

# CRAIG NOVA

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## **So You Want To Be A Screen Writer?**

I grew up in Hollywood, California, and I went to Hollywood High School. When I was young Hollywood was a lot like a mill town, in that everyone worked at one place, and it wasn't just writers, directors, actors and musicians who went through the gates of the movie factory, which even now I recall as having the atmosphere of a smoke belching lead smelter, but carpenters, electrician, seamstresses, costumes designers, set builders, too, and a collection of other people who's work was almost too obscure to be believed (animal trainers, say, who specialized in certain species doing certain things). When I was growing up there were high school kids who worked as extras on various productions around town, but most of us thought this was too dorky for words. It was too much like growing up in Coney Island and getting a summer job selling hot dogs. How about something legit, as they say in California speak, like working in a warehouse?

I left my parents house around the age of eighteen and moved in with the family of a friend of mine, and the father of this family was a screen writer. It is entirely possible that I became a writer because of this man, since we were very close, so close that when I left to come to New York, to try to become a novelist, this man took me aside to give me a word of advice. I was standing in front of him, holding the leather suitcase that my father had used when he had come west, a generation before. The screen writer had blue eyes, and I remember them filling with tears when he made a gesture that obviously including working for the movies. He said, "Whatever you do, don't come back here." His tone of voice was a mixture of dashed hopes, bitterness, and a wistfulness that makes me think, right now, of the old Ottis Reading song, "I've got dreams to remember." So, you can't say, when I was approached to write a screenplay, that I hadn't been warned.

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In fact I have had ample opportunity to ponder this advice. It is my version of Nick Carroway recalling something that his father had said to him, which was that not everyone had had his advantages. Frankly, it is not an accident that the movie business and Gatsby are related in my mind, since of all the American endeavors, putting aside rank, organized crime, what is more Gatsby-like than the movie business? There is something essentially romantic about it. At least in the beginning.

Writers, of course, aren't much interested in warnings. If they were interested in such things, they never would have sat down to put that first word on that first sheet with the hope of publishing it. The odds are long, the work is horrible (that is, when it is going badly, which can be a lot of the time), and the prospect of success, whether of quality or cash, is so remote, so far in the future as to seem like death: something that you have heard about but don't really believe is going to happen. Writers, by definition, are interested in taking a chance. By the way, I refer to writers here as "he", but this is not a gender specific activity. Everyone, male and female, and any stop in between, seems to have the same desire to have some attention from the movie business.

And where taking a chance is concerned, I can tell you from personal experience that this is part of the thrill of it. I would rather not remember the number of times I have sat down to write, almost broke, and knowing that I was going to have to perform at a nearly impossible level of skill in a time that was too short even to think about. When I consider these moments, trying to avert my eyes from the sheer intensity of them, I am reminded of the excitement that Graham Greene describes in playing Russian Roulette. So, when the call came to write a script, I was only too happy.

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Here's what the writer thinks when he approaches the movie business. Or when a producer approaches him about adapting a novel of his for a film. Writers believe, as a kind of article of faith, in merit. It is how they see the world (one writer being better than another, and, of course, when ranking one above another, each writer secretly puts himself into an advantageous spot in this pecking order). So, the first thing a writer thinks when the call comes is that if he is even half as good as he thinks he is, he is going to prevail. He knows the book that he is going to adapt better than anyone else, and of course he is willing to work harder than anyone else, and that, when push comes to shove, he can charm people into doing what he wants them to do. If there was ever an inflammatory mixture, one which, when ignited, is absolutely certain to incinerate every living thing for miles, it is this.

