

BOOKS & THE ARTS.

The Tie That Binds

NORA EPHRON

The following is adapted from a speech delivered at The Nation Institute's recent forum, "Hollywood and History: The Debate Over JFK."

I am not here to talk about *JFK* *per se*, but about what it is like to have written a movie based on something that happened. Nine years ago, Alice Arlen and I wrote the screenplay for *Silkwood*. It was a carefully annotated script, meticulously researched, and we kept scrupulously to what we determined were the key historical facts of the case. In *Karen Silkwood* we wrote a character who was considerably closer to whoever *Silkwood* was than to the person who had been written about in journalistic accounts—most of which had tended to whitewash Karen and gloss over certain less-than-perfect aspects of her character. In fact, what drew Alice and me to *Karen Silkwood's* story were the less-than-perfect aspects, and what we tried to write was not a movie about a heroic woman who did something heroic but rather the story of a complicated and interesting and flawed woman who quite unexpectedly did something heroic. We were extremely proud of the job we did and of the movie Mike Nichols made from it, and we were completely unprepared for what happened when it came out, which was first, an article in the Arts and Leisure section of *The New York Times* that focused completely on comparing the "facts" in the movie with the "facts" of the *Silkwood* case; and second, about two weeks later, a *New York Times* editorial denouncing the movie as a "docudrama." A docudrama, in case you don't know, is a movie *The New York Times* disagrees with the politics of.

The point I am trying to make here is that it doesn't matter whether you are good little girls like Alice and me or big bad boys like Oliver Stone. *The New York Times* is going to pound you into the ground.

They will not bother, of course, if your movie is *Out of Africa*, or *GoodFellas*, or *The Pride of the Yankees*, or *Bugsy*, or *The Glenn Miller Story*, or *Lawrence of*

Arabia—to name just a few of the wonderful movies that have done what any movie based on something that actually happened must do: *which is to impose a narrative*. So no one really objects that Denys Finch Hatton didn't really see Isak Dinesen on a train on her way to Africa, or that Tommy De Simone was actually very tall, or that Mrs. Lou Gehrig looked nothing whatsoever like Teresa Wright. These things don't matter, because they . . . don't matter. For something to matter it must be political—or more important, ambiguous, deliciously ambiguous, unresolved, mythic. The very thing that attracts a filmmaker to a project is the thing that guarantees his life will be hell once he makes it.

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Because suddenly, the filmmaker has ventured onto forbidden turf, and on this turf is a big sign that says *Keep Off the Grass*. In the case of *JFK*, the attack is that much worse because the press is one of the reasons we still don't know what happened in Dallas, and whenever you write something that implies that the press is not doing its job, or has not done its job, you get into trouble with journalists because you mortify them. (Incidentally, this happens with books too, not just with movies. It happened with *All the President's Men* and *The Final Days*, to name two books that were mortifying to the press, and I would suggest that the recent gang rape of Robert Caro on the ground that he was wrong about Coke Stevenson was actually inspired by the mortification he caused the press by discovering things about Lyndon Johnson, particularly about the source of his fortune, that had lain around undiscovered by the press for years. But I digress.)

So. You venture onto the grass. But no

one says, *Keep Off the Grass*. That would give the game away. What the press says as a rule is not that they mind your being on the grass but that they object to your methodology. What they say is that they have no problem with your making a movie of this sort as long as you stick to the facts. Now this is a fairly comical notion, because it implies that having the facts correct means that the story you tell is correct, as we all know the number of times we have read things that were correct on the facts but just plain wrong. In the case of *JFK*, the most commonly objected-to of Oliver Stone's methods was the combining of documentary footage with film footage. But the truth is that Stone could have done without all that, and in addition he could have changed Garrison into the flawed human being he actually was—and why didn't you, Oliver? oh never mind—the point is you could do any number of things and the press will still find something to object to. They will point to a silver fork that was actually stainless steel, or a breakfast that was actually a dinner, or some character you have made a composite of, or some event you have telescoped—something that proves that you have got it wrong. And they will fall on this like a fumbled football and wave it in the air to show that you have distorted the truth. All of this is nonsense; that's what I'm trying to say. Because what the press is truly objecting to are not your techniques but that you're there at all, that you have a political agenda and—and this is the important part—that you are imposing a narrative. Or put more simply, that you are telling a story.

Now it is a writer's obligation to impose a narrative. Everyone does this. Every time you take a lump of material and turn it into something you are imposing a narrative. *It's a writer's obligation to do this*. And, by the same token, it is apparently a journalist's obligation to pretend that he never does anything of the sort. The journalist claims to believe that the narrative emerges from the lump of material, rises up and smacks you in the face like marsh gas.

A couple of years after *Silkwood* was attacked in *The New York Times* I found myself at the New York Bar Association on a program on docudramas with Max Frankel. Frankel was at the time the editorial page editor of the *Times*; he is now executive editor of the paper. And I want to tell you what he said when it was his

Nora Ephron is a writer. Her latest film is This Is My Life.



