

ELEVENTH HOUR: NOTES TOWARD SEASON TWO

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March 25th 2009

We seem to agree that the ideal form for *Eleventh Hour* is an action thriller triggered when Hood uncovers the answer to a science mystery, exposing a perilous situation that no one was aware of and that requires immediate action involving personal danger. There's no question of handing it over to the appropriate authorities because it's already happening, and has to be dealt with *right now*.

So two principles there already:

- The science mystery is the springboard, not the destination.
- Nobody assigns Hood. That would imply that the scale of the danger has already been recognised. He sniffs out anomalies that no one else has latched onto yet. He isn't called in on cases like a detective, but shows up where he isn't necessarily invited or wanted. The response he'll often meet is, "Thank you, Doctor Hood, but we have this under control."

This maverick status means that we don't rely so much on procedural. More depends on character work as Hood pushes his way in. I'll talk about characters later but I want to talk about stories first.

I'm not going to knock season one. I enjoyed every show and my bumps were few. But after a while I began to feel that we were running out of road as many of the stories repeated the same pattern – someone gets hurt in a bizarre way, Hood follows the science to unmask the guy who's doing it, we end with a snapshot of the victim getting better.

Drawbacks:

- This form under-uses both Hood and Rachel. They gave him a bodyguard because the work is supposed to be dangerous. He's there to expose inconvenient truths and to stop people doing stuff, which means meeting resistance and making enemies from the beginning. She watches him like a hawk. He carries a panic button when he's out of her sight. They use false names in hotels – all for good reason.
- If villains only get revealed at the end, that doesn't allow for any character development. When their entire motive has to be wrapped up in a four-line arrest speech ("I only wanted to save my son," "I only wanted to protect the planet," etc) it's never going to be satisfying. With a show's guest character we should approach it as if writing a part for someone as expensive as our leads.

On the positive side, I think the science was impressive and grounded. I don't mind not fully understanding the science problem. I don't understand the science in *House* but I follow the people following it, if you see what I mean. I take for granted that what's passing before me is real-world information.

We ought to be able to feel that any aspect of real science could offer a springboard for an *Eleventh Hour*. To demonstrate how we shouldn't restrict our thinking, here's a bunch of examples of the kind of science-based thriller that could easily have been an *Eleventh Hour* (but for budget):

- *The Andromeda Strain*. Science topic: Investigating a virus of unknown origin. Thriller scenario: Escaping from the sealed bunker before the automated nuclear device sterilises it.
- *Dante's Peak*. Science topic: Spotting unforeseen danger in geological data. Thriller scenario: Getting Linda Hamilton and her family off the exploding mountain.
- *Mercury Rising*. Science topic: autistic kid unwittingly breaks an Agency code. Thriller scenario: protecting the kid from the hit squad sent after him.
- *Dead Woman Walking (CSI Miami)*. Science topic: Assassination by radiation. Thriller scenario: Finding the killer before the victim's time runs out. (I didn't realise that our own Ildy Modrovich cowrote this until I looked it up)
- *Jaws*. Science topic: Oceanography and a town's worst nightmare. Thriller scenario: battling a natural monster while hindered by civic denial.
- *Twister*: Science Topic: Meteorologists deploy lifesaving device. Thriller scenario: endangered by unscrupulous rivals.

(Obviously the TV equivalents of these epic and effects-driven stories would need to be rendered on a more intimate and human level, which is no bad thing.)

What I'm trying to show is that there's more potential in the world of science than 'things that escape from labs'. There may be no obvious personal endangerment in higher mathematics, but what if someone were kidnapping and lobotomising selected mathematicians? Killing off the crew of a decade-old shuttle mission, one by one? Sinking shafts into an unstable hillside above a school and faking safety data to speed the work along? In every case, Hood can be the first to spot the pattern and sense its implications.

If he doesn't passively accept cases like a detective, with other people having been all over them first, how does he work?

This starts to take us into the area of character. Hood is pro-active. He follows leads. The leads come from an ever-expanding network of well-placed observers, whistleblowers, former colleagues, his former students, analysts, watchdogs, pressure groups, anonymous tip-offs, victims with nowhere else to turn... it could be as sophisticated as a flag on the Poisindex register or as

simple as something he sees on the TV during his restless one-in-the-morning channel surfing, where he spots something in a situation that no one else has noticed.

Hood

This may not transfer to anyone else, but when I'm writing Hood his character is informed by a certain amount of below-the-surface knowledge that (for me) is the key to what makes him tick.

