# History of Big Fish

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I first read Daniel Wallace's BIG FISH: A NOVEL OF MYTHIC PROPORTIONS in manuscript form: essentially a stack of double-spaced pages that comes, unbound, in a cardboard box. Compared to the double-bradded, 120-page orderliness of a screenplay, a novel in its unpublished form seems primitive and raw. And frankly, amateur. After all, in screenwriting one learns to obsess about the flow of words on the page, carefully tweaking every line break. I've re-written scenes just to keep a dialogue block intact. Here the words were chosen simply to tell the story. It all seemed so unprofessional.

This was the fall of 1998. My first produced film, GO, was stuck in never-ending post-production, and I was actively looking for a new project, preferably one that wouldn't pigeonhole me as a guy who writes comedies about teenage drug dealers. So I cracked open the cardboard box and read Big Fish.

My second impression of Wallace's novel was that it was great.

The book tells the story of Edward Bloom, a Southern braggart who is now lying on his deathbed. On four separate occasions, his grown son tries to have a heartfelt "what-it-all-means" talk with him, but each time he does, Edward tells bad jokes and impossible tales. Edward is slippery, and slipping away. The rest of the book recounts various adventures Edward claims to have had over the course of his life, which range from tales of Herculean labors to climatic impossibilities, such as fourteen-foot snowstorms in Alabama.

The writing was simple, and weird, and imaginative. It clearly offered a lot of cinematic moments. But what attracted me most were the things that weren't even on the page. I knew that the son, Will, was a reporter in Paris, married to a pregnant French woman. That's nowhere in the story, but I was absolutely certain it was true. There wasn't a circus anywhere in the book, yet I immediately sensed where it would fit. In short, I knew so much about the story I wanted to tell that I had to write the script immediately.

I brought the book to Sony, who was releasing GO, and begged them to option the rights for me. Since the novel doesn't have a conventional plot -- each little story is essentially self-contained -- this took a fair amount of convincing. Structurally, the movie would work somewhat like THE PRINCESS BRIDE, in that we would move back and forth between the "real world" and the fantasy version of Edward's life. The studio was mostly concerned about the tone: would it be a comedy or a drama? I described it thusly: "It's funny, then it's funny, then it's funny, then you're laughing through tears, then it's over." They relented, and I suddenly had a book to adapt.

There were no producers attached to the project, so I dealt directly with the author. I first met up with him during a research trip to Washington, D.C. for an ill-conceived WB show. Over lunch at IHOP, Wallace and I talked about the book, trying to sort out its mysteries.

Was the Witch really Jenny Hill? Who was the Girl in the River? Wallace had answers, but more impressively, he didn't insist on being right. Everything was open for interpretation. He didn't see anything in his book as being sacred and untouchable.

Energized from our conversation, I was set to write the screenplay. And then I didn't.

First, Sony asked me to do some work on BLUE STREAK, changing a character who had been written for Nicholas Cage to one suitable for Martin Lawrence. Then the ill-conceived show I was developing for the WB was ordered for pilot, which meant six weeks freezing in Toronto. Then Sony asked if I would take a look at CHARLIE'S ANGELS, because Drew Barrymore had just signed on to star and produce. I wrote two drafts. Then the ill-conceived WB show was picked up for series, which meant six months of co-exec producing a crappy Canadian-based drama about Washington interns. I was busy and miserable.

Then I was booted from CHARLIE'S ANGELS. Then I was booted from my television series. And suddenly, after eighteen months, I could start adapting Big Fish into BIG FISH. Except I had no idea where to begin.

Over the months, my enthusiasm for the project had dissipated. I started to wonder if Sony had been right all along, and there really wasn't a cinematic story to be told. But since I owed them a screenplay, I tried my best to bang one out. I started with the low-hanging fruit, the easily cinematic scenes that could be adapted almost directly from the novel. Wallace started his tale with a dustbowl sequence in which Edward Bloom's birth ends a decades-old drought. The sequence was quick and easy to write, and felt like a movie. Unfortunately, it didn't involve any of the movie's primary characters, so it didn't do much to pave the way for the rest of the writing. I needed to tackle some fundamental issues first.

The biggest challenge in adapting the novel was figuring out exactly who was telling the story of Edward's life. His son Will is the narrator of the novel, although we don't learn much about him. Yet in the movie I had promised Sony, Will was supposed to be a major character with backstory and conflict and growth. The idea was that Will would come to understand his father by finding the truth in these impossible stories.

And this was the problem. If the movie is about Will not understanding his father's stories, why is he telling them in the first place?

I needed to find a new way to get into Edward's stories. The solution was to have Edward tell them himself. Over the course of the movie, I would build moments where he could launch into his tales, which would then bridge us into the fantasy world. Will's wife Josephine—who doesn't exist in the book—became an important resource, since hers were a set of fresh ears to hear the tales. Other stories could come from more oblique angles. Early in the script, Will sees a kid making hand-shadows and remembers his father illustrating a story with his hands. Later on, Will peers into his childhood bedroom and remembers his father watching over him when he had chicken pox. In both cases, reality triggers flashback, which in turn triggers fantasy sequence. It's a complicated way to do it, but ends up feeling natural for the movie.

