

So You Want to Write a Screenplay for a Children's Movie

by Cynthia Hawkins

For starters, someone must be dead. That's the golden rule to remember here. And if that someone is mom, you've got a hit on your hands. *Nanny McPhee*. *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs*. *Cinderella*. *Annie*. *Harry Potter*. *Jumanji*. *Beauty and the Beast*. *The Game Plan*. *Nim's Island*. *Bambi*. *Snow White*. *Fly Away Home*. *Hannah Montana*. What do they all have in common? That's right. A musical score. Oh, and a dead mom.

Fill your screenplay with adorable creatures. Animated, not animated — doesn't matter. Maybe they talk. Maybe not. Just have them. But no cats.

And for the love of all things Jiminy Cricket do not kill off your adorable creature! We've come a long way since *Where the Red Fern Grows* and *Old Yeller*. Those films are relics of a bygone era. We just don't kill off animals anymore. It's upsetting. No one likes to see that.

The only exception would be, of course, if your adorable little creature is a mom. Then you can kill off your adorable creature. Think *Finding Nemo*. Think carnage in the opening sequence. Imagine those teary-eyed little children watching from between their wee little hands squashing their faces at the heart-smashing tragedy of it all. Now imagine their gazes drifting over to their mothers beside them as they think, "Wait a second. You mean ... I could lose you? Forever and ever? Out of the blue? All of the sudden? Nooooo!" You've just made fans for life.

All right, all right. If you must have a cat, the cat can be the villain or the companion of a villain. But that's it. No strutting around looking cute. Villainy only.

Repeat after me: flatulence is always funny. Always. It doesn't even need a set-up. That's the beauty of it! And your children's movie must have it. Or belching. Please, though, do not involve the mom in the flatulence or belching because mom is not here to be funny. Are you saying you think death is funny?

Dead within fifteen minutes of the opening credits, recently dead, long dead, doesn't matter as long as you remember that one or both parents must go. We can't have our lead characters running around under the protective supervision of a couple of doting parents without even an inkling that said parents could be horrifically ripped from their lives at any given moment. Trust me. The people who want to see that kind of thing don't go to the movies. They're too busy holed up at home knitting and playing Jenga and watching "Little House on the Prairie" marathons.

So, let's say that despite everything you've learned here you still insist on including a mom in your children's movie. Fine, but I would advise you under such circumstances to make sure that only mom's legs are visible. As in *Toy Story*. Possibly hands, if need be. Might I suggest she be a faint voice from afar, like the humming of a refrigerator in the kitchen. Three houses down. Listen, I'm warning you. If your mom has more presence than the wallpaper, you can forget about developing any conflicts because she can solve a problem faster than you can say "half pint." Even better, have mom abandon the central character early on, a la *Meet the Robinsons* or *Enchanted*, and then go away forever. As if she were dead.

And I will make this final allowance for you: if you'd like to make it seem like your adorable creature is dead for at least five minutes, maybe ten, this would be acceptable. Like in *Beverly Hills Chihuahua*, *Over the Hedge*, or *G-Force*. Bring your young audience to the brink of tears and then reassure them by showing them the creature was just *playing* dead. Make them laugh about it, even. This is a good time for that fart joke. Let them know everything is just fine. Unless we're talking about mom. Mom is dead, and they're just going to have to deal with it.

