

HOW DO YOU MAKE PEOPLE CRY?

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If your screenplay, on top of being well-written and well-structured, can make people cry, you can be sure you'll be getting phone calls.

Crying is a big relief. Well intended friends and parents often try and make the crying person stop crying, as if stopping the crying will stop the pain. In truth, crying is how we heal from pain. It's a load off. Crying is enjoyable.

Because our culture represses crying, people unconsciously (or consciously) hunger to find release and cry. Movies are a terrific opportunity to engage in this very healthy and enjoyable activity. If your writing can make people cry, your audience will appreciate you tremendously.

So what's the trick? How do you make your audience cry?

Do you show them really sad stuff? No. Sad stuff doesn't make people cry. In fact, if your script piles on one sad thing after another, you are likely to achieve the opposite effect and make people laugh. That's a natural way to cope with all that sad stuff coming at you. So unless you are writing a farce, ease up on the sad stuff.

What makes people cry is the opposite of the sad stuff.

Examples from films:

"Big Fish"

When do we cry?

The son being estranged from his father doesn't make us cry. The son telling a story the way his Dad would makes us cry. They are now of one mind and are united!

The father dying doesn't make us cry. The father being honored by all the people in his life who love him - that makes us cry! It's not the sad stuff that gets the tears. It's anything that **CONTRADICTS** the sad stuff which gets the tears.

"Home Alone"

(Don't make fun! I cried watching that!)

The son separating from his Mom and family at the end of Act I doesn't make us cry. The son and mom reuniting at the end of the movie gets the tears.

"Brokeback Mountain"

(PLOT SPOILERS IN THIS PARAGRAPH. If you haven't watched it, go see it now!)

When does everyone in the theater start passing tissues around? When they have a big fight? Nope. When Ennis Del Mar gets his postcard back and finds out that Jack is dead? When he finds out how Jack died? No, no, no. No one cries at those moments. We all lose it when Ennis finds his shirt behind Jack's closet. Their deep love for each other is all in that shirt. It's their love that makes us cry, not their separation. The artists behind that film even squeeze a few more drops out of us in that very last image, as we watch Ennis open his closet and the shirt hangs there.

PLOT SPOILERS END HERE.

You've seen or heard of this scenario: a young person plays in the playground and gets hurt. He brushes his knee off, jumps right back into the fray and plays like nothing happened. The moment mom arrives, he runs to her in tears about his hurt knee. The mom being there makes it safe enough to finally cry. She is the opposite of the painful experience.

Your audience will identify with your main character. Your main character will play until he gets hurt and scrapes his knee. The tears will come, both for your character and for your audience, at the moment when mom arrives and it is safe enough to release the hurt.

Even if your script is not designed to make anyone cry, it can be useful to think in those terms: what point in the story is the mom-finally-arrives-in-the-playground point? Every good story has this moment; some are subtle and some hit you like a sledge hammer. (I happen to like sledge hammers.) The hurting of the knee is not the emotional height of your story. The moment mom finally shows up at the playground is the most emotionally powerful moment in your script.

Study films that make people cry and you will notice this: The sad stuff doesn't make us cry. The sad stuff prepares the ground for that big relief when we finally get a whiff of hope, caring, love, human connection against all odds - those moments of relief from the pain are the moments that make us cry.

Happy writing!
-and happy crying!

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