

## SCREENWRITER SPOTLIGHT: FINALIST – JEFF MUSTARD

BY FELIPE

NOVEMBER 28, 2022

### What's your name?

Jeff Mustard

### Where were you born?

Canarsie/Brooklyn, New York

### Where do you live?

Delray Beach/Boca Raton, Florida

### And what's your hobby?

Walking/swimming, writing screenplays/tv shows & the research that goes along with it.

### Where did you come up with the concept that just placed as Finalist in the screenplay contest?

As a Florida resident, I have been exposed to and aware of the influence Cuba has had on Miami. I also felt/believed that the geopolitics surrounding Cuba, in general, is not only fascinating but was a part of world history profoundly.

Namely, Fidel Castro's rise to power, the Bay of Pigs, the Cuban Missile Crisis, and the transformation of Cuba (and the Cuban people) after Castro took power is an extraordinary, if not fascinating, subject that has not been properly explored or exploited for television. It is with this in mind that I set out to write a multi-season tv series that tracks this era. This general period, place, and history, I felt, had ample room to be mined for a prestige television series – it has all the elements for a dramatic, compelling, intriguing long – form – multi-season (6 seasons + a limited series spinoff based on one of the female characters) Historical Fiction show. This includes a rich mix of dramatic variables, such as the zealotry exhibited by both pro and anti-Castro supporters, both in Cuba and the U.S./Miami (especially), the Covert CIA involvement and their continuing desire (circa 1960 – the mid-1970s) to seek still to undermine (read overthrow) Castro. And then, of course, there





were the many U.S. assassination plots on Castro himself; along with numerous violent pro-and-anti-Castro clashes that took place literally in the streets of Miami – car bombs, political murders, building explosions, and non-stop political thriller intrigue set against an ensemble cast of fictional characters, based on high level/high profile Cubans from the worlds of Cuba’s most successful industries – Sugar, Tobacco, Rum and business (banking) at large. Think – Succession and Unauthorized Living meets Narcos and The Bridge.

### **How long did it take to develop it into the screenplay it is now?**

I wrote the first draft of the tv pilot in 2017 and spent about a year or more continuing to tinker with it. Receiving feedback from proper “screenplay coverage readers,” etc., I continued to modify/tweak... for example, the present opening scene was not always there, and other small scenes were also written later to smooth out and bridge certain other scenes. Another year or so was spent creating the associated marketing and promo materials for the work. This included various iterations (lengths) of a sizzle reel/animatic – a short-form one – about a minute, and a long-form version, about 3 minutes.

As a creative advertising and marketing veteran and a multiple-award-winning commercial radio writer/producer, I have the background, skills, and expertise to produce compelling high production-value audio productions. With this in mind, I produced various high-production quality English and Spanish Language audio versions of both the long-form and short-form Prose versions of the narrative I chose to write (an exercise that helped me further flesh out both the storylines/story engines as well as the various character arcs for this fairly large ensemble cast.) The narrative short story and the actual audio productions live on the website. **[www.ExileFromCuba.com](http://www.ExileFromCuba.com)** (Note: the majority of these wide-ranging story engines and character arc elements mostly are not contained in the actual pilot script; nevertheless, all of this material – e.g., concepts, storylines, and character studies, all of which significantly add and contribute to the overall story and world-building of this multi-season show evolved from this critical ancillary prose writing work).

- The 5,000 words version became the # 1 historical short story on CoverFLY (October 2022), earning a spot on the RED LIST – a very high-level industry website/platform.
- This 5,000 words short story/prose version was also a Second-Rounder for the Launch Pad Prose Writing Contest (a significant international writer’s platform & contest.)

### **A SHORT FILM SCRIPT – “On My Way to Exile”**

After having met with a Miami producer some years ago who loved the pilot, he asked if I could write/rewrite/modify the Pilot script so that we might be able to shoot it as a “proof of concept” short film. I did not question his ability at the time to produce the short film version. I had questions about this, though, since the original opening scene was a big budget multiple boat scene with a Cuban Navy War Boat and two other (clandestine CIA Boats) that take place on the water. Notwithstanding this, I said yes, of course. That producer’s suggestion, however, resulted in the Short Film version of the story/script – “On My Way to Exile.”



