

Annabelle: Creation & The First 10 Pages of Your Script

By Jacob Krueger – from the podcast “Write Your Own Screenplay”

This week we’re going to be discussing *Annabelle: Creation*, directed by David F. Sandberg and written by Gary Dauberman.

Normally, since this is a screenwriting podcast, I don’t talk a lot about directors. But this is a case of a good director taking a struggling script, and turning into something far better than what exists on the page.

I’m not saying *Annabelle: Creation* is a fully successful film. The truth is it’s a pretty cheesy horror movie, full of holes, gaps in logic, violations of its own rules, crappy dialogue...

But it’s also a movie whose director understands the demands of its genre, and capitalizes on that understanding to turn a script that could have been a total flop into a finished product that not only squeaked to a 68% approval ratings on Rotten Tomatoes, but also has generated over \$280 million at the box office for a reported budget of \$15 million.

Not a bad return on investment for the producers.

Now the truth is, *Annabelle: Creation* is a prequel to an extremely strong horror franchise, *The Conjuring*, with a dedicated fan base and a loyal following among critics and moviegoers alike. And the connection to that franchise, and the very strong script, *The Conjuring*, that launched it, certainly has a lot to do with its success.

So if you’re a new writer, please don’t take *Annabelle: Creation’s* success in spite of its problems as a suggestion that all you have to do is hit your marks with your genre elements to succeed as a writer.

For you to get noticed and get your script made and have that kind of success in this challenging business, the truth is you have to write *better* than the professionals. Because you neither have the connections in the industry, the track record on your resume, nor the fan base out there in your audience for producers to see the dollar signs unless your script knocks it out of the park.

Nevertheless, studying *Annabelle: Creation* is not a bad return on investment for you as a writer.

Because while you will certainly be frustrated by the way *Annabelle: Creation* fails to live up to what should be a *very* strong premise, you can also learn a ton about rewriting from the film.

That starts with understanding the tools David F. Sandberg used to transform a weak script into a genre success.

It means understanding the power of genre, and how to use it to your advantage, regardless of whether you're writing a horror movie, action movie, romantic comedy, [web series](#), or even a little indie drama.

And it also means understanding how the writer, Gary Dauberman, fell into the most common trap in screenwriting and lost track of his own premise. So that you'll know what to do if the same problem starts to happen to you.

And it all comes back to one simple premise.

Screenwriting Rule #1: You've got to nail the first 10 pages of your script!

The first 10 pages in your script are the most important 10 pages in your script. And the first page of your script is the most important page of your script. Not your brilliant trick ending. Not that fabulous turn halfway through the movie. Not that moment that makes you laugh or cry or hurl on page 72. The first page. The first 10 pages.

And why are these first pages the most important pages? For 3 very important reasons.

#1 – The first 10 pages of your script are the only pages everyone is going to read!

By the time your producer, coverage reader, A-list actor, director, manager, agent... hell even your great great great uncle who you're begging to invest... reads the first page of your script, they are already making a decision about whether this script is actually worth reading. You either grab them, or you don't.

And by the time they get to page 10, if they even get that far, they've already made a decision about whether this script is actually for them— if they're going to read it, or skim it, or if they're simply going to pass.

That means that if you don't hook them from the very first page, they're never going to get to your fabulous trick ending, your tear jerking climax, your horror inducing end of act one.

So that's the commercial reason for nailing the first 10 pages.

And you can see that, whatever the flaws that show up later in the script, the first 10 pages of *Annabelle: Creation* certainly don't suffer from them.

What we're watching from that very first image is really cool! You start out on this creepy doll's eye, this creepy eye, that's being assembled into this creepy doll in this creepy workshop, and you are just seeing the eye— you are just following the eye everywhere.

And the creepy doll into whom the eye is placed belongs to this father who makes these creepy dolls. And he has a daughter that he loves and a wife that he loves. And they have a cool little complicated family in a creepy little house.

And, slight spoiler ahead....

You are 10 minutes into the movie and that little girl gets hit by a car.

And at that moment, you are already fully drawn in. You are already pitching yourself a movie. And it's a horror movie, but it's a particularly classy version of that movie that you're pitching yourself– the story of parents whose desire to hold on to their lost child turns something beautiful into horror.

And you see, that should be frickin awesome. And whether you're a horror movie genre fan or not, there's something real in there you can grab onto, something beautiful and terrifying from the very first page, that captures not only what is important and beautiful and scary about this movie, but also how the story is going to work, both structurally and thematically.

It's a story about creation and horror. About the creation of a doll and creation of a child and creation of a family. And what happens when the creations that we love start to fall apart and twist us into darkness.

It's the story of *Annabelle: Creation*. And they've fulfilled the promise of their title, and captured the physical and emotional attention of their reader– and we're only 10 minutes in!

So that's the commercial reason. If you want your script to sell, your first 10 pages have got to grab us like the first 10 pages of *Annabelle: Creation*. They've got to be the ten best pages in your script.

But there is also an artistic reason.

