



TOP GUN SCREENWRITER, ALUMNUS SAYS REWRITING SEPARATES PROS FROM AMATEURS



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College of Arts & Letters alumnus Jack Epps and his former screenwriting instructor at MSU, Jim Cash, wrote the screenplays for Top Gun, Legal Eagles, Turner and Hooch, and The Secret of My Success among other hit films.

If there's one skill separating the professional screenwriter from the amateur, it's the ability to successfully rewrite. Now, from MSU College of Arts & Letters alumnus Jack Epps Jr. (BA, English '72) comes *Screenwriting is Rewriting* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), a comprehensive guide that explores the many layers of rewriting.

"I was first introduced to the benefits of rewriting while an undergraduate at Michigan State," Epps said. "I was taking a short story class with Professor Virgil Scott, and he kept sending back my story, telling me to rewrite it. As with most writers, I resisted. But I did the work, and over the course of several drafts, the story got appreciably better. I've been a rewriter ever since."

In *Screenwriting is Rewriting*, Epps provides a practical and tested approach to organizing notes, creating a game plan, and executing a series of focused passes that address story, character, theme, structure, and plot issues. Included are sample notes, game plans, and beat sheets from Epps' work on films such as *Sister Act* and *Die Hard III*, as well as exclusive interviews with Academy Award-winning screenwriters Robert Towne (*Chinatown*) and Frank Pierson (*Dog Day Afternoon*), and Academy Award nominee Susannah Grant (*Erin Brockovich*).

"One motivation to write the book was to get down on paper my theories of screenwriting, developed over a 30-year period as a professional screenwriter," Epps said. "I didn't want to let all that experience disappear and wanted to pass on what I'd learned to the next generation of screenwriters."

An award-winning writer and filmmaker, Epps first became involved in making films as an undergraduate in the College of Arts & Letters. Inspired by a student film festival, he made his first film the following semester.

For nearly 20 years, Epps and his former screenwriting instructor at MSU, Jim Cash (BA English '70, MA Television and Radio '72), co-authored numerous successful screenplays. Epps lived and worked in

Los Angeles while Cash remained at MSU teaching courses in writing and film history until his death in 1999.

The duo's first produced screenplay – after penning seven unproduced scripts – was *Top Gun*, the highest-grossing film and #1 worldwide box office hit of 1986. Within 11 months, the duo produced three screenplays for films in theatres nationwide: *Top Gun*, *Legal Eagles*, and *The Secret of My Success*.

"First drafts are important, but the real work is done over a series of rewrites. That's rewrites 'plural,'" Epps said. "And it's important to understand rewriting is much harder than writing a first draft, but all professional screenwriters are rewriters. It's an essential part of the job."

Epps adds that rewriting is challenging and often a messy and confusing process, but it's important for the writer to organize their rewrite and do a series of strategic-focused passes rather than try to fix everything in one giant rewrite.

"Rewriting is generally overwhelming," Epps said. "But by breaking it into small parts, you can fix three or four major issues before moving on to new areas. Over a series of passes, the writer will eventually be able to address all their notes and issues, and have a vastly improved screenplay."

Epps currently serves as Associate Professor and Chair of Writing for Screen & Television and holds the Victoria and Jack Oakie Endowed Chair in Comedy at the University of Southern California's School for Cinematic Arts.

The recipient of the Michigan State University Spartans in Hollywood Lifetime Achievement Award, Epps was the fall 2008 MSU commencement speaker, at which time he was awarded an honorary doctorate. A 35-year member of the Writer's Guild of America, Epps also is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.