I adapted the TV Pilot into a Short Film – 31 pages. This was a very useful exercise in that it forced me to think further about “character and story,” and, in so doing, I came up with a series of very important scenes that profoundly impact the backstory elements of certain of the key/principal characters – all of which ultimately inform character understanding and motivation and contribute at large to the dramatic storytelling. –

Ultimately, the producer thing dissipated into nothing but the effort was worthwhile as I have been able to use this material to further market and promote the show/project in other ways and avenues. For example, the short film version – which I envision as a “long teaser trailer – that could potentially be used for film festivals has earned, to date, two significant industry recognitions – one as a Quarter-Finalist in the ScreenCraft Short Film Screenplay Contest and the other with promising Script Coverage through Stage 32, a Global Writers Platform for the Film and Television industry garnering both a Writer/Consider and Project/Consider.

### **From concept to finished draft, can you take us through your screenwriting process?**

As this project is historical fiction, it is firmly grounded in legitimate (historical) events against the backdrop of life (In Cuba and the U.S) at the time the show/series takes place, which is during two time periods – Cuba – Circa 1960s intercut with (present-day/time) – Miami 1975 (the multi-season series takes place in the respective years of 1975 – 1980 – ending in 1980 as a natural, historical “break” period as this was when the Mariel Boat Lift occurred. Bearing this in mind, the challenge of the show in general is, and was, to weave together the lives of this ensemble cast set against the extraordinary (real-life) events that unfolded during the two periods the show covers. Given the aforementioned, research was a very big part of the process, understanding not just the history but getting a bearing and feel for life both in Cuba and Miami during these periods, then constructing the dramatic elements and intrigue that each character – meaning the co-conspirators who plotted against the lead/protagonist – and creating/inventing circumstances and conditions that would draw us into their lives and then slowly watch everything taken away (destroyed) by the protagonist whose own life was taken away from him due to the hubris, greed, and actions of each of the co-conspirators (villains/bad guys) who made a “choice” to destroy the lead characters life – which is why he seeks revenge.

As for the actual “process,” my writing and my thinking about wiring and the actual writing itself starts with having, what I believe, a good story – something interesting and compelling that covers “new territory” – something we have not necessarily seen before – namely, for instance, a new “setting.”

By comparison and explanation, take, for instance, some of the all-time. Even old(er) shows that were smash hits – going back as far as Dallas, for instance, or even Lonesome Dove, are (both) shows about “families.” NOT UNLIKE, for instance, Succession – again, a show about a family. Each of these shows relies on and leverages the individual personalities of the family members’ goals, desires, wishes, etc.

Other relatively recent examples of this paradigm/model include, of course, Sons of Anarchy – a show about a family involved in a motorcycle gang, yet “motorcycle riding, per se,” was a nominal aspect of the show. Sons of Anarchy and “Breaking Bad” (another show about a family) were likely the inspiration for Ozark, another



recently extremely well-done show with profoundly comparable elements (drugs, drug dealing, drug cartels). And, of course, these are all merely likely undeniable precursors to more recent hit shows like Yellowstone – again, simply, a show about a family in a new/interesting setting – with their own particular set of challenges and interpersonal conflicts, drama, and intrigue.

Back to my process, as it were, the process for a feature is much different than for a series. Stating the obvious, in a feature, you have a very clear beginning, middle, and end. The key here is “the end.” You know when the story is over (whether you build in a cliffhanger intentionally because you know you want to create a franchise is another matter, but for the most part, the “end” of the feature should satisfactorily wrap up the story) – so you know what to write towards.

Writing “series” tv is much different, and I believe much more difficult for various reasons. First, you need to have enough “story” to get you through however many seasons you think you want/need. Not all shows necessarily lend themselves to super extended seasons. We’ve seen all too many very good series in their first two, three, or even four seasons disintegrate into hollow, mockingly thin versions of their original selves – this is always a disappointment, but unfortunately, all too familiar as well.

