Screenwriters On Screenwriting.
The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust
Frank Cottrell Boyce
27 September 2011 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

(Clip from the opening scene of 24 Hour Party People where Tony Wilson hand glides into shot)

Frank Cottrell Boyce: Hi, I showed that clip because I really like it. I haven't got a damn thing to say about it, I just wanted to share it with you because I really like it. Because I'm not going to talk about writing movies tonight, I'm going to talk about enjoying, watching and cherishing movies and why we like movies. This came about partly because Tricia, who organised this, rang me up a couple of weeks ago to make sure I hadn't forgotten and she asked me to talk about what I was going to talk about and I realised I hadn't had a film made for about five or six years and I felt completely fraudulent talking about screenwriting.

But in the fortnight since that phone call suddenly two films have crystallised. One of them is a completely normal process; it's a script I've been working on for about three of four years, knocking it back and forth. It's never really been off the desk. And suddenly it all came right, and it's going out and it's all going to happen next year hopefully, fingers crossed. And that's great; it's wonderful that that's happening.

But the other is a much more unusual story, it's a film that I wrote more than ten years ago. 'More than ten years ago' is a term that I've agreed with the producer so that we don't actually talk about how long ago it really was. That's a legal formula. I'll just say that the Grand Canyon was formed more than ten years ago. It's a film about the Second World War, and when I was writing it it wasn't that clear who was going to win. I can see Greg, my agent, is there and he looked at the deal for me to see what it would be on the first day of principal photography and it was 30 golden guineas and the hand of the princess, and deer hunting rights in Hackney.

It's called *The Railwayman*, and it's absolutely fantastic that that's happening, really wonderful. I really feel rejuvenated by the fact that that's happening. But that process, that very prolonged process, those ten years... They're not ten years where it was beautifully written, parked up and waiting. They're ten years full of frustration, self-doubt, losing, humiliation [and] failure. I thought I was going to get laughs for this actually.

I also thought, when I said it was going to get made after all this time, you were all going to go Oprah on me and say, 'Go Frankie!' This didn't happen on this particular film but humiliation is part of the process I think. It's sort of connected with this film. We went to Hollywood to try and raise money for it and kind of got sucked in to doing another film. That was my first experience of dealing with Americans. I'm sure there's lots of lovely Americans in the room and you're all fantastic; I'm not used to that level of politeness because I'm from Liverpool. People telling you that you're wonderful; it's all fantastic.

I remember having this conference phone call with them. Conference calls always sound like a really good idea. It's going to be seven o'clock at night, at least you don't have to go to America. But come seven o'clock at night you're tired, you haven't quite finished your supper, there's stuff going on in the house. The phone goes, it's always going to be another 20 minutes. The phone went and, 'It's just an honour to work with you, we just want to say that to start with, we're so happy to be working on this project, blah, blah, blah.' And the conversation went on, very constructive. And then I put the phone down to ring my English producer, who's also the producer of *The Railwayman*, to see how he thought it went.

But [whispers] when I picked the phone up they were still on the line. I was in the top bedroom and I could hear what they were saying. I thought, 'This is it, this is when I hear all the secrets.' I was listening and it was horrible. It was, 'When are you going to tell him?' 'Tell him what?' 'Tell him he's just not funny.' 'I thought you were going to tell him.' 'I couldn't tell him.' I was dying inside, but I couldn't cry out in anguish or fear because they would hear me. I couldn't breathe out because they could hear me. I couldn't

hang up because they would hear me, and they were still there tearing me apart on the phone.

And then, because it was late, the kids were starting to come upstairs to bed and they could hear this like, 'Daddy!' So I was in this room, and pulled this duvet over my head, I was hiding under this duvet and praying that no-one was going to come into this room, and they're still tearing me apart. And they were going, 'We need someone to Richard Curtis-ise this script,' and I was thinking how Richard Curtis-ish a situation I was in with that duvet and that phone. So that's part of it.

And then there's all that rewriting. I love rewriting. Writers complain a lot about rewriting. To me rewriting always seems like a fantastic privilege, a fantastic thing that you can get it right; you get the time to get it right. I think that's a wonderful thing. Anybody else in any field of human endeavour would give... what would Torres give to say, 'You know that thing with the open goal? It didn't really work for me, let's go back and see how it works if I actually score'?

You can rewrite too much. I won't give you an example from my own work because it's so dreary, but I'll give you a story about one of my children. One of my daughters told a knock knock joke. Knock knock...

Audience: Who's there?

FCB: Kenya.

Audience: Kenya who?

FCB: Kenya let me in it's cold out here. Right? It's okay, it's fine. But she would end that knock knock joke by saying, 'Do you get it? It's because Kenya's a really hot country, so you wouldn't be cold out there.' Okay. I should have said this before, she's quite little, she's one of my smaller daughters. This meant a lot to her because her brother was working in Kenya at the time, and Kenya was on her mind and Africa was on her mind.

So she rewrote the joke, so that people would get it, because people didn't get it and she had to explain it to them, like Kenya was hot. They weren't getting that. She thought Kenya was too obscure, so she changed it to knock knock...

Audience: Who's there?

FCB: Africa.

Audience: Africa who?

FCB: Africa let me in, because it's cold out here. So now it's obvious. I don't know how many times I've been in the process with a script editor or a commissioning editor, who has seen very clearly what people weren't getting – which is the 'Africaness' – and has changed the script or the idea so that people will get it because they've had their idea about it – and it's the wrong idea. It's sweet and touching, but it is the wrong idea, and when you follow those rewrites you kind of end up in the wrong place.

Okay, so that's a protracted process. We talked about more than ten years and rewrites and humiliation and all those things, and what I kind of wanted to talk about tonight is how you keep faith through all that, how you endure that process, how you enjoy that process. How do you keep your movie in your head? Because for most of its life, even a quick turnaround movie is going to take years. For most of its life your movie isn't moving. For most of its life your movie is a set of meetings and phone calls and rewrites, and appointments and recces and hassle, and it's only in your head that it's a movie. How do you do that? How do you keep that thing alive for possibly more than ten years?

There's a guy called Pete Skillman – I don't know if anyone's come across this – but he does this thing and it's like this managerial team building thing where you get a packet of spaghetti and some string and a marshmallow. Has anyone ever had to do this? [No hands from the audience] You are so privileged. People have

had to do this. The thing is, you get a certain amount of time, I think it's ten minutes, to build the biggest structure that you can and then put the marshmallow on the top. And it's got to stay up with the marshmallow on the top. And he's done this across a spectrum of things, he's discovered that the people that are best at it are architects, which is really good news, I think.

The people who are the very, very dog's breath worst at it are graduates from business school, because they spend nine of the 10 minutes arguing about who should be the CEO of Spaghetti Inc, and then they build this structure and then they put the marshmallow on top and then it collapses. And they've got a crisis, and we're all living through it.

