

The List

By Rob Long

Martini Short on KCRW

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This is Rob Long with *Martini Shot* on KCRW.

When I was trying to break into show business, an older, more experienced writer – I think he was twenty-five; I think he once had a script optioned by a Serbia-based producer – well he told me that the only way to break into television writing was to be on a list of network-approved writers. It was a real list, he said, with a lot of names on it, and only those names would ever be hired to be on a writing staff. Get your name on that list, he said. It's the only way...



So I spent a good year trying to see that list; trying to find anyone who had seen it, trying to track down who compiled it, where it was kept and how you get on it. I would ask people in show business “so about this list of approved writers”. Half the time they would look at me blankly and the other half they just assumed I meant it metaphorically.

“Well, one way to get on this list that you speak of”, an actual working writer once said to me – and he was really an actual working writer. He was 35, practically a grey, and he was the supervising producer of a big hit comedy at the time. But when he said “list” he used air quotes. “This ‘list’ that you speak of”, and that was my first clue that one, there was no list, and two, that as long as you believe there is a list you will never be on it.

See people on the outskirts of the business, and people on the in-skirts too for that matter, spent a lot of time creating ordering mechanisms in their heads. Lists, policies and secret contracts that they imagine govern the complicated and unpredictable world of show business. See randomness is scary. It means anything can happen to anyone, good or bad.

So people trying to break in, focus on a list they need to be on, searching out the keepers and the writers of that list and people inside the business focus on other kinds of rules and guidelines to help them stay in.

“You can’t do that”, I was once told by an executive at a large studio.

“You can’t end the B-story in a swing set in the third act without first resolving the A-story in the main set.”

“Why can’t I?” I asked, pretending to understand what was just said.

“Because it breaks the story rule” was the reply.

Now, see, I was aware there was a story rule, really, until just then. I mean, besides the really big one which is “Don’t be boring”. Or if you are doing a comedy, “Be funny and don’t be boring”.

But there is a rule in that executives head anyway and it is “You can’t end the B-story in a swing set in the third act until you resolve the A-story in the main set” which doesn’t make any sense but it is a rule and it can be followed and checked and crossed off the list of *Things that Make Stories Work*. It is something objective. It can be measured. It’s stupid, of course, and total nonsense and completely misses the point of entertainment which is, as I have said, “To be totally un-boring”. But it is a rule and it is comforting.

You see, we cling to these rules and lists because we really have a hard time grasping just how strange and risky and unknowable most of what we do in this business is. Getting work as a writer means getting on a list. Stories only work if they follow certain rules. I think we’d all be a lot happier and we would probably end up being a lot more successful too if we just stopped believing all those things.

Unless there really is a list and I am on it. In that case, you know, then let’s not make waves.

And that’s it for this week. Next week we will return for phone calls. For KCRW, this is Rob Long with *Martini Shot*.

