

---

# On Writing

---

A Publication of the Writers Guild of America, East

## In this issue

**William Goldman**  
**John Patrick Shanley**  
**Todd Graff**  
**Malia Scotch Marmo**

# William Goldman and John Patrick Shanley

January 14, 1993 • New York City



drawings by Kevin Kelly

**GOLDMAN:** I think it's important when you do these things to state when they're happening. This is the day before *Alive* opens—one of the nutty things about the picture business—John has no idea if the movie's going to be a hit or a flop. I have a picture that I worked on out now, which is a failure—called *Chaplin*—and nobody knew, I mean, it tested very well, blah blah blah. The fact is, nobody knows until you get in front of people who are willing to pay, people who don't care.

**SHANLEY:** Right.

**GOLDMAN:** And that's why it's a nutty business. Because we can't make them come.

**SHANLEY:** Although when you say failure, I always think that you mean to say financial failure.

**GOLDMAN:** Oh yes, of course.

**SHANLEY:** Because what happens is, if you use too long and too well the language of the enemy, then it's your language. You can't do your work and measure everything that way.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah.

**SHANLEY:** It is still somewhat true that life is not printed on dollar bills.

**GOLDMAN:** No, no, you're absolutely right. I don't think you can tell about the quality of a

movie, usually I say 30 years, but now I'm coming down to maybe 20. 20 years.

**SHANLEY:** Me, I felt five years.

**GOLDMAN:** You think you can tell if the movie has—

**SHANLEY:** I think after five years you get a sense of what it was.

**GOLDMAN:** I don't know why I say 20 or 30 years. It's just that there are so many movies that are so famous and so much a part of our culture, like *The Wizard of Oz* and *It's a Wonderful Life*, that were failures, from Hollywood's point of view, when they came out. It seems inconceivable now.

**SHANLEY:** Well, the interesting thing is that in playwriting, the exact opposite is often thought to be true. Somebody said that plays have a life of about 15 years or 10 years and then, after that, they start to feel like they're from another time and they start to lose their pungency, their immediacy. There are plays that transcend that but not many, and not simply because they're great, but because some plays are tied to the time that they're in. I think even more than movies for some reason.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah, I never thought that but you're right.

**SHANLEY:** I don't know if you have this malady, Bill, but actually I'm suffering from this malady today, and that is that movies have actually entered my unconscious and I have dreams about them. And I'm sometimes having a very serious dream about my life and my family and my history and my marriage, and suddenly it turns into a movie and we're talking about how much it costs...

**GOLDMAN:** One of the differences between you and me is generational and it's one of the sadnesses of my career. I was brought up in the '30's and '40's and movies began, historically, as entertainment for illiterates; that was what movies were around 1900 and 1905. And in my head, movies haven't changed very much. You actually—we've talked about this before—you actually find esteem and pleasure, not maybe comparable to your playwriting, but you do in your screenwriting. And you see, I'm of the Groucho Marx theory of I don't want to be a member of any club that'll have me. And screenwriting came so quickly to me when I started, that I've never taken it—I find it, for example, very hard to take American movies seriously. That sounds shitty; I don't mean that foreign movies are better. I don't, they're not. But compared to, let's say, a novel. Which you don't have, do you?

**SHANLEY:** Well, I go back and forth about all the things that you're talking about. I mean, certainly in the last two years I have torn my hair out over the film business. I've gotten to work with very good people and, for the most part, *people* have not tortured and driven me crazy—but just the nature of the medium, in that you have to fight so constantly the attrition of the physical reality of filmmaking. You're constantly fighting the erosion of like, we can't afford that shot or, we shot it and it's no good or, the actor came out today and said "just didn't feel like doing it," and trying to keep that original thing alive. And the mystery is that sometimes it actually turns out to have captured it but with all of those things that fell out and fell apart.

I did this movie *Five Corners* I talked to you about. Thirty minutes at least is on the floor, and yet when I saw the movie I went: Gee, how could this movie still work without those 30 minutes?

But it does, and I don't know why it does, and this is more mysterious than I thought.

**GOLDMAN:** Well, one of the things I think that people who aren't in the business don't realize, and there's no reason for them to, is how fragile movies are. See, I don't think you can tell anything about a movie when it comes out except whether it works or doesn't work for an audience. And I'm just jumping now, one of the ways that movies have gotten so much better—I was thinking while watching *Alive* which I liked really a lot but I distrust myself—I always am very dubious about my critical faculty when I really like or hate somebody connected with a picture. I'm not to be trusted. But I was looking at that movie and I flashed for a minute to *Lost Horizon*.

**SHANLEY:** Yeah.

**GOLDMAN:** Which also has a lot of snow shit. And I thought, one of the ways that movies have gotten so much better is that they're so much better technically. Not only is the film better, but the things they can do in terms of special effects and in terms of, I don't know what any of those things mean, blue screen, all that stuff. It's just amazing because so much of what we used to look at as being scary is so phony now. I mean, King Kong's stopping the subway train, although an extraordinary achievement for that time, doesn't really knock us out now. Some stuff does still from before, but for the most part, that's the one way movies have gotten so much better is that you can do anything, you can literally write anything, and somebody can figure out a way to fake it.