My writing and thinking process includes old-school index cards and post-it notes EVERYWHERE – I have a big board – two walls in my writing office and write out slug lines for scenes and the gist of the scene. I also do this using Final Draft’s “Beat Board” (which for some reason has had a bad rap, but I think it is exceptional – FD has upped their game significantly in the past two years, and I’ve been an FD user for 20 years)... Depending upon the project, I also (sometimes) like to “write it out” as a prose/narrative story. The actual process of “writing” (regardless of form) helps garner momentum and inspires creativity, and ultimately results in story ideas, story ties, and a bunch of “what ifs” that all contribute, ultimately, to the thinking and development process.

I mostly like to know where I’m headed with the story – I’m a blend of a plotter and a pantzer. I can’t just “sit down and start writing” (without knowing where I am headed or the story’s direction). I am also not a “character-driven” writer, and more firmly believe that “plot” (I agree with Aristotle on this point), more than anything, drives the story. Something needs to happen – we, as the story writer/creator, must know (or at least I do) what the goal or objective is (for the character(s)), where is “this headed” and then “write toward that” and then “imbue” the character or characters with “traits” I believe are both consonant and resonate with a prospective characters “personality.”

Having a “zany, quirky” character is fun, I suppose, but that zaniness needs to translate and contribute to action or goal, either directly or indirectly. My thinking is not the build/create the “character first” paradigm. With all of this said, my approach, rather, is to have a character goal and then “imbue” that character with “traits” that make them fun, interesting, morbid, morose, bi-polar, or anything one can think of and then use and integrate these character modalities/traits into the character and then, by both default and extension, the storyline. My current feature film project is a perfect example of this. I imbued the character with a “personal goal” and an “attribute” that ultimately makes a legitimate and profound impact on that character’s journey.



Take, for instance, *Silver Linings Play Book*, this is a perfect example of my suggested character discussion. Both Bradly Cooper's and Jennifer Lawrence's characters were both deeply flawed, or rather, impacted and greatly hurt and affected by the dramatic (and very public) negative circumstances of their past. We have two hurt (read "wounded") and broken people who are each searching to "find/improve/heal" themselves. Of course, in the process, they find one another, which in turn, helps to heal each. Here is a perfect example of knowing, going into the actual writing process, the back story and pain/trauma/circumstance of each character, and then finding a way to combine/mash these two stories together to create a cohesive and satisfying whole. It is interesting to note, however, that an argument can be made either way that this is a character-driven story or a plot-driven story. In this case, it's one of those ideal blends of both – which is what made it such a successful and enjoyable, and satisfying story to watch.

In my process, after I wrote the Pilot for *Exile*, I found myself thinking about the story in more prose/narrative terms – mainly because there are so many characters (an ensemble cast and so many storylines that take place over twenty years.) In so doing, the prose/narrative process fosters and facilitates my thinking regarding character history, which is backstory. As backstory plays a profound impact in each character's story – as it often defines or explains their "reasons or desires" to do something. Every revenge story ever written draws on this. A character is doing something for a reason. Their backstory tells us why and "in this process," the writer hopes this helps the audience (better) understand and identify with the character.

### **When did you realize that you wanted to become a screenwriter?**

I was working as a publicist in the entertainment industry – which included working as a stringer/freelancer for a variety of regional and national film/tv industry trade publications. This exposure led to me being asked to become the President of the South Florida Screenwriters Guild (not LA WGA affiliated), which I agreed to. This put me squarely in the middle of the "screenwriting world" and high-profile involvement in the South Florida film/tv entertainment community. In this capacity, I created, along with the IFP (Independent Feature Project, LA) what became a highly successful screenwriting and film production contest – the Make a Film Contest, with more than 30 film teams vying for recognition and prizes. This event received quite a bit of attention.