#2 – The first 10 pages of your script create the window through which your audience experiences everything that follows.

Audiences come to movies for *genre* experiences. Which is really just a fancy way of saying that they come to a movie because they want to be given a very specific feeling.

If they're coming to a romantic comedy, they want to feel like love is possible. If they're coming to an indie drama, they want to experience catharsis through the twists and turns of your main character's emotional journey. If they're coming to a broad comedy, they want to laugh their asses off. If they're coming to an action movie, they want to get their adrenaline pumping. If they're coming to an experimental art film, they want to feel their minds bended.

And if they're coming to a high class horror movie, like *Annabelle: Creation*, they want to be terrified. Not just at the jump scare level, but at the emotional and psychological level.

In other words, they're coming to movies for the same reason you're coming.

In fact, many filmmakers and screenwriters become famous and successful for their ability to create a certain genre experience in their writing— think about Nora Ephron or Charlie Kaufman or Martin Scorsese, or Aaron Sorkin, or [Christopher Nolan](#), or my guest on next week's podcast, Mark Bomback (the writer of the *Planet of the Apes* franchise).

If you give your audience the feeling they are coming for in your first ten pages, you can get away with a *lot*. Because even if the stuff that comes later doesn't fit perfectly with the genre, or even puts pressure on the genre (like the comic character of *Bad Ape* does in *War For Planet of the Apes*, or the comic grave diggers do in *Hamlet*) the audience will still *see everything that follows through that original genre lens*.

They will interpret what they see through the window of the genre. They will enjoy things that they otherwise would never enjoy. And they will know they are going to get back to the stuff they came for. That the movie is for them.

If you actually look at the structure of *Annabelle: Creation*, until all hell breaks loose and the requisite blood starts flowing, not a hell of a lot happens from a horror genre perspective. It's really mostly just creaking doors and a creepy looking doll that keeps showing up and a really damn good director and score.

And it doesn't even make any sense why this doll keeps showing up or even how this doll works or like what the hell does the doll really do? I still don't even fricking know—

But because of the way the doll is introduced in those first 10 minutes— because of the image of that eye, and the feeling of being watched, and the love that is built between father and daughter, the knowledge that death is coming, that in this horror movie, even a little girl can die a sudden and horrible death— that experience inflicts everything that we're watching with a feeling of horror.

David F. Sandberg uses the window of that first 10 pages to such great effect in his direction, mirroring the elements that he's created early in such creepy and terrifying ways, that he doesn't even need a jump scare or much blood at all to create the feeling of horror. All he needs is that fricking doll.

And even though you're thinking to yourself "I shouldn't be scared" and even you are kind of annoyed with yourself that you are, because you know this is cheesy. You have to admit. It's scary.

And it's not scary because of what's happening. It's scary because of the way the events of the first 10 pages inflect what you're seeing. The way that genre feeling carries over and bleeds over into everything that follows— not in the *Chucky* cheesy horror movie way, but in the complex psychological horror movie way.

Even many of the critics got swept up in that feeling, to the extent that they barely noticed the structural problems that existed in this part of the script, or the ways the film was failing to live up to the power of its premise.

If you capture that genre experience, and allow your audience to viscerally experience it, in those first 10 pages, that effect will bleed over to everything that follows.

But if you don't give it to them— if you don't establish the feeling of the genre in those first 10 pages— it's not only going to lower the chance that they keep reading, it's also going to *diminish* their experience of everything that follows.

Instead of interpreting your horror movie like a horror movie, they might interpret it like a drama or a comedy. And now, suddenly, all those creaking doors and jump scares don't feel scary anymore. Suddenly the doll feels cheesy instead of horrifying. Suddenly we're watching *Troll 2* instead of a movie worthy of *The Conjuring* franchise.

Now it's important to understand that when you think about genre experience in this way, you're not just thinking commercially.

In fact, you probably shouldn't be thinking commercially at all— because as someone who is not on the phone all day finding out “*what's hot right now*”— your ability to actually know what audiences or producers want is pretty much non-existent.

And even if you did figure it out, it would change in the next five minutes.

The genre experience really begins with what *you* want to say as a writer. What's the movie that you'd kill to see? That you really want to write. What would that movie *feel* like? And how do you get that feeling into your first 10 pages?

Which leads us to the third reason the first 10 pages are the most important pages in your script. And that's a creative and structural reason.

#3 – Creatively, your first 10 pages are the pages from which all the rest of your structure should organically grow.

And this is where the script for *Annabelle: Creation* really falls short.

Because the first 10 pages of *Annabelle: Creation* contains the raw material for a truly transcendent horror movie. The kind of horror movie that doesn't just make you cringe in your seat, but makes you look at the darkness and the horror in yourself.

In this case, *Annabelle: Creation* is screaming out to be an intelligent psychological horror movie, about how a good father and a good mother lose their child. And how their grief and loss and fear and desire to hold onto what is lost causes them to transform the beauty of their creation into horror.