**SHANLEY:** When I did *Five Corners*, and I often mention that film because it's the first film I did so it was an epiphany for me, I had worked in theater for years before that. And when I first saw dailies, I remember this sickening wrench and thinking: Wow, this is so real. You know, in theater, you put a couple of chairs and tables on stage and a couple of lights and you say, it's a bar. Then you write the same scene in a movie and they go to a bar and there's all that stuff there. And people are using vending machines and going to the bathroom, and there are other people there who aren't involved with the scene. And at first I said, how am I going to keep the style of this up? How am I going to keep this off the

ground, or is this just going to feel like people milling around and we're photographing them? These people, they're walking on real ground, that's real light coming in the window. And that's a whole different thing.

**GOLDMAN:** I don't think this is original with me, but my definition of what a movie is: we're all on a ship in a fog and we hope we're going toward our destination, but we have no idea if we are, and we're all at each other's mercy. It's just one of those amazing things where anybody can screw anybody up. It's just as simple as that. But it's true.

I wrote a book and rewrote the book and wrote all the versions of the movie *Magic*. At one point, to use the movie actors' names, Burgess Meredith is drowned by Tony Hopkins. They're shooting in California, I'm in New York I think, and I get a phone call from the production designers department saying—Burgess Meredith's body gets washed up on the shores of the lake, it's a big plot point after he's been drowned. And I got this call saying, how wet are his trousers? And I said, what the fuck difference does it make how wet are his—why are you talking to me about that? I don't know. And they said, we have to know because we have to know how long has he been ashore? Has he just gotten ashore? Has he been ashore all morning? And all of a sudden I realized...

**SHANLEY:** The script supervisor came up with that question.

**GOLDMAN:** ...all of a sudden—it probably was. When I say we're all at each other's mercy, if they had gotten it so he had dry pants, the audience is so shocked that they would have said, why aren't his pants wet? It's just one of those things where it is a bar. It's not like two chairs and a board and you say, this is a bar. It's a different thing.

It's terrifying when you see your stuff on a screen. It's always terrifying, because it's never, for me, ever what I wrote. Sometimes it's better, sometimes it's worse, it's never what I thought. Because you're not used to the reality of the room. You're just not. It's always shocking.

**SHANLEY:** It occurred to me that of the films you've done, in terms of the adaptation problem,

*Misery* was very like *Alive* in that it was people cut off from the world and the whole movie sort of took place, except for a bookend kind of thing, within these small parameters. Did you find that difficult?

**GOLDMAN:** Well, I was working very closely with Rob Reiner and his partner, Andy Scheinman, who are wonderful. We had, yes, the same problem, with a flip. I may have been the first writer to be offered *Alive* when it came out, and I passed on it because I didn't know how to make it work. One of the things was that there's a whole section in the beginning when you get to know the rugby players. And then there's the plane crash. The decision you made, which allows the movie to work, is we don't know who the fuck they are, we're just in the plane. And then suddenly the crash happens two minutes in, and under duress we get to meet the people. I would bet nobody else had done that.

**SHANLEY:** I got the idea from *Lost Horizon*.

**GOLDMAN:** Did you? That's right, they cut the first—

**SHANLEY:** Exactly, they cut the first reel.

**GOLDMAN:** The problem with *Misery* was kind of the flip. On page one of the book, you knew she was crazy and that he hated her. And that's fine for a book, but in a movie we felt that, the minute you know she's crazy, it's a whole different movie. So what we kept doing was delaying and delaying. We went as deep into the movie, I think we went 30 minutes into the movie, and Kathy Bates is sort of this sweet lady living alone in Colorado who's rescued Jimmy Caan. And that was gutty on Reiner's part, I think, because why are they sitting there those first 30 minutes?

**SHANLEY:** Um-hmmm.

**GOLDMAN:** There were so many things in *Misery* that were really scary that we cut just because we wanted it to seem like what it wasn't. Because once you know she's nuts, it becomes a different flick. So we went backwards and you went forwards. But essentially, yeah, they're very similar.

**SHANLEY:** Do you find it hard to adapt your own book, or somebody else's book?

**GOLDMAN:** The easiest to do is an adaptation of somebody else's work, because I don't care what was hard for them. I'm very vicious with their work. And the hardest thing, of course, is an original, because that's miserable. What's interesting when you adapt your own is you're not as hard on yourself as you should be; you think, oh God, that scene was so hard for me to write, it must be for the movie. There's a great Faulkner phrase: "You must kill all your darlings." And that's really, I think, a wonderful lesson for us all to try. I try to remember it all the time. It doesn't matter how hard the scene was for me to write, movies are different from plays or books. Or poems or skyscrapers—they're just—movies are different.

**SHANLEY:** You've done a good job with it; your adaptations of your own books are really good. One of my favorite films of yours is *Marathon Man*, which I think is just a sensational movie. It's very upsetting and disturbing to me. And also every time I've seen the film it's hit me a different way, depending on how I felt, because it raises a lot of emotional—it's almost like a dream.

