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# Tablets of Stone or DNA? TV series Bibles.

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## Introduction: What is a Bible?

'What is a TV Bible' is a question rarely addressed by screenwriting manuals, and answered only sparingly. Dave Trottier says it is 'a printed guide that sets forth the rules of the show, including character sketches, and information on what's forbidden and what they're looking for' (1998: 280). William Smethurst notes it's the first thing to be commissioned when a drama series is greenlit (1998: 139). Professional TV writers claim to know what 'TV series Bible' means, but when asked to define it, they appear vague. One UK TV series writer (Writer A) is clear that 'it's a selling document',[1] but 'it's more than that', according to Writer B, 'it's a Road Atlas'. 'It's about the parameters of a show', claims Writer C, who adds that a lot of Bible content is online these days. Writer A says it's a 3-page Treatment, worked up to 10 pages once sold. However, it can be a hefty document (Writer D), perhaps even 20-25 pages (Writer C). In his blog, Irish writer Danny Stack declares 'it's 5 to 8 pages' (2007), but then qualifies it: '*proper* series Bibles go into great lengths about the [story] world and the characters' [my italics]. Writer E agrees. He has 'written a few Bibles, and they are quite shockingly more expansive than anyone would suspect.' US writers seem to refer to detailed episode outlines as Bibles. Beau Willimon,

[1] Anonymised quotes in this article are all from personal emails to, or conversations between the author and seven professional UK TV writers/script workers, in late 2015.

showrunner on *House of Cards* (2013-2017), says his season Bible was 50 to 60 pages long (Anderson-Moore 2015).

The impression given is that everyone is unsure. The term 'TV Bible' is applied to something a bit more worked out than a Treatment, but it's not clear how much it differs, nor what it does, exactly. The literary agent Julian Friedmann says 'there are no standard industry definitions, because it varies from producer to producer, broadcaster to broadcaster'.[2]

Even the Writers' Guilds are a little short on detail. The Writers Guild of Great Britain (WGGB) and the Writers Guild of America (WGA) refer to 'Bible' as a synonym for 'Format', where it has more detail; as in the 'full episode bible', different from treatment and story outline (WGGB 2010: 12.1), and 'format for a miniseries'[3] according to the WGA West website (WGA 2017 fn14).

The WGGB agreements with the BBC, ITV and S4C use the term 'Format' to refer to (in the BBC example):

> The expression of an original idea for a television programme, recorded in writing or otherwise and consisting of such elements as its setting, characters and their relationships its themes and how the narrative might develop.
> (WGGB 2016: 4)

The WGA 'Bible' includes some of the components that they expect to see within the framework of such a multi-episode series – the setting, the theme, the premise or general storyline, plus the central running characters and the interplay between them. They also acknowledge it might include some episode storylines (WGA 2017 fn14).

[2] Personal email dated 6th October 2015.

[3] In the UK, a miniseries was/is called a TV serial, where the main storyline develops through all the episodes, and resolves by the final episode.

To invest in something this vague and ill-defined is surely high risk. The rights in a TV series 'property' exist in something which can only be described literally before the fact. This is not just before the fact of its existence as a TV series, but before even the detailed nature of its potential existence is known. It is vulnerable to change during development, and therefore to misunderstanding and legal challenge. It does seem extraordinary that a multi-billion dollar worldwide industry is based on something that is almost indefinable legally, in its earliest stages (see the discussions on mature format rights at Malbon 2006a, 2006b). This may be why there has developed an approximately common style of writing TV series Bibles, based largely on US conventions. The industry must want to minimise exposure to the risk of commercial or critical failure, or at least to protect themselves from later criticism (including from within their own company), by asking basic questions about the common elements they normally seek. As noted above, this is expected to be information about setting, characters and their relationships, theme and story; and by implication structure and genre, and claims about dramatic impact, and novelty. If these elements can be seen to work together, and work well enough to give the project an identity that can be seen as unique (or at least having a Unique Selling Point), then there is a format which can be seen to fit industrial need – at this early stage.

Albert Moran defines the Format, in the context of global trade, in general terms.

> …the complex set of production knowledges having to do with the establishment of writing and production teams, storylines, work routines and schedules, resources allocation and general production origin.
>
> Moran (2006: 37)

Jean Chalaby refers more specifically to the production Bible as one of several 'knowledge transfer mechanisms' (2016: 15) during the process of re-sale for local production.