The people who are second best at it are kids in kindergarten, which I guess you'd guess. There are two reasons, and one is the one that he is focused on which, I think, is worth thinking about: They're not afraid of failure. They'll just start. If it falls down they'll start again. They'll just keep starting again and they'll just try different things. And they'll get through ten different models in those ten minutes, until they find one that works. And they're great. They don't think in towers, they think it would be great to have a big dinosaur or a huge flower or things like that. Kids are brilliant, everybody knows that.

The other thing about the kids that I kind of noticed – and this is a bit twee – but it's that they started with the marshmallow and they built up with the marshmallow because the thing that they were really interested in was that marshmallow. They started with the marshmallow and they built up underneath the marshmallow. That just seemed to be really important, that the pleasure, the object stays central. That you don't get frustrated around all the architecture and the group dynamics and things like that. It's the marshmallow that really counts.

I was thinking, how do you do that? How do you keep your marshmallow in mind when you're having all these meetings and you're having that structure? And I've forgotten where I was going to go... so I was thinking about connecting with that pleasure, the pleasure of the film [and] of screenwriting. How do you keep that pleasure in front of you, that sharing thing in front of you, throughout this possibly very protracted process? I don't think this is a good thing but I've never done any of those courses or followed those books or the guides or anything.

So I kind of looked at them for this talk in case I was missing out on something, because I've never written a hit movie, I've never done those things. When I look at those screenwriting books they're very focused on a particular object; getting your film made, making your film do the best at the box office. And those things are very, very important but there's something very dry, architectural and very self-helpy... they read like diet books to me.

And I was thinking how you connect with the pleasure of it all. So I was going to talk about my pleasure in movies and what I love about movies, and then it just sort of turned into Down Your Way, or These I Have Loved. So I decided I am not going to talk about my early experiences of going to the cinema which were in a weird little cinema in the middle of Liverpool which was later turned into a church called The Shrine, which was like a church that was open all day. So I was always confused because it had cinema seating and a big rake and the altar where the screen had been, and church and cinema got completely mixed up in my mind.

To this day I will often go into Odeon 1 at Switch Island and genuflect at the end of the pew. Or sit expectantly during exposition, looking up at the triptych at the back thinking, 'When's it going to start?' So that kind of mixture of things. And I do have a very vivid memory of being in St Alphonse's Church watching *Jason and the Argonauts* and that can't be right.

I'm not going to talk about watching films with my parents on a Sunday afternoon on the sofa; those black and white films before the daytime

schedules were invented. You'd sit with your parents and they'd watch these black and white films and reminisce about how they'd seen it in a fleapit in the Blitz and paid with jam jars to get in. And they would sit through the whole film going, 'Isn't that thingy from whatsitsname?' 'Who's that then?' And if my gran was there she'd say, 'Hasn't Bing gone thin?' which missed the point.

I'm not going to talk about the first trip to the cinema that I actually remember, which was to see *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* with all my cousins, and we bought sweets that you could only get in the cinema that I'd never seen before. I remember sitting there, and the car, that beautiful Edwardian car, going towards the edge of the cliff and everybody screaming, and then 'INTERMISSION' coming up and everyone howling with frustration and rage and excitement about what was going to happen after the intermission. I'm not going to talk about that.

I'm not going to talk about seeing *Gregory's Girl* for the first time and thinking, 'Aaahh, that's my world, that's where I live on the screen. I didn't know you were allowed to do that,' and feeling completely thrilled and excited to see that. This is nothing to do with the talk but I've got to tell you this story – Leo McCarey… do people even remember who Leo McCarey is? Leo McCarey was a great cinema genius. He's the man who put Laurel & Hardy together and he went on and made all these Bing Crosby films like *Going My Way* and *The Bells of St Mary's*.

But he also made the first funny Cary Grant film, which is called *The Awful Truth*, I think. Is that right? Tanya Seghatchian is nodding, so I know it's right. And Cary Grant had never done funny before and when Leo McCarey saw it – and he was a very successful, charismatic, good looking guy – saw this film and thought, 'That's Cary Grant doing me.' And he got really angry, and sort of took Cary Grant apart afterwards and said, 'You've stolen my shtick, this is how I behave.'

And I'm just imagining what an ego you need, because maybe this is another thing you need – a big ego – to sit in a cinema, watch Cary Grant being funny on the screen and think, 'HELLO? Is nobody getting this? Excuse me, that's me.' That was an aside; I'm not going to talk about any of those things.

I'm not going to talk about the pleasure of going to movies and really hating it, which is a very important creative energy I think. Nobody ever talks about that. When you go to a meeting it's always about 'it's a bit like this film that I really love' and actually so much creativity comes out of really, really hating another movie.

I know that *Juno* was written after she [Diablo Cody] saw *Knocked Up* and came home so angry that she wrote *Juno*. I watched *Drive* the other night, a brilliant script by Hossein Amini, and it throbs with a hatred of *Gone In Sixty Seconds*.

It's true, it releases an energy. There's a brilliant story about two great heroes, Billy Wilder and Izzy Diamond, who went to see *Brief Encounter* together and just didn't get it at all. Izzy Diamond said, 'I just don't know what was going on there, why didn't he just give her one? What was that about?' They hated the film. And Izzy Diamond said the only interesting person in that film was the guy who lent them the flat. What was going on in his head? What was that conversation? And by the time they got home they'd come up with *The Apartment*, which is about someone [Jack Lemmon] who lends his flat out to people. That kind of hatred and misunderstanding is such a power.

I'm not going to talk about any of those things. Instead – I have to crave your indulgence on this – I'm going to show a clip. I know other people have shown clips of their work in this series, or things that have inspired them. I'm going to show you a clip of something that I've never seen. And maybe you've not seen it too, but probably you've heard about it. And we're going to conduct a mind experiment because instead of going back to my childhood joy of watching the

cinema, I'm going to take you back for a few seconds to the beginning of cinema. And I want you to imagine that you're in a Russian town, and I'll pronounce this wrongly but it's Nizhny Novgorod, and there's a young man, he's about 23. It's Easter time and he's at the fair, and he's sort of taking in what's at the fair. This is a real person.

He's someone who's had a tough upbringing, he was orphaned very young, he ran away from his orphanage and went to live with his grandmother and he's just making his way in the world. And he would become a very great man, a great artist and a great figure. But this is the beginning of his life. It's April and it's in Muscovy. It's cold, I imagine, I don't know what other people imagine that fair's going to be like, what are you going to see at that fair? I'm putting up dancing bears, jugglers, come on, help me out here... anybody, shout something.

Audience member: A bearded lady!

FCB: A bearded lady, fantastic. Old babushkas selling stuff, a band playing maybe, and he goes to a tent and the tent is called Aumont's Tent. And inside the tent this is what he sees.

(Clip from Louis Lumière's Arrival of the Train)

FCB: Okay, I've never seen that before. I know that the woman in the shawl is Lumière's mother and the little girl is his daughter. And the man that I was talking about was Maxim Gorky who went into that tent and saw that, and that was in April. I think the first time that the Lumières had ever charged anyone to watch their film was in December. And because their equipment could record and project they sent people all over the world and they would film in the daytime, and then you would go and watch it in the evening and they would collect that money, but they would also send that footage back to France so they would show footage of France in Muscovy, and then there'd be footage of Muscovy to show in France. But there's also that thing of going to watch yourself on the screen.