Of course, you slip into this slowly. I am going to put aside the various options of books of mine for films (of which there have been four or five) and the experience of watching what happened to the people who tried to get these books made into films. No, I am going to stick with my own experience in the actual screen writing department, the variety for which I was paid. I have to say, somewhat parenthetically, that the movie business pays well, no matter what else it does. Recently I have been wondering about this part of it, and how it effects a novelist who publishes a book every two years but who is not famous and who still has financial obligations. Ready money has its own charms. So mixed in with the motivation to put into practice the belief that the only way to get one's way is to work himself into a state known in Chinese as guolaosi, (which, roughly translated means "over work death"), there is the money. Mixed in there with all the other considerations, is that old, slithery sound of hundred dollar bills being rubbed together. If Marcel Duchamp once said of a very stupid man, that he was "as stupid as a

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painter,” I think I would like to add that when someone is very greedy, it is probably best to describe this person as being as greedy as a writer. Of course, for a writer, who has no objective way of telling precisely how he is doing or where he stands in relation to other writers (aside from the purely interior and moody ranking that each writer uses to get through the day), having someone pay him a lot of money is essential. The real danger in the way writers see money is that they confuse it with being loved. And what wouldn't a writer, who goes through some of the most appalling work, do to get love?

In any case, putting rank theory aside, the first call was child's play compared to the second. Still, if I had been alert I would have seen that there was a pattern in the first experience, a dynamic that, if I hadn't been such an amateur, I would have instantly recognized as being important. The first call came from my agent, a smart and charming man, who had been talking to a man who was running a “major studio” and this man had had lunch with someone else, another studio executive. The two of them had come up with an idea for a movie.

Here it is. “A hot shot young attorney, gets his father, a doctor, acquitted of murder charges.” This is the idea. Do I want a crack at it or not?

First, there is the matter of character. “Hot shot,” in California speak means that he drives a Porsche, has a girl friend with long legs and silk dresses, and he lives in an apartment with a view (the perfect example of a hot shot view is the one that the character Greg Kinnear plays in Nurse Betty has: shimmering avenues in Los Angeles, seen through glass windows over the aquamarine pool). The Hot Shot doesn't wear a tie with his Armani jacket, and he has a Corporate American Express card.

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Now, his father is a little more, ah, generic, but even so, in California-speak this is a lot to go on. Doctors come in two varieties. The first are those who wear surgical greens and who carry stethoscopes, although, to be honest, there are probably a couple of subsets of this variety, the young ones and the old ones.

The other variety of doctor is the one who looks like a hot shot, although, since he is a doctor, he is silver haired, and he drives a SUV, although, if we are talking about someone who runs a surgical department at a major medical center, he probably drives a silver Mercedes. Clothes that are more British than American. Often, this kind is seen in black tie at vague fund raisers. His wife is like an Ur wife, which is to say that, if the budget is worth anything, he will be married to the actress who plays the wife of Harrison Ford in *Clear and Present Danger*.

I know these things now. At the time, when I was talking on the phone to the guy who ran the studio (with his assistant listening in, breathing a little breath mint that I could almost smell, even at a distance of three thousand miles), I thought that what they wanted, in some inarticulate way, was something good. Not a formula but something new. Not a cliché with a twist, but a character. Still, there is only one way to learn California speak.

However, I did say something that got me the job. The major studio head and his assistant hadn't thought much about story, since, as they saw it, they had given me the characters, and what was I there for if they had already done so much work? I said, "Well, if the son gets the father acquitted, why then the charges must be false. If they aren't false, what are we left with at the end? That the son has perverted justice?" Now that I think about it, this might make an interesting movie, but at least I had the sense to keep my mouth shut about that.

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On the other end of the phone I heard a little sigh. Yes. They hadn't thought about that part of it.

There was one other angle that was supposed to go into this film. The doctor was also supposed to be abusing his wife. It was not said precisely what form this abuse might take, but surely it was both verbal and physical. And, as a result (sequela in medical terminology) the wife was hooked on some kind of prescription drug. The pharmacology wasn't specified (it rarely is), but I thought that Xanax and Ativan, mixed with alcohol might be a good possibility.

I now realize that the opening sequence should have been a memory of the young hot shot, as a child, seeing the doctor wallop the crap out of the child's mother, and that maybe (given the sensibility of the studio) the child tries to care for the stricken Ur wife. Maybe he does it with a Mickey Mouse blanket, which gets stained from her bloody nose. This, I now know, would have (in California speak) put the "rubber ducky shot up front." Well, I had a lot to learn.