> Today's bible can detail the series' premise and showrunner's vision of the original series… and include information about key characters, story drivers, and dynamics, down to the shooting schedule.
>
> Chalaby (2016: 16)

So, before production a Bible (or Format) exists as a 'risk check' ('risk analysis' is too strong a term at this stage), a snapshot serving the industrial need to invest considerable finance in a project which must succeed, commercially and/or critically. Later, it exists as a basis for a new version in a new market. The basic questions thus being asked, if vague, check the orthodox markers of what is thought to be 'good' TV drama, for a particular market. Paradoxically, this includes both its novelty or unique nature, and the level of its similarity to previous similar productions. The tension between these two opposites may surface with any of the elements being discussed, at any point in the document. In addressing this, the thrust of the whole Bible is probably going to be finely balanced between these two.

These two functions, check and stimulant, focus attention on the screen idea as the location for the not-yet fully defined project.

## Consistency of form and purpose

Have Bibles always been like this? Here are some UK examples which suggest they have, at least in essence, but with variation in style and purpose.

The origins of the BBC TV science fiction series of serials, *Doctor Who* (1962-2017), are associated with documents which occur in two memoranda and a set of general notes.[4] They address the core narrative issues of concept and setting, character and story. The first memorandum, dated 25th July 1962, from John Braybon and Alice Prick to HSD Tel.[5] (Donald Wilson), enthuses about time travel and telepaths, and particular stories which work for TV because:

1. They do not include bug-eyed monsters.
2. The central characters are never Tin Robots…
3. They do not require large and elaborate science fiction type settings…
4. They do provide an opportunity for genuine characterisation…

The second memo, also to HSD Tel and dated 29th March 1963, described 'a continuous serial… a loyalty programme' for 14 year-olds, lasting at least 52 weeks.

As a public service producer-broadcaster, these concept documents only need to sell the screen idea internally within the BBC. They address the same essential elements: the concept, the setting, the characters, and notes on likely story content. The BBC's income was more closely fixed at the time, so value for money is foregrounded alongside potential popularity, and the tone is one of cutting the cloth to fit (rather than commercial success). As enthusiasm builds, the Screen Idea Work Group begins to form – in this instance led by the incoming *wunderkind* Head of Department, Canadian producer Sydney Newman who, in handwritten notes, details ideas about character, criticisms about the clarity, praise for some ideas, and negative reaction for others. The latter included comment on the somewhat wild

[4] Transcripts of these can be found at https://sites.google.com/site/tvwriting/bibles. Accessed 10th Feb 2017. Also at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/archive/doctorwho/ Accessed 28th June 2017.

[5] These quasi- Civil Service abbreviations have long been characteristic of BBC management. For a sense, see *A-Z of the BBC 1978* (BBC 1978). I assume HSD. Tel means Head of Script Department, Television.

proposal that Doctor Who's machine should be invisible, or rather 'visible only as an absence of visibility.' On television! Newman did not like this at all.

*A Magnum for Schneider* (1967) written by James Mitchell, was a British single play broadcast by UK commercial TV in 1967 which spun off into the spy series *Callan* (1967-72), plus two feature films. The ABC TV document entitled *Callan: Format for a series* (Mitchell 1966) is designed to sell the concept, and goes into the origins, the writer's track record, the background/setting (in this case the world of espionage), the 'Aim' (effectively a Statement of Intent) of creating 'the acid authenticity of the gritty world of espionage', and finally goes into the regular characters and three storyline examples. A note from 17th November 1967 appended to this Format talks of a change of character for the second series. This Bible is clearly a sales pitch, in a more commercial environment than the BBC.

The Writers Pack for the UK police ITV soap *The Bill* (1984-2010) dated October 1990 (Fig. 3) has format notes for writing the script, character notes, practical notes about the setting and working of Sun Hill Police Station, research notes from the police adviser, photos of the characters, production detail, examples of scripts and storyline, and plans of the set. This form of Bible is about detailing the storyworld and history for a continuing serial.

*Wyrdsister* is a UK Bible from 2001 (Fig.1, Fig.2), proposed by writer Martin Riley. It starts with the concept, in which Mildred Hubble, the heroine of the successful childrens' magic-school TV series *The Worst Witch* (from the novels by Jill Murphy), moves on to magic-University. There's a description of the setting, Wyrdsister College Cambridge, and character notes for a mature version of Mildred and her new room-mates. In the version I have seen, there are no storylines

appended, but the title page announces ‘storylines by John Coombes and Martin Riley’. It’s another sales pitch.