So from the beginning there's this split, I think, between *Gregory's Girl* – seeing yourself on the screen – and seeing something fantastically exotic on the screen as well. I'm going to read you what Maxim Gorky said because we've got his thoughts on how that felt, to see that for the first time. He saw it the way you saw it; completely silent. I'm just going to take you back to what it was like to be one of the first people to see moving pictures.

'When the lights go out in the room in which the invention is shown, there suddenly appears on the screen a large grey picture. A street in Paris, shadows of bad engravings. As you gaze at it you see carriages, buildings, people in various poses, all frozen into immobility. All this is in grey and the sky above is also grey. You anticipate nothing new in this too familiar scene, for you have seen pictures of Paris streets more than once. But suddenly a flicker passes through the screen and the picture comes to life. Carriages coming at you somewhere in the perspective of the picture are moving straight at you, into the darkness in which you sit. Somewhere from afar people appear and loom larger as they come closer to you. In the foreground children are playing with a dog, bicyclists tear along and pedestrians cross the street, picking their way among the carriages. All this moves, teems with life, and upon approaching the edge of the screen, vanishes!

'And all this in silence, where no rumble of the wheels is heard. No sound of footsteps or of speech, nothing. Not a single note of the intricate symphony that usually accompanies the movements of people. Noiselessly, the ashen grey foliage of the leaves sways in the wind, and the grey silhouettes of the people, as though condemned to eternal silence and punished by being deprived of colour, glide noiselessly along the grey ground. Their smiles are lifeless, even though their movements are full of living energy, and are so swift as to be imperceptible. Their laughter is soundless, although you can see the muscles contracting in their grey faces.

Screenwriters On Screenwriting.
The BAFTA and BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series in association with The JJ Charitable Trust
Frank Cottrell Boyce
27 September 2011 at BAFTA 195 Piccadilly

'Before you a life is surging, a life deprived of words and shorn of the living spectrum of colour; the grey, the soundless, the bleak, dismal life. It's terrifying, but is the movement of shadows only of shadows, and suddenly something clicks and everything vanishes and a train appears on the screen, speeding straight at you. Watch out! It seems as though it will plunge into the darkness in which you sit, turning you into a ripped sack of lacerated flesh and splintered bones, and crushing into dust and into broken fragments, this hall, this building so full of women and wine and music and vice. But this too is just a train of shadows, noiselessly the locomotive disappears beyond the edge of the screen, the train comes to a stop and grey figures silently emerge from the cars, soundlessly greet their friends, laugh, walk, run, bustle and are all gone.'

Barrel of laughs. I disciplined myself not to read it as well. I've never seen the clip, I've not read that before. I just wanted to think about what it meant to be there at the beginning, the kinesis of it, and the greyness of it and the silence and the transformative power of those pictures. And keep that in your head. Because from the beginning has there not been a big gap in cinema between the Lumière Brothers going out and showing you moving images of your town in which you might literally see yourself in that picture? And on the other hand the Méliès Brothers' exhibition of wonders and amazements.

I was watching that and thinking of that great line from Rilke, about if you think your world isn't poetic or exciting enough to tell a story about – that's not because it's a dull world, that's because you're not 'poet' enough to wake its soul up. I'm thinking, that's a great challenge, to remember that it was just about opening that window and how it transforms things and how amazing it was for Gorky just to see a familiar street transformed, drained of colour and sound and what that does. Okay, so I'm going to wrap this up quite quickly now, but I just wanted to throw out, because I know that some people are thinking about writing and starting writing, two mental tricks to play to keep it pleasurable; to get you through those more than ten years, so that you too can have 30 golden guineas at the end of it.

When I read those screenwriting books, that whole thing about three acts and structure, and that whole kind of architectural vocabulary... What about putting something much more subtle and dynamic in its place, and talking about suspense as a way of structuring your story? Suspense is part of the rhythm of how we live, suspense is the gap between the question and the answer, between the birth and the death, between the gestation and the birth, between the, 'Will you?' and, 'Yes I will.' Between the, 'I'll kill you,' and, 'You're dead.'

That kind of amazing gap between announcement and act, the way those two events send a signal to each other could be like a string that puts any kind of pearls that you want on it, as long as that string is sound enough.

Obviously you can make it too sound. You can kind of make it too clear what's going to happen, but it's that thing that if you make it clear enough, that people are waiting... because you kind of always know how a film is going to end, it's going to end wrapped up. The thrill is that delicious thing of sitting there thinking, 'I know where we've got to get to, I can't see how we can get there.'

And one of the most beautiful, beautiful examples that I can think of is the end of the Disney *Cinderella*, where you know what's going to happen. Does anyone remember this? The Prince comes round and says, 'I'm going to try the slipper on everybody,' but Cinderella is locked in the room at the top of the castle. How can she possibly get out?

And then the animals help her out and she comes down the stairs, and you think, 'Oh fantastic,' and then the Wicked Stepmother trips the Prince up and the slipper is broken, and you know you're 30 seconds from the end of the film

but how is it ever going to get there... and she produces the other shoe from her pocket.

I never thought about the other shoe, all these years of that story and nobody ever thought about the other shoe. Fantastic, that kind of delicious thing between knowing where you're going to get to and not knowing how you're going to get there. I have a very silly example of it, which is that thing of announcing where it's going in some way but teasing how you're going to get there.

I'm going to play something that's not a film clip, it's a piece of music but I'd like you to listen to it and I'd like you to hear particularly the moment when he says, 'Not yet.'

(Clip of Bill Bailey's Cockney music sketch spoofing Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata)

All you need to know about structure is in that little clip, to be honest. Hitchcock, of course, said a brilliant thing about suspense. He was distinguishing between mystery and suspense, and he said mystery is an intellectual thing, mystery is 'Here's the puzzle, what's the answer?'

Suspense is an emotional thing. It's like I need to know, I can't wait, and it's teasing on that emotion. I think that is the most delightful experience you can have as a viewer, and I think if you can get that in your writing then the marshmallow is there, then you'll see the end. It's a much more dynamic, for me anyway, way to think about how to put a story together than any kind of architectural metaphor would be.

I have to say, before I go any further, when I talk about these things I am not the pathfinder pointing this path saying, 'I came this way, it was great.' I am the poor sod smashed on the rocks saying, 'Honestly, try over there, it didn't work here.' These are the rocks on which I perished. If you're looking for examples of my wisdom in my work you're not going to find it. These are things I learnt afterwards.

But there's another kind of suspense that you can enjoy, I think. The way the industry is structured, quite understandably, really mitigates against you [sic]. You're constantly being asked to predict what you're going to write, predict how it's going to shape up, how things are going to be. You're asked to write a treatment, you're asked to write a step outline, you actually do the pitch and tell people what it's going to be like.

But writing isn't like that, or shouldn't be like that, or at its best it won't be like that. At least for the first draft could you not just throw yourself off the cliff and see what happens?

