

# The Station

by Kira-Anne Pelican

**B**est described as a character-driven film about three people who have only their shared solitude in common, *The Station Agent* is a gem of a film, remarkable in its simple truths and deep emotional resonance. Written and directed by Tom McCarthy, the film was received with almost universal glowing reviews and went on to win the BAFTA award for Best Original Screenplay in 2003, which was somewhat impressive for a first-time director and even more impressive for a first-time writer-director who made the film for \$500,000.

After three years raising the finance, McCarthy, an actor whose credits include *Syriana* and *Meet the Parents*, shot the movie in twenty days. When the film wowed audiences at Sundance and took the Audience Award for Best Picture, the Best Actress Award for Patricia Clarkson and the Best Screenplay for Tom McCarthy, it was snapped up by Miramax and went on to gross an impressive \$8.7million worldwide at the box office.

## Three Act structure

McCarthy laughs when I comment that his script exemplifies the perfect three-act structure. Whilst he resists what he describes as formulaic, structural approaches to screenwriting, it seems that with his actor's experience, it was a classic Hero's Journey that subconsciously ended up on the page. We meet our protagonist, Fin (Peter Dinklage), in his ordinary world. The Inciting Incident forces him to leave his previous life and embark on a journey. Through that journey he confronts his deepest fears, grows psychologically, and returns to the world equipped with new

emotional skills. In Fin's case, he learns the value of friendship.

## Act One

The first five minutes of the script establish Fin as a laconic, solitary man who works in a model train shop and suffers from dwarfism. In retreat from a world where he's stared at, called names or, worse still, not even seen, Fin just wants to be left alone. His only friend is his boss.

## Fin's boss dies

Five minutes into the script, Fin's boss unexpectedly collapses and dies. It's with this Inciting Incident or Call to Action that Fin's world is turned upside down. The model train shop is to be sold but Fin's boss leaves him a station agent's depot in rural New Jersey in his will. Despite being warned there's nothing out there but the depot, Fin packs up and moves in. It's little more than a hut with no phone and few amenities but for Fin it's an enchanting new home.

The next morning Fin wakes to find a hot dog stand setting up on his doorstep. It's run by Joe (Bobby Cannavale), a gregarious New Yorker, who loves to talk. Bored stiff looking after the stand whilst his father is ill, Joe is desperate to make friends. That's of no consequence to Fin. He'd rather be alone.

## Olivia runs Fin down

Walking down the road one day, Fin is accidentally knocked over by Olivia

(Patricia Clarkson), a bohemian artist, whose unfortunate accident with her coffee causes her to swerve as she drives. Unhurt, Fin picks himself up. Desperate to make up for her actions, Olivia offers him a ride home. Fin refuses but then just a few days later, Olivia knocks him over once again. Fortunately the astonished Fin isn't hurt.

## Act Two

In the turning point that marks the beginning of Act Two, Olivia arrives unannounced on Fin's doorstep. Entering Fin's world uninvited with a bottle of wine and an apology, Olivia's arrival forces change in Fin's secluded life. Over the shared bottle, Olivia reveals she's divorced and struggling to come to terms with her son's death. Exhausted, she falls asleep on a chair. When Joe sees her leave early the next morning, he misinterprets what's happened and suggests that they should all hang out together. Fin asserts that that's unlikely to happen.

Fin bumps into Olivia at the library. He tries to join but can't as he hasn't received any post at his new address. Later Joe tracks Fin down to a bench overlooking the railway tracks. Reluctantly Fin introduces him to the joys of train spotting. When Olivia passes, Joe persuades her to give them a ride home. He ends up cooking dinner for the three of them.

## A first taste of friendship

Joe recruits Olivia into joining him and Fin

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# Agent (2003)

walking "the right of way" along the train tracks. Fin describes the joys of train chasing but admits he's never had a chance to try it. Some days later Olivia lends Fin her video camera and Joe offers his services at the wheel of his van. Fin experiences the sheer joy of an afternoon spent pursuing a hobby in the company of a friend. They screen the video of their exploits at Olivia's house and share a wonderful evening enjoying each other's company.