**GOLDMAN:** One of the things you get when you get a director like Schlesinger, who is—Schlesinger has no real interest in action particularly; he's really interested in character. He's constantly saying to the production designer: I don't want to know who lived in the room, I want to know who lived in the room before the people lived in the room. He's fascinated by texture.

Schlesinger's one of those figures—how can I put this? The most important movie of, quote, quote, modern times, I think is *Jaws*. Which changed everything in terms of the studios. And one of the things that we're all dealing with and all of us have been going mad with, is the fact that they're all looking for these phenomenal blockbuster movies that can make them a trillion dollars and insure their jobs for them. And Schlesinger is one of those directors who's at his best, if you look at his early work, making small, character stuff.

**SHANLEY:** That turned out to be blockbusters.

**GOLDMAN:** But those movies aren't getting

made anymore on a major basis. *Jaws* made so much money so fast that it shocked them; they didn't know that kind of money was out there. But they did know, after it happened, that it had to still be there for other pictures. They just didn't know what the picture was.

One of the awful things I feel about Hollywood is that there has not been a *Driving Miss Daisy 2*. There'll be a *Die Hard 2* or a *Die Hard 9*, but I will bet you, and I haven't looked, that *Driving Miss Daisy* was more successful than *Die Hard*. And the reason they don't do sequels to quality films is because it requires talent of a certain nature. It requires a certain delicacy of screenplay, it requires a gamble of making the picture with nobody in it. But, this is going to sound very arrogant and it probably is, I could write a really shitty gangster picture by Monday. Because all you do is add more car chases and shoot-outs.

**SHANLEY:** Well, the action picture is the direct descendant of the silent film—it's the only international picture. It's the true international picture, because it's based on action rather than language...

**GOLDMAN:** Yes.

**SHANLEY:** ...so it translates around the world much better.

**GOLDMAN:** That's right.

**SHANLEY:** But I have to take issue with you: there have been many small personal films made in the '80s that have done very well.

**GOLDMAN:** Oh sure.

**SHANLEY:** But it is true that the studios don't look at them and go, boy, this is really a money maker.

**GOLDMAN:** That's right.

**SHANLEY:** Why would they? I mean, I wouldn't look at them and say that either. And occasionally I would say that of some blockbuster script where you read it and say, who do you have in that? That's probably going to make a lot of money. It's sort of more obvious. But it's a strange...

**GOLDMAN:** Oh, I'm not being critical of the—

**SHANLEY:** ...it's a strange business. I don't

know why a lot of movies—I mean, I know why they make a lot of action movies: because they make money. There are a lot of movies that are made that, when I see them announced and hear what they're about, I'm like, why is that movie being made? I'm amazed that they would okay that.

**GOLDMAN:** Inexplicable to me.

**SHANLEY:** I was amazed, I didn't understand this—at the time I had not read *Misery*—and I said: A movie called *Misery*? With a writer, the main character, his legs are broken with somebody sadistic taking care of him? This is their idea of a commercial film? So I was definitely one of the mooks in that situation. And boy was I wrong. When I saw the film I started to understand it, the appeal of the film.

**GOLDMAN:** Well, we got lucky in that. I wrote the part for Kathy Bates, who I never met, but I'd seen her work for 15 years and I think she's one of the best actresses in the world. I wrote the part for her, and I said to Rob [Reiner] when I gave it to him, I wrote it for Kathy Bates. And he said, oh, okay, we'll use her. Because he'd seen her too. If the director had not been around the theater enough to have seen Kathy Bates' work, no way she gets the part.

But she was so extraordinary in it because she was unknown and she—here's what I mean. There's a scene in *Misery* where she's trying to get him to burn his book and he won't do it. And she walks around his bed saying: Well, then I would never ask you to do anything you didn't want to do; I think you're the most fabulous person I've ever known and you must never think that I would ever force you to do a thing that wasn't something you were desperately anxious to do yourself. Now while she's walking around saying this, she's flicking lighter fluid on his bed. The fact is, we could have had any actress in Hollywood because if you look at what the actresses have, for example this year, there are just no parts for women. And so a lead part in what the British would call a double-hander, and I don't know that there's an actress we couldn't have had. The fact is if we had had any of them, no matter how skillful they are, you would have known that Sally Fields or any of the others

would not have burned up that cripple. But you don't know what Kathy Bates is capable of doing.

**SHANLEY:** That's true, that's true. I should have thought of that.

**GOLDMAN:** With Kathy Bates, since she was so unknown, you didn't know what she'd do. I think her performance, I'm not denigrating whatever else the rest of us did, but I think what made the movie special was her performance.

**SHANLEY:** Well, certainly one rule of thumb, I would say, is if Bill Goldman is going to do a movie and it's got a sadist in it, he's going to get a really good actor to play that part. He's going to get Laurence Olivier or he's going to get Kathy Bates.