Of course, in doing this kind of work, the real heavy lifting is to try to find a way to be engaged with it, and I can say that in this matter, I gave good effort. What I didn't realize is that I was obligated to do a second draft under the direction of the young assistant, not so friendly anymore when she saw that I was trying to do more than a film that would be fodder for the day time talk shows.

In fact, I learned many things in this job. The first is that some studios are like factories, just like the lead smelters of my imagination, and that like factories, the studio has an interest in making sure that all the parts fit on the production line, and that everyone is going to produce a new product that is, in most respects, indistinguishable from a product that made money. I have no quarrel with this, not really. I heard recently that the average cost of a middling Hollywood film these days is

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48 million dollars. Of course, this includes distribution costs. Or at least I am hoping that it does. With this kind of money involved, no one can be cavalier (which, to be honest, is the fun of being a novelist...anything is possible). But this kind of money requires caution. Who would be so stupid as to think otherwise?

I am trying to say that approaching a studio's point of view (i.e., it's the money, Jack) with anything less than understanding is going to lead to trouble, both for the screen writer and for the studio, too. This means that a writer may be required to do work that is not as good as he would like it to be and to abandon the standards by which he has been working. It means forgetting the notion that success comes by doing your best work. This forgetting, or learning to do less than you can do, has a vile effect on your sense of who and what you are. This, I think, is part of the reason that Hollywood pays writers well. It is not the time or the work the studios are buying, but a price for the more insidious (and well known) effects of doing less than one's best. What do you charge for losing your vision of what a writer should be and how he goes about it? Of course, this is nothing new. Everyone knows that writers get hurt in Hollywood. What hasn't been said before, I think, is that the damage is done when a writer loses the ability to bear down, particularly in the face of adversity, and to no longer be able to do what he knows he should do, no matter what. The damage takes the form of being easily fatigued by this effort, which is hard enough anyway.

Still, I was not without hope. Of course, I knew that there were problems of working for a studio, particularly if you were not a darling of someone who could sign the checks no matter what. I particularly knew this when I added my experience to the memory of the tears in the eyes of the screen writer I had known as a kid. My hope came from knowing that there were other ways to get films made, such as the loose

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organization of producers, film distributors, small and not so small production companies that are known in general as the Independents.

Well, the conventional wisdom is that an independent producer is someone who is out of a job, but yet, as everyone knows, many films do get made this way, and the chances of such films being better than what comes out of Hollywood are pretty good. The Independents have their own problems, of course. I know this because the next time a call came, it was from one of them.

One of the things about being a novelist is that people call quite often and ask if they can option a book to make it into a film. When you are young, you are flattered by this kind of thing, but the thrill wears off when you realize that the person who has just called is working out of his mother's house in New Rochelle, and that he wants to pay you not much more than you have been known to spend on one night in New York City (dinner and a hotel room). So, when someone does call this way, the first thing you want to do is to find out just who they are.

In this case, when the next call came, I talked to my agent at CAA, and he said that the company was "small but legitimate" (formal California-speak, rather than the colloquial "legit"). And, as I learned, the smallness of this outfit wasn't going to last long, since it had been acquired by someone with enough money to build an international film distribution company. In fact, the new owner was going after the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in a way that was seductive (this, I think, really is the word). He was intent on setting up an international company that would produce and market films worldwide, and would also produce and market such things as computer games and magazines for people who were between the ages of eighteen and thirty. In fact, even now I still think this was a good idea.

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This company wanted to wanted to option a book of mine called *The Good Son*, and they wanted me to do a script for it. Essentially, this is a father son story about how power is passed from one generation to another. It is also a love story.

So, I signed a contract and went to work. Perhaps, this is the time to talk a little bit about a movie contract, which everyone wants but which few people have actually seen. As will be obvious (see below) having a film contract can turn out differently than one supposed, and, in fact, can leave you tearing your hair and wondering just what the hell you could have been thinking when you signed on the line, just above your social security number.

