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Ross Grayson Bell



**Breaking
good**

When no studio wanted to touch *Fight Club*, producer Ross Grayson Bell fought hard to get the film green-lighted. Now, he's back home in Australia and pulling no punches with budding storytellers.

By Sarah Price.

particle board, which disintegrates when wet. There is nothing to hold on to.

"There is a line in the film: 'The things you own end up owning you.' In some ways, *Fight Club* is a response to the idea that we've all been emasculated or dehumanised into becoming consumers. It's about Robin Hood's giving people back their lives." All of us would like to have part of Tyler Durden in us, he believes, "that person who flouts convention - blows it up, in fact. It's that idea of setting free the true spirit underneath, of not bowing down to false gods."

"It's a male-dominated film. I always saw it as liberating men. There is something that has gone from society - men have lost ritual in their lives. Where do we find it now? It's not on the daily commute, or in corporate Australia, or on our iPhones. The wrestle that's played out in *Fight Club* is between that acceptable face of masculinity: the guy in the suit catching the train and making his daily wage, and the other one who says: 'Fuck that, let's go hunting or surfing or whatever.'" Shifting his focus from student to student, blue eyes unwavering, Grayson Bell asks: "Where has true masculine energy gone?"

"What's really interesting is that this treatise on masculinity was generated by gay men. Chuck Palahniuk, the author, is gay, and he was mentored by a gay writer. Palahniuk sent the book to a gay agent. The gay agent sent it to a gay executive who then sent it to me, a gay producer. Ultimately masculinity is not about gay and straight - people get confused sometimes with that. The idea of being a provider, of being able to fight, all those things, is separate from gay and straight. Gay men sometimes suffer because they don't fit that image. The pressure to be a man is the same whether you're gay or straight."

Reading the unpublished manuscript for *Fight Club*, Grayson Bell felt a charge go through his body, "like a lightning rod. You can't fake that. Every time I talked about the project it was there." It is your conviction that moves things forward, he believes. The ability to stay the distance when everyone else says no. "That conviction, if it's authentic, is almost physiological: you can feel an energy shift."

Initially, no studio would agree to make the film. The book's coverage was damning, advising executives against it. Determined to counter the negative image, Grayson Bell got a group of actors together and did a read-through of the book. The first session lasted six hours. He then edited the book: changed internal monologue to dialogue, rearranged scenes, reordereed it. After a couple of months he got it down to 50 minutes, rented sound equipment and taped the read-through like an audio book. He gave the tape to the late Laura Ziskin, head of Fox 2000 at the time. Ziskin listened to the tape during a 50-minute drive to Santa Barbara. At the end of her drive, she called Grayson Bell to tell him he had a producing deal. He had never made a film, yet had an exclusive deal with 20th Century Fox.

"The tape convinced her there was a movie in the book," he says. "It was my first film and I was completely naive about how difficult it was to make movies. I probably broke every rule in terms of getting a writer attached, a director attached, the studio to say yes. Then I watched the process. It was very fast. From book to finished film was two-and-a-half years - that's unheard of in Hollywood - especially with something as sedulous as *Fight Club*."

From the class comes a question: what is the film's message about violence? Grayson Bell moves in closer, brings his hands together in a pensive clasp. "*Fight Club* was criticised for promoting a violent society. I would argue the opposite. With *Fight Club* you have filmmakers at the front of the room ripping open their souls and saying, 'This is how we see the world.' The audience gets to see part of themselves. I think *Fight Club* lets the pressure off; it doesn't create a violent culture. In *Fight Club* men found some place they could express themselves.

We weren't saying go out and fight each other; we were saying look for a way to break yourself apart. Break the bonds that hold you down. The fighting was an expression of that idea." The film was made because the ideas were so valid and current, he says. Now, new generations of men are finding it, "coming up to tell me they love it".

Kneeling on the floor, Grayson Bell props his elbows on the desk in front of him and surveys his students. "How do you raise the stakes?" he asks. Answers come at him from around the tables: ghosts, pregnancy, illness, through conflict, confusion, betrayal. He leans forward, nodding and questioning, drawing ideas out. "Get your audience on board and ratchet it up each time: stakes, obstacles, reversals," he says, clicking his fingers. "The stakes are relative to your character. Ed Norton's character is a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. Everything is a copy of a copy. It has no real value. Life is deadening. What's at stake for him? His whole world. It defines him, or at least he believes it defines him."