Every screenwriting book will tell you that voice-over is the mark of bad filmmaking. By that standard, BIG FISH is awful. There is a ton of voice-over, by a total of four characters. In its defense, this is a movie about storytelling. There are obviously going to be moments where a character's in-scene dialogue will carry over into voice-over. However, in most cases the voice-over has very little to do with the scene it's playing over. Instead, it's giving you information that you couldn't get just through images alone, usually Edward's perspective on what's really important.

The most complicated use of voice-over ended up being the first 10 pages of the screenplay, which needed to set up all of the primary characters (Older Edward, Younger Edward, Will, Josephine and Sandra), plus explain the reason for Will and Edward not speaking to each other, the fact that Will lives in Paris, that Edward is dying, that Josephine is pregnant, and still be entertaining.

The result was a sequence in which the younger and older incarnations of Edward tell a single story over the course of 27 years. With each time cut, we see Will growing older and more annoyed with his larger-than-life father, until the tension finally snaps at Will's wedding to Josephine. Oddly for a family drama, the only argument in the movie happens on page five.

After this fight, Will and Edward don't speak to each other for three years, and we suddenly move into Will's voice-over. This was a tough decision. Usually, you only give story-telling power to one character in a movie. But in this case, Will was just as much the hero of the story as Edward. Giving his character the ability to talk directly to the audience early in the film signaled that he was to be taken seriously. For most people watching the movie, Will is the one they relate to the most. He's ordinary. He's human. He's me.

One of the complications in adapting the novel was that Will's story pretty closely mirrors my own life. I lost my father in college after a long illness, and while we both made an effort to know each other better in those last years, we were fundamentally alien to each other. As Will puts it: "I didn't see anything of myself in my father, and I don't think he saw anything of himself in me. We were like strangers who knew each other very well."

My dad was nothing like Edward Bloom, but my relationship to him had the same dynamic as the movie I was writing. For some of the details, this was extraordinarily helpful. You can't watch a person fight cancer for three years without learning a lot about doctors, hospitals and nutritional supplements. I knew what to put in the movie. More importantly, I knew what to leave out. There's a matter-of-factness that develops when a person is dying, which has nothing to do with medical jargon and morphine drips. By keeping it simple, I kept it more honest.

In terms of Will himself, I made him a journalist because that's what I studied in college. I made him my age (28 at the time) so that I could keep timelines consistent. And more than any screenplay I'd written before or since, I just wrote him as myself. While I hope the character embodies some of my better qualities, he certainly incorporates some of my worst. He's stubborn and self-defeating. He's eager to please but desperate for praise -- a grade-grubber

grown up. And worst of all, he insists on being right, even when there's no "right" to be found.

Compared to the gregarious Edward, Will is more difficult to embrace. I knew that when I wrote him. But knowing that still didn't prepare me for the notes I would receive, most of which began with some version of, "We don't like Will." I fought the temptation to stand on my chair and shout that I was Will, and that any attack on the character was an attack on me. I fought the temptation to soften the character, because to do so would soften the inherent drama in the story. To me, it didn't matter if you liked Will, as long as you understood his motivation.

All told, it took five months to write the first draft of the script, more than double what it usually takes me. Part of the delay was the complexity of the story. Part of it was the release of StarCraft, an insidiously addictive videogame that has been the downfall of screenwriters much stronger than me. But when the script was finally finished, I sent it to Daniel Wallace, who liked it. He had never read a screenplay before, so it was obviously disconcerting to read a variation on his own work, but he offered surprisingly objective criticism.

(In fact, Wallace was so taken with the screenplay form that he became a screenwriter himself. In addition to his novels, he's now writing an original movie for Universal.)

The studio read the script and liked it, up to a point. They felt the movie was charming but expensive, a deadly combination. With all the special effects in the fantasy sequences, the budget looked to climb over $60 million, which was a very high price tag for what they ultimately saw as a small, intimate movie. They honored my contract, however, and let me write a second draft. This version was better, tighter, and not a dime cheaper to shoot.

Without any momentum, the movie was pretty much dead. I took the script to Dan Jinks and Bruce Cohen, who had just produced AMERICAN BEAUTY. The film hadn't won its Oscars yet, but was very much admired around town. When Jinks and Cohen agreed to sign on as producers, Sony couldn't say no. After all, they were well-regarded producers who had just made a difficult comedy-drama inside the studio system. Working through another draft with them, we finally had a script the studio would let us send to directors.

