



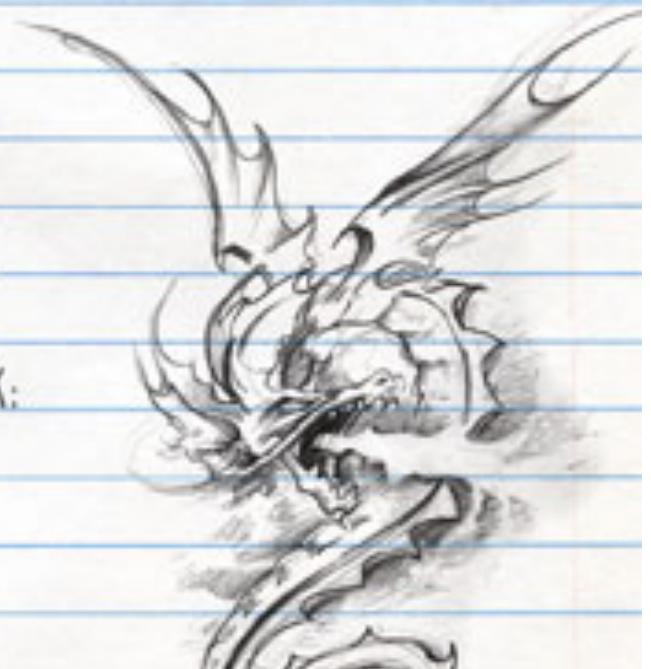
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Surprise in the Twenty-Fourth Century

By Scott Rubenstein

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- Laurie Lamson, Editor

Scott Rubenstein wrote thirty produced episodes for television including *Star Trek: The New Generation*, *Cagney & Lacey*, *Hunter*, *MacGyver*, *Night Court*, *Nine to Five*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*. Aside from also being a story editor on three shows, he executive produced the award-winning documentary *NOT AFRAID TO LAUGH* and the short film *Peacock Blues* for Showtime. He taught for ten years as an adjunct professor at California State University, Northridge and USC.

It was 1988. I was staring at Maurice Hurley, executive producer of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. A smile on my face. My writing partner Leonard Mlodinow and I were about to be on the writing staff on the most innovative show on the air.

I grew up in a family that loved science fiction. For a long time I thought Edgar Rice Burroughs and Ray Bradbury were relatives of mine. In some ways they were. Someone was always reading about “John Carter of Mars” and my mother became infatuated with *The Martian Chronicles*.

But this is an article about surprise. A definition of surprise is “*to cause to feel wonder, astonishment at something unanticipated.*” The perfect way to describe *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. The show takes place in the twenty-fourth century, so it must be filled with surprises. Unfortunately, the first surprise we’ll discuss here took place in the twentieth century.

A few days before our meeting at *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, our agent called and said the producers of the show really liked us, so we didn’t need to prepare anything. We just needed to show up and prove we weren’t very weird. We could do normal. We did show up, but after twenty minutes of normal, the producer asked us why we were there. Surprise.

I explained that we were there because we were going to be on the staff on the show. He said, “No.” The show was very hard to write for and one couldn’t be on staff without writing a script, and what ideas did we have? Bigger surprise.

First thought was I was going to have to call a lot of friends and relatives and tell them that we weren’t writing on the show, and also that we killed our agent. I needed help from my bag of tricks as a writer and a person, and I needed it fast.

Before I tell you what happened at the meeting, I'll tell you what I had learned about surprise up to this point.

Surprise was always my weapon of choice. I learned it at a very early age. I knew that I wasn't the smartest kid in class. Laura Scheiner and Ronnie Lipkin had the co-honor. I wasn't the handsomest person. It felt like everyone other than me had that co-honor. First lesson for the writer to learn: the more awkward you are, and the more jokes you can tell—i.e., unanticipated, surprising reformulations of reality you come up with—the better chance you have at success as a writer. When you try to sell any idea—whether to Hollywood or the literary world—humor is important, but surprise is essential. Also, with a billion ideas out there, it's important to use an element of surprise to make your idea unique. Often it's good to even surprise yourself; your audience will follow.

