who contends that prose and film are quite similar. Prose can do anything film can do, especially when, as with Drewe's work, that prose is particularly visual and immediate.

However, I found that in adapting these film scripts, residue of the films' structure and mimetic elements remains. I think that in each story there are imprints of the films first imagined – in structure, duration, and in dialogue and characterisation. The strong adherence to genre in each story remains a feature.

'For the Birds' is possibly most like a film in terms of its large cast and cross-cutting of interlocking stories. On the other hand, many novels do this, too. *The Bonfire of the Vanities*, *Underworld* and



*The Corrections* spring to mind. *American Beauty*, *Traffic*, *Any Given Sunday* and lots of Robert Altman's films are cinematic examples. Outside of structure, I have always battled to think of what film 'For the Birds' might be like. *Delicatessen* meets *Identity*?

I think 'The Ring-In' is still filmic. It is noir with a bit of the Tarantino *Pulp Fiction* structure thrown in, influenced by *The Grifters* (the film, rather than the Jim Thompson novel). But it is an Oz version, so maybe there's some *Two Hands* in there too. I think the prose genre and the film genre of the thriller are pretty similar. The writers have seen the movies and the directors have read the books so there's a kind of cross-medium genre now. I see 'Random Malice' as a classic thriller.

'Small Claims' has changed the most from its original. As a script, the story was shown from an objective, effaced narrator, Hemingway-style. In the script, we happen to be in the perfect position to see what Robin and Zac do, and to hear what they say, but we are not privy to their unspoken thoughts. But it was, and is, a kind of detective story, and I did not want to know what was in Robin's head when I was turning it into a short story. I liked the mystery of her. So I saw a chance for Zac to tell his side of things. He's a pretty funny guy, kind of confused and yearning, and I thought I'd like to play with the first person character narrator – which isn't something that works particularly well in film. Once I got into Zac's head and found his voice, then his intentions and the things he failed to see became a really strong force within the story.

'Double or Nothing' was a comedy heist movie. Dave is one lucky and unlucky bastard. As I wrote it, I was thinking about larrikins like Barry McKenzie, and books by Shane Maloney and Robert G. Barrett. They usually work by contrasting the hero's beliefs against what is actually going on. In the screenplay there were great scenes of surveillance and cross-cut police mishaps outside the barge in Amsterdam and while Dave has to excrete the diamond packages in the grounds of Scone Castle. These worked well in the script, but once I chose to have Dave telling the story to a variety of *gendarmierie*, then clearly there were things he could not know at the time.

'You sure you're not spinning out of control?' Dave's mate Terry asks him. But Dave says he's spinning faster and faster so he's going to take off and fly away from the disasters. That's Dave. Spinning faster and faster.

## **What was the story that went through the most number of drafts? What changes occurred along the way as you moved from script to fiction?**

'The Ring-In' went through the most drafts and for a variety of different reasons.

The first issue was point of view. Film is very fluid in regards to its handling of point of view. It appears to be objective, but actually moves into subjective views from different characters quite often, within a scene or even from shot to shot.

Yet, while film can be omniscient in choosing perspective, it does not go as deeply into consciousness as prose can. All of these things become choices for telling the story. Who sees this? Who is telling this? Who is experiencing this? And, as a consequence, what don't they see? Does the viewer? Does the reader? These are strategic storytelling choices, mind you, not rules.

The script of 'The Ring-In' used a lot of point of view shifts within scenes, sometimes line to line, whereas the journey towards the finished prose piece involved a variety of experiments concerning perspective and how quickly I could shift into another character's point of view while bringing the reader with me. (I'm wrestling with an academic article right now trying to explain why this is in more detail.)

In 'The Ring-In', Grace is the only character who has flashbacks. Her flashbacks are about the three years that have led her and her husband JJ to the events of this long, long day. Some folks who have read the script have had issues with the mix of time lines within the same story. I confess I was influenced by Tarantino when writing this script and loved the playfulness of changing it up.

Can I also invoke *Breathless*? *Out of the Past* has a really interesting time structure too.

I had other discussions concerning 'The Ring-In' regarding genre and how that fitted in with Perth. These were conversations with my editor for the stories, and also with readers giving feedback on the drafts. There had been many earlier discussions on this script with producers, directors and script editors – so all this feedback can be tested or rejected or embraced.