Instead, the writer takes a left hand turn, running away from the promise of its first 10 pages, launching into a completely different, and far more familiar slasher storyline which we'll discuss in a few moments, and pushing the best part of the story, the real heart of it, into the background.

It's suddenly 12 years later. Mom, for reasons we don't yet understand, is living entirely in her bedroom and wearing a mask. And Dad, for equally puzzling reasons, has decided to invite a nun and a bunch of Orphan girls to live with them in a house that he knows is haunted by a terrifying doll, that cost his wife half her face.

As anyone who's ever seen a horror movie would expect, it's not long until the doll starts to torment one and then ultimately possess one of these little girls, the polio stricken Janice, (played by Talitha Bateman, whose tremendous performance is another element that allows the film to transcend the structure of the script).

Dad, of course— played by the brilliant Anthony LaPaglia, who somehow manages to find motivation underneath all this character's inexplicable behavior— despite knowing everything about the doll, seems to have a hard time processing what's actually happening, and spends most of his time brooding off screen. And mom is barely present in the movie at all...

So we've lost the characters we actually care about.

The doll, similarly, has all kinds of powers, but how exactly they work, and what exactly this doll can or cannot do, other than creep the crap out of us is equally unclear.

I'm not going to even get into how stupid things get from there, but suffice it to say that little Janice is going to start slaughtering her friends—

It's not until about two thirds of the way through the film that we finally come back to what made the story worth watching in the first place, when we find out (in exposition) what really happened and how the doll became possessed.

And check out how cool that story is.

Having lost their child, Annabelle, this beautiful, deeply religious family found their grief ebbing away at their faith. When praying to G-d didn't bring their child back, they started praying to other forces— any force, good or evil, that was willing to reconnect them with their little girl.

And so, their little girl started to appear to them. First, in little haunting glimpses. And then later, in moments of full communication. And even though they knew something was wrong, they didn't want to believe it.

She asked them to invite her back into their lives in a physical form— to take over the body of the doll that her father had made for her, so that she could be with them forever. And despite whatever forebodings they had, whatever creepy haunting feeling told them that something was wrong, these grieving parents invited her spirit back in.

And for a short moment, they had everything they wanted. They had defied death, and grief and loss. They had their little girl back...

And then they started to see that something was wrong... to wonder if the spirit in the doll, the little girl they loved, wasn't their little girl at all. And that's when the real horror started— she started to do horrible things, preying on her parents love, their desire not to see the truth, torturing them...

Until they finally had to accept what was true, that their child was lost forever, that their desire to hold onto what was lost had brought this demon into their lives— had transformed the child they loved, the beauty of their creation, into the ultimate horror.

The showdown that ultimately vanquished the demon cost mom half her face, and both parents something even more painful, any hope of ever reconnecting with their child.

But even then, they couldn't completely let go. Instead they kept the doll locked in a little secret room, surrounded by holy writing, believing somehow that they could hold onto her in this way and still be safe.

That, is the fricking movie! That is the creation story of Annabelle.

And notice how that version of the story doesn't require any leaps of logic at all. And keeps us focused on the characters that really matter. And has every opportunity for the same kind of bloodletting that we see in *Annabelle: Creation*.

Hell, if it was really important for this writer to slaughter a bunch of kids in his script, he could at least have done it *then*—before dad knew what the doll really was— back when it would have made sense for him to invite a bunch of orphans into his house to fill the wound his lost child had left in him.

That story is the story the movie is screaming to be built around.

Instead, the real heart of the story—the part of the horror that is actually plausible and that should have been the structural spine of the piece is pushed to the background, and reduced to a few minutes of exposition late in the film.

And what should have been a transcendent horror movie is reduced to a typical slasher film.

Failing to honor your own premise is the most common mistake that writers make.

If you get the first 10 pages right, and launch into your story with the kind of velocity that *Annabelle: Creation* launches into its story, those first 10 pages are already going to tell you exactly what the movie *wants* to be—no outline necessary. The structure is going to be screaming at you. And all you have to do is honor it.

But oftentimes, rather than growing the structure of our screenplays organically, we fall into the same trap that Annabelle’s parents do—holding onto our plans—our outline—of what we thought the movie was going to be, rather than reacting to and growing the structure from what the movie wants to be.

Sometimes we do this because we are afraid that we don’t have what it takes to do it right.

Sometimes we do this because we are wedded to a particular ending (or easter egg, like the one at the end of *Annabelle: Creation*) and so focused on getting to where we’re going that we fail to take stock of where we are.

Sometimes we do this because we’re so worried about serving the genre elements that we forget that the genre elements are supposed to serve the story.

Sometimes we do this because of our own insecurities, our fears that our ideas aren’t good enough, that maybe our movies should be more like what we’ve already seen, that maybe the premise we love isn’t going to resonate with other people.

And sometimes we do this because, like Annabelle’s parents, we are so wedded to our plans for what our story “should” be, that we can’t let go of them. We end up worshipping the wrong gods, trying to hold onto what once was, rather than finding the beauty in what our stories can become.