Among your work, I can't neatly divide it into two categories because there's too much of it and it's too diverse, but there certainly are two streams that I see. One is the kind of movie where the main character, or the main characters, they're in terrible danger and terrible things are going on, but nothing can happen to them. They're blessed. All sorts of things can happen to them, but basically we know they're all right. And that'd be like *Butch Cassidy* and *Year of the Comet* and *The Princess Bride*. We know they're all right. No matter what happens. Until the incredible nihilistic orgy ending of *Butch Cassidy*, which doesn't revel in the fact that they're dead. In fact, it leaves it somewhat—when I saw the film, when I heard the guns go off at the end, I still didn't know, maybe they made it. Because they made it through everything else.

And then there's the other category of movie, in which really nothing is going to go very well. You're going to fall into the hands of sadists, and they're going to have tremendous power over you, and you're going to be subjected to their *kindness*, because the sadists have this tremendous solicitude and concern for your feelings—to give you the oil of cloves, or, I would never make you do anything you didn't want to do, I love you, I think you're the greatest. And those seem to me to be two sort of rivers running through your work; those are places to which you return.

**GOLDMAN:** I don't know. I'm such a totally instinctive writer that I don't know what I'm doing, I never know what I'm doing. I don't mean

by that I'm waiting for inspiration to hit, because I think I've had inspiration hit me twice in 37 years, so you don't wait for it. But I just always have been instinctive. By which I mean I can get fucked up very easily and I can't figure out, when I've made a mistake, what the hell I did wrong. I just have to basically sit there and hope for some idea to hit, something that says no, no put it at night, put it outside. A lot of people can say, what scene will I use there? I mean, we all know when we're in trouble. Don't you know when you're in trouble?

**SHANLEY:** I hope I do. I usually do, but I don't always.

**GOLDMAN:** I have gotten very few compliments that I treasure. One of them was from a studio executive who said to a director about me: "Be careful on his screenplays; he can fool you with good writing." Because that's true in the nutty way; I don't mean that it's good writing, what I mean is I fake around a lot. If I have a weakness in a sequence, I'll try and be as dazzling and as cute and put in as many asides as I can in trying to hide the weakness.

But when we're in trouble, no, we don't always know when we're in trouble. Sometimes we think we're doing neat work and it's awful. But when I'm in trouble, I'm sort of helpless to get out of it quickly.

**SHANLEY:** Sometimes I can get out of it, sometimes I can't, but it definitely takes serious time. I did a spec screenplay recently. My most recent spec screenplay, I wrote a draft of it and I knew something was horribly wrong. I had found the subject of the movie, I had found the world of the movie, but the structure was a disaster and the entire first act was wrong. In the past I've always told other people, if the first act is wrong and the second act is great, throw it away because you're dead. Because you're going to have to get rid of that first act and put another one in that goes with the second, and that's almost impossible to do. And that's what I did this time, I took out the first act and it took me two years to put in a new first act.

**GOLDMAN:** It's tough.

**SHANLEY:** But I did it, and it was some of the hardest mule work that I ever—

**GOLDMAN:** I could never do that. I am undeniably, I'm one of the world's—shit—I hate rewriting. I'm terrible at it and I've always been terrible at it and I couldn't do that. I would just pitch it.

**SHANLEY:** But I wanted to do this. I had an idea, an image in my mind of a movie on a subject with a kind of person in a world—I had found a world that I thought was a great world to do a movie about and I just couldn't give it up. I knew that if I gave up this screenplay I would never in my life do it, so I stuck with it.

**GOLDMAN:** Well it's funny, what you write about almost always, certainly in plays and I'm thinking of the movies, it's always family. It's always family. *Five Corners* was family. And God knows *Moonstruck* was family, and *January Man* is the brothers. And *Joe Versus the Volcano*, God knows, there are three sisters aren't there?

**SHANLEY:** There's two sisters, but one actress plays three women.

**GOLDMAN:** *Alive* is the first thing you've done which isn't about family. *Alive* is the first picture that you've done with a standard kind of structure. I could have written *Alive*, but I couldn't have written any of the other movies that you've written. I wouldn't have written it as well as you did, but if somebody had said to me, we're going to have the plane crash in the first two minutes and we're not going to have the business at the end after they get out, I would have said: Okay, I can figure out a way to make that, I can do that. Because that sounds like *Misery*, as you said.

**SHANLEY:** Right.

**GOLDMAN:** But I couldn't have written all the others. The others are basically family.

**SHANLEY:** Well, I think that's what was going on in my life. I was working out problems having to do with my past and my childhood. And then, when I got to *Joe*, I had started to come to a state of resolution about those things, but I started to go into shock from what had happened in my professional life. I had been swept into this new arena and had all these experiences that basically stunned me and put me into a sort of somnambulant state, from which I would gradually emerge.

**GOLDMAN:** Did you expect to be a screenwriter?

**SHANLEY:** No.

**GOLDMAN:** When did you—

**SHANLEY:** I didn't expect to be a playwright. I was a poet until I was 26. I never wrote a play, I never went to the theater. I never went to the movies. I would go to a movie once a year and see *Spartacus* or something.

