

4-8-2014

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### Recommended Citation

"Madness or Craft?" (2014). *News Releases*. 2901.  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news\\_rls/2901](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/news_rls/2901)

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# University of Dayton, Ohio (url: <http://www.udayton.edu/index.php>)



## Madness or Craft?

04.08.2014 | Campus and Community, Culture and Society

(Cathryn Michon, (url: <http://humorwriters.org/2014-bombeck-workshop-faculty-cathryn-michon/>) best-selling author, standup comic, actress and Hollywood screenwriter and director, talks to Teri Rizvi, Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop founder, about adapting books into films, the writing process — and why she's so passionate about a grassroots effort to bring her new movie, *Muffin Top: A Love Story* (url: <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/cathrynmichon/muffin-top-girls-night-out-red-carpet-premiere-tou>), to cities around the country. Cathryn is part of the faculty at the 2014 EBWW, along with her writing partner and husband, W. Bruce Cameron (url: <http://humorwriters.org/2014-bombeck-workshop-faculty-w-bruce-cameron/>).

**You raised nearly \$100,000 from a grassroots effort to give your new movie, *Muffin Top: A Love Story*, a red-carpet treatment in cities outside Hollywood. Why the passion for this movie?**

In most of my writing, I've often been obsessed with the topic of low female self-esteem, in one way or another. We always write about what we need most to learn, so, yeah, I struggle with insecurity. I had Graves Disease as a teenager, which caused facial disfigurement in and around my eyes. You would never know it, because I had seven reconstructive surgeries and I look completely normal today (thanks to great surgeons and generous eye tissue organ donors). But as a teen, literally having people stop me on the street and say, "what happened to your face?" definitely set me on the path of examining how women limit themselves because of how they feel about their looks.

But I didn't need the experience of being actually disfigured to feel inadequate, because I'm a woman in America, which means I see at least 400 photoshopped media images a day telling me I don't look right. Of course, the model in the photo didn't either; that's why they photoshopped her. *No one is good enough*. That is the message, and I wanted to tell a story about a woman who lets that madness about appearance infect her life in really stupid ways, with hilarious consequences that lead her to grow out of her obsessions.

**The movie is adapted from one of your own novels. What are the challenges of adapting a book into film?**

I learned so much about the story from the time I wrote the novel until Bruce and I co-wrote the screenplay, and so the film is very, very different from the novel. At least in this instance, I'm one of those jerky Hollywood writers who ruined my perfect novel. And by the way, it wasn't perfect. I would rewrite it today if I could, but I would also rewrite grocery lists if I could. I had a list last week that would have been BRILLIANT if only I had put the bell peppers before the paper towels. That would have been a kick-a\*\* list. In short, I'm a perfectionist, and I do believe that writing is rewriting, so I was thrilled to have another shot to get the bones of this story right, but if I could, I'd rewrite the screenplay and reshoot the film, too. Is that madness or craft? Hard to say, but it's how I am. I never get it exactly right, but I never stop trying to get it right.

**What advice would you give other writers who believe their book can be brought to life on the screen?**

Many of my personal favorite films are from books, such as *Silver Linings Playbook*. But on the other hand, that same filmmaker made a wonderful film from an original screenplay, *American Hustle*. Both methods work, and can make for great films. The biggest challenge with adapting your book is that, well...novels are longer than films. So you will have to, as in the famous phrase, kill your darlings. It can be painful. There is a reason a lot of very successful book authors want nothing to do with writing the screen adaptations of their books: they just can't take the pain of throwing out very good material. As a filmmaker, my favorite part of the process is editing, paring it down in the edit bay, so I kind of love killing my darlings. Maybe I'm a bad person. It's just so great when you realize that you didn't need a sequence you thought was essential. Not great for the time wasted in getting it on film, but great for reducing a story down to its essential, elemental core. But that's the difference between filmmaking and writing. If you've got great details you envision as belonging in your book, there's no limit to how long and rich that book can be. You have to decide if, as an artist, you want some total stranger paring your book down, or if you can stand to do it yourself.

**How did you get started as a writer? Do you consider yourself primarily a writer or an actress?**

I always say I should refuse to answer this question for sexism reasons because I find it is more often asked of women than men. But I don't think you're being sexist, and I'm also terrible at refusing to do things (I love to say yes!) so here goes: The truth is, I want to be like Albert Brooks, or Lena Dunham: people who write and direct films in which they also act. I figure for one thing, it's convenient, as I always have at least one actress who won't drop out of the project. I really found out who I was creatively at *The Second City* in Chicago, where we did live improv in front of audiences. So basically you are writing, acting and directing yourself in real time. That's where I learned to do everything. That's still one of my favorite creative outlets, and why I just simply refuse to pick between any of my artistic disciplines. It's all good, I'm grateful to do all of it and want to continue to do all of it.

**What drives you to write? Do you have a routine, or do you wait for inspiration to strike?**

If I'm writing for someone else, for hire, I procrastinate until my stomach hurts and then I write. If I'm writing something for free that I plan to try and make...oh wait, I do the same thing, but the stomach ache takes longer to show up. That's not admirable. If you want a process that's admirable you should ask my husband. We're like the writer versions of those cartoon characters Goofus and Gallant in *Highlights for Children Magazine*. I'm Goofus, so don't do what I do, do what Bruce does.

**Your husband, W. Bruce Cameron, is your writing partner — and your life partner. Together, you're turning a number of books into movies. Why do the two of you collaborate so well on projects?**

Well, neither of us likes to commute. We live in L.A., so that's only partly a joke; you simply cannot underestimate the value of having your commute consist of walking to the dining room table.

We met on book tour, when we were both published authors, so we came to the partnership with established voices and skill sets. I think that's the main thing. We liked each other's books before we even liked each other, so we each respect the other's talent. Even on projects we don't partner on, we are each other's primary first read and edit staff. If the answers in this Q & A are poorly written, it's his fault, he had the last pass.

**This is your first time on the faculty at the Erma Bombeck Writers' Workshop. Why did you say yes?**

Because they asked me and I love to say yes! Well, that and the fact that Erma Bombeck was a pioneer who I so admire; she wrote an astonishing word count in a medium I wouldn't dream of tackling. Bruce was a syndicated columnist for years, so I know what it's like to have that "Sword of Damocles" of a deadline hanging over your head. Bruce wrote one newspaper column a week; Erma wrote three columns a week. I cannot imagine that. If she whined three times more than Bruce, I feel a little sorry for her husband.

And her columns (and also books) were funny, smart, and honest. I think Erma gets dismissed by some critics because her topics are considered women's topics, and, therefore, less important. My hero Nora Ephron was another funny woman writer like that. In my opinion, these ladies did not get the acclaim they deserved.

That's why I'm so glad that this workshop has become like a shrine to her point of view, and is encouraging others to write in her genre, because her topics were interesting, important and even profound. Certainly other columnists, my husband included, felt that domestic concerns of family were worthy topics, and so I'm glad that there are also men who come here to celebrate the genre. I couldn't begin to do what she did, but I'm honored to be even a small part of a program that honors her wonderful writing.

**Contact Teri Rizvi at 937-229-3255.**