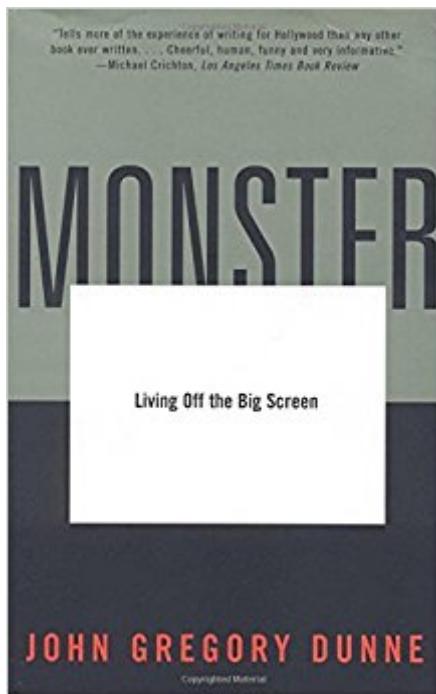


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# Monster: Living Off The Big Screen



## Synopsis

In Hollywood, screenwriters are a curse to be borne, and beating up on them is an industry blood sport. But in this ferociously funny and accurate account of life on the Hollywood food chain, it's a screenwriter who gets the last murderous laugh. That may be because the writer is John Gregory Dunne, who has written screenplays, along with novels and non-fiction, for thirty years. In 1988 Dunne and his wife, Joan Didion, were asked to write a screenplay about the dark and complicated life of the late TV anchorwoman Jessica Savitch. Eight years and twenty-seven drafts later, this script was made into the fairy tale "Up Close and Personal" starring Robert Redford and Michelle Pfeiffer. Detailing the meetings, rewrites, fights, firings, and distractions attendant to the making of a single picture, *Monster* illuminates the process with sagacity and raucous wit.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a story of a screenplay, how it was initially conceived, "developed" by a number of studio heads and producers, and finally transformed into a movie even its writers admit is mediocre. In 1988, John Gregory Dunne and his wife Joan Didion began work on a film script based on the tragic life of anchorwoman Jessica Savitch. Over the next eight years, studio executives coaxed them to transform it into *Up Close and Personal*, a toothless star vehicle for Robert Redford and Michelle Pfeiffer. In his account of the script's metamorphosis, Dunne also mentions other potential masterpieces of excess that he and Didion worked on, including *Dharma Blue*, an aborted Jerry Bruckheimer-Don Simpson movie about UFOs and *Ultimatum*, a nuclear thriller that was abandoned after its studio spent \$3 million on script development! Dunne makes no bones about being in show

biz for the money--his film work financed his heart surgery, legal costs, and vacations in Honolulu. Still, this account of a screenplay's devolution unmasks an industry spoiled rotten by wealth and power. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Novelist (Playland) and journalist Dunne makes much of his living by writing screenplays, and this journal covers the eight years it took between the time he and his wife, Joan Didion, were approached to write a screenplay based on *Golden Girl*, a biography of newswoman Jessica Savitch, and the 1996 appearance of *Up Close and Personal*, a rather different movie that made no mention of Savitch. The "monster," this veteran of Hollywood knows, is the producers' money, which always takes precedence over creative ego. This account-written while Dunne had much other work but also money worries-is often digressive and undigested, as if it were written to satisfy Dunne's own money monster. Even so, Dunne can be a deft and amusing reporter both of the tricks of the screenwriting trade and of the foibles of the "industry," as Hollywood is known. He explains why studio execs like screenplays with explanatory exposition while good actors don't, and he uncovers the dynamic of a script reading, in which stars need less dialogue than others to establish their characters. He tells of the youthful "creative executives" who give screenwriters critiques laden with peculiar jargon, and he reports on working with a series of charismatic executives-first producers Don Simpson and Jerry Bruckheimer, then producer Scott Rudin and director Jon Avnet. In the end, the film made a nice profit and Dunne not only had a good time but wrung a book out of the experience. Copyright 1996 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I wasn't looking forward to reading this, but it turned out to be both a fascinating and funny story, as well as much more insight into author Joan Didion's life and work, which I've been following since the publication of "Slouching Toward Bethlehem." This is the story of the script that became "Up Close and Personal" as it goes through various writers, titles, and stories. But I remember the Jessica Savitch TV meltdown, and wish Hollywood would have kept hands off. Her story would have made a great movie. But Dunne, Didion's husband, who she writes about after his death in "The Year of Magical Thinking" is a writer who can tell a good story and has always been revealing about California from an outsider's perspective as much as his wife has told the story of modern California from the viewpoint of someone born there. Also interesting is the fact that the two writers begin the script because Dunne needs health insurance for heart surgery, and later his heart disease and death begins the story of Didion's great book. A delightful, ironic book even if you like Hollywood

