

## THE FIRST DRAFT.

I knew the moment I'd finished Lynn Barber's wonderful autobiographical essay in *Granta*, about her affair with a shady older man at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties, that it had all the ingredients for a film. There were memorable characters, a vivid sense of time and place – an England right on the cusp of profound change – an unusual mix of high comedy and deep sadness, and interesting, fresh things to say about class, ambition and the relationship between children and parents. My wife Amanda is an independent film producer, so I made her read it, too, and she and her colleague Finola Dwyer went off to option it. It was only when they began to talk about possible writers for the project that I began to want to do it myself – a desire which took me by surprise, and which wasn't entirely welcome. Like just about every novelist I know, I have a complicated, usually unsatisfactory relationship with film writing: ever since my first book, *Fever Pitch*, was published, I have had some kind of script on the go. I adapted *Fever Pitch* for the screen myself, and the film was eventually made. But since then there have been at least three other projects – a couple of originals, and an adaptation of somebody else's work – which ended in failure, or at least, in no end product, which is the same thing.

The chief problem with script-writing is that, most of the time, it seems utterly pointless, especially when compared with the relatively straightforward business of book publishing: the odds against a film, any film, ever being made are simply too great. Once you have established yourself as a novelist, then people seem quite amenable to the idea of publishing your books: your editor will make suggestions as to how they can be improved, of course, but the general idea is that, sooner or later, they will be in a bookshop, available for purchase. Film, however, doesn't work that way, not least because even the lowest-budget films cost millions of pounds to make, and as a consequence, there is no screenwriter alive, however established in the profession, who writes in the secure knowledge that his work will be filmed. Plenty of people make a decent living from writing screenplays, but that's not quite the same thing: as a rule of thumb, I'd estimate that there is a ten per cent chance of any movie being actually put into production, especially if one is working outside the studio system, as every writer in Britain does and must. I know, through my relationship with Amanda and Finola and other friends who work in the business, that London is awash with optioned books, unmade scripts, treatments awaiting development money that will never arrive.

So why bother? Why spend three, four, five years rewriting and rewriting a script that is unlikely ever to become a film? For me, the first reason to walk back into this world of pain, rejection and disappointment was the desire to collaborate: I spend much of my working day on my own, and I'm not naturally unsociable. Signing up for 'An Education' initially gave me the chance to sit in a room with Amanda and Finola and Lynn and talk about the project as if it might actually happen one day, and later on I had similar conversations with directors and actors and the people from BBC Films. A novelist's life is devoid of meetings, and yet people with proper jobs get to go to them all the time. I suspect that part of the appeal of film for me is not only the opportunity for collaboration it provides, but the illusion it gives of real work, with colleagues and appointments and coffee cups with saucers and biscuits that I haven't bought myself. And there's one more big attraction: if it does come off, then it's proper fun, lively and glamorous and exciting in a way that poor old books

can never be, however hard they try. Even before this film's release, we have taken it to the Sundance Festival in Utah, and Berlin. And I have befriended several of the cast, who, by definition, are better-looking than the rest of us...What has literature got, by comparison?

I wrote the first draft of 'An Education' on spec, some time in 2004, and while doing so, I began to see some of the problems that would have to be solved if the original essay were ever to make it to the screen. There were no problems with the essay itself, of course, which did everything a piece of memoir should do; but by its very nature, memoir presents a challenge, consisting as it does of an adult mustering all the wisdom he or she can manage to look back at an earlier time in life. Almost all of us become wiser as we get older, so we can see pattern and meaning in an episode of autobiography – pattern and meaning that we would not have been able to see at the time. Memoirists know it all, but the people they are writing about know next to nothing.

We become other things, too, as well as wise: more articulate, more cynical, less naïve, more or less forgiving, depending on how things have turned out for us. The Lynn Barber who wrote the memoir – a celebrated journalist, known for her perspicacious, funny, occasionally devastating profiles of celebrities – shouldn't be audible in the voice of the central character in our film, not least because, as Lynn says in her essay, it was the very experiences that she was describing that formed the woman we know. In other words, there was no 'Lynn Barber' until she had received the eponymous education. Oh, this sounds obvious to the point of banality: a sixteen-year-old girl should sound different from her sixty-year-old self. What is less obvious, perhaps, is the way the sixty-year-old self seeps into every brush-stroke of the self-portrait in a memoir. Sometimes even the dialogue that Lynn provided for her younger version – perfectly plausible on the page - sounded too hard-bitten, when I thought about a living, breathing young actress saying the words.