There's a great line in *The Hitchhiker's Guide To The Galaxy* about how to fly, which I think beautifully explains that element of trust that you've got to have to throw yourself into something, which is a really hard thing to do. I think it's Arthur Dent who says, 'It's really easy to fly, all you do is fall off a cliff then get distracted and then you'll find you're doing it.' And it's that isn't it? You throw yourself off the cliff, you're constantly being asked to explain what the ending is, but if an ending is going to be surprising, shouldn't it surprise you first? Shouldn't you not quite know where it's going?

I can use an analogy from chess actually; if you're playing to a particular ending in chess, if you're playing to a particular checkmate, the minute somebody *spots* that you're stuffed. But if you just play for your strongest position all the way through the game, then towards the endgame you'll have three or four endings to choose from. And you choose one and it will always look inevitable, but that's the great art of it, that it always *looked* inevitable. I loved saying that because I am rubbish at chess. I always look out thinking, 'Yeah Frank, chess.' The reason I know that so clearly is that I know one checkmate and I play it with my 14 year old, and the minute he sees it the game is over. But I know what it would be like if I was good at chess; it would be to play to your strongest position all the time.

My word of hope about that, about how long this process is and how you endure this process and how tedious it can be and how you've got to keep yourself together is that one thing people always ask writers about is inspiration. Where do you get your inspiration? Where did you get your inspiration? Can you get me some inspiration?

I think the map that is in people's heads is that inspiration is this ignition key, that inspiration comes at the beginning, you turn the key and you're off. But inspiration often comes at the very last minute, the very best inspiration comes after you've done all the groundwork and you've headbutted your way through draft after draft after draft, suddenly something will come to life.

I think that's my message to anybody who's writing, don't despair of that hope that it will come as long as you keep faith, as long as you keep trying. That moment will come. The number of things that have been rubbish until the last minute is legion.

I went to Seven Stories, a brilliant museum in Newcastle, which is a museum of children's writing. I went with my daughter and we saw the manuscript for *The Borrowers*, this absolutely brilliant book, and it's not called *The Borrowers*, it's called *Under The Carpet*. It sounds like a Dyson advert or something.

And the character in *The Borrowers* have all got these amazing names, they're called Pod and Homily, fantastic names. And in the original manuscript they're all rubbish names, sort of Beatrix Potter names. They're all nicely typed out and then crossed out, and all the brilliant stuff is put in much later.

Inspiration can come very, very late so that's another thing that might help you endure 14 years. I said it, I said the number. Okay, I'm going to wrap up now, and I'm going to end with... the end of *24 Hour Party People*. It was very difficult to think of an ending for *24 Hour Party People*.

I'd rejected the hero journey. I'd said it's a film about Tony Wilson who never learnt anything in his life. He didn't learn, he didn't love, he didn't grow, he just was the same person all his life. And it was very difficult to think how that would end, apart from him just going on. I had a conversation to that effect with my wife, who told me the ending. She just said, 'It should be this,' and I typed it up and it was.

And that's the ending, so I'm going to show you the ending that she came up with, because maybe that's another thing that you need to know, maybe sometimes it doesn't come from an intellectual process, it's an emotional thing and maybe sometimes, in the end, all you need is love. So here's the ending of *24 Hour Party People* by Denise. And you can tell it's not by me because it's so theologically adept.

(Clip from *24 Hour Party People*)

APPLAUSE

FCB: Hello Olivia.

Olivia Hetreed: That's brilliant. Well done Denny, it's always good to credit your co-writers.

FCB: Yeah, well done Denny, a separate round of applause to Denise for that.

OH: I thought we were going to get the humiliation later, but unfortunately you jumped the gun there Frank so I'm going to have to back off on those dreadful stories of humiliation. You've had such an incredibly varied career as a writer...

FCB: That's such a polite term.

OH: And it's one of those things that worries people, doesn't it? They can't go, 'Oh Frank, he writes *those* kinds of films...'

FCB: I do live in dread of that Amazon thing, 'If you liked Frank's charming fable about children you'll love his early lesbian serial killer movie...'

OH: Do you get sad people saying, 'I thought *Butterfly Kiss* would be a fairy tale'?

FCB: No, they're all separate worlds. I've never had any actual problem with it, I just wake up at night worrying about it.

OH: Well, it's very impressive. I thought we might go through the kind of history of one film in particular maybe and try and understand what the ten or three year process, or however long it takes. What happens? It can be quite vague, can't it? Can we go through *Millions* and find out how that happened from start to finish and beyond? So you were writing, working, shooting *Welcome To Sarajevo*....

FCB: And Graham Broadbent was the producer and wanted to do something else with me, and I was very keen to do a children's film because I loved – and still love – children's films. I hadn't sussed then – what is blindingly obvious, I don't know why I hadn't sussed it – [that] it's actually very difficult to make a children's film.

A, because it will have a child in the lead and they won't be able to walk up the red carpet in a lovely backless dress, they won't be played by a big star actor. And B, if you make *Welcome To Sarajevo*, you're up against other indie films about political issues. If you make a children's film, you're up against Disney or John Lasseter or whatever. It's quite a scary field to go into.

OH: But everybody wants to make family films...

FCB: Do they? See, I remember going for the commission of that, and pitching the story as it was; two little boys find a bag of money. Not all the bits were there, but it was two little boys find a big bag of money and have an adventure. Going through the meeting and saying this was really great, and it was a lovely meeting. It was FilmFour at the time I think, who went, 'Of course you'll deliver a 15 certificate film, won't you?' I was thinking, 'What? How can that happen?' And I'm very politely going, 'Yes, of course,' whilst thinking, 'How's that going to work?'

If I've got one piece of wisdom to impart it's to take notice of what people say as you're leaving. You can sit through a two hour meeting and nothing can be said and then somebody will say something as you're leaving and that's the thing to listen to.

OH: That's the note.

FCB: Because basically he was saying, 'This film that you've just pitched, that I'm too polite to turn down because we're very happy with *Welcome To Sarajevo*, doesn't fit at all with what we want to do and you're just wasting your time.' That's really what it was saying, so I did several drafts and they weren't ever going anywhere. Every time I took them back it was like...can't the kids swear a bit?

OH: So you had two children and a bag of money. Were there any saints?

FCB: No, the saints all came with Danny [Boyle] who came on very late in this process.

OH: So there were no saints, two kids and a bag of money, and not enough swearing and no sex.

FCB: Yeah, and then there was a draft that people sort of liked, that sort of went out to some directors who were very lovely, didn't really get it but worked on it in that very polite way. Worked on it for a very long time, just sort of making it worse.

OH: So you would go and meet and discuss, and write a draft?

FCB: Yeah, and there was no real communication. You know, you think it's great that you've got a director because it means the film is going to be made, but you're also thinking, 'He doesn't get this at all!' So the little boy in the story starts to see saints who give him advice.

And this director would say things like, 'He needs to get closure on that and move on.'

And I'm thinking, 'It seems to me a talent... it's like a spider, does he need to get over being a spider? It seems to me he's in a really good position here, don't mess with his head because it's good.' But no, they were like, 'We needed to get closure on that and look at his issues.' That was a long time, I won't talk about who it was but they were slow.

