

Linda Aronson article (extract from *The 21st Century Screenplay*) “When ‘character-driven’ means characters in search of a plot”

When 'character-driven' means characters in search of a plot

(sneak peek extract from *The 21st Century Screenplay*)

Ensemble films are often referred to as being 'character driven', which in practice frequently means that everyone concerned in creative development feels that a group of interesting characters placed together will inevitably result in an interesting film. Unfortunately, it often results in characters in search of a plot. Character-driven is a much-misunderstood term. Properly, it means ‘action line driven by the demands of the character’. It means that character dictates the action line and that the function of the action line is to demonstrate character. Thus, a James Bond plot will be carefully invented and put together to give James Bond the opportunity to react as only James Bond would. A Mr Bean plot will be carefully constructed to give Mr Bean the chance to behave as only Mr Bean would. The action line must permit the character to display what is characteristic about them. Unfortunately, character-driven is often taken to mean ‘you don’t need an action line plot; just put an interesting group together and you will have a film’. This results in characters in search of a plot, technically speaking; characters locked into an endlessly repeating normality, just being themselves. Fascinating as they may be (or rather, fascinating as they may be for us as writers to write, because they are actually not fascinating to watch), characters in a film can’t just stand around behaving normally or wander about bumping into each other and talking (it’s surprising how many unsuccessful films are exactly that).