**GOLDMAN:** Right.

**SHANLEY:** I expected to be a poet for the rest of my life and do odd jobs. But then one day I wrote some dialogue and something happened in me and I said, this is for me. It was just a very simple recognition. And then, after I was doing plays for quite a long time, I still had no particular interest in going into the film business. But I realized that I was going to be back painting people's apartments if I didn't do something, so I decided to try to write a screenplay to make money. And when I started to write it, I was about ten pages in I remember, and I suddenly said, this is a great art form, this is really wonderful. And what a relief as an alternative to playwrighting; I don't always have to do playwrighting, I can turn to this. And from that time on, I've gone back and forth between writing screenplays and plays.

**GOLDMAN:** See, you'll never know the envy I have when I hear you say that. I wish I could say that, more than anything.

**SHANLEY:** But you, you're going to suffer whatever you do.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah. But I think basically, if you went around and asked my peers who are still at it, if you ask, oh I don't know, who's my age? Bo Goldman is my age, Alvin Sargent is my age, Bob Towne's my age. Frank Pierson's my age, God knows Larry Gelbart. If you asked them in a lump, could we say that? I would bet you all of us would say no. That's the thing that I envy so much with the young writers.

I'd been a movie nut all my life but I never dreamt that anyone would ever pay me to write a movie. I'd written five novels and all of that, but what movies were for me were a wonderful—clearly I had a facility for it because my first real screenplay was *Harper* and my third real screen-

play was *Butch Cassidy*, so I had that going in. All I've ever had as a writer from the very beginning was an ear for dialogue and a sense of structure. And that happens to be very helpful in the movies.

**SHANLEY:** You didn't enjoy writing *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*? You didn't have a good day?

**GOLDMAN:** I really enjoyed writing only one thing in my life, and that was *The Princess Bride*. I loved writing that book.

**SHANLEY:** Writing the screenplay?

**GOLDMAN:** No. But I remember writing that book was just a wonderful experience. I remember thinking while I was writing it: God, how wonderful it must be to have experiences like this every time you write a book.

Because essentially, my lawyer, who I've had for many, many decades, says I constantly live my life as if I'm in danger of being found out, and that's true. Which is what you said, it's the same thing as you saying I would always suffer.

But I think the young people, your age and younger, really can say that about screenplays.

**SHANLEY:** Well, what I enjoy is that—there's a tremendous amount that I don't enjoy. What I enjoy is writing a good screenplay. I do not enjoy all of the business dealings that surround it, I do not enjoy talking to people who are obviously overstimulated and uncentered and saying things that I know aren't true.

**GOLDMAN:** I think as a screenwriter, every other job has millions of problems we're not privy to. I know directors get eaten alive by the studio. And there's always the guy in the suit saying, why didn't we get one more shot and all of that. And I know that the costume person has got a vision for how this scene should look and the star says no, I don't look good in yellow, and there goes—you know what I'm saying.

**SHANLEY:** Um-hmmm.

**GOLDMAN:** They all have, we all of us have our own problems. One of the things that I've always regretted about movies—the studios hate rehearsal because there are no dailies on rehearsal and they think they're expensive. In point of fact, all movies should have rehearsal because it saves



money on the movie; all of a sudden you've got your problems ironed out in rehearsal, not when there are 80 people standing around. And I think one of the things that I've always regretted is, on a movie, there's never time when the six or seven of us who are crucial to the success or failure of any film get together for a couple of days in a room and talk about our problems.

In other words, there's a lot of stuff in a screenplay that I write, that if I knew that they wanted it—instead of having it in the library they wanted it in a phone booth, that's not a problem. As long as they don't fuck with my structure, as long as the thrust of the scene is the same, it doesn't matter for me very much where it takes place, it doesn't matter. I'm overstating that, but once you start screwing with structure, the whole movie for me falls apart.

You have a different sense of structure than I do. *Alive* is your first, as I said, classically structured picture, and also your first adaptation.

**SHANLEY:** Yes.

**GOLDMAN:** You only do originals, and—

**SHANLEY:** I did two adaptations this year. I have *Alive* and I have an animated feature with Spielberg.

**GOLDMAN:** Right.

**SHANLEY:** That's an adaptation though, of a 12-page booklet with large pictures. So I had to flesh it out a little.

**GOLDMAN:** But it never happens in a movie. I mean, you just don't meet anybody. I never meet the cinematographer. And there is that thing which, at a certain point, all of us know more about a movie than anybody else on the movie.

And there's a great waste in that moment before the director takes over, when the writer is the movie. We're the only one, because we've been in our pit for six months and we know more, we should know more, but we're the only one who's been working on it. The producer's not working on it; he's just sitting there saying, when am I going to get it? And there's no director for the most part until we're done. And at that moment when we're so full, we're cast aside.

**SHANLEY:** Well, I've never had this experience. So really you are describing a common but different experience than mine, in the sense that

I've never written a screenplay where I didn't sit down and talk to the director about the concept and go into rehearsals with the cast—that I can think of.

**GOLDMAN:** No, that's because you write your own—you have this unique way of going about writing movies. Which is that you write them and then debate who you'll honor to sell them to.