The other major problem was the ending. Lynn Barber nearly threw her life away, nearly missed out on the chance to go to university, nearly didn't sit her exams. And though lots of movie endings derive their power from close shaves, they tend to be a little more enthralling: the bullet just misses the hero, the meteor just misses our planet. It was going to be hard to make people care about whether a young girl got a place at Oxford, no matter how clever she was. Lynn became Jenny after the first draft or two; there were practical reasons for the change, but it helped me to think about the character that I was in the process of creating, rather than the character who existed already, the person who had written the piece of memoir.

Some stories mean something, some don't. It was clear to me that this one did, but I wasn't sure what, and the things it meant to me weren't and couldn't be the same as the things it meant to Lynn: she had found, in this chapter of her life, all sorts of interesting clues to her future, for example, but I couldn't worry about my character's future. I had to worry about her present, and how that present might feel compelling to an audience. It would take me several more drafts before I got even halfway there.

## BBC FILMS

The first time I had a formal conversation with anyone in the film industry about *An Education*, it didn't go well. Somebody who was in a position to fund the film – because Amanda and Finola, as independent producers, were not able to do that – had expressed an interest, read my first draft, invited us in to a meeting. His colleague,

however, clearly wasn't convinced that there was any commercial potential in the film at all, and that was that. This reflected a pattern repeated many times over the next few years: there was interest in the script, followed by doubts about whether any investment could ever be recouped. Sometimes it felt as though I was in the middle of writing a little literary novel, and going around town asking for a five million pound advance for it. Our belief in the project, our conviction that it could one day become a beautiful thing, was sweet, and the producers' passion got us through a few doors, but it didn't mean that we weren't going to cost people money. Another problem with the film's commercial appeal was beginning to become apparent, too: the lead actress would have to be an unknown – no part for Kate or Cate or Angelina here – and no conventional male lead would want to play the part of the predatory, amoral, possibly lonely David, the older man who seduces the young girl. (Peter Sarsgaard, who responded and committed to the script at an early stage, is a proper actor: he didn't seem to worry much about whether his character would damage his chances of getting the lead in a romantic comedy.)

The good people at BBC Films, however, saw something in the script – either that, or the desperation in our eyes – and funded the development of 'An Education', which meant paying me to write another draft, and giving Amanda and Finola some seed money. The meeting we had with David Thompson and Tracey Scofield went the way no conversations of this kind go, in my experience: as we talked, their professional scepticism was replaced by enthusiasm and understanding. This is supposed to be the point of meetings, from the supplicants' point of view, anyway; but in my experience, (and probably in yours too, whatever your profession) nobody who was previously doubtful is ever really open to persuasion or suggestion. The fact that the thirty minutes or so spent talking to David and Tracey wasn't a waste of time is more remarkable than it should be.

I didn't need money to write another draft of the script, of course; I am well paid in my other profession, and my family and I could have borne a few months of unpaid work. But money has a symbolic value, too. We all needed some indication that others in the industry felt as enthusiastic about *An Education* as we did, otherwise we could be pretty sure that any future energy poured into the project would run right through it and down the drain. BBC Films gave us a sense of purpose. They were not in a position to fund the film, but they could help us to get the project into shape so that others might want to.

## DIRECTORS.

It helps to attach a director to the project, too, for exactly the same reasons. Beeban Kidron read whatever was the most recent draft, liked it, met to talk about it, and then worked with me on the script for the best part of a year. (These years slip by, so it's a relief to remember that other things were happening while *An Education* wasn't being made. I wrote my young adult novel 'SLAM', and my third son was born; Finola was off making the TV mini-series 'Tsunami'. We have something to show for that time.) I loved working with Beeban, who lives round the corner from my office, and could therefore meet within five minutes of receiving an email, if she was around; it was through talking to her, thinking about what she needed from the script as a filmmaker, that I made several important improvements to the script. Certainly Jenny's complicity in many of David's deceptions, her willingness to manipulate her parents, came out of my work with Beeban; we too as our cue Lynn Barber's admission, in the original piece, that when she witnessed 'David' stealing the map, she didn't do

anything about it. The decision we made during that time made the script more morally complicated, and the film is the richer for it.

Beeban and I had a cloud hanging over us, however. She was attached to another movie which, like ours, had spent a long time in development. Eventually it became apparent that she couldn't do both, that they were going to clash, and reluctantly (I think and hope) she decided to go with the project which had predated ours. We were back to square one.

