



PICTURES AS WORDS

by Doug Copsey, April 2008

I tend to think in pictures, which I think comes from an early fascination with movies. And television, and theater, and all the performing arts. I can still call up an image of Peggy Lee singing her torchy version of *Fever* on an afternoon variety show the first time I saw a TV set in the second grade. Pictures have been the foundation for my ideas ever since.

It wasn't until high school that learning lines for plays sparked an interest in the words that made those pictures come to life. You know, the first time you read Shakespeare—I mean really *read* Shakespeare—and began to understand how much emotion and passion and angst and every other feeling can be created by a simple string of words on a page. After that, I wanted to translate my pictures into words.

Screenplays seemed like the natural starting point for my writing career. Unlike plays, films rely on pictures more than words—real landscapes, actual locations—even if, today, a lot of them are created by computers. Yet the screenplays themselves are just words, the starting point for the long journey from page to screen. The catch-22 with screenplays is that you have to use as few words as possible, and those are mostly dialogue. Descriptive passages are heavily discouraged. That way, producers and directors are free to imagine the environment and “look” they will create for your story on the screen. It's why I need regular forays into novels and short stories just to release all those pent up words I haven't been able to use in screenplays.

I know no better motivation for creating words—with or without pictures—than deadlines. Whether laid down by a publisher, necessitated by a television air date, or imposed on yourself, deadlines are the great motivators. It's one thing to miss the due date for a school paper by a few days, but quite another to miss a paycheck for not having a magazine article or a script finished when it's due. It's the next level of the challenge—creating the words on time.

The towering obstacle to meeting deadlines is that feared word—procrastination. There is no greater enemy when a deadline looms for the bread-and-butter piece in front of you. That's when the pictures in your head reveal a breakthrough idea for your next novel. When you feel a nearly addictive need to check your e-mails one more time. Or a longing to experience the joys of vacuuming the house ... again.

If procrastination is the enemy, focus is the true test of writing mettle. A few years back, at The Cabin's last BookFest, I attended a workshop led by author Deborah Donneley that centered on these two infamous words. The first thing she did was pull out a stop watch and tell us all to write for five minutes. We could work on anything we

wanted, a new idea or a story already in progress. When our time was up, I was surprised to realize I had completed almost an entire scene for a novel I was working on.

The rest of the workshop was spent discussing the concept of managing your writing time, and how much can be accomplished if you just let yourself focus and write, instead of procrastinating because you don't think you have time to get anything accomplished.

It's a lesson I recall every time I sit down at the computer and find my eyes drifting to the clock. It always seems to bring the pictures back into focus, and the next thing I know I'm writing.

Doug Copsey's writing career spans more than thirty years. His work continues to be seen in several regional publications as well as numerous television documentaries. He has also written several feature screenplays and a novel. His work as a writer/director/producer in film and television earned him an Emmy nomination for writing and directing One Light One World, the official Film of the 1992 Olympic Winter Games. He lives in Boise with his family.