Hood was originally a career scientist following a classic path. In your 20s, you're on someone's team and you work to get noticed. In your 30s, you run your own team and do your career-signature work. In your 40s, you oversee others doing *their* career-signature work, while spending more of your time on administration. Eventually you're given emeritus status and are freed to write books and sit on committees.

Hood's progress along this path was interrupted by the death of his wife, which coincided with the end of the 'signature work' phase. It knocked the stuffing out of him and the life of a fundraiser/administrator now held no appeal. He was saved by the offer of this job, which meant stepping away from his old life and immersing himself in the work.

It worked for him as a way of dealing, but it pissed off his 20-year-old daughter, from whom he's been estranged ever since and whom he never mentions. That informs his approach to the job – he puts a father's protective instincts at the service of all human society – and his relationship with Rachel. She's the substitute grown-up daughter that he trusts with his life.

Rachel

The TV show that influenced me most when growing up was *The Avengers*, in which Diana Rigg and Patrick MacNee flirted like best friends but the characters had their romantic relationships offscreen and outside the partnership. Rachel's my take on the Emma Peel character – sexy and confident and in no way submissive. Sometimes Hood can drive her nuts, which is *her* side of the subliminal father/daughter substitution.

I got a handle on her from a low-rent reality show called *Dani Dares: Bodyguards* in the late '90s. Dani Behr was/is a lightweight UK TV presenter for whom no job was too small. Blonde hair, long legs, that's it. *Bodyguards* was one in a series where she joined the recruits training for various jobs and we were supposed to enjoy watching the bimbo struggle. But she aced it; came out at the top of the class in every area – driving, shooting, unarmed combat – and was told that with her arm-candy looks she could make a fortune in personal protection. In a little black dress by the side of her boss, she'd be the ultimate concealed weapon.

A real-life Emma Peel! My respect soared. Until she signed up for *I'm a Celebrity, Get me Out of Here*.

Felix

I'm still developing my thinking on Felix. I accept that he's here to stay but I don't want to treat him as the comedy goof or to simply give him Rachel's scenes. He's been in a firefight now, so he can be more of an Agent and less of a newbie. *Medea* put him in the position of having to balance Bureau duty with Hood's unorthodox needs. I liked seeing him be the one to make the arrest at the end of *Medea*; if Rachel's concerned wholly with Hood's protection then in circumstances like that Felix can be more of the cop on the team.

Villains and Guest Characters

At the beginning of my career I wrote a miniseries called *Chimera*, a variant on the Frankenstein story with a cold-hearted scientist as its villain. It made some waves, and through various debates and public events brought me into contact with a lot of real-world science professionals. I found that these scientists were, almost without exception, sharp, cultured, funny, and great late-night company. They were well-read, they listened to opera, they played musical instruments. Future Nobel prizewinner Paul Nurse was a motorbike nut (and was the guy who first encouraged me to dream up a real-science drama). Biologist Jack Cohen advised sf writers on alien-building. All were genuinely excited to be doing the work they did.

As much as these real scientists shaped my picture of Hood, they also shaped my attitude to science villains. The ruthless, 'playing God' stereotype, arguing that harm can be justified in the name of progress, is a cartoon. Science's villains are the same recognisably human people as those regular scientists. But they become villains through regular human flaws, not by Nazi logic. They sell out, or screw up. They can bend the truth to suit their paymasters or the policymakers, and call it 'being realistic'. They can be reckless, they can underestimate danger, they can lie to cover their mistakes, they can take desperate measures to cover their lies. But science's villains are characterised by their human failings, not by single-minded immoral intent.

And often they won't even be scientists, but people who co-opt science to their own purposes. CEOs, charlatans, toxic waste dumpers, politicians, lobbyists, thieves, counterfeiters, scammers, conspiracy theorists, drug lords, mobsters. People like the real-life international hustler and would-be breakthrough human cloner who provided the model for the bad guy in my very first story.

Looking Ahead

To my mind the first step in planning a season should be to think globally and lay out a wish-list of disciplines across the episodes, as the starting point for each story process and a way to guarantee variety. The second step: identify a 'hot button issue' within that discipline. Third step: find a thriller scenario to attach to it.

(The thriller scenario doesn't itself have to be scientific, though every opportunity should be taken to have Hood apply his learning to obstacles)

If I bring anything to the table, it seems to be a knack for spotting the human angle that can unite science and thriller elements.