Let me go back a step. When I first conceived of 'The Ring-In', I wondered whether the very American noir genre could be transplanted to Perth. Killers for hire seemed to be particularly American, and perhaps also European. I asked myself: what if my hero was not a gunslinger? What if he was more like you and me and not an ex-soldier and not a fist fighter or gun user? Could that person win without being Clint Eastwood (in younger days)?

David Whish-Wilson, Alan Carter and Dave Warner have all worked with crime in Western Australia and Perth. Robert Drewe does too, in *The Shark Net*. But the question of whether the noir could become *Perth suburban* noir, given some notorious events surrounding alleged race fixing, is what made me want to write this story, and it needed lots of tweaking to keep it believable and exciting as Aussie Noir.

Then came the issue of Perth and where the story would occur. I love the beach and the river too. But I didn't grow up there. I grew up as far west as Morley, as far north as Gnangara and Upper Swan, as far east as Mundaring. The centre of my pre-university world was Midland. Midland does not have a lot of sea breezes. It doesn't have a lot of surfies or hippies either. It's urban, industrial and pretty tough. Roe Highway sums up a lot of Australia, not just Perth – big bits of Sydney and Melbourne where their west is our east. And that's where I wanted 'The Ring-In', on what was once the edge of town ... where 'the boardwalk ends' ... and where I went to high school. So, in the course of drafting and revising, the version of Perth I worked with in this story was something I took time with, and of course, the result is a composite, not a documentary.

**Reading your novel *Spinner*, about the cricketing wunderkind David Donald, and now reading these stories, it seems to me that storytelling as an art form is something you really enjoy and something which is central to your practice as a writer. Is this true?**

Maybe it is. But *Spinner* needed a frame. The truth and the emergence of who was telling us this tale came late. With these stories, I was confronted with voice because it was more important in prose. Voice disappears in film. Unless it is *Forrest Gump* where someone is narrating, screenwriting rarely has a voice. The storyteller is effaced. Events are happening and we merely report what happens; the drama and characters are the story. And then, if the film is made, the scriptwriter disappears altogether; the film seems to exist in its own right (unless you're Charlie Kaufman!). But in some of this prose, it felt like a great chance to explore who tells the stories and therefore why we tell stories. Again, that became something central for me in *Spinner* – why we need David Donald and why we need stories.

But when it came to turning these five scripts into prose stories, *how to tell them* was in the front of my mind. I think I wanted to tell them differently because, unlike the screenplay form, I felt I had more narrative options in prose as to the different ways I could tell the stories.

In 'Small Claims', limiting the point of view to Zac preserved Robin's mystery but increased Zac's emotional depth. Using only Zac, I had to lose some bits of the screen story, but the emotional gains made up for this. Having Dave narrate his own story in 'Double or Nothing' brought out his humour and opened up a playfulness that the reader can be part of – 'Who? Who's he talking to now?' On the other hand, a restricted point of view would not have worked at all in 'For the Birds' because I needed the ironic outside stance and the interplay of lots of characters – like the internet.

This brings me back to the divergent time lines that I mentioned regarding the rewrites of 'The Ring-In'. There's a very strong power in a story proceeding over a very short time frame with the clock ticking. I was intrigued by who Grace was and who she could become, and so I also used her flashbacks. Flashbacks are supposed to be suspense killers. We wait around till people have finished showing the past so we can get back on the exciting train of the present. Anyway, I felt the prose story should have the robustness to carry Grace's backstory and the present story. Who she had become could not be contained within one night. On the other hand a lot of Simon and Ellis's past is conveyed in their dialogue. In 'The Ring-In', there's three stories all heading towards the crash site.

## **Where do your ideas come from?**

Everywhere. At any time. I write them down on scraps of paper and put them in piles of possibly related material. For instance, I once wrote a drama for the WA Academy of Performing Arts based on the hypothermia experiments at Dachau. It was an exploration of evil called 'Good'. It came from a single photograph I saw on an ABC documentary discussing the ethics of using the findings of 'tainted experiments'. The black and white photo was of a man dressed as a pilot suspended over a tank of water. Right then, I wanted to write about that man. And so I researched and wrote the drama, which we recorded at Channel 10 in Perth. But usually, it isn't as clear or as strong as that.

