

# OVER THE SHOULDER



# OVER THE SHOULDER

*A Freelancer's Guide to  
Telling Stories and Editing Films*

**Mark Solomon**

*Editor: Shark Tale, Chicken Run, Frankenweenie*  
*Eddie Nominee: Best Edited Animated Feature Film*

*7 Pines Publishing*

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*Preview*<sup>1</sup>

Long ago in a galaxy called New York City, I auditioned for a quirky theatre project devoted to traditional Asian drama. For a young actor, this became a welcome gig: a summer in Connecticut with room and board, and maybe a good story to tell.

Our teachers and directors were accomplished artists from Bali, India and Japan, and that summer changed my life, opening me up to a rich world of new ideas about story and drama. What makes a good villain? What does an audience consider beautiful? Funny? Frightening? These questions popped and fizzed in my mind for months and years.

I couldn't get enough of the Japanese plays and their refined aesthetic. I read everything I could about Noh, Kabuki and Kyogen theatre. The essentials I learned that summer had a major impact on my creative thinking, first

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<sup>1</sup> This preview (introduction) has not yet been rated.

as an actor and eventually as a film editor, with a career in Hollywood spanning more than 30 years, editing animated films, such as *Shrek*<sup>2</sup>, *Chicken Run*<sup>3</sup>, *Space Jam*<sup>4</sup>, and *Frankenweenie*<sup>5</sup>, nominated in 2012 for an *Eddie* award as Best Edited Animated Feature Film.

Alas, I didn't win, but as a member of a select club of nominees, I would like to share what I have learned about editing and telling stories. My purpose here is to use my experience to tilt the odds in your favor to find success in this highly competitive field.

I have been lucky to live my dream and work with some of the best A-list creative filmmakers in the business, such as Tim Burton, Mel Gibson, Nick Park, and Gary Ross. I was in the room with directors, producers, writers and composers who set the standard for stories that have resonated with a large global audience. Some were big budget productions. Others

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<sup>2</sup> *Shrek* (2001). Screenplay: William Steig, Ted Elliott, Terry Rosio. Directors: Andrew Adamson and Vicky Jensen. Editor: Sim Evan-Jones.

<sup>3</sup> *Chicken Run* (2000). Screenplay: Karey Kirkpatrick. Directors: Peter Lord and Nick Park. **Editor: Yours Truly.**

<sup>4</sup> *Space Jam* (1996). Screenplay: Leo Benvenuti, Steve Rudnick, Timothy Harris, Herschel Weingrod. Director: Joe Pytka. Editor: Sheldon Kahn.

<sup>5</sup> *Frankenweenie* (2012). Screenplay: Leonard Ripps, Tim Burton, John August. Director: Tim Burton. **Editors:** Chris Lebenzon and **Yours Truly.**

were tiny independents. Some won Oscars, and others wound up in court battles. Others are still collecting dust in a vault somewhere in the Rocky Mountains.

*Over the Shoulder* is literally how I learned, watching expert editors at work. If I was lucky, this meant working with a visionary who liked to talk, whose creative process benefitted from having someone like me nearby, eager to learn, who could be called on to serve as instant audience to test a new idea.

### IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Producing any creative work for the screen, like a movie, a streaming series or even a short reel on your phone, means the story is told three times. First by the screenwriter with words on the page, then by the director and actors making a screenplay come alive, and then by the editor, who brings together all the visuals and sound in the most dynamic way possible.

As Orson Welles once said, “The notion of directing a film is the invention of critics. The whole eloquence of cinema is achieved in the editing room.”

It’s a team effort to fulfill or exceed the original vision of the writer, to breathe life into the story. In the end, a film relies on cameras, lighting, costumes, and actors bringing their experience and craft to the job at hand—and the way an editor brings them all together.

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“The film is made in the editing room,” said Philip Seymour Hoffman. “The shooting of the film is about shopping, almost. It’s like going to get all the ingredients together, and you’ve got to make sure before you leave the store that you got all the ingredients. And then you take those ingredients, and you can make a good cake . . . or not.”

As for the editor, no matter how fast A.I. technology disrupts the process, secrets continue to be passed down from old masters to new students on naming the tools, why they are effective and how best to use them to produce an emotional, memorable result. These tricks of the trade were shared with me, and I am passing them on to you here.

