

On a chilly morning in May, my daughter Ann and I are in a car in Victoria, Canada on our way to the movie set for *The Mermaid Chair*. It is day 9 of a 22 day shooting schedule.

As our car pulls up at a small hospital— the location for today’s filming— I notice an empty lot nearby filled with trucks and trailers. Out of idle curiosity I ask the driver: “What’s going on over there?”

He looks at me like I’ve just fallen off the turnip truck. “The movie,” he says.

Up until that moment I believe I was envisioning the production of it to be the approximate size of a paper towel commercial.

“This is a little bigger than I imagined it,” I tell Ann as we wander past the catering truck, picking our way through a maze of equipment and crew.

Somehow I had not grasped the size and complexity of making a television movie. As a novelist, I sit in one room and work alone except for my dog, Lily, who sleeps under my desk. In that introverted and contained world, I more or less get to be the entire crew: producer, director, set decorator, casting director, costume designer, camera operator and special effects person. I am also the person running the catering truck.

Back when I was first approached about adapting my latest novel into a movie for Lifetime, it felt like an invitation to go skydiving. On one hand there was the oddly alluring thrill of jumping out of a plane or, in this case, of seeing the imaginative world I’d created come to life on a screen. On the other hand, there were all the things that could go wrong. The unopened parachute, for instance. I ended up jumping because, as usual, my fear of regret trumped my fear of failure. Now, as I take in the scope of the whole thing, I realize that if the parachute doesn’t open, a great many people will notice.



Sue with her daughter and director Steven Schachter

“Think of it like this,” Ann tells me. “When it comes to adapting your novel into a movie, it’s probably better to be overwhelmed than underwhelmed.”

Ann is along not only to offer reassuring perspectives like this, but because for the past nine months she and I have been “script consultants.” To be honest, in the beginning I wondered how seriously anyone would take our suggestions. We read the script in its various incarnations and offered feedback during a series of conference calls. Then fresh drafts would arrive and there we’d find most, if not all, of our suggestions incorporated. I began to worry that perhaps we were being taken too seriously.

I have every single script note I made. Here’s the first one: “Could we please see Jessie struggle more with her conscience?” And her relationship with Brother Thomas took on more conflict. Mostly I harped on making sure the internal struggles and spiritual longings of the characters were portrayed. I also made inane suggestions like: “Does Jessie really have to scrub the floor in this scene?” The floor scrubbing got upgraded to floor mopping. And this, “The idea of Hugh making an omelette with fingerling potatoes in the same scene that he discovers Nelle’s severed finger in a bowl in the refrigerator makes me queasy.” The fingerling potatoes got turned into mushrooms.

I hasten to tell you the real work of adapting the novel into a teleplay was done by Suzette Couture. My contribution is infinitesimal compared to hers. She amazed me at times with the way she took pages from the novel and distilled them into a concentrated scene that preserved the essence of the story. I was told that when Suzette was first asked to write the script, she responded that she would do it only if the intention was to stay true to the novel. Bless her. When I finally met her in person, I thanked her for that and she told me a story. Once while adapting another novel into a script, the producers asked her to make some drastic changes. “Is there anything about the novel you want to keep?” she asked. “Well, we do like the title,” she was told.

All things considered, I’m grateful they kept my title and my story. On top of that they invited me to come to the set.

Meanwhile, the inside of the hospital is hushed. Cameras are rolling. We are led, tiptoeing, to “video village,” where director Steven Schachter presides, watching the action on a monitor. At the end of the corridor, nearly obscured by cameras, lights and people is Kim Basinger, who plays the lead. She stands at a window in the waiting room— the scene in which Jessie awaits Hugh’s arrival. Ann and I are handed headsets. In my first “official” act

as *Novelist On The Set*, I slip on my headset and in doing so, snap it completely in two. Startled, looking over at Ann for perspective, I notice she has broken her headset into two pieces as well. That we've both done this strikes me as unbelievable. Later we will joke that it was due to a strange, shared genetic trait. But at the moment I have to tug on the assistant director's sleeve and explain. We are given two new headsets which we treat like fine crystal.



Sue and Bruce Greenwood (Hugh)

“Cut!” the director shouts, and at once the place explodes into sound and movement as if someone has just released the Mute and Pause buttons. The next scene is blocked, studied, practiced, then finally, filmed—

take after take of the same scene— ten times from one perspective, ten times from another. Bruce Greenwood, who plays the role of Hugh, whispers to me: “Making a movie is mostly a lot of standing around. You’re going to get bored.”

I can see how that could happen, but the truth is, it never does. The painstaking process reminds me of rewriting—going over and over a sentence, a paragraph, a page for no reason other than the desire to make it beautiful, to find a deeper way to jolt the reader’s heart, her senses, her mind. I have always found a kind of elation in this tedium because I feel that at any moment I might stumble upon something extraordinary.

Just before arriving here, I read an extract by director Ingmar Bergman in which he describes the special happiness that comes when suddenly after weeks of predictable routine, the camera will unexpectedly register a feeling, a truth, an expression, some rare intangible moment that astonishes. “It is possible I live for those brief moments,” he wrote. “Like a pearl fisher.”

As I watch the repetitive shooting and the inordinate amount of effort and time that goes into capturing a mere thirty seconds of film, I realize Steven Schachter is a pearl fisher.

This is confirmed to me shortly after lunch, when Ann and I sit inside his trailer and watch the “dailies,” the scenes filmed from the previous day. On the screen Kim Basinger wades into the sea, scooping up a strand of kelp and wrapping herself in it. The waning afternoon light strikes her face, then suddenly turns the golden leaves of the seaweed translucent. This is when I know the parachute will open.

In the middle of the afternoon, Steven turns to me and says, “Sue, do you want to be in the movie?”