We had a nickname for him in the house, which was Barely Turns The Meter. We'd just seen *Dances With Wolves*. You know what it's like when it's not a good match and it's going to take a long time.

OH: So how do you extricate yourself, having got into that situation?

FCB: I think somebody just knocked it back and said, 'This is rubbish now,' and I think Graham then got the script back and sent it, or gave it, somehow – I don't know quite what the logic of this was – but Danny Boyle got it. He probably was the last film director in Britain to be offered it, because he would be the last person you would think of.

He was working on *28 Days Later* at the time so it was zombies and junkies and not little boys. There's always a dialectic when you're making a film because a film is an overwhelming experience. If you're making a zombie film you are going to want to make a film about two nice Catholic boys. And if you're making a film about two nice Catholic boys you're probably going to want to go and make a junkie film.

OH: So it was the perfect antidote in a way?

FCB: Yeah, you could see the kind of relief as he came into the room one day to meet. And we worked really hard on it, and didn't really show it to anybody until he was happy with the script.

OH: So that was drafts? That was writing together? What was the process?

FCB: He was busy. Danny is brilliant. He would give you notes that weren't very prescriptive but that would put your finger on the problem. So you'd get notes like, 'We need some female energy in Act 3,' and you'd think, 'Okay,' and of course it would be exactly right but you wouldn't quite know.

OH: You had to go home and figure it out.

FCB: You had to solve that yourself, yeah. And Danny makes you read it out, which is an amazing thing. He makes you read the script out, or he made me read the script out – maybe it was just me. But I thought that was good.

OH: Just for the fun of it.

FCB: You had nowhere to hide when you were reading it out. You couldn't go, 'and then it would be alright, blah, blah, blah, subtext.' You can't do that, you had to read it out. It was kind of mortifying but very informative as a process.

OH: Had you done that before or was that the first time?

FCB: No, I'd never done it before. I'd been to read throughs before, where everyone's been lovely. This is just sitting there, like homework and him going [sucks air through his teeth] 'Oh dear.'

OH: There's a story in one of the articles about you, about Sister Mary Paul.

FCB: What did I say about her? She was great.

OH: She was the reason you went into screenwriting.

FCB: The saints thing. First of all it was Danny who really pumped the saints thing, because I think Danny recognised a lot of his own childhood in that story, and a lot of that kind of world. There were little flickery bits of saints in, but Danny

thought that was the thing that was going to make it not a film on a housing estate.

It was going to allow you to put images from frescoes and things like that, and there were a lot more saints in the early cuts of the film, there were three or four more saints actually. You can get them on the DVD extras. And I had this kind of rich knowledge of saints because Sister Paul decided one year – I was in her class for two years and she was brilliant, she was a massive influence on me – but one year she decided that she would read us the saints of the day, whatever day it was, without ever really kind of realising what a mixed bunch saints are.

So there were all these 11-year-olds going, 'What? Why did they do that? What is a virgin martyr? What do you mean castrate? And self-castrate?' Saints aren't just nicer people, they're people who stand in a different light and channel an amazing energy, and it's always disruptive and often seems crazy.

I do remember her standing there and reading to us about Saint Pyr who's the Patron Saint of Coldey Island, off Barmouth, which is a blessedly small portfolio. It's not like being in charge of the environment or something like that. He was the Abbott there and he got very, very drunk, fell down a well and broke his neck and became a saint... administrative error really. It was a misprint, or a misunderstanding the Welsh or whatever.

OH: But that's in the Book of Saints, is it?

FCB: Yeah, he's there. He made it. I think of him often. He's shown the way. Administrative error is what I'm counting on.

OH: Okay, so now you've got Danny Boyle, you've got a load of saints...

FCB: I guess that thing you said about Sister Paul, because it goes back to childhood… I guess there was a link with his childhood too, and we had a common currency.

OH: I've noticed actually just in this [Screenwriters Lecture] series, almost all the writers are Catholics. Is there something about being a Catholic?

FCB: It's because we rock. I don't know...

OH: Because you learn to tell lies early [on]?

FCB: Aah, listen to you. I dunno, it's a different culture isn't it? It puts you to one side of things maybe. It's very visual, very theatrical. It deals with big issues. It's about sin and death, and death is always on the agenda which is always important in a story I think. I don't know really.

OH: Sister Mary Paul and cutting bits off people.

FCB: She was very sweet and lovely about it, she would always gloss over that bit. We'd always go [whispers], 'What did she say?'

OH: But that makes you more interested, doesn't it? As soon as you know that someone is hiding things.

FCB: That's like watching those films on a Saturday afternoon, the other thing that you learnt from watching those films on a Saturday afternoon with Humphrey Bogart in is, because of the Hays Commission, you knew something was going on but it was very vague about what it was. That was really kind of an amazing thing.

OH: You didn't have your parents say, 'Don't watch this bit.'

FCB: They didn't have to because it was all in code.

OH: Okay, so you have Danny Boyle, you have saints, it goes into production, how did that happen?

FCB: A very long casting process looking for little boys. Casting directors call that kissing frogs. You see 400 odd little boys and then one little boy walks in who's very different. I do remember him

very clearly because he came in, and we asked every kid the same question, we asked, 'What would you do if you found 200,000 quid?'

And the eight year olds were like, 'Buy Manchester United,' or something like that, and the older ones had a shopping list where they could easily spend it in an afternoon in the Trafford Centre, which was really depressing. But it was great to confront that, because I think when you write about childhood you tend to default to your own childhood and you were really looking down the barrel of the modern childhood gun, and it was kind of grim.

Then this boy came in, called Alex [Etel] and I said, 'What would you do if you found £200,000?' and he said, 'Why?' I said, 'Well we've got this story and it's about a boy who finds...' and he said, 'Where did you get the story from?' I said, 'I made it up.' He went, 'So who are you?'; 'I'm the writer.'; 'What's he doing here?'; 'He's the director'; 'And what's he then?'; 'He's going to be the cameraman'; 'Can I have a go with his camera?'

And he never sat down, never answered any question, didn't want to be an actor just came because everyone else in his class had gone and he got the part straight away. It's that kind of magic; we talked about the transformative power of the screen and he's got a beautiful, beautiful face, a really fantastic face full of sorrow and longing.

But actors, I don't know if there are actors here, but it's boring making a film and actors are bored most of the time on the set and they love it when they're acting. But those kids loved being on the set, they loved going to make-up and having injuries done to themselves, they loved playing with the pile of cash which we had for the scenes. They played Jenga with wads of cash. They loved the fact that food was always available and other kids were available, and they hated acting. It was just awful.

So you get these close-ups of Alex where he's beautiful and full of forlorn longing and only I know that he's looking out at the screen going 'They're all playing footie, and we're stuck here. They're eating chips.' It's just this very visceral... Danny would go, 'That was brilliant, let's go again,' and he'd go, 'Why, if it was brilliant, do we have to go again?' One more time.

OH: Quite a lot of actors want to ask that question. So you were there on the set all the time?