I was at my first college dance. I had never asked a girl to dance. I saw this beautiful young woman sitting at the sidelines, moving to the rhythms of the song. Little did I know this was about to define me as a man, as well as help me succeed as a writer. I don't think she had a clue either.

I asked her to dance. She went into the crowd of dancing bobble head dolls and moved to her and the band's rhythm. I was totally lost in my head. I realized that the entire trick to winning this woman for the night was to get her to dance with me for a second song. My history of second dances was limited. So I needed a strategy. I needed intrigue. So there was that awkward moment when the song ended and I asked her name. She told me, Melody Martin. She asked me mine. I paused and said "Thirteen."

"Thirteen?" she mouthed. The band started playing. She paused for a moment. And started dancing. I had the rest of the dance to concoct a story. After that song was over, I

told her my parents had twelve children before me and they ran out of names so they called me Thirteen. She laughed and we ended up dancing together for two months.

So the tricks I learned in life helped me in writing. But I should have known, if you don't come prepared for anything, you might end up in shit's creek without a paddle, or a boat.

And at this life-changing producer's meeting, my writing partner and I were up a twenty-fourth century creek. A group of writer-producers wondering what ideas we had for them, and we had been told by our agent, "No need to prepare."

So I started with an arena. Wesley, the young ensign, falls in love for the first time. I wasn't familiar enough with the show to know if they had done this. Every show will do this kind of episode, but newbies like us don't get to do them. For some lucky reason, they wanted us to go on. They seemed to be on the edge of their seats, waiting for an interesting storyline that I was praying for my unconscious to help me with. I continued spinning a story. I talked about a young female leader from another planet that the *Enterprise* needed to transport to her home planet. Everyone seemed to be nodding like it was okay up to that point (even my partner, who had no idea where I was going). I felt I needed some surprise and I knew whatever I came up with was going to be a surprise, at least to me. And then I smiled. The female leader turned out to be young, beautiful, and humanoid. But what Wesley learns, to his surprise, is that she is a shape shifter. There was a pause that seemed like a black hole. Then everyone was happy and we ended up working on the show and actually got to occupy Gene Roddenberry's old office as story editors.

EXERCISE

This exercise is based on assignments I give my students to get them involved in using surprise in their writing. It's also based on my own personal homework assignments I give myself. These are sneaky ways to trick your unconscious to share its untapped gold.

1. The first thing to do is acknowledge that based on feedback or your own nagging sense, something about what you have written is not working. You're either stuck or have written something cliché or perhaps too thin, superficial, and obvious. We are going to work on that section for the purposes of this exercise. So take a two- to five-page scene from your screenplay or portion of your book, and copy it to a new file or print it out. You're going to put this portion of your work into a creative boot camp.
2. If it's a drama, rewrite it as a comedy. Write it in that genre with all your heart, milking it for any comic potential. If it's a comedy, write it as a drama, digging deeper into the subtext to find the inherent lurking drama. Now read what you wrote. What about it surprises you? Is there one thing you uncovered from your unconscious that you can use to freshen up, deepen, or expand that section of the work?
3. Look at this or another section of your work. To turn it on its head and surprise yourself and the reader, try these other forms of rewriting to trick your creativity into surprising you:
 - a) Write your story from a completely different historical perspective. If it's science fiction set it in the twenty-fourth century, the old West,

or Elizabethan times. Again, see if you discover some element of surprise that you could insert into your original story.

b) Change the gender of your characters, thereby surprising yourself with the choices they come up with, motivations as well as actions that, once you are done, you can mine for surprises.

c) Take a scene or a chapter and find a completely original location that makes no sense at all for your story, but write your characters and circumstances into that location. Explore what you come up with for more surprises.

Surprise always works to grab your audience and to keep you glued to your chair, writing yourself out of corners and into a professional writing life.