**SHANLEY:** I think that's making it sound a little better than it is. But certainly, even on *Alive*, that was sort of a more normal film making process: I adapted the book, and then the director and producer, Frank Marshall and Kathy Kennedy, sent me video cassettes of every actor they were considering for every role in the film and discussed with me casting on every one of the roles as they came up. My house was filled with video cassettes. And then I read people in New York for them and put them on tape, and then when it was time to rehearse the film, I went to Vancouver and made whatever changes were necessary. And then, when they went to the glacier, I went home.

I thought that was a very healthy process. It's an interesting thing: I had been very involved on the set of *Five Corners*. I was associate producer on *Five Corners* as well as the writer, and I brought in John Turturro and I brought in the art director and I brought in the casting director. So I was very involved in that show. And then I remember on the first day of shooting for *Moonstruck*, I came on the set, which was shooting on location in New York, and Norman [Jewison] looked at me and gave me this strange look and he said: Thanks for dropping by. And I knew I was dealing with a different guy.

**GOLDMAN:** Well, see, in all honesty—never believe anybody who begins a sentence with “in all honesty.” I don't want to be on the set. I tend to be absent. I think I make the actors nervous. I'm frightened of actors and never know what they mean when they talk to me. I never do. I have no idea how actors' minds work. And when an actor comes up and says, what does that mean? I just go into a state of absolute hysteria where I spent a lot of time writing exactly those words, I thought it was so valid. But I don't know if the star means, I don't like the line, I do like the line give me

another one, I want the close up. I don't know. So all I ever said was, well why don't you ask the director? But I tend not to be there. I don't know how much I could be present. With Rob Reiner, I like being around Rob's sets; because he's so hard on himself, it's a very happy set. I loved being around the shooting of *Princess Bride*. That was wonderful.

**SHANLEY:** *All the President's Men* jumps out at me as being sort of different than all of your other films. But it's probably in part because of the subject matter, which was such fresh history.

**GOLDMAN:** It's the same trick in *Alive*. What we were faced with—essentially *All the President's Men* is two guys on the phone. And the decision was finally reached, fuck it, let's just have two guys on the phone. In other words, we didn't go particularly mad; there's an awful lot of two guys talking on the phone.

**SHANLEY:** To me, it's a terrifying concept. *All the President's Men*, from beginning to end almost, is a terrifying concept of a way to do a film.

**GOLDMAN:** What made it eventually feasible was we ended the movie halfway through the book. We ended the movie on a fuck-up by Woodward and Bernstein, the logic being that—because they were media darlings by this time—the audience would carry it, would know that eventually it ended well. So we missed all kinds of fabulous material, but we basically were able to find a structure.

For me, I can't do a screenplay until I know what the structure is, I just can't do it. I can write all kinds of terrible scenes, but I won't know really what I'm doing until I have that spine.

**SHANLEY:** But when you're doing the *All the President's Men* or anything that's based on a real incident—I faced this problem in *Alive*—where God created the structure; you're faced with the history of the thing and now you must extrude that structure and make it work.

In *Alive*, I just looked at: What are the big incidents that faced these people from the time that the plane crashed until they finally escape the Andes? What were the incidents? And I said, okay, then that's the structure. Those are the main elements that we're working towards or coming

away from. Every time you leave one of them behind, you must be being pulled towards the next one. Also I asked the question: What is the most cinematic thing that happens here? Because this is a screenwriting nightmare. These people are trapped by a plane in the snow, and really nothing happens for extraordinarily long lengths of time. I said, an awful lot happens in the first three days: they crashed and then there was bleeding, and people unconscious who woke up, and the bleeding stopped or they died. There's a lot of action and drama in that. I said, I'm going to make the whole first act of this seventy-day story the first three days, because that is filled with action and incident.

But I was faced with what happened, and you were faced with that on *President's Men*. Did you have different key incidents that you were sort of building towards or—

**GOLDMAN:** Eventually. I remember Bob Woodward was in New York and I had him in my office and I said, tell me everything that had to happen for this story to work. And he said, well, I had to go to the police line-up and hear the guy say he was in the CIA and blah. First of all, there had to be the break-in, and I had all those incidents in an outline. And then I realized I had the movie.

I had a really neat beginning for the movie. Alan Pakula, the director, I don't know if he ever shot it; we had a horrible length problem with that movie so it never worked. And the fact is, if you saw it now, this is why I was saying 20 years, whatever it is later, it would be a dumb opening, because now the whole fact of everybody being knowledgeable about Watergate no longer holds. Nobody knows what Watergate was anymore, the kids don't remember who Kennedy was when he was shot. So essentially it's one of those things where it was an interesting opening for that moment, but if you saw it now, it would just be sludge.

I think we're in a very bad period for movies now. I think if I had to make a really pretentious statement, which won't be the first, I can't think of a worse period in terms of quality in sound history.

**SHANLEY:** Yeah.

**GOLDMAN:** This is the first year in several years when you can actually come up with five pictures that could be best picture. We've been making shit, I think, and I think the studios know it. I happen to think we have a very bright bunch of studio heads out there now, and they all know the quality of movies has really gone down.