We will explore contrast, cause and effect, suspense and surprise, along with little-known principles from the Japanese stage that make a visual story pop. These tools can seduce your audience into a conversation, and guide your decisions in whatever medium you choose, whether you’re writing a novel, working on a screenplay or pitching a new startup to investors.

All these tools exist to tell a compelling story. No matter what medium you work in, your story is everything. Some books about visual storytelling present the creative process as a mysterious, bubbling stew of ‘feel’ and ‘rhythm’ that depends on inspired whispers from your muse. Others want you to believe it’s a cut and



dry, button-pushing exercise, where powerful editing software rules all and if you know what buttons to push, you can call yourself an editor, a director, or heaven help us, a creative executive.

## PERSPECTIVE

In a visual story, *over the shoulder* indicates a shot composed with two characters, allowing the viewer to see the facial expressions of one character and the physical distance between them and their scene partner. The camera typically shoots from behind the character in the foreground while holding both characters in frame. It offers a point of view that provides intimate detail while allowing viewers to see how the two characters share a common space.

Over the shoulder also suggests the keen eye of observation, such as when one of your parents stands behind you and checks to see if you are doing your homework or sneaking a peek at Netflix. Nice try. They'll catch you most of the time, as mine did when I couldn't resist watching *Ultraman* when I was meant to be solving math problems instead.

If you are hungry to learn the tools needed to tell an unforgettable story that evokes tears and laughter, or if you want to support yourself with freelance work and claim the true value of what you bring to the table, then this book is for you. If you want to create online content

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that has emotional resonance, keep reading. Or if you just want to tell better bedtime stories to your kids, you will find something here for you, too.

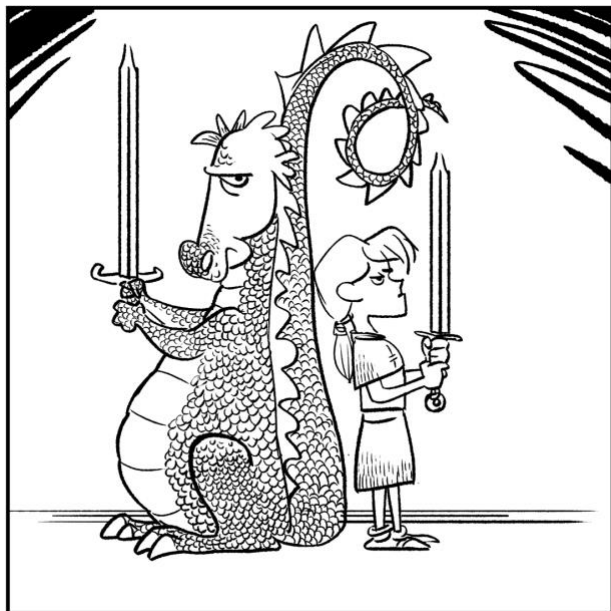
I invite you to take a seat over my shoulder. That's what I wanted when I started out, from my academic advisors at university to the editors who took a chance and hired me. They let me in on a secret, took me into their confidence, and let me see how they did their magic.

The climate is different today, largely due to the unintended consequence of working in a digital environment. The technology that brings us together has become a barrier that keeps us apart. Everyone sits at their own workstation and casual conversations overheard in the hallway have disappeared. There's less opportunity to sit together and watch a scene come alive in the edit. As a result, passing on the craft of storytelling had been compromised, a sacrifice to the speed and efficiency of digital workspaces.

We adapt, as any wily artist must do. So, let's agree on some ground rules. I'm not sharing what I know for an ego boost. I come to this sincerely. I assume you are, too, and will take what you find useful to tell your story. It can be a true story or a fantasy, a bedtime tale, a manifesto or even a eulogy, as long as you endeavor to make your story shine. I encourage you to use the secrets and "inside baseball" I am offering here to make something meaningful.

If even one idea sharpens your instincts and makes your story shine, then it's worth your time and mine. All I ask is that you use what I am offering, What happens if you don't? If you let your story die on the vine, you will pay a price when you look in the mirror. I know this from experience. No kidding? Don't thank me. Just do it. Tell your story.

Let's make an agreement, so there's no confusion. On the next page, you can sign your end of the deal and send a copy to me, care of my website, listed in the back. I'll post it and we can share accountability!



*OUR AGREEMENT*

I, Mark Solomon, the author of this book, agree to share what I know about film editing and storytelling. I will be as generous and honest as I possibly can. I will share my personal story, the interior life of a film editor, and the exterior life of working in the movie business. All I ask in return is that you, the reader, will read it and use it!