FCB: For *Millions* yeah, because it was shot near my home and Danny's very inclusive. A lot changed in the process but he's very consultative about that, he likes to know that – on this anyway – he liked to know that there was someone on top of that.

OH: So you were rewriting?

FCB: Yeah, we did quite a lot of rewriting. I think we stopped shooting for a couple of days because something was happening differently... a performance was slightly different from the way we thought it was. We did a lot of changes. And on the last day of the shoot, I remember very clearly because it was a long shoot because the kids were in every scene so our hours were very restricted and it was a lovely summer and it was just a really fabulous time.

On the last day everyone was collecting little souvenirs from the set and one of the kids came over with his script and said, 'Frank, will you sign this script?' I looked through the script – and you know you change paper colour each day of new changes, it's blue today, then yellow – there were two white pages left in the script. I said, 'How good was my script, two white pages left?' and he said, 'No, we ran out of colours, do you not remember? White's this week.' Okay, thanks.

OH: So not one single page of your shooting script?

FCB: No, not one page. [Laughs] I don't know why I'm so pleased about that.

OH: It's fantastic, because you were still so open to changing it.

FCB: No... it was fun. It was good fun.

OH: And you also played a small part?

FCB: Only because the actor didn't turn up on the day. Danny had this list of action points and it's only afterwards that you think, 'What?' But he's got that authority so you do. He said, 'The actor hasn't turned up so you'll have to play that part.' Okay. What? I didn't know the lines, everyone thought because you'd written the lines you'd know the lines, but I didn't know them at all. So in the outtakes you can see little Alex prompting me and saying, 'Just keep going, you're alright.'

And also writing the book, we went out for dinner when it was greenlit, and he went, 'I want you to do this, I want you to do that, and do you know what would be good? I think if you wrote a book.'

OH: So Danny told you to write the book?

FCB: Yeah, 'Write the book because that'll be good; it will help place the film.' Okay, yeah. What?

OH: Just talk about the difference between writing the book and the film. You'd written the script, you'd been through that whole process...

FCB: Writing the book was a joy because I wrote it really quickly, and it was just a fantastic thing to be doing. I now realise that is because I'd spent those ten years [on it]. I'd done the hard graft and the thinking. But at the time I just thought 'book writing's so easy'. I've been slaving away writing screenplays all these years and this is a doddle. This is my life. I didn't realise that I'd made it easy by working very, very hard. So that was a joy.

OH: So you wrote the book...

FCB: Which came out before the film, so that was a bit of a race...

OH: Pretty high intensity.

FCB: Yeah, because we weren't that far off shooting, we were prepping.

OH: And did you think 'I can do things differently in the book' or were you trying to make the book like the film?

FCB: Yes I did, that was quite funny actually. The whole point of writing the book was [that] it's going to be hard to place this film, if there's a book that will help, do it quick. And I did it and it was great, really enjoyable, everyone loved the book and it was bought really quickly. And I thought 'I'm in this very happy position here', because nearly everyone, no matter how high falutin' they are in this country, when you're writing a book you kind of want it to be a film.

I really knew this was a film so I could make it like a book. So that process sort of took care of itself. And by the last day of principal photography we had proofs ready, super proofs that look like a proper book.

So I gave it to Danny on the last day of the shoot, and Danny's a voracious reader. I think we had breakfast together the next morning or maybe there was a party the next day or something like that, and he was quite off with me. I thought this was a bit odd. I asked if he was alright and he said, 'Yeah, I read that book.' 'And what did you think?' 'It's really different from the film.' I said, 'Yeah, well you've made the film. This is a book.' He went, 'People are going to be disappointed. They're going to read that book and they're going to say it's not like the film, the film's not like the book. They're going to be disappointed.'

So he sulked quite a lot. We got extra money, and there was a scene in the book that I would never have dreamt of putting in the screenplay because it was just somebody talking for a long

time, it was like a whole chapter where somebody tells a story, and Danny really loved that so we shot that. That's the really weird thing, that the book is adapted from the screenplay but bits of the film are adapted from the book that was adapted from the screenplay.

OH: So it went both ways at once.

FCB: Yes, it kind of re-met itself.

OH: And did that end up in the film?

FCB: Yeah, it's in the film, the big monologue by St. Peter, who's very chuffed with himself for being on the door.

OH: Okay, so then you've made the film, you've written the book, this is pretty much hog heaven isn't it, for a writer?

FCB: I was very happy, and I'm still really happy with things. We had lots of meetings about how to place it, what its release date would be, because it had a kind of Christmasy theme, should it come out at Christmas? Would it be overwhelmed by other films? We had endless, endless meetings about this, and its date was shoved around a lot, and then they decided on the perfect date. And on that date *Star Wars* came out at the same time. So it was like, what was all that about then, that was a bit of a strange move completely.

OH: And no-one noticed that *Star Wars* was coming out that day?

FCB: Yes, I'm not telling anyone off about it, that's just the way things happen.

OH: So you were the second choice family film of the weekend?

FCB: I don't know, I think *Nanny McPhee* might have been around as well. I think we were well down the pecking order. We took it to Toronto and we took the actors with us thinking if the little boys were with us no-one would boo the film. So we made it really clear that there were little boys [there], and of course because they had taken no interest in the process they had no clue what the film was going to be like. And particularly what it was going to be like watching it with a huge audience on a massive screen. That was the first time they'd seen it, so I was quite cool about this, and they were sitting with us and it was really nice, I was thinking 'This is so exciting for you, isn't it?' but it was just overwhelming, emotionally.

I sort of looked at Alex and little tears were coming into his eyes, and I thought 'Oh well, never mind' and the credits rolled and I was like, 'Get up, just get up on the stage now, there's going to be a Q&A.' By the time he got onto the stage he was really crying quite audibly and then there was a question – full of heart, he wasn't one of my kids – I just gave him the microphone and he just bawled. There was mucus, it was just awful. We had to go. I think there was a huge party, but we had a pizza in the room I think, as far as I remember. It was just too much for him really, so I don't know whether that worked as a sales strategy.

OH: Nobody was nasty, apart from you.

FCB: Yeah, just me.

OH: I was really struck by what you were saying about people seeing themselves on film and you seeing *Gregory's Girl* on film. In Tahrir Square in Egypt they've been filming all of the uprisings and everything, and one of the big hits has been Tahrir Square cinema where they just show people themselves doing what they're doing, every night.

FCB: That's cool.

OH: That's kind of an extraordinary thing, of watching yourself back, being the news.

FCB: But that happens at a match, when you go to a football match there's a big screen and people are always looking 'Oh there's me,' and

the screen is always full of people waving at themselves. We love to wave at ourselves.

Q (from the floor): Frank that was a delicious lecture, thank you very much. I'd like to ask you a question about endings. There seems to be a lot of religion about endings, like you have to know the ending before you start or you mustn't know the ending before you start. And the way you spoke it was certainly implied that one of the joys for you was discovering the ending rather than beginning at the end. Can you talk a little about that please?

FCB: I just think if the ending is going to surprise anybody, it should surprise you first. And I know that's really difficult in a film situation because you are asked to pitch things... I would just plead to allow us the latitude to do that because endings that you love tend to be things that people have played lots of great cards [with] all the way through and then they pull one back that you've always loved.