But the list was short, and filled with impossible names. Since the movie was going to be expensive, Sony wanted an A-list director. After a protracted courtship with one such name-brand filmmaker, we finally found our man in Tim Burton, who was looking for a more intimate movie after a series of marketing-driven tentpole pictures. He came on board the project along with producer Richard Zanuck. Burton liked the script just the way it was. After years of trying to placate directors for various projects, it was disconcerting for me not to be tweaking and changing, trying new things to tailor my vision to someone else's vision. Burton just wanted to make the movie. My longest meeting with him probably lasted half an hour, of which fifteen minutes was spent with one of us saying, "Absolutely. I agree."

When it came time for casting, figuring out how to handle Edward became a problem. Since we follow the character from the day he's born until the day he dies, we would potentially

need several actors to play his various incarnations. One school of thought was to pick an actor in the middle range of ages, say Tom Hanks or Russell Crowe, and age him up or down as appropriate. This discussion was coming right after Crowe had done A BEAUTIFUL MIND, and there was a sense that the same type of prosthetics that aged him in that film could be used in ours.

The other school of thought—of which I was dean, provost and head cheerleader—was to split the role into a Younger Edward, who would handle ages 18-40, and an Older Edward, who would handle ages 50 and over. With this in mind, I wrote a new sequence specifically for the Older Edward character, in which he inadvertently becomes a Texas bankrobber at the height of the 1980's savings and loan debacle.

My school won. We cast Ewan McGregor and Albert Finney as the younger and older Edwards. We decided that McGregor would play all of the fantasy sequences, leaving Finney all the "real world" scenes. A truncated version of the bankrobbery sequence, written for the older character, was moved to be part of Younger Edward's timeline.

The rest of the cast filled out quickly. Billy Crudup would play Will. Jessica Lange and Alison Lohman would share the role of Sandra. Danny DeVito took the role of circus owner Amos Calloway, a character I'd created with him in mind. Helena Bonham Carter would take the dual role of the Witch and Jenny Hill.

One of the best scenes in the movie came fairly late in its development. I was happy but surprised when Jessica Lange signed on to play Sandra, because the role isn't particularly rewarding. Since the real drama is between father and son, Sandra ends up playing mother and nurse. You like her, but she isn't all that memorable.

I met with Lange in New York during costume fittings, and was struck, as most people are, by how beautiful and ethereal she is. As she tried on clothes with costume designer Colleen Atwood, Lange kept pushing for more sensual and revealing outfits, exactly the opposite of what you'd expect for the Alabama housewife character she was playing. Lange argued that Sandra wanted to dress nicely for her husband. She wanted to be touched, caressed. Lange wanted the audience to sense that the Older Sandra and Edward still had the passionate romance that we'd seen in their younger incarnations.

I thought she was absolutely right. I also thought the script wasn't giving her any moments to support that idea. Scribbling on hotel stationery, I wrote out a bathtub scene with Edward and Sandra that felt like it always belonged in the movie. When we previewed the film for an audience, the scene ranked as one of the most-liked.

We began shooting in January, 2003. A little over four years had passed since I'd first read Wallace's novel. In the dozen or so drafts I'd written during that time, pretty much every word had changed, but the structure of the movie was almost exactly the same. It had good bones.

As it turned out, the very first sequence I wrote, in which Edward's birth ends the dustbowl,

was cut from the movie just before production. The budget was already too high, and this sequence -- which didn't involve any main characters -- was easiest to drop. On Tim Burton's suggestion, I wrote a new scene in which newborn Edward is so slippery that no one can catch him. It was cheaper to film and nicely set up the quirky nature of Edward's stories.

The movie was shot on location in Alabama and Paris. After spending two weeks on set during pre-production, I left to begin filming another (ill-fated) television pilot in Vancouver. I returned to set several months later to find everything was going smoothly. Too smoothly. Happy sets generally result in bad movies, or so the truism goes, and the worst calamity to befall BIG FISH had been unusually persistent rain.

Once they wrapped, Burton began editing in London. As months passed without news from the editing room, the fear set in. I convinced myself that the movie was doomed. The structure was too complicated, too confusing. The fantasy sequences were too strange, or not strange enough. And the Will character—my doppelganger—was insufferable.

And then I saw the finished product. The movie worked in very much the same way the script had. The story was easy to follow, and the balance between fantasy and reality made sense. The love story between Edward and Sandra had moved closer to the foreground, even though scene-for-scene it was just the way I wrote it. Most importantly, Will didn't come off as a whiny twat.

The most rewarding moment of that first viewing came during an important plot twist near the end. Sitting in the audience, I found myself panicked, wondering, "What's going to happen?"

Of course, I knew. I'd been working on the damn movie for five years. But the fact that the story could still surprise me meant that something special was at work. I immediately called Daniel Wallace to tell him the good news. He demanded to know everything that had changed from the script. As I started to list the cuts, I could sense his apprehension. "But it doesn't matter," I explained. "It's different, but it's exactly the same."

In that moment, I remembered opening the cardboard box to read his original manuscript. Even as I read it that first time, I knew I would make huge changes in order to convert it into a movie. But that didn't matter. Much like Edward Bloom's stories, the details might change, but the underlying message would be exactly the same.