This contract covered the option for the book and details about how this option could be renewed and how I would get paid if the film was actually made. These details, the money part about the actual making of a film, are known as “the back end of the deal.” The “back end of the deal” refers to the “pick up payment” (which is what you will actually get paid for the film rights, if the movie gets made) and it also tells you when you will get paid this amount. You get paid on the “beginning of principal photography.” There are, of course, some details about how the accounting will be done, to determine profits, etc. In my case, and I think in many other cases, my “pick up” payment was a percentage of the budget. Of course, this might explain why budgets are increasing, if this word could possibly be strong enough to honor this bloat. Everyone has a percentage of the budget, and since this is the case, as the pie gets bigger, the pieces get bigger, too. Who could object to that?

Now the contract also had a section to cover writer’s services, which is a list of how you will be paid for the work on the script, so much for the treatment (or first draft), so much for the second draft, so much

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for the first polish, so much for the second polish. This turned out to be a kind of cascade, as they say in medicine, when one complication leads to another, and when the physician begins to lose control of his patient.

“Beginning of principal photography” is a phrase that has broken so many hearts, and is such a seductive invocation of hope, that it needs to be singled out as the one, essential piece of language that is right at the heart of the attractions and dangers of working in the movie business. You see this in the contract you are about to sign, and you think, Yes, yes. You can see the clutter of the set, the lights and cables, the smoke rising from the hot lights, the boredom while people wait around to do the next thing, the exhaustion and fatigue, the sense of things almost, but not quite going wrong, etc.

Now, the man who was actually in charge of this project, whom I will call Mr. Big, couldn't possibly be involved with the work I did on a week to week basis, since he had many other obligations, such as overseeing an operation that employed hundreds of people. Business meetings from Japan to Paris, and a life that was essentially lived on an airplane. So, he hired someone, a secondary producer, whom I will call Little Big. Little Big and I went to work.

I did the first draft, the second draft, the first polish, the second polish. Periodically, I thought that what I really needed to be doing was working with a director, or at least I thought I should have an idea about who the actors would be, since what lines I wrote would be determined by what lines an actor could say well. There is all the difference in the world between writing a line for Val Kilmer and one for Ben Affleck. In fact, I talked to my agent at CAA, and he was willing to carry the script to a lot of young actors (all of whom are famous now). The producers didn't want to do this. They wanted to control things, they said, and to get the script right.

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In fact, I want to say, this was in many ways the happiest time of my life. I did a draft of the script, got notes from the producers, went back to work. I wasn't really worried about how Mr. Big and Little Big were communicating, and I assumed that they were in perfect agreement. I learned that this assumption was a dangerous thing. In fact, I learned that all assumptions are a dangerous thing. I was a little worried that sometimes Mr. Big would look at a script that Little Big and I liked to find that Mr. Big was appalled. I guessed that was part of the business, which is to say it had begun to appear to me that my job was to keep more than one master happy.

We did have story conferences, and the one I think of in this happy period took place on Nantucket. The producers, and their wives, and my wife and I were all going to be flown into the island to stay at an exceedingly comfortable hotel. For instance, if you asked for a McCallan's Scotch at this hotel, they naturally brought you a slug of it that was twenty five years old.

All six of us met in Boston, where we got on a private plane, a six seater. Now, one of the things about the story I was adapting is that it had to do with a young man who was a fighter pilot in World War II, and, of course this was much on my mind when we took off and flew out to sea. On this day the sky was filled with pillars of thunder heads, enormous, curdled and white towers of mist, which we flew between. The air was a little turbulent and we bounced around in those airy valleys, between the impossible scale of the clouds and with the blue sky in the distance. Of course, I was taken with the power of imagination, in that I had imagined afternoons like this, when I was writing the book, and here, because I had imagined it, I was flying through clouds like the ones I had describe in the book, and, of course, I was on my way to make this vision, the air, the clouds, the airplane into a film. This, for a

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novelist, is heady stuff. It is like knowing the temperature of the air in paradise. My wife reached over and took my hand to give it a squeeze.