And my reason behind it: throughout history, we don't know why, but we do know that talent tends to cluster. And I think right now we're at a time of very low talent in films. Also in the theater. Also in all kinds of the arts, I think this is a very low period. I don't think in 50 years anybody's going to say, oh God, it was only back in 1990, *that* was a year.

**SHANLEY:** It's extremely true in theater. But everybody in theater knows that it's a really rough time; there's virtually no legit plays on Broadway and it's just sort of a general lackluster feeling right now.

**GOLDMAN:** And it's worse in England. In England they were very arrogant because they had a bunch of terrific, interesting playwrights, but they're all done now. John Osborne is essentially done now, and Harold Pinter recently wrote an eight-and-a-half minute play.

**SHANLEY:** Well, you know, the whole society creates what's in front of them.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah.

**SHANLEY:** The quality of the audience is not good right now either. You're not faced with very lively, intelligent people who are making references for you. I'm worried about very basic things right now, like people don't know classic mythology anymore. In 10 more years, 20 more years, is anyone going to understand Byron? Is anybody going to be able to read the 18th century English poets and have any idea what they're about? Is anybody going to be able to read Milton? They're not going to know what that stuff is about.

**GOLDMAN:** I'll give you an example. I had a great failure with a novel of mine called *Heat*, which takes place in Las Vegas, and the main character sardonically referred to Las Vegas as the Athens of America. And everybody came to me and said, you'll have to change that. And I said, why? I didn't understand. I mean, 5th

Century B.C. Athens, that's the cradle of—and they said, nobody knows what the line means. And I went around, and nobody knew what the line meant. And so I changed it. It was one of those things where there's no point: if enough people tell you you're drunk, lie down. I was so appalled.

**SHANLEY:** But I write my scripts and I have stuff in them that are obvious references that are going to go over the heads of 99 percent of the audience. Only I'm not really sure that it does go over their heads. There's a line in *Alive* which I wrote, but I didn't write, because it was just something that one of these guys happened to say. And it was, for me, one of the keys to how I was going to write the entire film. This guy had severe leg injuries, got gangrene, he's feverish, and he turns to another guy at one point and he says: "I have abandoned the church of Rome in favor of Utopia." And I said, you could never write that line, that is a totally great line. Especially that it came out of completely nowhere.

Now, the audience, what are they going to make of that? I don't know what they're going to—it's sort of, that's their problem. They're going to make of that what they will. They've all heard things like that. They may not know what they mean, but they recognize what it means about that guy in that moment, I think. And I guess I can't do the terrible television thing, or the high-concept movie thing of assuming ignorance or, and because, I will be helping to create and abet and feed greater and greater ignorance by withdrawing language from, or references from the screenplay that I think people won't understand.

**GOLDMAN:** In the movie business, I've written this and I believe it to be true. There is an undeniable adversarial relationship between directors and writers. Not all directors, maybe not half; I wouldn't know what percentage. But an awful lot of directors hate us, because they can't do it. And they know the same words we do and they can't do it and they get very frustrated.

The awful thing about screenwriting, once it gets into the mill out there—which you haven't experienced. I've said this a lot. You rarely read about a cinematographer getting fired. It rarely

happens, because nobody knows what they do. All we know is we can't say: Let me have an 8 gel and a 16 this, or whatever they say, and suddenly something looks wonderful. But we all know the alphabet and we all know words, so we think: Oh, I can do that, I'll fix that, I'll just take the script home.

**SHANLEY:** Right.

**GOLDMAN:** I think I'm a much better writer than any actor I've ever known. I'm a much worse actor than any actor I've ever known. But I'm a better writer than any director I've ever known, I just am. I ought to be, I've done it for so long.

In my head, you see, I'm a novelist who happens to write screenplays. But I have chosen to be a gun for hire. And I've chosen that because my books are my power. I'm not saying they have any quality, but they're mine; every word in them is mine and every word is there because I want it to be: They may be shitty words, but they're my words. And since I've chosen to be a gun for hire, once you get into the system, you have to deal with it. You can't say, wait, this isn't right. Don't get in there. They overpay us, they always have, they've overpaid us for silence for decades. And I envy your career, I envy what you have done, because that was a thing I never dreamt of doing. Never dreamt of doing it.

**SHANLEY:** Well, you did it with *Butch Cassidy*.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah, but that—

**SHANLEY:** You did it with *Year of the Comet*.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah, but essentially, I haven't really written—I sold *Butch Cassidy*. The reason *Butch* is so good is because I got lucky. We got that cast and George [Roy] Hill. I mean, George—

**SHANLEY:** But you didn't get those people because they happened to wander in.

**GOLDMAN:** No, they—

**SHANLEY:** They read the screenplay and wanted to do it.

**GOLDMAN:** I'll give you an example of how a director can actually make things better; it does happen. In the final shoot-out in *Butch Cassidy*,

which I think is an extraordinary sequence, George made a decision that the Sundance Kid never missed. You don't know it until you see the movie and look at it to see: every time there's anybody visible and he fires a gun, somebody falls. And it makes it mythic, it just does. Because you've never really seen him do much with a gun, and then all of a sudden it's—well, that decision was not mine. And that's one of the things that makes that sequence so extraordinary, I think.

