

## Two of Huron English teacher R. J. Fox's books to be produced as full-length feature films

By Julie Heng

Robert J. Fox can—and will—write anywhere.

You'll find him typing away on a laptop just after the kids have gone to bed, or scribbling furiously on a composition notebook, scrap paper, restaurant napkins, or the Shinola notebook he received for Christmas. The point is, the medium doesn't matter.

The writing utensil doesn't matter, either.

"I usually just use a cheap old pen like this," he says, pulling one out of his pocket.

And above all, the time doesn't matter. When you have a day job, you make time. You sacrifice sleep. Plain coffee with a dash of milk can get you the caffeine kick without all the calories and sugar.

After that, it's off to the races.

As his own literary agent, Robert J. Fox is constantly urging movie directors to read his stuff.

"I'm constantly hustling. Anytime I come across someone who has a connection to the film industry, I kind of hound them about it," says Fox, who admits to cold-calling contacts. "You have to really advocate for yourself. Authors really have to market themselves. There's so many other things trying to fight for people's attention."

And that "it's not a no until they tell you no" mentality has really paid off: not just one, but two of Fox's novels are now set to be produced as feature films. *Love and Vodka* (2015) is a memoir chronicling a trip to Ukraine in pursuit of love, and *Awaiting Identification* (2018) is a fictional, redemptive exploration of five unidentified bodies that arrive at a Wayne County morgue.

Fox, the screenwriter for both upcoming movies, actually initially wrote both books as screenplays.

“Most of the time, things start out as a book and then turn into a script,” Fox explains. “Since I was in high school, my dream was to be a screenwriter, so I had been doing this for several years before I wrote any prose at all.”

As a screenplay, *Love and Vodka* wasn’t successful at first, so Fox experimented with a novel format. The book allowed him to deviate from the specific cookie cutter structure of a screenplay.

“With a book, you’re not as bound. You can kind of wander aimlessly, take tangents, have flashbacks. I had to cut a lot of scenes from the script, and was able to resurrect those scenes into the book.”

*Awaiting Identification* underwent a similar surgery. Fox was inspired by an article in the Detroit Free Press about the hundreds of bodies arriving annually in Detroit’s morgues, buried without identities. His original plans saw scenes cut back and forth between the five characters, but his book developed separate chapters for each, with interwoven cameos and progressive revelations.

After each publishing both books, Fox went back to refine the original scripts.

This time, it worked.

At one point, *Awaiting Identification* even made its way through the jungle of Hollywood onto the desk of Oscar-winning director of *12 Years A Slave* Steve McQueen.

“[That] was pretty incredible,” Fox says. “It’s really hard for a nobody to access anyone on that level. But somehow I sent an email, just out of the blue, and they responded within five minutes. He passed on the project but it was this key moment where I lost the fight but still went the distance.”

There’s still a lot of work down the road for these two independent films—beyond shooting them, there’s also a matter of financing, film festivals, production, and mass distribution in theatres or platforms like Netflix—but Fox hopes both will be “something at the end of the day that we’re all proud of: a good movie.”

While he acknowledges every screenwriter worries their vision will be lost in the movie-making process, Fox says he has full faith in the teams handling his projects.

“I’m hoping they’re happy with the screenplay that I’ve given them. I’ve made short films in the past, but having someone make a movie—a real movie, a feature film? That is the pinnacle of what I’ve been trying to do for 20+ years.”

Of course, Fox doesn’t plan on stopping anytime soon.

“I’m engineered to not just settle for [this],” he says, sitting up straighter. “My ultimate goal is to win an Oscar someday, and if that happens, then two, and then become a writer/producer/director, and then make a TV series...”

For the time being, as Fox is waiting for further instructions from the directors, he continues to write. While Fox doesn’t set himself weekly or even yearly deadlines, he is always working on a slew of projects.

“I can’t just sit and wait for the movies to happen because I always have to have a creative outlet somehow,” says Fox, who recently submitted a collection of short stories for publication. “I’m just continuing to work.”

Right now, he’s in a self-described “experimental phase,” playing around with new ideas and old ones. More often than not, he finds himself working late at a Starbucks, brewing fresh short story plotlines.

“I need to have stimulation around me,” Fox says. “I can’t work in a quiet room with no sound. Writing is such a lonely thing, so if at least if I’m out in public, there’s life happening.”

If not people-watching, then Fox finds himself people-listening, building up “a database of quirks about people.” Being observant is essential to any writer. Sometimes, those quirks end up in a story.

“I’m never not thinking about [writing],” Fox says. “[Making my dreams happen] is something I wake up thinking about and go to sleep thinking about. I’m very fortunate to teach the things I’m most passionate about—film, writing, and literature—at Huron.”

Still, Fox does wish the English department focused more on creativity and creative writing.

“I feel like creative writing often takes a backseat,” he says, noting that “a lot of teachers might not feel comfortable teaching creative writing because they don’t do it themselves or don’t know how to.

And then the focus just becomes essay writing and analytical writing. Even if it's a small writing prompt for a journal, it doesn't always have to just be 'analyze this passage in this book.' You could write a piece of fanfiction about Holden Caulfield that demonstrates understanding."

In his ninth grade class, for example, Fox will ask students to not only analyze short story structure and plot, but then apply that structure by creating their own short stories.

The best piece of writing advice he can offer is this:

"Don't get intimidated by looking at a blank page. If you map out an outline before you start writing, you at least have a roadmap to follow. Don't worry about grammar on a first draft. It's not about getting it perfect, and you lose out on the creativity that might be trying to come out. Even if it's really sloppy, I can sculpt it later."

At the end of the day, it's all about conviction.

"The trick to happiness is just following your passions," Fox says. "You can still find happiness even if you have to work a different job to make income, even if you have to get less sleep. You just have to stick to it and not give up."

He compares it to having a talented athlete without a burning desire to win.

"Certain players are just driven to achieve what they're setting out to do. They will it into power. I believe in that sort of thing. You have to fight for it."

And one day, even though it might take a while, that tenth grade aspiring screenwriter will see two of his stories made into feature films. One step closer to that Oscar dream.

"Too many people say they want to do things but don't," Fox says. "Anyone can say, 'Oh, I wanna make a movie someday.' But what steps are you taking to make that a possibility?"