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turn to speak. He said that he was wearing a tie, which indeed he was, and he held his tie up for all of us to see. He said that he had put the tie on that morning and that it had special meaning for him, it was a gift of enormous sentimental value—he went on at some length about the tie, although never being much more specific than that, so we never did find out what was so special about the tie, or who gave it to him, and I don't even remember what it looked like. When I called him about this a couple of days ago, he not only didn't remember what it looked like either but he didn't even remember the story, although he did say that it sounded like the sort of thing he might have said (which I assure you he did). Here's what he went on to say: He said that if you put an actor into a movie playing him, giving a speech at the New York Bar Association, wearing an identical tie, it would not be the truth because you would have no way of knowing what that tie meant to him. Now I love this story. I love it because it's so honest. And I love it because it's right out there: Max Frankel honestly believes there's only one version of the story, and it's his. But I just told you my version, and I promise you it's just as good.

I said to him that night, Max, you mean we can't even make *Dr. Ehrlich's Magic Bullet*? And he said, That's right. He was quite cheerful about it. By the way, when I called to check the story with him the other day, he continued in his merry way by ending the phone call with me by saying, And congratulations on your recent success in fiction.

Fiction and nonfiction. Is that all there is? Or to put it in the opposite way, as Edgar Doctorow did in an essay a few years back: "I am thus led to the proposition that there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative."

Edgar Doctorow brings me to another story. Years ago, Doctorow wrote a novel called *The Book of Daniel*. It happens to be a masterpiece. It is a novel that was clearly inspired by the historical fact and ongoing myth of the Rosenberg case, and is an improvisation on it. (I always feel that someone should mention the Rosenbergs at any event sponsored by *The Nation* in Town Hall.) The characters in the book are named the Isaacsons, and when it was published, it received splendid reviews. Some years later, Sidney Lumet made a movie based on the book, called *Daniel*. And when the *New York Times* Arts and Leisure section put out its hit on

the movie—an article that, it will not surprise you to hear, compared the events in the movie with the facts of the Rosenberg case—it actually said that Mandy Patinkin was playing the part of Julius Rosenberg. So here we have the case of a writer who removed something from fact, who never pretended to be telling the story of the Rosenbergs, but they nailed him for it anyway.

Having said all this, let me speak to the topic as I understand it, which is what the obligations of film are to history. As someone who was trained as a journalist, I have strong feelings about this that I suspect are slightly more rigid than the average screenwriter's. I believe that you have to hit the marks, whatever the marks are. The marks differ from project to project, and there's no way to make a simple rule about what they are. In the case of *Silkwood*, as I explained, one of the primary marks was Karen's character, which we believed we had a moral obligation to convey, warts and all. There were, in addition, a number of episodes that, it seemed to us, had to be conveyed as accurately and with as little dramatic license as was possible. When we got to areas where it was not known what happened—like when Karen Silkwood's urine sample was contaminated with radiation—we did not depict anything in connection with that that wasn't known at the time. At the time, we did compress things; we made up the characters of the people Karen worked with, et cetera. We made a movie that was our version of what had happened. What we believed was that we had written something that conveyed—not the truth, but what it was like, sort of, maybe, and what it was like in a way that ordinary journalism couldn't come close to.

It was clear to me when I saw *JFK* that I was seeing Oliver Stone's version of the story. And I didn't object to it, any more than I object to the 601 books that have been written about the assassination. One of the problems with the movie *JFK* is that it is more ambiguous and brilliant than its defenders, but that shouldn't be held against the movie, which in its own way is not just a wild and wacky look at the assassination but manages to capture thirty years of Kennedy assassination madness and recapitulate it in a way that seems to me practically ontological (I hope I'm using that word correctly). What intensified this even further was Oliver Stone's splendid performance as himself, a performance that was genuine-

ly inspirational to those of us who were bewildered and cowering in the same circumstances. Unfortunately, though, there are very few directors who want to make a movie and spend the four months after it opens with Ted Koppel. On the contrary: Most directors will look at a similar sort of movie and say to themselves, life is too short.

There are people who say that movies have a special obligation in this area, that for instance young people will see *JFK* and think that the Joint Chiefs of Staff killed President Kennedy. But I don't

know why they think this any more than I did. And what if they do? Eventually they will grow up and figure it out for themselves. Or else they won't. It's not the issue and it's not the filmmaker's responsibility.

The real danger is not that we might have an inaccurate movie—which, by the way, never hurt anyone. The real danger is that the wholesale, knee-jerk objection to movies based on things that happened might result in something far worse, which is a chilling effect on the creation of works of art. □

Cape Fear

JENEFER SHUTE

AN ACT OF TERROR. By André Brink. Summit. 834 pp. \$25.