In a tender moment between Olivia and Fin, she admits she's still in love with her ex-husband. A little drunk at the end of the night, Olivia kisses Fin gently on the lips. Whether it's the maternal kiss of a woman missing her son or the kiss of a potential lover, it's ambiguous but it marks a major turning point in the film. Fin sets out on his journey convinced that all he wants is to be left alone but here he is, at the script's midpoint, in the company of strangers, with the growing realisation that he cares for these strangers.

## Olivia shuts Fin out

Things are going well, too well for the middle of Act Two. It's time to introduce some conflict. The next morning, David, Olivia's ex, turns up at her door sending Olivia's life into a downhill spiral. She shuts herself away, refusing to see Fin when he brings round her groceries.

Cleo, a local latchkey kid whom Fin has befriended, asks him to speak at her school. Fin says he can't. He's clearly not ready to face a crowd, schoolchildren or not.

Now armed with some mail, Fin joins the library and meets Emily (Michelle Williams), the pretty, young librarian. Later that day, Fin agrees to join Joe for a drink at The Mill but Joe doesn't show up. ▶



My sorrows drown easy.

The Station Agent: Miramax



Light sleepers

The Station Agent: Miramax



"Don't actually drink it though, okay?"



Going nowhere, slowly

Emily is the only face he recognises at the bar. She's also been stood up - by her boyfriend. Soon she starts pouring her heart out. She's pregnant and was planning to tell her boyfriend that night. When the bar closes, her boyfriend shows up and the situation becomes ugly. Fin steps in to help Emily and her boyfriend pushes Fin to the ground.

### Fin's low-point

With Olivia still refusing to see him, Fin is feeling bleak. Joe seeks him out to apologise for his absence at the bar but Fin's response is that he just "wants to be left alone". Emily turns up on Fin's doorstep, asks if she can stay over and unexpectedly plants a kiss on his lips.

Now with a little renewed energy, Fin visits Olivia. He finds her on the phone rowing with her ex. Olivia tells Fin she just wants to be left alone: "I'm not your fucking girlfriend or your mother."

Fin seeks refuge at The Mill. The punters laugh and stare. Drunk, Fin stands up and shouts: "Here I am! Take a look. Take a look!" He walks back home along the railway line, stumbles and falls. Lying on the rails at his low-point at the end of Act Two, Fin looks up to see a train fast approaching. He smiles, embracing his seemingly inevitable death.

### Act Three Another chance

The next day, Fin wakes on the railway tracks. He's intact. The train must have passed straight over him. With his life spared he picks himself up and visits Olivia. He finds her slumped on the floor at the film's climax. She's taken an overdose. Still conscious, she explains she's just learnt her ex's new partner is expecting their baby.

### The joys of community

The script's resolution sees Fin and Joe collect Olivia from hospital when she's recovered. Fin accepts Cleo's invitation to talk at her school, faces a class of enquiring eyes and awkward questions, and gives a charming lecture on trains. In the film's final scene, Fin, Joe and Olivia spend a comfortable evening enjoying each other's company. Three unlikely companions with little in common other

The Station Agent: Miramax

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than their shared solitude, embrace the joys of friendship.

### Genre

Using Norman Friedman's system of analysing plots in terms of their structure and values (also used by Robert McKee), *The Station Agent* is perhaps best described as an Education Plot where the protagonist's view of life arcs from negative to positive. Even though Fin seems initially content, we know that he's shutting out much that life can offer. Through the course of the film Fin learns the meaning of friendship and thus his world-view arcs from wanting to be left alone to an appreciation of the joys of community.