I think of the ending of *Cinema Paradiso*, that film probably goes on too long and it's probably a bit over sentimental, but that thing [where] they were cutting out all those kisses earlier in the film and they come back. You can watch that ending without watching the rest of the film, it's such a great ending it doesn't need a movie.

Or the end of *Sideways*, when he's been carting that book around, it's a running gag and obviously nothing is going to happen with that book and then one person reads it and it's the right person. I was so not expecting that and I bet the writer wasn't expecting to write that. I know that *Sideways* is from a book but... you can see sometimes that people have played a note, a beautiful note, and just bring it back and it works.

The end of the *Harry Potter* films was fantastic, there's a throwaway thing in the first *Harry Potter* where Harry goes to the zoo and the snake responds to him. Ten years later that turns out to be absolutely axiomatic to who he was. I don't believe she knew that, I think there's a kind of synergy between throwing out these great cards and thinking 'Aah, I can play that one again'. That was awe-inspiring, that ending I think. That feeling of musical closure.

Questioner: In terms of your process you discover that as you go?

FCB: Yeah, I'm not saying that's a good thing but I'm just saying that's what I do.

Q (from the floor): Frank, I just wanted to ask how difficult you find it to avoid writing derivatively?

FCB: I thought you said to avoid writing, that's really, really easy.

Questioner: Even on a subconscious level, we all – writers and audiences – have seen so much now, we've got such big televisual memory banks. How do you avoid cliché and falling into that trap?

FCB: Well with film you're well supported by other people saying, 'That's from there, and that's from there.' I don't think there's that much wrong with borrowing if you've got great taste. I think it's about your great taste isn't it? In a way, one of the things that I think drives me to say you should just let go, at least for the first few drafts, is that lots of the rules about filmmaking and storytelling are really hardwired in you.

You've been watching films since you were a kid. It may not be that you can tabulate those rules in a really crystal clear way, but you've taken those in with your mother's milk... You know how a story works and in a way I wouldn't be that scared of being derivative I think. Isn't it great when you take something old and put something of yourself in with it?

I think that's the thing, if you put something that means something to you with an old story, it comes to life again. *Millions* is *The Pardoner's Tale*, every rom-com you've ever seen is *Cinderella*, what's wrong with that? There's a great line from Italo Calvino that the tale is not

beautiful until it's added to. I wouldn't be too scared of stealing, it's having the taste to steal the right things, maybe.

Q (from the floor): I wondered if you could talk a little bit about how the structure came about for *A Cock and Bull Story*, because that's such a brilliant screenplay and you just think 'how did they come up with this?'

FCB: I think that's the first film I ever pitched to anybody, because I'd loved the book and I think when I first started working with Michael [Winterbottom] I'd said to him, 'You should do *Tristram Shandy* because it's about a baby being born.'

We'd just had a baby and it seemed to me that although it was formidable intellectually, it was this very warm thing, and I think it was going to be the *Tristram Shandy* home birth video because people were videoing themselves at the time. I was thinking that would be such a great fit. And then actually, it's sort of in the film what happened, because when you get down to it there isn't that much in *Tristram Shandy*. Although it's quite a thick book in terms of incident, it's actually quite light.

So there was kind of a gap to fill, and of course *Tristram Shandy*'s a book about trying to write a book despite the fact that you're ill and you're busy and you've got other jobs to do. It seemed to me quite a real vehicle for making a film about making a film. There are great films about making films and there are some awful films about making films.

I hate inter-textuality [sic] and all that stuff, but nearly every Fred Astaire musical is about making a musical. And I love *Day For Night*. It's a brilliant film; just about that kind of organic little community of a film set. And that seemed to me a really good metaphor for what Laurence Sterne was doing anyway, and it seemed equally warm to the book. So it was like that really.

Q (from the floor): I was just wondering about your approach to writing Tony Wilson [in *24 Hour Party People*]? Writing about real people, or real events in the last couple of years has sometimes been quite controversial with things like *The Social Network* or *Frost/Nixon* or *The Damned United*.

FCB: This is sort of the answer that I should have given to the question about being derivative. I think real life stories are almost always more surprising and more exciting than stuff that you make up. The Oscar for Best Original Screenplay always seems to be a massive misnomer because all the original screenplays seem to be quite like each other. Whereas Best Adapted, whether they were adapted from life or books or plays or whatever, often quite interesting things are going on in there because there's some new energy coming in to the film process.

You asked me about real people, I just love interviewing people and talking to people. Writing's quite a secluded job and for me it's always quite interesting to go and meet people, talk to people, and try and catch something of them. And it also gives you a court of appeal when people say, 'He doesn't seem to have learnt anything or resolved his issues.' You can just say, 'Well he didn't, sorry. He was a very slow learner, he didn't learn anything.'

Those films that you mention are fantastic films, but they're about much more serious subjects than the ones that I've done. Although I guess *Welcome To Sarajevo* is quite interesting because you can see the Hollywood structure in that because he gets the kid out and you could have ended with that. For better or worse I was always intrigued by the fact that you had to go back and that her mother did appear, and the messiness of war and the fact that it's not really an ending. It's never really an ending.

That came from just trying to stick as close to the truth as possible. I do think you kind of get amazing things if you try to stick as close to the truth as possible, and if you can't do that then

putting someone on the screen saying, 'This isn't true.' That's what we kept doing in *24 Hour Party People*.

OH: With *Hilary & Jackie*, where there was quite a lot of antagonism to telling that story, how did that affect the writing or the telling of it?

FCB: I wasn't really aware of that at the time. *Hilary & Jackie* is about the cellist Jacqueline de Pré, and there were people in the musical establishment who really didn't like the film. And it was kind of divided between family and musical people. I'd been working with the family, I'd been working with Hilary who absolutely loved the film; it was her story and I'd been reading Jackie's letters, so I felt very close to it and was quite surprised that people argued about that in a way.

It was quite interesting, that thing about people's own reaction to those films. It can be quite emotional. Hilary, you know we sat and watched it with them thinking, 'If they hate it we're really stuffed,' and it would be awful because they gave us their trust. And actually she was really thrown by it because a lot of it was told from Jackie's perspective, and she said to Andy [Paterson, producer] afterwards, 'You gave me back my sister,' which is kind of an amazing thing to say.

But then people get hung up on really little things in films about themselves as well, which I know is kind of a displaced thing. But like Kiffer Finzi – who in that film is involved in a very complicated relationship with his sister-in-law – a ter the film said, 'I'm glad that Hilary likes it, but you show me conducting with my right hand and everybody knows I'm left handed.'

OH: Shagging your sister-in-law is fine but...

FCB: Tony [Wilson] was very troubled by *24 Hour Party People* I think, because he thought it was important for him to have that film, and he wanted these people to be commemorated and Manchester to be celebrated and all that, but he was tormented by it. And he didn't quite know where to put his fury.