'Random Malice' came from the scene in the Christmas store. I was there with my two girls and this kid was being very annoying around a racing car display, and was reaching in and disrupting things. Finally a random father tried to stop him and out of nowhere came this aggressive man – the father of the annoying kid. 'Don't you touch my kid. Don't you ever touch my kid.' It was quite scary. There were Christmas carols playing in the background. I ushered my girls away rather than stand up to him, as my character Daniel did ... and I had a neighbour who had a business and there was a recession on ... and I have been renovating houses (mine) for years and then I thought, what if this guy from the Christmas store just fixed on you, like a curse, like a recession?

'The Ring-In' had lots of influences. I was intrigued by a news story I had read about this jockey and his girlfriend who'd been sent on holiday for two years to keep them from testifying on a gambling trick called a horse ring-in. I think it was the Fine Cotton Affair.

None of the existing story has any basis in real events, I should add. Anyway, I couldn't leave the idea alone. What if the girlfriend read books while they were away? What if she gave herself an education and came back changed? At the same time, I'd been thinking about all the American crime stuff I liked to read and thought – what if your hero didn't shoot? What if he was an anti-Clint? I have trouble with the notion that 'might' wears the 'white hat'. In addition, there was a guy who wanted to beat me up in high school. And then there was the idea of Midland, its portrayal, and the rural edges of Perth where I grew up. So, there were a few ideas meshing and sparking. (By the way, I'd written three drafts of the script before the Tom Cruise film *Collateral* came out, which killed off producer interest in making 'The Ring-In' for a while, but was not an influence on my story.)

## **Are you particularly drawn to stories or films about crime?**

I like crime books. I go through periods where I devour them. I've had other periods during which I read a lot of science fiction. And I love literary fiction too.

I have a long list of crime. In Oz, there's Peter Corris, Peter Temple, Gabrielle Lord, Alan Carter, David Whish-Wilson and Dave Warner. But I've always been drawn to American noir – Jim Thompson, David Goodis and Cornell Woolrich. I've read Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler, of course, and I love Michael Connelly and Elmore Leonard, as well as James Lee Burke and Ross MacDonald. Not so keen on Ellroy. Then there's the more police procedural stuff like Patricia Cornwell and Martin Cruz Smith. And spies. I love everything John le Carré writes.

Everything. Grit. I like a lot of grit. I don't like drawing room, village stuff. Not a fan of Miss Marple or Poirot. I loved Malla Nunn's first novel, *A Beautiful Place to Die*.

I also like film noir. *Out of the Past*. Oh, and both versions of *Cape Fear*. I also really like newer films such as *Body Heat*, *Chinatown* and *The Grifters*, oh and *Red Rock West* and *The Last Seduction*. Some folks have started suggesting *Raging Bull* is noir, but it's not. It might tick some boxes, but noir is criminal. *Seven* and *Miller's Crossing*, maybe. *Blade Runner*, sure. *The Third Man* is noir. My favourite is *Double Indemnity*. Noir is petty as well as greedy.

## How do considerations of genre affect your prose?

These are very important in film. There are rules and conventions. I like the bending part of it. The genre stuff then goes elsewhere and questions the tropes that it employs. It should never be a formula, but you do need to study the genre before you write in it because the audience has expectations – these can then be extended. I fell in love with genre through westerns; I saw how there were cycles in a genre, parodies, and the intertextuality of films talking to each other. *Rio Bravo* and *High Plains Drifter* were two different answers to *High Noon*. *Little Big Man* and *The Searchers* answered more basic earlier dichotomies. And then *Deadwood* came along and redefined civilisation and morality again. I love westerns. *The Proposition* pushes these conventions into the Australian past. *Bad Day at Black Rock* is a great western. Knowing and using genre conventions allows you to throw up certain kinds of sparks against the rules.

I believe that all the stories in *Now Showing* play with genre expectations and awareness. 'Random Malice' plays it straight, but 'The Ring-In' hopefully keeps you guessing with characters, expectations and events, while all the time you are wondering if Simon is going to crack. I hope 'Small Claims' plays with the yearnings that life is like a movie, when it's not. It's messy and we don't get to shoot our way to happiness. I think that Crime is a broad enough church to allow my stories to sit amongst the congregation – maybe near the back or behind the baby window.