Transformation is hard, he tells the class. Overcoming a personal flaw that you are blind to is difficult. Know your character's psychology. Understand



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Ross Grayson Bell stands behind a chair, hands rested on the high point of its iron frame. He is slight and compact, with a powerful smile. Dressed in mauve and purple, with clipped silver-brown stubble, his look is casual but cool. The most exciting thing about *Fight Club*, he says, is the scene in the convenience store. "Brad Pitt's character, Tyler Durden, drags the guy out from behind the counter, puts a gun to his head and asks him what he'd rather be doing. The guy says: 'I want to be a vet.' Tyler Durden takes his driver's licence, telling him: 'We know where you live. If you're not in vet school tomorrow, next month we're going to kill you.' The guy runs off terrified, sobbing. Ed Norton's character turns to Tyler Durden, saying: 'How could you do that?' Tyler Durden says: 'I gave the man back his life. Tomorrow his breakfast is going to taste better than any breakfast he's ever had.'" Pausing, Grayson Bell smiles at his students. "I love that. As they say later in the script: 'It's a near-life experience.'"

After 20 years in Hollywood, Grayson Bell has come home. He's working on two local TV series, consulting for Screen Australia, mentoring writers, and today, teaching character and story at Faber Writing Academy in Sydney. Twelve people sit in his class, quiet to begin, almost reverent. They've driven from country towns, come across suburbs and flown from Melbourne. Desks are arranged in the shape of a horseshoe, hooked towards Grayson Bell. Surrounded by students, he begins: "When you are writing anything, you need to know your premise. What are you trying to say?" Part of the ease with getting *Fight Club* made came from his "absolute belief in it", from his need for the message to go further than readers of the book. "It was such an important premise: 'You have to break yourself apart to build something better.'"

The film speaks to people now more than ever before, he says. We are more immersed in consumer culture, more owned by possessions. Increasingly, we are isolated and repressed by consumerist lifestyles. "In the novel, Chuck Palahniuk writes about semi-disposable Swedish furniture. IKEA uses 1 per cent of the world's wood. That's 1 per cent of the world's forests going into

their belief system. How is it similar to your own?" All our choices are based on our belief system. False beliefs often make us feel strong and safe. That's why it's so hard to let go of them." For a moment, Grayson Bell is silent. He runs a hand over his stubbled chin. "I'd've been raised differently. I may not have produced *Fight Club*," he says. "Seeking parental approval pushed me to be as ambitious as I was. People could say I was self-centred for the first 50 years of my life. I believed that love was a weakness, and that by needing somebody you'd be held back in what you wanted."

For his entire life, until recently, Grayson Bell "didn't love". He believed he was unloveable. "It's the fear of being vulnerable and intimate, and then being slapped down for it. Showing your true self and being punished for it is something I have experienced. So better not reveal yourself, better not expose yourself to that kind of hurt." Fear can create a mask of strength, he says. What your character thinks is strength is often denial. It takes tremendous courage to let go of the belief system that gives you strength. "I once said that people can take away their love, but they can't take away your career. It was crazy thinking. Of course you can lose your career. But I always thought a relationship would hold me back. In some ways that's true. I've lived all over the world and moved when I needed to, and worked hours I wouldn't have worked if I had been in a relationship."

"I sacrificed a lot to get Hollywood happening. Like a lot of people who are overly ambitious, I think I was trying to prove something." In Hollywood, you are on all the time, he says. Everyone is always selling themselves. There is complete immersion; you are constantly talking story. It's infused, becomes part of who you are. People are in Los Angeles for one purpose: to make it. You are valued for what you do, not who you are. "But what I do love about America is that everyone gets a shot there. A story can come from anyone. The producer of *Erin Brockovich* was told the story by her hairdresser. I got my shot. I was a nobody and I was able to get *Fight Club* going."

Now, he is much calmer about work and feels he has less to prove. "It's not that I've achieved everything I want; it is an ageing process. I realised there are other things in life. At the end of the day, who do you come home to?" Although he still has a house in LA, Grayson Bell is based permanently in Sydney. "My contacts are now here, my future is here. I have a firm belief that if the concepts behind our TV shows here are strong enough, they can travel the world. When I first arrived back in Australia I went to work at the film school in Sydney. My colleagues were as talented as anyone I'd ever met in London or LA or New York." He says he always wanted to return to Australia, where "we have a kinder, more community-based life". Every morning from his home in Darlinghurst, he goes to different beaches to photograph the sunrise. "The community at the beach is like a private club. Everyone talks to you; it's free. It's who I think I would like to imagine myself to be: the freewheeling, barefoot Aussie having a swim in the morning and saying hello to everybody."

At the end of day Grayson Bell still hasn't sat down. He is bright-eyed, energised. Most movies are about transformation, he says. Liberate your characters from their flaws. "What can Ed Norton's character do at the end of the movie that he couldn't do at the beginning? He stands up to Tyler Durden. The climax is the ultimate battle between identity and essence. We know transformation has taken place. He has broken himself apart and is on the way to building something new. Essence wins."

Scrawling his email address across the whiteboard, Grayson Bell tells his students, "You can contact me." He pauses, marker in hand, and turns, smiling at his class. "But you need to do one thing. Write a piece about what you want for the next six months. Go out into an imagined future, write your perfect scenario and send it to me." ●