It was at this time that I had great exposure to writers and the art and craft of screenwriting. As the President of the Screenwriters Guild, I spearheaded several writing seminars (not as "teacher/instructor" but as facilitator and organizer of such events) – this led to a hands-on approach to learning the craft. It was during this time that I was approached to do a "write for hire" screenplay contract, which was my first paid screenwriting gig.

### **Who are your biggest filmmaking/screenwriting influences?**

This is a tricky question and answer, mainly because a "filmmaker's influence" differs significantly from a "writer's" influence. For example, who gets the credit for constructing a world-class building? Is it the architect



responsible for the actual “design” of the building, OR is the developer /contractor responsible for translating the blueprints of a building into the finished product? I believe the same analogy applies to SCREENWRITING VS. FILMMAKING. Of course, this does not apply to the industry hyphenates – e.g., the writer/director.

In terms of “screen/tv writers,” I’ll list/note some writers whose actual scripts (meaning their words on the page, the story they tell, and how they tell it) stand out as exceptional. In no particular order to which weight should be given suggesting one is better than the other, here goes:

Film: Hancock (2008) – by Vy Vincent Ngo & Vince Gilligan – this script represents a perfect example of that holy grail of references – the attribute of “voice,” which we hear so much about concerning “writing” at large. While it’s difficult to explain a perfect pitch voice of a vocalist, one knows it instantly when it’s heard. The same goes for writing. This is why they say that within 5 or 10 pages of a script, a reader can detect whether writing chops (or talent) exist. And while this might seem, or be, unfair, there is truth to this (sad) reality. This screenplay is a very strong example of this. The “quality” of the writing is excellent, and a distinct “voice” is evident. Naturally, Vince Gilligan went on to create and write one of the all-time great dramatic TV series – Breaking Bad.

Film: El Mariachi (1992) by Robert Rodríguez. – This “grind house-style” blood, guts, gore horror script, like Hancock, is also, like Hancock, a great example of a clear, distinct writer’s “voice.” The use of language, the quality of the storytelling, it’s all there, right on the page. All the elements transcend “the read,” and virtually instantly, the reader is caught up in and engaged with the story.

Film: Being John Malkovich (1999) – by Charlie Kaufman – A remarkably well-written and entertaining script to read – fun, funny, clear, and succinct. Short, tight scenes hit all the right comedy beats.

Films: When Harry Met Sally (1989) and You’ve Got Mail (1998) – by Nora Ephron.

It’s no surprise that Ephron’s screenplay “When Harry Met Sally” was nominated for numerous “Best Original Screenplay” awards. The story and the story-telling “on the page” was nothing short of exceptional. Between Ephron’s great writing and Rob Reiner’s brilliant comedic directing, the film is an all-time great, both as a screenplay and a finished film.

Eleven years later, Ephron hits it out of the park again with “You’ve Got Mail” – also, a syrupy sweet Rom-Com and powerfully blended tear-jerker (along with the forerunner, “When Harry Met Sally”) truly sets the bar for the genre. The script, perfectly and beautifully written, is an example of taught writing while simultaneously hitting all the right emotional beats, seamlessly weaving the character journey and arcs for each lead character. The powerful and effective use of Hanks’s “son character” had shades of 1979’s Kramer vs. Kramer, an adapted novel written for the screen by Robert Benton, whose film went on to win five Oscars, garnering 34 other wins and 25 noms, including for Best Film and Best Screenplay. All three scripts noted here are not just great scripts, but each is equally a pleasure to read.



Yellowstone – TV Series created and written by Taylor Sheridan – with many episodes directed by Sheridan; this series not only revived, to a great extent, the modern western and facilitated a “land buy up during Covid in Montana and Wyoming” for its magnificent settings and wide open space. Sheridan did for “ranching and horse country” what writer, director, and showrunner Kurt Sutter did for Motorcycle riding and gang-banging in his breakout series, “Sons of Anarchy” – interestingly, the thread and theme here for these two shows – both, it just so happens, are stories about “families” set in and against “unique backdrops”- one on a ranch, the other a modern-day motorcycle group/gang.