We talked to several more directors after Beeban's departure. Most wanted to develop the script further, which was fair enough; the trouble is that no two directors could agree on the route we should be taking. One young director even wondered whether the whole 1962 thing was a red herring - had we thought of setting it in the present day? No, we hadn't. I was particularly keen to work with a woman director - yes, I had female producers to keep a watch on Jenny as she developed in the script, but the value of a woman director who could work with our young actress on set would, I felt, be incalculable - and when Lone Scherfig, the Danish director of *Italian For Beginners*, expressed an interest in making the film, we all wanted to listen to what she had to say. Lone turned out to be smart about the script, endlessly enthusiastic, and with an outsider's eye for detail; after she'd taken the job, she set about immersing herself in the look of 1962 England, its clothes and its cars and its cakes. We were lucky to find her.

## CAST

So then we were four: Amanda, Finola, Lone and I. And, for some time, we'd been talking to casting director Lucy Bevan. I'm quite often asked how much input I have in the various processes of film-making - "Do you have a say in the casting, for example?" And though I'd like to claim credit for just about everything, the truth is that I simply don't know enough about actors (or directors, or editors, or designers, or composers) to contribute to these decisions in any meaningful way. How many young actresses did I know capable of playing the part of Jenny, for example? None at all. What about male actors for the part of David? Well, there was Colin Firth, of course, who I knew from *'Fever Pitch'*. And John Cusack (*'High Fidelity'*) and Hugh Grant, and Nicholas Hoult, from *'About A Boy'*, and the guy with the haircut from *'No Country For Old Men'*, which I'd just seen, probably, right before I was asked for my opinion ...OK, not one of these was right, but they were all I could think of. Lucy Bevan's job is to read a script and come up with scores of imaginative suggestions for each part, and she's brilliant at it. On the whole, it's best that the casting director, rather than the writer, has a say in casting.

Every now and again I'd say, "Oh, God, you can't ask *him*." Not because the actor in question was bad, or wrong for the part, but because it seemed to me insulting and embarrassing to offer it to him. Lucy, Amanda and Finola were ambitious for *An Education* in ways that I could never have been, which is why we ended up with Dominic Cooper and Rosamund Pike and Sally Hawkins, rather than, say, my friend Harry, my sister and my next-door neighbour.

It was Lucy who knew about Carey Mulligan, of course - she's been in *Bleak House*, and *Pride and Prejudice*, and those who had worked with her all talked of her phenomenal talent. But when I was told that they were thinking of casting a twenty-two year-old as sixteen-year-old Jenny, I was a little disappointed; it would, I thought, be a different kind of film, with an older and as a consequence more knowing girl in the lead role. But when I saw the first shots of Carey in her school uniform, I worried that she looked too young, that we were involved in a dubious remake of *'Lolita'*.

When Carey's mother visited the set, she told us that Carey had always cursed her youthful looks, but here they worked for her: I cannot imagine any other actress who could have been so convincing as a schoolgirl and yet so dazzling after her transformation. And, of course, she can act. This was a huge part for any young actress - Jenny is in every single scene - but I don't think one ever tires of watching her, though. There's so much detail, so much intelligence in the performance that it's impossible to get bored.

My only contribution was a small panic when I'd watched her audition on DVD - she was so clearly, uncannily right that I was concerned when I heard she hadn't yet been offered the role. And yet this small panic, expressed after producers and director and casting agent had seen the audition, and long after she'd been cast in other high-profile productions, is easily enough for me to claim that I discovered her; so I will, for years to come.

## ORLANDO BLOOM

"Oh, God, you can't ask him," I said. Well, they'd already asked him, and he'd already said he wanted to play the part of Danny. Arrangements were made for the care of his dog.

A couple of weeks before shooting, I was asked to talk to him about a couple of lines in the script. He called me at my office, and told me that, much as he admired the writing, he wouldn't be able to play the part. He hoped we'd be able to work together on something else. Confused, I called my wife and told her that, as far as I could tell, Orlando Bloom had just told me he wouldn't, after all, be playing the part of Danny. Amanda spoke to his agent.

"No," she said. "There has been a misunderstanding." (It was clear, I felt, from the tone of her voice, who had misunderstood whom.) "He just wanted to talk to you about the script."

I replayed the conversation in my head. We already had a wonderful cast lined up, but Orlando Bloom's fan club would, it was felt, help the box office of a small British film no end. How had I managed to drive him away, in under three minutes? What had I said?

"He's going to call you at home later," she said. Don't mess it up, she didn't say. But that's what I heard anyway.