---

*Author*

I, the reader of this book, agree to read what Mark knows about film editing and storytelling. I will be as open and focused as I possibly can.

I will absorb Mark's personal story, the interior life of a film editor, and the exterior life of working in the movie business. All I ask in return is that Mark, the author, responds when I write to him!

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*Reader*

## PAYING IT FORWARD

Why a formal agreement? I do it for Ted Kloos and Wendell Phillips, the teachers who kindled my love for theatre and the performing arts; for Victor Nord and Manuel Lutgenhorst, for understanding dramatic writing and visual design; for Tony Gibbs and Rob Kobrin, editors who gave me my first break.

I owe so much to these “ancestors,” the artists and teachers who took time to share what they considered worthwhile because they trusted me to do something with it. They let me sit over their shoulder, and now they encourage me to pass on what they thought I could use as a willing pupil, eager to learn how to move people with a story. They trusted me with knowledge they shared and now I am paying that forward with you.

This book offers a shortcut to storytelling insights that can take years to figure out. Think of me as your uncle in the movie business, but not the wacko at a family barbecue. I’m your ally without an agenda who just wants you to succeed. This is your chance to learn the craft of storytelling, practical matters of freelance work and how to create and maintain a work/life balance to keep yourself healthy and strong.

When a student sits over a teacher’s shoulder to observe a demonstration, or a teacher looks over a student’s shoulder to check their work, an unspoken, intimate agreement honors their one-to-one

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communication. Certain truths are whispered in these moments, as Tibetan monks would say, and that's a big inspiration for the title.

So, here we go. Imagine you're sitting over my shoulder when the usual frantic pace of the cutting room slows down and we can talk about the big questions of taking a good story and making it great, along with other subjects that inform who we are.

Do you read me? I hope you will find this book valuable, and that you will use these tools and care for them as I have done throughout my career. Give them a chance. See which nuggets spark your imagination and then you can determine which ones are right for you to keep and cultivate as your own.

Good luck!

## *About the Author*

Mark Solomon is a visual storyteller with a memorable body of work in animated movies. He cut his teeth as a film editor on *Space Jam* in 1996 and went on to edit some of the most highly regarded films of the past three decades. *Shrek*, *Chicken Run*, and *Frankenweenie* are among his award-winning highlights.

He also edited *Scoob! Holiday Haunt*, *Sgt. Stubby: An American Hero*, *Sherlock Gnomes*, *The Tale of Despereaux*, *The Fox and the Hound 2*, *Unbeatable Harold*, *Shark Tale*, *Stuart Little 2*, *Escape from Planet Earth*, *Dalmations 2: Patch's London Adventure*, and *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*.

As a producer and writer Mark's projects have taken him from the Himalayas in Nepal to the Olympic Stadium in London. He is a recognized expert, consulting

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on international productions, including *Ella Bella Bingo* (Norway), *Condorito* (Peru), *Googly* (Scotland), *Simon's Cat* (UK), and *Rumbuck and Spink* (Australia).

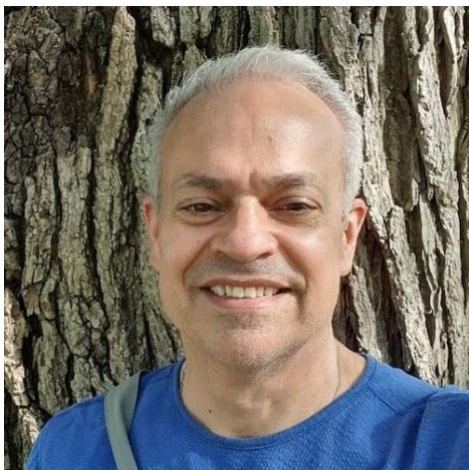
His work spans all the major Hollywood studios, generating more than \$1 billion worldwide for a global audience in 30 different languages.

He has been honored for his work on *Frankenweenie*, nominated for best editing of an animated feature film, A.C.E. Eddy and Best Animated Feature (Oscar), and *Chicken Run*, nominated for best picture (Golden Globe).

To support future filmmakers, Mark has taught at film schools and universities in the U.S. and the United Kingdom and continues to enjoy creative collaborations on projects large and small.

*Over The Shoulder* represents his first adventure into the world of books and publishing. Enjoy!





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