**What about their style do you like or borrow?**

I think the greatest takeaway of these shows is how to leverage and explore large ensemble casts. The larger the cast, the greater the story-telling potential, which ultimately translates to the number of shows, the number of episodes, and the (potential) number of seasons. With this understanding, I have crafted and populated my television pilots/shows with ensemble casts.

**Have you ever been obsessed with a movie or TV show? If so, which one? Why?**

I would not use the word obsessed, but more particularly, “highly intrigued” or “strongly drawn to” certain television series. Mainly because they are so well written – meaning, the storytelling and craft are at such a high level that it creates compelling, binge-worthy television, which is only a relatively recent phenomenon – the beginnings of which can be traced to The Sopranos (HBO/1999). Other shows that hit this mark and are worthy of aspiring to as a writer are (in no order of quality or preference): The Bridge, Narcos, Sons of Anarchy, Yellowstone, Ozark, Entourage, House of Cards, Feud: Bette and Joan, The Night Of, The Night Manager, BoardWalk Empire, Gentlemen Jack, Deadwood, Mad Men, Dexter, The Crown, Downton Abbey, Better Call Saul, True Detective, The Sopranos, Breaking Bad (there are about another two dozen shows, but this is a pretty good list of Excellent and even GREAT television)

In summary, the thing to admire and aspire to in writing a (new) tv series is having an interesting, unique setting and a large cast of characters – notice many of the above shows are ensemble pieces – large-ish casts help contribute to storylines and character journeys and arc – which in turn contributes to multiple seasons (unless a show is specifically a limited series show).

**What’s your favorite moment in cinema history? Why?**

Equally, Tony Soprano and Walter White. Both characters immortalized and ingrained the “anti-hero” character into our viewing lexicon. Essentially, each was a bad guy/person – yet, collectively, we were drawn to them. In the instance of Tony Soprano, the use of him seeing a psychiatrist, Dr. Melfi, “made him relatable” (it was the single most brilliant use of a “character trait/ flaw” to make a character resonant with an audience.) Mind you, being a killer mob boss is not inherently relatable, BUT Soprano’s desire/urge to “understand himself better”



– and it’s no surprise that so much of his angst classically revolved around the Freudian issues he had with his “mother and father.”

In the case of Vince Gilligan’s character, Walter White, Gilligan likewise made White a schlub of a guy of sorts whose turn to the dark side revolved around his only desire, as a father would, to be able to “provide for his family.” White’s expertise as a chemist/science teacher who uses these talents/skills to cook exceptionally high-quality crystal meth was brilliant. It is the use of these contra-points that makes each of these characters both compelling and relatable, again, not as a mob boss and not as a meth dealer, but as people — in Tony’s case, to better understand himself through self-reflection and visits with a shrink, and in Walter’s case, a man, whose life spirals out of control from his initial desire that went from seeking to “provide for his family” to “protecting his family.”

**If you could talk to anyone from any era, who would it be, and what would you ask them?**

Lee Harvey Oswald. Oswald holds the key to one of the great unanswered questions of modern civilization – was he the only shooter of John F. Kennedy? And if not, who else was involved? The assassination of John F. Kennedy changed the course of world history; let’s find out the truth.

Dick Cheney. He is the “power” behind much of modern U.S. policy during our country’s most tumultuous times – starting with 1991’s Desert Storm and leading up to and through serving as George W. Bush’s Vice President from 2001 – 2009, which includes Cheney’s heavy hand and involvement initiated by the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the subsequent Global War on Terror that he spearheaded. Specifically, I want to know everything Cheney knows about the 9/11 attack. Coincidence or not, Cheney was the Chairman and CEO of Halliburton, a global company with billions of dollars in various government contracts and services. Cheney, like the entire Bush family, knows everything about everything concerning U.S. secrets and how he/they are, and were, able to capitalize and monopolize on these various troubling circumstances and times on behalf of United States Policies and the personal financial gains and benefits derived not only by the Bush and Cheney families but the companies they front.