### Characterisation

Soon after developing an idea of the characters, McCarthy cast his actors. 'As I'm writing, I can't get the actors out of my head,' says McCarthy. 'I developed the script over a year and a half. I'd have a read through with the actors, listen to which lines worked, then go back and work on revisions for the next three to four months. I've been an actor for a long time so I'm aware of the natural rhythm of the characters. It's their emotional story that propels the script. If I need to give more information about a character at a particular point, I'll direct the scene from their point of view.'

*The Station Agent* excels in its astutely observed and dignified portrayal of Fin. As a man suffering with dwarfism, he initially provokes our curiosity but soon we're living vicariously through him, empathising with his every move. Before long we've forgotten all about his diminutive stature.

When I ask McCarthy why he thinks Fin has such emotional resonance for the audience, he explains: 'It's all down to the genuine humanity of Fin's character. He's very true to himself and is content with who he is.'

Fin's paradox is that whilst he wants more than anything to be left alone, people are constantly drawn to him because of his size. The more people notice Fin, the more he wants to withdraw. McCarthy describes Fin as an active character. He's not merely withdrawn from the world; he's gone about actively constructing a life that involves as little contact with others as possible. We're reminded of the active nature of Fin's character by his directness of speech. He's a man who knows what he wants and speaks only when he has to. He's polite but firm and for the audience, that's a resolve that's admired. McCarthy ensures Fin never acts as a victim and thus he engages our empathy, not pity.

At heart, Fin's just a simple man who loves simple things. Other people may stare at him intrigued but as Fin says "It's really funny how other people see me and treat me because actually I'm just a very

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simple, boring person." Here's a man who is passionate about old trains, walks everywhere, carries his belongings in a suitcase and doesn't own a mobile phone. He's a man who knows who he is.

### Fin's Hero Quest

McCarthy's mastery of his characters is best demonstrated by the progression of Fin's character arc. Fin enters the script as a loner whose only friend is his boss. When his boss dies, Fin moves to the middle of nowhere, determined to be alone, but the people around him won't allow that. When friendship is first offered by Joe, Fin refuses and it's not until Olivia turns up on his doorstep that Fin accepts

his call and allows her into his life. Little by little, Fin's relationships develop from the unwanted attention of strangers to friendships he actively seeks out.

As in all Hero Quests, Fin encounters tests, allies and enemies. His allies include not only Olivia and Joe but also Cleo and Emily. Enemies come in the form of those who ridicule Fin for his height, amongst them Emily's boyfriend and his clan. As for tests, these come when Olivia shuts Fin out of her life. It's through this that we see Fin turn from passive to active in terms of his journey: rather than simply accept the company of others when offered, Fin now searches out Olivia and turns up unwanted on her doorstep.

When Olivia refuses his offer to help and Joe stands him up at The Mill, Fin enters his 'Innermost Cave'. If he fails to confront his fears, he won't move on. Alone at The Mill, Fin invites that of which he had been most afraid: the attention of strangers. His ordeal ends with a brush with death. Fin stumbles on the railway tracks and prepares to die, choosing death above friendship.

Fortuitously Fin survives. Resurrected, with the new lease of life he's gained through confronting his greatest fear, it's

now Fin's turn to help Olivia in her hour of need. With the skills he's learned he's now able to save Olivia through his new gift of compassion.

As McCarthy explains, it's the organic nature of the script that makes the characters so convincing and Fin's arc so powerful. Notch by notch, Fin invests more in his relationships with the characters around him so these new friendships feel real and not forced. Emotional ordeals are notoriously hard to write about and a brush with death even more so but by allowing Fin to reach his nadir through a series of barely perceptible but carefully crafted steps, his ordeal feels both poignant and true. ▶

## Family

Together, Fin, Olivia and Joe form an unlikely family. Seen from a distance, Fin's height suggests he's the child of Olivia and Joe and a child-like element is echoed in Olivia's ambiguously maternal kiss at the script's midpoint. Olivia has of course lost her son and found Fin but for the most part, it is Olivia and Fin who take the parental role as Joe plays ball or cooks.