He called that night, and we had exactly the same conversation. I strode around our kitchen, listening to Orlando Bloom talk about his regret and sadness, while I made throat-chopping gestures at my wife. As I wasn't doing any of the talking, she could see and hear that I wasn't doing any of the damage, either. I have no idea what any of it was about - why he'd turned us down, why he'd said yes in the first place, whether he'd ever intended to do it, whether it really was Orlando Bloom I'd been speaking to. Incredibly, the brilliant Dominic Cooper stepped in almost immediately.

## THE READ-THROUGH

In the strange world of independent cinema, everyone - director, writer, cast, producers - proceeds on the basis that the film will be made, even though there is still no money with which to make it. If it's not make-believe (after all, we were all being paid to pretend, which children aren't), then it's a particularly committed form of method acting: we were inhabiting the bodies of independent film-makers, thinking their thoughts at all times in the hope of convincing someone that this was who we

were. And eventually somebody believed us. The American financiers Endgame Entertainment liked the script and the cast and the director enough to enable the film to happen, and suddenly we were all sitting around a table, reading the script out loud to see how it sounded. (I say “we” because I read too – Alfred Molina couldn’t make it, so I played the part of Jenny’s father Jack. This I did by shouting a lot.) I have been to a few read-throughs, and if they go well, as this one did, they are completely thrilling, not least because this is the only time that the script is read from beginning to end in its entirety, so it’s the only chance the writer ever gets to listen to his words in the right order, in real time. The film isn’t shot that way, and scenes get chopped, or never shot in the first place...For the writer, the read-through is the purest, most fully-realised version of the script, before the actual film-making part of film-making gets in the way.

## THE SHOOT.

I wasn’t there much, so don’t ask me. I had just started a book (*Juliet, Naked*, available now in all good bookshops), and wanted to make it longer; and in any case, being married to the producer of ‘An Education’ played havoc with child-care arrangements. Some directors like to have the writer on set, but Lone didn’t seem to need me much. Not least because she was so gratifyingly determined to be faithful to the script as it was written. She was always perfectly warm and friendly if I did show up, and actors are always interesting people to waste time with. But that’s what filming is, time-wasting (even, most of the time, for a lot of the people directly involved); past experience has taught me that there is really no other way to characterise it. Our budget was tight, so everyone had to move fast, but this still means that several hours a day, literally, were spent moving lights around, or re-arranging furniture. In the words of Homer Simpson: “I’ve seen plays that are more interesting. Seriously. *Plays*.” All a writer can really do is marvel that an activity so solitary, so imprecise and so apparently whimsical, can result, however many years later, in the teeming humanity of a film set.

## THE ENDING

I was struck, in Lynn’s original piece, by ‘David’ coming to find her in Oxford; it seemed like an appropriate ending for the film. And yet any event that happens after the main timeline of the script’s narrative was always going to seem more like a coda than a climax – I can see that now, but it didn’t seem so obvious during the writing nor the shooting of ‘An Education’. We shot the scene, and included it in all the early edits, but it never really worked: it didn’t give the actors enough to do, apart from restate their positions with as much vehemence and/or self-delusion as they could muster. The actors, meanwhile, had effectively found their own ending. The bravura performances of Carey and Alfred Molina during the emotional climax of the film, in which Jack talks to Jenny through her bedroom door, and reveals that he and Jenny’s mother had learned that the trip to Oxford had been a con trick, were enough, we felt; that, plus Jenny’s smile to herself when she receives the letter from Oxford (a moment that wasn’t scripted – it was something cooked up on the phone during the shoot.) It all works, I think. But if you needed any further proof that film is a collaborative medium, here it is. That ending was created by Lone, Carey, Alfred and Barney Pilling, the editor. And me, I suppose, although not in the way I had intended to create it.

## THE FILM

So, was it worth it? Yes, as far as I'm concerned, emphatically so. I am as proud of 'An Education' as of anything I've ever written – prouder, if anything, if only because it's so much easier to take pride in other people's work. Whatever I think of the writing, I love the work of the actors, and Lone's direction, and Andrew McAlpine's beautiful design, and John de Boorman's camerawork, and if nothing else, I can take enormous pleasure in helping to create a structure in which this work was possible. "You probably can't wait to start another one," somebody said to me after the Sundance Festival, where 'An Education' was received well, and won a couple of awards. It should work like that, of course. But the simple fact of the film's existence, let alone any quality it might have, is miraculous, a freakish combination of the right material and the right people and an awful lot of tenacity, almost none of which was mine. And how many miracles does one have the right to expect, during the average working life?