## What are some of your important cinematic influences?

My cinematic influences are too many and too varied to mention. Cinema of the fifties and seventies? The growth of Hollywood independents. The second wave of Australian directors such as Weir, Armstrong, Beresford and Schepisi. World cinema. Wong Kar-wai. Zhang Yimou. Ang Lee. Ingmar Bergman. Ridley Scott. Kieslowski. Mike Leigh. Herzog, Fassbinder and Wim Wenders. Scorsese. Francis Ford Coppola. I love *Bringing Up Baby*, *Groundhog Day* and also *There's Something about Mary*. I don't like David Lynch. I'm not very partial to all the special effects, gadgets and *Avengers* stuff, but like *Iron Man* and *Captain America*. I like Arnold Schwarzenegger movies and Atom Egoyan. Ron's top ten films: *Blade Runner*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *The Godfather*, *Three Colours: Blue*, *Wild Strawberries*, *In the Mood for Love*, *The Conformist*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *Citizen Kane*, *The Misfits*. Oh, okay, then ... and *Doctor Zhivago*, *Apocalypse Now* and *The Deer Hunter*, *The General*, *Pulp Fiction*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, lots of Kurosawa films and *Alien*. Oh, and all the films that Paul Newman was in. There. My top ten (or so).

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

### Introduction

- Is the experience of reading these stories similar to going to a movie? In what ways does the reader experience the residue of the movie experience?

### Small Claims

- In which genre or sub-genre would you place 'Small Claims'?
- How many movies can you identify in 'Small Claims' that are referred to directly or via different scenes? Why has the author chosen to make this story so referential?
- What burden does Robin carry?
- How would you describe the relationship between Robin and Zac?
- The car is used as a metaphor in both 'Small Claims' and 'The Ring-In'. What does it represent

and how does it differ in these stories?

## **The Ring-In**

- What is the connection between the Proust epigram on p. 67 and the story that follows?
- To what genre does 'The Ring-In' belong? What are the characteristics of this genre?
- What real-life echoes and cultural references can you find in this story?
- Does Simon conform to usual notions of the hero?
- Is Grace a *femme fatale*?
- How does the author manage Simon's point of view? How close does the author let us get to Simon? What distancing effects has the author put in place?
- What kind of a character is Ellis? Have you encountered characters like him in other movies?
- The author has said that he always thought of Graham Greene when he was writing this book, and the constant questing and failing to find forgiveness in Greene's work. How do these things play out in 'The Ring-In'?

## **For the Birds**

- To what genre does 'For the Birds' belong? What are the characteristics of this genre?
- Why does the story open with a diagram of the block of flats?
- Do you sympathise with any of the characters in this story in particular?
- Does Adam manage to flee from his past, by the end of the story?
- What kinds of models of contemporary masculinity does this story offer?
- What difference does the 1990s setting make to the story and the plot?
- What place does the internet have in the plot and themes?
- What crimes are committed in this story?
- The author has said 'For the Birds' is *Delicatessen* meets *Identity*. In what ways do these two films relate to the story?

## **Double or Nothing**

- In what genre would you place this story?
- What kind of character is Dave? Do you think that the reader's sympathies are supposed to lie with Dave?
- Do we witness any personal development in Dave through the course of the story?
- In what ways is this a story about storytelling itself? Is Dave a reliable narrator?
- Discuss the structure of this piece. What narrative difficulties does it present? Could it have been written another way?
- The author has said this story began as the script for a telemovie but ended up as a pilot for a TV series. How might each approach shape the script?

## **Random Malice**

- To what genre does the story 'Random Malice' belong?
- What kind of character is Amis? What kind of a character is Daniel? Have you encountered characters like these in movies you have seen?
- Amis' sections are written in a different tense to the Daniel sections. Why has the author done this?
- In some ways 'Random Malice' is a companion piece to 'Small Claims'. Compare and contrast the characters and threat in these stories.
- The author has said that Amis personifies the myriad economic factors and outside forces that can beset a family struggling to make ends meet. To what extent does the genre enable the author to explore this theme?