In UK TV, therefore, it seems that the ways in which writers shape their early screen ideas has remained similar, even consistent, since at least the later 1960s.

Definition of a Bible

Can we define a TV Bible more closely? The term ‘Bible’ is commonly used to refer to some kind of *ur-text*, the basis for practice around one particular screen idea. The very name suggests a work which has holy writ, an authority that must be obeyed, or at least a setting-out of the ground-rules – the tablets of stone, the commandments. It also suggests some kind of detail, and a completeness that takes the screen idea away from the provisional nature of a ‘treatment’ or proposal, towards something with more definition. It presents a screen idea as a worked-through factory floor design, from which products can be crafted in whichever ways the design proposes and allows. It offers a story-world, set specifically in time(s) and place(s), populated by specific characters set up to behave in certain ways, along with references to genre, to previous works, and to a unique selling point (USP). The Bible is also likely to offer examples of how this story-basis could be developed in single episodes, and thus the screen idea here works on two levels – (1) the ground-rules for the whole series, and (2) the specific proposal(s) for an individual episode(s), as examples of how this would work. In this form, the imaginary equivalent for a Bible is less a tablet of stone, and more like a DNA code. With long-running series, like soaps, success may well be seen as linked to an effective description of the ‘series DNA’, as the essence of that success.

Research into the global trade in TV series (e.g. Moran 2006; Chalaby 2016; Oren & Shahaf 2012; McCabe & Akass 2013) has looked particularly at shows whose content always varies locally, e.g. gameshow and reality TV formats. 'A format is all about the rules you put on an idea' says producer Julie Christie (in Moran 2006: 29). On drama series, Justin Malbon outlines a common development process for a fictional TV drama series (2006: 129-136), and Chalaby's study of the scripted format trade includes how knowledge of the format is transferred and thus changed, but not the detail of those formats, claiming only that 'the essence of the story must remain across cultures, else the story crumbles' (2016:16).

But to understand the framework of that 'essence', or screen idea, we need to examine the documents used. As unpublished documents, Bibles are difficult to find. From internet sources it is possible to find concept documents for around 35 productions, US and UK.[6] From other Google/Bing searches under variant terms Format, TV series Concept or Storyverse, occasional other documents come to light (including Simon 2000).[7] In addition, with personal donations from professional writers of six UK Bibles/formats, and a collection of around 90 historic sales documents from UK distributor ITC, I personally had access to around 130 such concept documents. I informally interviewed five writers, one agent and one producer, and noted craft advice from US and UK internet sources, e.g. www.janeespenson.com. If, overall, the provenance of these sources appears makeshift, it does have the advantage of being random.[8]

[6] See e.g. www.leethomson.myzen.co.uk/, and Google site https://sites.google.com/site/tvwriting/bibles
[7] Caution must be observed. The 'bible' for *Breaking Bad* at http://www.clickhole.com/article/vince-gilligans-series-bible-breaking-bad-2836 is unusual and may be a parody.
[8] Further historical research into Bibles might dig into the Script special collection at the British Film Institute, and the special collections department at UCLA, for example.

A synthesis of these sources provides a coherent picture, in fact. I present the findings below, starting with a definition of a series Bible as follows:

> A document (or documents) which propose(s) a screen idea, in ways which identify it as a unique story-world or narrative context sufficient to host new stories yet to be written.

This includes any set of documents or ways of recording the beginnings of a screen idea, but focuses attention on what is known about the underpinning screen idea framework. The essential screen idea, as storyworld (or indeed any form of narrative context) is linked with an intention to structure this as some form of part-work or series. Until relatively recently, the division into series parts (of whatever type: anthology/umbrella, stand-alone episodic, serial/miniseries, or reflecting a mixture of these) would announce the project is to be made for television. Now, the increase in distribution platforms, and the consequent connection with cinema and digital media in the form of franchises and 'story-verses', has released the series/serial form from being made for TV alone. Bibles can therefore be used across more than one medium. This article, however, focuses on the more traditional functions of the TV Bible.