This small bombshell comes as they are setting up the scene in which Hugh and Jessie gather in the hospital waiting room to sign her mother’s commitment papers.

I shake my head. “Oh no, I couldn’t.”

“It’s very Hitchcock-like to be in your own movie,” he tells me.

I shake my head again, but Ann intervenes, “Of course, you want to be in the movie!” And the next thing I know I’m getting my nose powdered. Someone suggests I should sit in the background in the waiting room, reading a book. They search high and low for a copy of *The Secret*

*Life of Bees*, but there’s not one to found. I’m given a Zane Grey western. As Kim Basinger and Bruce Greenwood render their lines, I stare at the book as if frozen in place. I do not turn a page, uncross my legs, move my head or breathe noticeably.



Sue as an “extra” in hospital waiting room scene

The next day, filming begins at 8:00 AM at the ferry dock. When Ann and I arrive, they are preparing to shoot the scene in which Jessie arrives on Egret Island. I notice the ferry is much grander than the humble pontoon boat that served as the ferry in the novel. Plus there is an impressive sign the size of a billboard positioned at the entrance to the ferry ramp. “Welcome to Egret Island,” it reads. Beyond it, a tiny village of shops which meander along the street. One store, in particular, catches my eye: “The Mermaid’s Tale.” Kat’s gift shop.

Then I spot Kat, played by Debra Mooney, who drives up in a golf cart with Ellie Harvie, who is Benne, Kat’s mentally challenged, but prescient daughter. Max, the island dog trots behind the cart. In real life, the dog is Jake, an eleven year old Labrador retriever. There is a fairly conspicuous woman standing beneath a tree wearing a bright African headdress and skirt— Hepzibah, played by Lorena Gale. I notice she wears the big hoop earrings that Kat teases her about in the novel, saying they are large enough for a cat to jump through. Finally I see a woman with a bandaged hand, Jessie’s mother, Nelle. She is played by Roberta Maxwell, who I remember from her part in *Brokeback Mountain*.



From left: Ellie Harvie (Benne), Lorena Gale (Hepzibah), Sue, Debra Mooney (Kat), Roberta Maxwell (Nelle), Ann

Here are all my “island women,” I think, and this becomes the most surreal moment I have on the set. It is as if the women I created in my head have somehow sprung to life and are walking around.

“Can somebody age the Egret Island sign!” Steven shouts and instantly the second assistant director climbs on a ladder with what looks like a can of hair spray and makes the sign look old and worn.

The entire morning is taken up with filming Jessie’s arrival on the island, then her departure. Rain comes and goes. Ann and I stay dry in the director’s tent watching the scene on his monitor.

After lunch the crew moves the set to a charming restaurant nestled beside the ferry dock called Seahorse Café. (In the novel it was Max’s Café.) As they prepare to film the scene in which Jessie, Nelle, Kat, Benne and Hepzibah are having lunch, Steven invites Ann to be an extra. She is seated at a table behind the women and told to have a conversation with her table mate. “What do I say?” she asks the first assistant director. “Just mouth the words watermelon, rhubarb, watermelon, rhubarb, over and over,” he tells her. This she does with perfect animation, gesturing, nodding, pausing to sip from a water glass.

Later when we watch the dailies and see ourselves in our respective scenes, she will ask me if she’s overacting and I will ask her if I’m underacting. Then we will both crack up.

Being movie extras leaves us in awe of real actors and actresses. Kim Basinger had me believing she was Jessie from the moment I saw her in the hospital waiting room. I will watch the rough cut of the movie when I return home and she will mesmerize me with her performance. Bruce Greenwood will break my heart when he discovers Jessie’s betrayal. Roberta Maxwell will take my breath in the climatic revelation scene. And Alex Carter will capture the most complex thing of all in Brother Thomas—the tension of being human and spiritual at the same time.

Adapting a novel into a movie is not the easiest task in the world-- some things have to be changed, others sacrificed. The only time this created a problem for me was when it became clear the movie would not be set in South Carolina like the novel. I could not fathom *The Mermaid Chair* without marsh grass, tidal creeks and pluff mud.

But at some point on my second and final day on the set, I look around at the mist on the mountains, the water and rocky coastline of the Pacific Northwest, and I get over it.

I would still have preferred the novel to be set in the Low Country, but I can honestly say now that the setting (which the director describes as “somewhere off the coast of somewhere”) is on my list of “Favorite Things In The Movie That Were Not In The Novel.” Also on this list are the peacocks that walk around the monastery grounds, a scrabble game between Hugh, Jessie and Dee, and the little band that marches down the street in the St Senara Day parade along with children tossing rose petals. But my most favorite thing on this list are the underwater mermaids. They are actually members of the Canadian free diving team who hold their breath for up to 5 minutes at a time. They wear special-built neoprene wet suits and swim magically through underwater kelp forests.

I also have a list of “Favorite Things In The Movie That Were In The Novel.” It includes the Felix the Cat clock in Nelle’s kitchen, the bath tub Madonna, Whit’s hidden lean-to, the turtle skull, the All Girl Picnic, the St. Senara statue in a blonde wig and bikini, Jessie’s father’s pipe, the monks chanting, and above all, *The Mermaid Chair*.

The chair was handmade for the movie by artisans in Vancouver. In some ways it is even more beautiful than I pictured it when I was writing. Some weeks after I return home from the movie set, a truck pulls into our driveway and unloads a large wooden crate. Inside is *The Mermaid Chair*.

In the novel and also in the movie, the chair is associated with the myth of St. Senara, a mermaid who becomes a saint and who is said to grant the prayers of those who sit in the chair.

When I sit in the chair for the first time, I am struck by the same blurring of fact and fiction I experienced when I saw my characters on the set walking around in person. I cannot help but say a prayer.



The mermaid chair