Now, to get to this meeting, I had probably done fifteen or so complete drafts. One of the things I learned here is that it is impossible to get every scene or every important part of a book of 400 pages into a script. It is a matter of translating or making a story that is a kind of stand in for the real story. What happens, of course, is that every time you put something in or take something out, the producer can say, "What, you didn't put in the car wash scene? Why I just as soon not make a film at all if we don't have that." The book begins to sit there, like a vulture on a branch right above a carcass, and it can sweep down any time it likes and start tearing at the flesh. Still, as far as the meeting on Nantucket was concerned, I thought we were making progress.

This, perhaps, is the moment to talk about money. As is obvious, if I had done fifteen drafts, I had worked through the first payment, the second, the third and the fourth that were coming my way, and, in fact, I had started working on my own nickel. The reason I did this was that the producers kept talking about how the budget was going to get funded soon and when that happened I would get my pick up payment (and I wouldn't even have to wait for the "beginning of principal photography"...that phrase against which so many hearts have been broken). Also, in the time that I was doing so many drafts, I had published another book, which this same company had optioned, for good money, and along with the option there was an agreement to do another script, for a little more money than I was getting for the first script I was already working on.

My theory here, I guess, was that it was probably a good idea to keep my mouth shut about more money for the Good Son script, since if

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the producers (somehow or other) were really going to fund the budget, I wouldn't have much to worry about. And, of course, what I really wanted, like so many other people in this position, was to get the movie made. And while I was somewhat goofy about this, and knew it (after all, I had grown up in Hollywood and knew how many things went wrong before a film actually got made) I thought that my fall back position (an ominous phrase, for a writer) was that if this project blew up, why then I would go on to the next script, and if I was smart about it, I would be sure that some of the money from it would go into a fund to allow me to start a new book. That was important, because what I was doing, I realized, was spending the money for a new book to go on working on the script for *The Good Son*. Surely, I have learned something from this.

Now, for this meeting on Nantucket, I had written a description of what each scene would look like (the colors, the lighting, the pay off, how each scene should be played, etc.), and one afternoon, we sat outside, on some lawn chairs, and I went through the entire thing, not shot by shot exactly, but pretty close.

This went over pretty well. Later that night, after we had all had too much of that twenty-five year old scotch, the producers asked me if I wanted to direct the film. Now, I had been on the sets of many films, and I had studied film in graduate school at Columbia, although mostly this meant looking into catalogues for equipment we couldn't afford. My wife had made independent documentaries and had produced shows for CBS News. Between us we had a more than passing idea of what went into getting a film made, but even through the warm haze of that scotch, I knew that on the job training with a budget of twenty-five million dollars wasn't something that I was going to add to the list of the mistakes I had made. So, I thanked them for their vote of confidence in

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me, and respectfully suggested we hire someone who knew what he was doing.

Still, every now and then, when I am in the midst of a new book that isn't going well, I will wake up and look at the ceiling for a while and consider whether or not I had made a mistake. Would I have been able to hold this thing together long enough to get the film made? I think I made the right decision, although every now and then I will have a drink of MacCallan's and in the warmth of it, I will become a little wistful.

With episodes like this, the towers of clouds, the excellent food in the excellent hotel, the good scotch and being offered a job to direct a film, how could one want to do anything else? It was just what I had imagined all of this to be. Someone once wrote that the beginning of each disaster is hidden. This is an observation that I have been able to consider, if not at leisure, while then in sudden, unexpected moments in the midst of trying to write my way out of a financial crater.

One day I received a phone call from Little Big. He told me that he was quitting. He hadn't been getting along with Mr. Big, and he had done something that had made some money for the company (I think he had talked a well funded production into using his company's special effects department) and while he had done this, his budget had been cut. Or, at least, that's what he told me. Of course, he said, someone else would come into work on *The Good Son*. Surely, if nothing else, it meant that the *Good Son* was not going to get "funded" any time soon.

Still, I decided that I would go to work on the script for the second project, a novel called the *Universal Donor* (which, I want to point out, had some other interest from more stable movie outfits). I found out very quickly that this project was going to be dropped, too, and, in fact, the entire movie end of operations was going to be merged with a company in Los Angeles, and in the ebb and flow of corporate

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reorganization, everything that I had been working on was going to be dropped. Or, dropped for awhile, and in this business, that could be a very long time indeed.