## Formation of the Bible

When or how does a pitch, or proposal, or a treatment become a Bible? Screen idea development is conventionally thought to start small and acquire detail as it develops (e.g. Alessandra 2010), from the 'back of an envelope'/logline idea, to a brief synopsis, along with character biographies, backstory, plot ideas and storylines, and later a step-outline or full treatment for a single episode. Any of these, from a one-line high concept pitch to a 20-page treatment, could contribute to, or be included

within, a set of documents collectively called ‘The Bible’. Importantly, there may also be other document forms, including wall charts, databases and even individuals known as ‘walking Bibles’ (see below). It seems as if the term ‘Bible’ is applied not just to a collection of documents detailing a potential TV series according to the Writers Guild components, but also to a broader collection of material which *continues to develop* as the series goes into production, or continues over several seasons.

So, the appellation ‘Bible’ starts when there is sufficient information, in the judgement of those creating it, to see it as a singular screen idea with the potential to host multiple stories, or long-running storylines (and arcs), or both (complex TV). The Bible therefore addresses the *completeness* of the screen idea according to its own content, as well as to the conventional Guild components. This content will need to refer to e.g. genre, to other productions in a broad franchise, and to other platforms, as appropriate. The level of detail depends on what is already culturally familiar *versus* what is presented as new or different.

Therefore, the answer to the question ‘when do these documents become a Bible?’ is, quite simply, ‘when they include everything we need to know at this moment’. And because ongoing TV series production is also a process of development, this is never wholly fixed, and the Bible is then subject to change. The ‘tablet of stone’ concept is useful for a while, but then it crumbles a bit and needs a new version even if, like its holy counterpart, those elements of the screen idea considered essential might remain firm. Scholars need therefore to consider not just the Bible, but ‘which version?’

## Versions of the Bible

I suggest that Bibles are created in at least six different versions for different purposes (**A-F** below). It is entirely feasible that a document called a 'Bible' might exist in only one of these versions, but it is also possible that the Bible for a single screen idea morphs through some or all six versions, as stages along the way in its development. It's important to understand that, within this dynamic process of development, some Bible versions look 'back' in establishing or affirming its principles, and some versions look 'forward' more, in guiding creative workers according to those principles.

The first version is as **(A) a defining framework for writers (Writer's Bible)**.[9] Writer C says 'you can't write the series Bible last, because it helps to define the series.' And it is unlikely to be easy. The same writer offers an example. He had been working on a series idea with a friend for about two or three weeks before finally beginning to write it down. At the end of that first day, they had achieved four sentences. Their subsequent goal was to develop the screen idea into a two-page document which will define the idea in enough detail to be seen as a realisable production. This key document also needs to be backed up by another 20 pages or so of detail worked out to show that there are definite and plausible potential storylines (that it 'has legs'). The process at this stage is about defining and testing out the screen idea in ways that are likely to satisfy the demands of the industry and of practical production. Whatever the format, the purpose is not dissimilar to that of the *Doctor Who* documents noted previously.

The second purpose is **(B) to sell the series (Selling Bible)**, and is therefore more of a public document than **(A).** It is likely that **(A)** merges into **(B)**, as close

[9] I have named these versions for convenience, but make no claim that these terms are in general professional use.

development stages of the same screen idea. It follows that a professional writer is likely to begin development of the screen idea with this second purpose also in mind – tonally and stylistically, at least. Like a film treatment, it's a written pitch, a document which must enthuse through both the vision, awareness of the industrial context, and the use of prose. It must attract attention. Fitting within the framework of the orthodoxy is important in assessing the project, and in trusting the competence of the proposer.[10] There is a belief that readers of such documents are very busy people who need to be drawn into the idea, page by page, paragraph by paragraph. In a freelance market, this is the way in.[11] A writer is selling the DNA of a screen idea here, with the claim that this can start a whole 'family'. Examples of a selling Bible noted above are *Callan* (1967-72) and *Wyrdsister* (2001).