**SHANLEY:** I remember the gun play in that movie. When I saw it, I remember my emotional feeling was recognition that I had never seen that before.

**GOLDMAN:** No, I hadn't either.

**SHANLEY:** I'd never seen that kind of gun play.

**GOLDMAN:** Let's talk about [*The January Man*] for a second, because that's the one movie of yours for me that doesn't work. And I'll tell you why it doesn't work. The mystery isn't—

**SHANLEY:** The solution doesn't make any sense.

**GOLDMAN:** Yeah. That's what it is, that's what it is.

**SHANLEY:** And you know, that's not their fault. That's my fault. I don't think I ever understood the solution to my own mystery.

**GOLDMAN:** Oh, I see. Raymond Chandler did that too.

**SHANLEY:** But, you know, I think a movie can work and that be true. In other words, if everything else is working and you get to the solution and you go, oh God, that doesn't make any sense...

**GOLDMAN:** What didn't work?

**SHANLEY:** Well, it was written to be a very complicated ensemble picture with the mayor of New York, and his relationship with his daughter was a big deal. And the Susan Sarandon character had an entire alternate character that she had a lot of scenes with that were not there. And her relationship with Harvey Keitel, the police commissioner, was much more complicated. And so there was a lot. In fact, the picture was cut to sort of try to make it more a standard main character

picture, probably, and that was certainly part of the difficulty. But in addition to that, I did not have a solution that made any sense, and that certainly couldn't help.

**GOLDMAN:** Well let me ask you this. What was the initial impulse to write it?

**SHANLEY:** I wanted to write a genre picture. I was interested in the genre. And I was interested in using it to look at New York as it was at the time that I wrote the screenplay.

But to me the amazing thing about a picture like *The January Man* is that you actually can cut 45 minutes—45 minutes is a long time—out of the movie and you can see it and you go: Gee, it doesn't work, it's not very good, I don't feel that involved. But you sort of think, well, it makes some kind of sense.

**GOLDMAN:** It's a movie.

**SHANLEY:** I mean, to me it should be gibberish. At that point it should be an extended montage of some kind.

**GOLDMAN:** You know it's funny...

**SHANLEY:** There was the writer's strike the first day after shooting. I was not allowed on the set. One day into shooting, I was off the picture.

**GOLDMAN:** The disaster I mentioned earlier with the Athens of America line was a movie of mine which was a novel of mine called *Heat*. And we set a record that will never be broken. Forget anything. I've only seen the movie once. And, it's a movie, ok? Six directors in six weeks.

**SHANLEY:** Oh my God!

**GOLDMAN:** 36-day shoot, six directors in six weeks. It's just never been touched. And it will never be touched again. And what's amazing is, if you didn't know that, you can't say, ah yes, this was where George Cukor worked and this is where so-and-so came in. Whoever the six directors were, they shall all remain nameless: it's a movie. It's just that it's not going to change the course of film history. But it's amazing, I was shocked; it was a movie.

Look, I think to make a quality picture, there are six or seven of us who have to be at our best. Any one of us can fuck up for the rest of the—I mean, there's no question the production designer can screw us up, the director can screw us up, we

can screw it up, the actors can be miscast.

Two figures who I respect enormously, [Elia] Kazan and George Roy Hill, both said the same thing when I was interviewing them, one about movies and one about plays. The first day of rehearsal your fate is essentially sealed. If you've got the script right, I don't mean to say the script is—but in a play, certainly in the theatre—obviously it's everything. But if you've got the script right and you cast it right, you have a chance for a quality piece. If you've made a fatal mistake there, it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter, you're dead. No matter how skillful everybody else is. I mean, essentially it just is; it's a given.

**SHANLEY:** That's true.

**GOLDMAN:** It really is true.

**SHANLEY:** You can't get around that.

**GOLDMAN:** You cannot do it. And I've come more and more to think that's true. You can make a picture, we can be clever and try and hide certain things and have bigger explosions or cut away to that or whatever, and a lot of music. Still, if you fuck it up early on, you can't save it. You cannot save it. □

William Goldman  
 Chaplin, 1992  
 Memoirs of an Invisible Man, 1991  
 Year of the Comet, 1991  
 Misery, 1990  
 The Princess Bride, 1987 (WGA Award Nomination)  
 Heat, 1986  
 Magic, 1978  
 A Bridge Too Far, 1977  
 Marathon Man, 1976 (Academy & WGA Award Nominations)  
 All the President's Men, 1975 (Academy & WGA Awards)  
 The Stepford Wives, 1975  
 The Great Waldo Pepper, 1973  
 The Hot Rock, 1971  
 Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, 1969 (WGA & Academy Awards)  
 Operation Masquerade, 1965  
 Harper, 1965 (WGA Award Nomination)

John Patrick Shanley  
 Alive, 1992  
 Joe Versus the Volcano, 1990  
 The January Man, 1988  
 Moonstruck, 1987 (WGA & Academy Awards)  
 Five Corners, 1987