and an even better book if you hate it.

Dunn writes a very clear picture of the emotional and professional challenges of screen writing. The machinations and cross purposes of Hollywood are artfully dissected and laced with humor. He's able to extract what were valuable lessons and gives insight to the process. The personality sketches are spot on.

I enjoyed it. Offered interesting insight into how screenplay writers work. Well written. A quick read if you are interested in the topic.

If one likes a film, one may read about it to enhance the pleasure. In the case of "Up Close and Personal," that order for me was reversed. I read "Monster" before seeing the movie, the making of which is the subject of John Gregory Dunne's (1932-2003) book. This turns out to be the right order. The film, about love and ambition in the news business, is a smooth, competent Hollywood job, with A list performers (Robert Redford, Michelle Pfeiffer), but, in a word invented by Donald Barthelme, "sub-memorable." According to Dunne, it took years and countless rewrites before "Up Close and Personal" was produced. The first half of his account is a highly amusing, funny, ironic insider's look at the movie business from a screenwriter's perspective, full of sharp, cynical views of Hollywood foibles, customs, jargon, greediness, vanities, animosities, and eccentric, sometimes self-destructive behavior and thinking. Many laughs. Dunne and his wife, Joan Didion, do rewrite after rewrite of the original script idea, a fictionalized biography of Jessica Savitch (1947-1093). Savitch led the kind of life on which tabloid newspapers dote. Attractive but not very smart, she went from rags-to-riches, with multiple bed partners, & some famous, and had a cocaine habit and an on-air meltdown, followed by an early death. Gradually, to make a more conventional, commercially viable story, these edges were smoothed away. Why did Dunne and Didion agree to that? They needed money, and they were paid extremely well, although often they had to fight to get what was contractually theirs. The cheapness and borderline illegal ruthlessness of the Disney studio is a running theme throughout. The second half of "Monster" is less amusing than the first. As soon as the script is more or less finalized (it is really finished only when the director, Jon Avnet, makes the final edits) the report becomes more humdrum"albeit a humdrum life with Redford and Pfeiffer and powerful movie people would be glamorous enough for many. "Monster" is at first bracing but loses some of its edge"a reenactment of the script around which Dunne's book is built.

John Gregory Dunne and Joan Didion's combined memoirs make for fascinating and unusual reading, because it's rare to have a long-term couple chronicle their shared lives (or their unshared lives in some cases, since-- despite Didion's contention in her Year of Magical Thinking that there was no envy between them-- it is evident that the marriage had its ups and downs). *Monster* isn't the best book in the chronicle, but it shows the shared part of their lives more than the other books, if mainly in the limited area of their work as a Hollywood screenwriting team, an unusual career in itself. Dunne does a good job of "interweaving" (excuse the reviewer-speak term) his account of their long and tedious labors on a mediocre film with their personal lives, especially his frightening encounters with the progressive heart disease that would kill him a few years after this book came out. What is the monster of the book's title? The movie industry in general, of course, and the Disney brand in particular. But one gets the impression that "their name is many, for they are legion" in the industry. Dunne quotes extensively from F. Scott Fitzgerald on the subject: it's impressive how fresh and true Fitzgerald's perceptions remain, seven decades after progressive heart disease killed him.

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