

ScreenplayCoverage.com Adaptation Memo
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Title: RESUME OF EVIL

Logline: Alabama lawman clashes over a 9 year period with a crafty former football player intent on building a drug running empire.

Writer: Mark Lee Sheppard

Genre: Crime (based on true events)

Pages: 303 pgs.

Reader: JS

Recommendation for screenplay adaptation: Yes

Structure:

A story about a clash of wills between good and bad alpha males that takes place over a period of years didn't hurt AMERICAN GANGSTER, for example, and it doesn't hurt this property.

The 9 year gap in the narrative can be an advantage as this enables a script to set up the characters and basic storyline in the first act, then use the leap forward in years to show how the characters have been altered as a result of Tyler's corrosive influence. This is a strength in that, for example, it's more gripping to see how Cedric has evolved from traumatized kid to full blown sociopath than it would have been had the story wrapped up without the time jump. A sad kid is one thing, but seeing how this kid was horribly warped due to his father as he reached adulthood is a big dramatic ace to play. And, of course, it makes the ending even more powerful when Cedric's the one who ends Tyler's reign of terror. The passage of years also pays off in terms of Shawn's rise in law enforcement to become Sheriff, Jimmy's reinvention of himself, Savannah hitting college age (which sets up the car bomb incident), Tyler's expanding drug operations and his increasing instability, various killings, etc. When a script can have a strong two acts, with a crucial time break in between, that strikes me as a boost over a more traditional three act structure. This book would have been lessened had events played out without the 9 years interval of time.

The novel, due to the passage of time and the desire to showcase both Shawn and Tyler on parallel paths that often intersect, is more vignette driven than the norm. There isn't one overriding "big crime" that's eventually thwarted, but more of a series of events that eventually result in aerial justice as a quartet of baddies get theirs on the flight back from Colombia (which is another strength as the novel doesn't culminate in a predictable mano a mano showdown between Shawn and Tyler). The good news is the vignettes are usually violent (have to keep the genre requirements in mind!) and a lot of them are based on solid real world factoids of interest (as with the telling little details about the difficulty of dredging up cars and corpses from a water filled quarry or Tyler's strategic choices when setting up a fake front business).

The only drawback to the novel's time frame is that Jimmy's miraculous escape from being shot in the head violates the "show, don't tell" tenet of screenwriting as it isn't

seen, only explained away in dialogue when he shows up alive and well years after the fact. I understand this is a legitimate surprise for an audience, but it has to be smoothed over. And, there are a few occasions in the narrative when other events are explained away due to events in the past (as when someone tells how they obtained Shawn's home phone number).

Characters:

Some work has to be done here as, per the norm, bad guy Tyler is far more charismatic and attention grabbing than much blander good guy Shawn. Obviously, this isn't the first time this problem has popped up in the annals of fiction, but it helps to be aware of it. Sometimes, performers are able to tap into the inherent decency of good guy leads and thus hold a screen against more colorful antagonists. I admit that the script's ongoing emphasis on family and faith gives Shawn some sympathy points; you can't help but share his knee buckling relief when the car bomb fails to kill his wife. He's also competent at his job and comes across as the kind of indefatigable lawman that never quits. Don't get me wrong; it's not that this characterization is a worrisome liability. It's just that Shawn needs some attention during the screenwriting process so that he doesn't wind up being a forgettable paragon.

My concerns about Shawn aside, the novel serves up a first rate villain in Tyler. Right off the bat, he's shown as being clever and adaptable when it comes to achieving his goals. And, I can't stress the importance of emphasizing his football background as the idea of him being able to read the offense and adjust is a solid goal character point. Football in the Deep South is nearly another religion (I speak as someone who grew up there) and it's fun to have a bad guy who a lot of people know from his pre-injury football career. His other personality tics (fear of drug addiction, business smarts, stone cold killer, etc.) hold your attention; his willingness to kill Cedric's girlfriend on the remote possibility that she might be a liability is chillingly memorable, as is his genuine remorse about his fatal jealous mistake with Sandra. Tyler's not going to be a problem for anyone writing an adaptation, if anything, they will sing his praises for making this part of the grueling job a breeze as they're given so much to work with.

The "evil is more fun to watch than good" equation carries over to the good sized supporting cast. By default, guys like Jimmy Z, Bear, Cedric, and Razor are more interesting than generic good wife Amy, generic cute kid Savannah, and guys who work with Shawn (Jack excepted) that all seem to be cut from the same cloth.