Now, this news came when I was in my office, upstairs in the house where I lived in Vermont. It seems to me that this happened in the fall, which is an awkward time in Vermont, if only for psychological reasons, since you are getting ready for winter, and one of the things that you don't to run out of, in the winter there, is money. It is amazing how quickly one sees one's true circumstances.

Here is what they were. I had spent the money that had been previously set aside to write a new book, and this book was now not started. If I was going to approach a New York publisher about an advance for a book, I needed to have something on paper. I think I had about two months worth of living expenses, although I wasn't sure. Two months is not a lot of time to write a novel, or a large part of one. Perhaps it might be possible to go to the bank to borrow money on the house, but when I have done this in the past, I have always had a contract, or contracts, which showed that I was gainfully employed. What did I have now? Well, not much.

I went downstairs to the kitchen where my wife was having a cup of coffee. She looked up and smiled. The kids were at school, and she was glad I was coming downstairs to have a cup of coffee with her. One of my wife's most charming qualities is the beauty and friendliness of her smile.

"I think we've got to have a talk," I said.

She could hear the little quaver in my voice, not fear so much as the definite vibration of terror. But, perhaps, it could have been something else. Still, she stopped smiling.

"About what?" she said.

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“Well, I’ve had some bad news,” I said.

“O?” she said.

She put her coffee cup down.

“How bad?” she said.

I explained.

“O,” she said. “O, no.”

“Do you think the bank will lend us money?” I said.

“I don’t know,” she said.

The clinical details of how I managed to get out of this mess are probably the kind of thing that it is best to avert one’s eyes from, but I did manage to get through it, with a certain amount of flirtation with guolaosi. It is safe to say that I wrote a sample of a book that no one wanted (after all, I did the entire thing in about six weeks), and then, in the midst of this disaster, I had to produce yet another sample, in an even shorter amount of time, etc., and to do so with the psychological pressure going up. There is nothing worse, as any novelist will tell you, than sitting by the phone in afternoon, just before, say, Christmas, when you are broke and it is getting dark, and your agent is not calling: everyone knows what this means. It is what I call the Silent Telegraph.

Still, if the beginnings of disasters are hidden, so are those of expected surprises. And these surprises often produce bigger ones, like friendships that you realize you had but which you hadn't looked at clearly. I lost touch with Mr. Big over the next year. I knew that he was getting out of the business, and out of business altogether, as nearly as I could tell. Often, in the aftermath of disaster, you feel a particular kind of emptiness, which is not so much the presence of the effects of what went wrong, but the more delicate one of missing the vital hope of what one had before. I decided that, really, what I did and had some control over was the writing of novels. I felt like a husband who has

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gone astray, and is glad that his wife has had the courage and the love to stay with him. I began a new book and knew that somehow I would finish it.

At the end of a year, the option for the Good Son was about to expire, and one of Mr. Big's new partners (from the movie outfit in Los Angeles) called to say that they would like to take a whack at the book. They wanted to renew the option. At this point I was a little older and a little wiser, and so I said that it was fine by me, but that I wanted to talk to Mr. Big for a moment. The next day I called him and explained what had happened. The day after that, a check arrived, by Federal Express for the outstanding money that was due on the second screen writing assignment. When I stood by the front door, with the check in my hand, it left me with a sense of, well, renewed faith, if not in the movie business, why then in this man's consideration. Well, I thought, can you beat that? It had the same quality as flying between those pillars of clouds and that slug of Macallan's, and while I still think that I would be cautious, far more cautions indeed if someone asked me to adapt a book of mine for a film, something else has presented itself. Why, I have been thinking recently, should I let other people control things. What I need to do is to write an original script, one without the baggage of a book, and without the proscription of the most controlling studio imaginable. Is that the way to go?

Well, a producer called the other day. He wanted to option a book of mine, and I said, "No. You don't want to do that. I've got another idea for a movie."

"Tell me about it," he said.