Afrikaner: "What a tricky, precarious, unmanageable word," muses the protagonist of André Brink's new novel, *An Act of Terror*. What does it mean, he wonders, and what could it mean? Does Afrikaner have to be synonymous with apartheid, an "anachronism and swearword to the world"? Does this white tribe, descended from Dutch settlers who arrived on the tip of Africa three and a half centuries ago, have no choice but to witness the extinction of its culture in the world's withering contempt? Or could Afrikaner be "chiselled and hammered into other meanings," beginning with the most radical of all: "Afrikaner: native of Africa"?

An Act of Terror represents Brink's monumental effort to hammer and chisel the story of the Afrikaners, his own tribe, into a history that might have a future; it's a countermythology—almost, in its scope, a counter-edifice to the Voortrekker Monument, Pretoria's shrine to Afrikaner nationalism, where the chronicle of the *volk* is carved in stone. Disowning this creation myth, Brink sets out, with great moral urgency, to write another, to reframe the question of his people's presence and purpose in South Africa. "Through what accidents of birth and genes is one relegated to one's corner of the earth, what responsibility does one assume for it?" asks his protagonist, Thomas Landman, a Boer who can trace his forebears back

through thirteen bloody generations.

Thomas, a 28-year-old photographer, has arrived at an answer that makes him a traitor to his *volk*: He has joined the underground, committed himself to the armed struggle and, as the novel opens, prepares to carry out his act of terror, an assassination. During the countdown to the bombing, Thomas and his comrade/lover, Nina, imagine what the newspapers will be asking the next day: *What could have possessed two talented young Afrikaners from good homes to betray everything that is dear to their people?* The answer, Brink implies, is *An Act of Terror*, all 834 pages of it. As the novel builds up to the bombing, it traces, in flashback, the moral trajectory that has brought Thomas to this point. After the badly botched explosion, Thomas flees, revisiting scenes from his past in an itinerary that serves the novelistic purposes of retrospection better than those of a trained guerrilla on the run. (I don't claim to be an expert on underground tactics, but it seems to me that showing up at the home of estranged family members is not the best way to remain invisible.)

On the day before his act, Thomas asks himself, "What was the meaning of 'beginning'? Where were the roots of what was to happen at fifteen minutes to eleven tomorrow morning?" Thomas's personal history, Brink suggests, is insufficient to explain anything, too new and tentative a shoot to peel away from the roots and earth and long-buried dead that have engendered it. Perhaps it all began when one Hendrick Willemszoon Landman abandoned his wife and children in Rotterdam and stowed away on a Dutch East India Company ship, washing up on the Cape's "little shore of history some time in 1662 or 1663 like so much other human debris." This, at least,

is Thomas's reconstruction of his origin based on the gaps and silences in the official Landman genealogy. His count version, "The Chronicle of the Landman Family, As Reconstructed by Thomas Landman," appears as a 200-page "Supplement" to the novel, which Brink instructs us to regard as a "floating presence in the text, to be read where and when the reader chooses."

Thus, *An Act of Terror* weaves together a multitude of narratives and discourses: a chronicle of Afrikaner history; a personal meditation on what it means to be an Afrikaner; an anguished debate on the ethics of violence; an exercise in multiple points of view, as we hear the inner monologues of those Thomas encounters on his travels; a cat-and-mouse chase with Thomas's nemesis, Brigadier Kat Best, of the Special Branch, closes in on him and a love story (which to my mind is the least convincing part of the book). It's a work of epic scope and inclusiveness, rich with all the cadences of South African from Cape township slang to the strange utterances of the ruling class. (Thomas's father, tellingly, can never finish his sentences.) Although Brink now writes mainly in English, he has said that many of the voices in *An Act of Terror* came to him in Afrikaans first, and something of the language's idiomatic structure lingers in the text like a linguistic unconscious.

Echoes of Brink's other works are sound in this novel: like *An Instant in the Wind* (1975) and *A Chain of Voices* (1982); it turns to South Africa's history to illuminate the present; like *A Dry White Season* (1979), it traces an Afrikaner's coming-to-consciousness; and like *A Chain of Voices*, it uses multiple narrators. Fortunately, Brink has abandoned his quintessentially white-South African obsession with interracial relations (the subject of two earlier novels), but there is still plenty of heavy breathing here, plus a distasteful attempt to confer mythic status on male voyeurism. Brink's best-known work in the United States, *A Dry White Season*, is probably at his least pretentious—no epic inflation, just a taut, focused tale—but in *An Act of Terror*, he makes it clear that he wants to be counted with the Big Guys. Thomas caps his speeches with lines like "Raskolnikov discovered . . ."; he has a Faulknerian encounter with a group of black people in a broken-down car, the father's coffin strapped to the roof; and he goes hunting with an almost mythical giant and his hunchbacked factotum, a Beckettian figure who springs into motion

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