A quick note on Jimmy Z: His links to Tyler are good screenplay fare (both in terms of being a browbeaten subordinate/relative at first, then miraculously surviving a shot in the head to go on and start a rival criminal enterprise)...but the "steel plate in the head" bit is a wobbly bit of plotting, especially when it's pulled out of a hat to explain how this guy who has been missing from the story for quite some time suddenly shows up. I mean, I accept that a steel plate and Tyler's impaired aim are valid plot points, but I'd rather that we had seen Jimmy Z survive at the time of botched execution than to have him show up

later. Surprise can sometimes be a script boost, but I'd wary of it as handled here. Food for thought in an adaptation...

I also want to give full credit for the chilling sequence in which young Cedric impassively drowns a puppy. That may be too strong for a lot of audiences, but it's the type of scene you remember and which is a valid character moment. When Cedric shows up 9 years later as an enforcer for his father, you're not at all shocked.

Additional advice:

I've got notes that I'm going to list as I think they will touch on earlier comments and also give an idea how I reacted to the novel as it unfolded. But, let me touch briefly on a few key adaptation elements.

Dialogue: As with the characters, lines for the evil are juicier than lines for the good. This is eminently fixable. Another good start would be the reduction of lines that begin with "I" as this happens too often for my taste. Also, there are a few bits of descriptive action that just scream to be revamped into dialogue. I refer to moments like "just another day at the office" on page 197 as Bear and others stroll away after some brutal enforcement lessons. I understand that Shawn isn't the type of guy who gets all the juicy Elmore Leonard crime novel dialogue, but he could stand some revving up.

Religion: I understand that Tate Publishing bills itself as a Christian based publishing entity, but you have to be careful that a script isn't stigmatized as something that isn't going to expand outside of a limited demographic. I thought a few moments of Shawn's genuine religious faith, particularly in giving heartfelt thanks for the bomb failing to detonate, are fine for an adaptation as they are in character. But, there are other instances of the novel that come close to outright proselytizing (as when minor characters remind others to read their Bible) and they should be reduced.

Notes:

The drug running inside info is notable and should definitely be included in a script. I refer to bits like the "one kilo threshold" and using old cars for transport.

Tyler's football background and how he uses skills acquired from his playing days to run his drug operation make him more than a generic baddie and should be explicitly referred to in dialogue.

I assume Shawn will be made into more than a straight arrow DEA Lt.

The dialogue seems to be okay, but it needs to be punched up for a movie. I bet anything the bad guys will get the bulk of the better lines as this is the way of the world...

The "late Mrs. Colton" line is menacing as intended, but is Amy that unaware of Shawn's job risks?

These jumps back in time to explain a few points should be avoided unless they add something memorable or unless you're going for a "meta" type of script with lots of time cuts. I refer to Billy's recruitment scene coming after he's already inside Tyler's operation.

The DEA agents look like idiots for using a Crown Victoria, which just screams "cop car".

The jump back in time to explain how Ray obtained Shawn's phone number is clunky.

Use time jumps only if you're going for style to juice up the narrative. Otherwise, you might be viewed as just another Tarantino wannabe going for style points.

Here's an example of the novel's authenticity when it comes to crime/law details as we're told Tyler's house being in between 2 vacant lots = less collateral damage in a raid. This is an example of knowledge that should be worked into the dialogue. Authenticity and professionalism count in scripts.

How to handle the faith based passages in a script without being too blatant?

Estrada and Taylor seem amateurish as they're spotted so easily by their targets.

Good plot point here about Nicole stashing meds on Tyler's request. This works as a character nugget for her (given her occupation) and is a good example of how Tyler thinks and plans. This is the type of material which enhances a script.

The novel keeps introducing new characters (Nicole, Cedric, Jones) that are adding something to the narrative. Really, the story keeps expanding and is getting better by the page. I also note that this novel isn't shying away from nastiness.

Nicole's freeing of Billy and getting rid of Smokey's car seems a bit of a stretch as she isn't showing enough concern for how Tyler is going to react.

Shawn's skilled handling of the manhunt is of interest. Should an adaptation be made into a quasi-police procedural? I'm leaning towards this as the law enforcement inside info stuff can compensate for the fact that the good guys aren't as interesting as the baddies.

A script might want to give Jones more time to register as a character before he's killed and should clarify that he viewed Tyler as a loose end that might expose his graft.

The bit about Nicole being dragged under can work if filmed correctly. It reads a little awkwardly, but this isn't a make or break issue.

I'd cut down on the overt Christian belief passages or you might face a limited audience for films...unless, of course, that's your goal.

The bit about Shawn being close to Amy's parents because he lost his at a young age is something that can be used to enhance his character. Look, I'm not implying he's not an admirable stand up guy, but I don't think he should be trapped entirely in Tyler's shadow.

Some suspense points are scored as Jimmy Z double crosses Tyler.