I was with my brother, of all things, on the set and he just suddenly got me in a corner and said, 'Why have you...' – and this is a film in which he's shown defrauding people, taking loads of coke, being unfaithful, being a very bad judge of music which you would have thought was like a big thing to him but it didn't bother him – he got me in a corner and was saying, 'Why did you say that I brag about going to Cambridge? I have never, ever. There are people who've worked with me for 25 years don't even know I went to Cambridge. Why have you put that in?'

I said, 'I don't know Tony, you talked about it to me.' He said, 'Yeah, I talked about it to you! That was part of us and now look...' And this is really true, that night I went home and my wife Denise – who's not from the northwest and wasn't that aware who Tony was – and I put a local sports quiz programme on, and he had this mad jacket on, more like a stole and he was the question master. And in answer to a question somebody said, 'Hartlepool' and he said, 'No, actually.' And I said, 'Denny this is him you can see what he's like on telly!' And as she came into the room he said, 'No it's not Hartlepool actually, it's Cambridge, my old university town.' Bless him. I know you better than you do Tony.

Q (from the floor): When you sit down to write a first draft, you haven't worked it out, you don't know where it's going, you don't know who all the characters are...

FCB: I tend to have talked a lot by then, as you can tell, and I do think talking and listening are really underestimated skills in our schools and where we work. I think good listeners are really, really useful, really powerful people and you don't meet that many of them. So I will have talked a lot by then and I will have tried to talk it up into a story that I can tell by talking to other people about it. And I think that's a very good place to be in. Inevitably, because it's an

industry, you are probably going to have to have written something.

Questioner: Are you saying you wouldn't have outlined the whole thing first?

FCB: I've tried not to, but nine times out of ten I will have done that. The film that I was talking about, not *The Railwayman*, but the one that I've finally got right, I don't think I did that because I was working with someone who trusted me and I trusted them and we talked and talked and talked. I wrote a draft, and interestingly wrote two or three drafts that got 'really good', 'not quite as good', 'no, definitely losing it.' I went back to writing treatments then and that was really, really useful. I'm just putting in a plea for having a go first, throwing yourself off the cliff to start with, because it's not a real cliff. So why not?

All those things that are in the screenwriting books... I think it's incredibly useful to have that vocabulary, but it's a diagnostic vocabulary. Nobody ever diagnosed a thing into life. You can fix something when it's sick with a diagnosis, but the only way you can make something come to life is with love and the recklessness that that implies.

Q (from the floor): You have all these kids running round your house. How do you get your best writing done or where do you go? Do you have a best place?

FCB: My kids are not running around... that's a legend.

Questioner: I'm sorry; I don't mean to impugn anything.

FCB: I started writing around the same time as I started a family, it's what I'm used to. When they go away, if they go away, I hate it. I don't really work very well if they're not there. I find it lovely to have them in the house. Everyone has their own routine. Lots of people, that idea that you have to have 'me time' or you have to have a quiet space. I think that's such a myth.

Loads of people didn't write like that. Edith Nesbit, who's my absolute hero, would write in the middle of a party. PG Wodehouse had a massive social life, nobody could ever figure out when he was doing his writing. But it's something you love doing. I'll grab hold of that time and love doing it.

Questioner: So it's just anywhere, anytime?

FCB: Yeah. I do have an office, but I'm a children's writer now so you spend a lot of time travelling. That's a much bigger thing, it's not my children it's other people's children that are the problem. I spend a lot of time going to schools and things, and writing on trains. I quite like that. The fact that you're moving and you're trying to protect yourself. I'm someone who did their homework on the bus, so it does connect with something very deep in me, doing it on the move. I know it's not the same for other people.

Q (from the floor): How do you work your dialogue, do you write it and then try it with actors and then rewrite it?

FCB: I don't try it with actors. I mean I do read it out to myself a lot, but I don't try it out with an actor or something like that. It was very interesting having to read it out to Danny that time. I think that's the only time I've ever had to do something like that. But I do love a read through, because that's such a great diagnostic tool.

Questioner: Does that often end up being the same as you've written?

FCB: No, I think you come out of a read through with a lot of notes, usually.

OH: Do you write a lot of sound into your scripts? You were talking earlier about the clip, and Gorky's reaction of the silence that really struck him. Do you write much sound into your films?

FCB: I'm trying to think... I love the fact that it's a full palette. That is the big thing when you're talking to your aunties, uncles and cousins, they think you've written the dialogue. Not that you've shaped it and put in those colours or sounds. I love the fact that you play with a full palette. I don't mind not getting credit for it but I do like the sound thing in there. Do you do a lot of sound?

OH: I like sound, I do love sound. I also always put a smell somewhere...

FCB: In *Girl With A Pearl Earring* you can really hear the dialogue because there's a lot of silence around it and a lot of brooding.

Q (from the floor): Could you tell us a little bit about the work you do in schools?

FCB: Well, if you're a children's writer you're always being asked to go to schools. There are a couple of schools on Merseyside that I've got a much closer relationship with. Reading – you'll be here all night if I start talking about it too much – but I've got a big thing about reading for pleasure, which involves somebody reading out to you. I love going to schools and doing that. I think everybody loves being read to, and I think that can be a much underestimated thing in schools, that thing about listening, but also about pleasure. I think pleasure is kind of underestimated.

I think people mistake pleasure for fun or distraction. I think pleasure is like a very deep form of attention. Pleasure is where you take something in and it stays with you, and it's got to stay with you for a long time. What I love doing is going to schools, reading and they can ask me questions but I'm not asking for anything back. I do love the question time in schools.

I went to this school in Glasgow a couple of summers ago, and it was a school for very big, hard boys. And I read out a bit from one of my books and I stopped at the cliff-hanger and I said, 'Have you got any questions?' and this big lad put his hand up and said, 'What happens next?' I said, 'I'm here to encourage you to read, do get the book out and read on. I'm glad you want to know what happens next, that's a good sign. Any other questions?'

And the big lad put his hand up again and said, 'Can you read a bit more?' I went, 'Well we're running out of time and there's other people who want to ask questions, get the book out of the library, there's five copies in your library, I'm really glad you want to read it…' blah, blah, blah. And the biggest lad in the school put his hand up at the back, a massive lad, huge, the weather changed when he put his hand up. I said, 'Yes, what's your question?' He said, 'Would you just read wee man?' So it's stuff like that, it's all an adventure.

Questioner: Have you found, through your interaction with older teenagers, why they find it so difficult to engage with reading?

FCB: So many different things. I think we've conflated literacy and reading, which we'd never do in any other field. You would never say to someone 'You can only eat what you're able to cook' or 'You can only enjoy sport at the level that you can play it.' But for some reason we've conflated learning to read with reading and we've put the two things together. 'You're going to read what you can read.' And I think back in the day people read to kids for pleasure, and then you can see why you would want to learn to read; just to find out whether someone likes these new trainers or not? I don't know why anyone would want to acquire that skill in order to find that piece of information out. I just think there's too much emphasis on mechanical skills, reading and writing skills. We should be talking and listening more.

OH: I think on that note, it's been an enormous pleasure Frank to have you here tonight. Thank you very much indeed.

FCB: Thank you very much.