By alluding to this family motif repeatedly, McCarthy subconsciously strengthens the theme in our imagination. When this hodgepodge family is torn apart, we're waiting breathlessly for their reunion and when they're united in the final scene, we're rewarded by a great sense of emotional payoff and resolution.

## Character functions

Each of the primary characters serves a unique function. Like Fin, Olivia has sought out her solitude as a reaction to events in her life. She moved here to get away from home after her son died. Unlike Fin, she's warm, nurturing and someone who naturally belongs in the company of others. With her storyline echoing Fin's, his reactions are tested. First he has to save himself. Then he has to save Olivia.

Joe's contrasting nature creates 'a geometry to the characters' according to McCarthy. 'Fin and Olivia are very closed down. Unless someone initiated interaction, nothing was going to happen. Out of Joe's need to interact, there

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scene at the end of the film. They're both straightforward, honest and with no artifice.'

### Unique voices

Fin is blunt, direct, polite, precise and firm. He's laconic and speaks only when he finds it necessary. His sentences are short and to the point.

**JOE:** "Listen, do you want to go down to The Mill later and grab a beer?"

**FIN:** "No, thanks."

Joe is loud, loquacious and welcomes opportunities to be forthcoming.

**JOE:** "This is my pop's truck, by the way. He's sick. That's why I'm out here.

He can't get out of bed. I'm taking care of this shit for him. I've been here for six weeks. It's driving me crazy."

Olivia, in contrast, is closed but has only become that way in reaction to her recent life circumstances. Given the right opportunity, she wants to explain herself. Her language suggests a creative artist with thoughts running wildly through her mind as she tries to pin them down.

**OLIVIA:** "Oh shit. It's mine. I always forget I have this thing. My husband gave it to me in case of an emergency. Although he's not my husband right now. We're separated. You don't have a phone?"

village shop that delivers groceries, a small library with a friendly librarian and a single bar called The Mill.

By making Fin passionate about old trains, his character immediately acquires a certain romantic quality. It goes without saying that this would be a rather different story if instead Fin loved planes!

### Slow pace

It's not just the character design and setting of the script that endows the film with its nostalgic quality, dialogue is sparse, scenes are slow and the characters are allowed to breathe. Despite the script's short running-time (90 minutes), it's a slow burn partly because so much of the script is turned over to its primary plot: Fin's growing relationships with Olivia and Joe. Sub-plots are minimal and only a handful of pages are devoted to Fin's additional relationships with Cleo and Emily. Dialogue is used only where necessary and scenes begin and end in a gentle fashion. Rather than cutting in at the last possible moment, just before the action begins, characters tend to walk into their scenes and we then follow them until they leave. Rather than cutting out scenes with a question burning on the audience's lips, McCarthy allows his scenes to appear to mirror life in that they are slow and often apparently inconsequential. The amalgam of these scenes is an evocative portrait of our human need for community. It's heartfelt, touching and truthful.

Thankfully, *The Station Agent* doesn't mark the end of the line for writer-director Tom McCarthy. He's keeping the title and subject matter of his new script firmly under wraps but of one thing I've no doubt: it will be another journey to look forward to.

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naturally came humour.'

McCarthy created his characters by thinking about who Fin would naturally encounter and respond to in his created world. Cleo, the ten-year-old schoolgirl who plays in the abandoned railway car, is one of those characters. 'A latchkey kid seemed right,' says McCarthy. 'There's something of Cleo in Fin and *vice versa*. We see that kinship in the classroom

### Nostalgic tone

One of the delights of *The Station Agent* is its slow, nostalgic tone. There's a certain magic to the simplicity of the story and its characters that reminds us what's important in life and what we'd perhaps all like to return to. By locating the story in small-town New Jersey, we experience quintessential village life and its inherent charm. There's the slow pace of life, a