The quarry search is absolutely a movie scene. The same goes for the dive team sequence. Both sequences are graced by loads of fascinating real world logistics.

Tyler's fear of drug addiction is a solid gold character definer.

More good use of small details comes during the recovery of the cars and corpses at the quarry. I refer to the crane, Shawn having to deal with local media, the covering up of the corpses out of respect, etc.

The domestic dialogue for Shawn and kin is a little bland, but you can argue that it's true to life. I'd rather than "true to life = naturalistic" than "true to life =bland". I don't think most audiences want to hear the same type of mundane at home dialogue they get in real life.

This storyline is getting better as it goes along; momentum is building and this bodes well for an adaptation.

The body count is also getting up there; there isn't a lack of jolts.

This sad sequence of Cedric drowning the puppy may disturb some, but it shows the corrosive influence of Tyler and how sociopaths are created.

Speaking of corrosive, the theme of Tyler as a destructive influence on everyone around him should be emphasized in a script.

Jack's profession of faith is one profession of faith too many in a novel with no lack of them. A script in which people keep telling others to read the Bible (and specific passages) is a script that is going to be, fairly or unfairly, pigeonholed as something for a limited demographic.

Page 168: Tyler's line about the "better deal" is an example of how he gets the best lines.

Getting back to the matter of faith: Shawn's faith, if handled seriously and as a key facet of his inner man, and not just as pandering to an audience, could get a script some attention. But, I'd rather that Shawn alone get this treatment without having to also get into the religious beliefs of minor characters like the mother of Billy.

The assault on Turner's warehouse is a keeper as it's a ready made movie set piece.

Work the bit about how Razor got his nickname into dialogue.

The 9 year gap in the story might be an argument for making this a two act type of script. The changes are readily apparent as Shawn's now the new Sheriff, Cedric's a full grown thug enforcer, Bear's having qualms, etc.

Page 197: The "just another day at the office" descriptive passage as Bear and the others wrap up an enforcement session just has to be used as a throwaway dialogue line.

The execution of Marsha has taken the nasty to a new level. If Tyler keeps this up, he just might reach a top rank of movie villains, crime genre division. Honestly, this just might be the greatest strength of this novel when it comes to an adaptation. You can't argue that this cold blooded S.O.B. isn't a memorable presence.

The suspense has some CAPE FEAR overtones as Tyler targets Shawn's family.

I have concerns about how to handle Jimmy Z's survival in a script. Having him pop up and cutting away to a flashback of how he survived is a little too much like cheating. I can see the value of not ruining this surprise by showing the survival as it happened, but this is a dicey area. I'm also concerned about the "origin" of the partnership with Hector as it reads too contrived (a criminal enterprise is born when one guy just happens to bump into another). The plot point, though, about Jimmy Z and Hector prospering in a stolen car racket is of interest.

The prayer at table to give thanks for Amy's miraculous survival is a legit moment where Shawn's faith is handled sincerely and you don't feel that the novel is nagging you to go read your Bible.

It's not like this guy is lacking for "evil points", but Tyler has taken it to a new level by his misguided killing of Sandra in a fit of jealousy. His remorse, for a villain, seems sincere (and the incident also points out how Bear and Cedric are starting to distance themselves from their increasingly out of control boss).

Page 225: Here's some more excellent and solid crime lore as Calvin makes a homemade knife for his impending hit on Butch. Realistic details never hurt a script.

Some dialogue is dry and explanatory, as when Jimmy explains his survival on page 236.

Page 239: This exchange between Shawn and Agent Smith is the height of overly manipulative proselytizing. I have no trouble with some earlier cited scenes about Shawn's faith, but this sequence is something I would not retain in a script.

Page 246: Tamara's dialogue has too many lines that begin with "I". This happens elsewhere and is easily changed into script dialogue that is less stiff.

The change of venue to Colombia works. It's a refreshing change of scenery and taps into sturdy South American druglord archetypes.

Cedric's long suppressed need for familial warmth is a legit element and taps into an overriding theme about Tyler's destructive impact on too many families, not the least of which is his own.

The bit about Tamara recognizing Cedric's shoes will play better if we clearly see these shoes earlier.

This novel does not lack for last act momentum. I appreciate the lack of a shootout between Shawn and Tyler as it's more memorable for the antagonist to be dispatched by his own son (with a bonus being this is a deft ploy tapping into the ongoing theme about family). This aircraft crash finale is suitably grim, as is the last minute hint that Jimmy Z isn't going to escape the death toll of nearly everyone in Tyler's orbit.

SUMMATION:

Happily, I don't think extreme heavy lifting will be needed to get a solid crime thriller (with loads of authenticity) out of this novel.