INSERT: Fig. 1 *Wyrdsister* Selling Document 2001 (B) cover

INSERT: Fig. 2 *Wyrdsister* Selling Document 2001 (B) overview

The third version **(C)** may **(re-)define a series that has already been green-lit (commissioned Bible)** – an idea that has come perhaps from a production company who commissions a format outline, or a re-write, or a series development. As a commissioned Bible, its purpose is long-term story projection. 'Nowadays, because characters change during the development process, the Bible is more about the parameters of the show; what it's trying to do, how and why', says Writer C. This

[10] On competence see, for example, the chapter *Do you have what it takes?* in Lees 2010; 17-33, on factual/reality projects.
[11] Thus says the advice often found in manuals (e.g. Frensham 2011: 264) and online (e.g. www.dannystack.com). The BBC Writers Room has a policy of making a decision based on the first ten script pages only (see FAQs at www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom).

also applies to further updates, as the series goes into subsequent seasons; further attempts at recording the story-world and the specific screen idea, as it continues to evolve.

One type of Bible is used in a more dynamic, interactive fashion. This is where the Bible is used, fourthly, as **(D) a development tool in its own right (the Season Bible)**, echoing the Writer's Bible (A), but with the aim of developing the screen idea into storylines and series arcs. It's key in shaping the series, collaboratively; a physical expression of the coalescing screen idea shared amongst core contributors in the Screen Idea Work Group. The Season Bible for *House of Cards*, for example, is described as a prose version of the character/storyline grid, a huge chart on the Writers Room wall, on which six writers have been working for four to six weeks (Eason 2015, Anderson-Moore 2015). They have already seen the earlier season(s), and taken direction from show-runner Beau Willimon about possible storylines, plus vague ideas he's read about. They've discussed characters, major storylines, plot points, set pieces, indelible moments, and they've talked to political consultants. The 50 to 60-page prose Bible then contains a mission statement for the main characters – meaning what they want or need – story arcs for all these characters, and narrative threads for all 13 episodes. There is also a bullet-point breakdown of events, actions and key character developments, specified in beats for each episode. The prose Bible takes about two weeks to write, and is the basis for working up the episode scripts. So this version, in the way it was used by *House of Cards*, is a development tool in <u>two</u> forms, a wall chart and a paper Bible, and it continues to evolve throughout production.

This is a US example, and there may be different traditions or emphases in different industries. For example Anders Lundstrom, showrunner on the

Swedish/Danish co-production *The Bridge*, has said that their Bible is more about the design and look of the series; not about story,[12] and this may reflect a 'filmic' tradition within Scandinavian TV production. The function of this Bible is the same, even though it is used by set designer and director to support a consistent *visual* approach, as their creative decisions build up into 'case law' which informs later decisions, and so on.

Over time, I suggest this type of Bible gives rise to, or morphs into, a document or database which is mostly concerned with maintaining consistency; the '**Production Bible'**. So fifthly, and particularly with firmly established traditional series and soaps where there's a big writing team and writers change more often than the cast or characters, there's **(E) the perceived need to set down the existing rules of the show**; to codify the 'case law'. This kind of Bible is about underpinning the consistency of a successful formula, so that writers can create new episodes in line with previous ones. Such a show has already proved its worth. There's enough story-world established to become a rich source of detail, but inconsistency is also a danger for new writers who are not familiar with it, as they might stray 'outside' the framework. Eventually the Bible becomes a database, an archive of 'fictional facts', to be consulted when the storyworld history is important. There may also be an acknowledged expert or 'walking Bible' on the staff, the go-to person with an amazing memory. Such resources are used for producing packs of information for new writers –sometimes <u>also</u> called a Bible, as noted above for *The Bill* (1984-2010) (Fig.3).

INSERT Fig. 3: *The Bill* Writers Pack c.1990 (E)

[12] Personal conversation, 03/12/15

The *Emmerdale* Writer's Pack has a list of who lives where in the village, and detailed bar prices at the local pub. There's a map of the permanent set so the writers can orientate themselves and their characters (Fig.4). Within the soap genre convention that pretends the action takes place in real time, it helps to know that the village pub, the Woolpack, is next door to the village guest house but quite a distance from Wishing Well Cottage, where the Dingles live.

INSERT Fig.4: *Emmerdale* Writers Pack 2012 (E)

The last type of Bible is another selling document – this time its purpose is **(F) to sell the completed show,** or the **Format Bible** for local production. The trade in scripted formats has been well researched at the economic and cultural levels (Moran 2006; Straubhaar 2012; Chalaby 2016 *etc.*), referring to scripts which 'as a general rule… need more adaptation than unscripted entertainment' (Chalaby 2016:15). For format sales Jean Chalaby refers to a 'knowledge transfer mechanism, routinized as early as the 1970s' (2016: 15), probably the production Bible **(E)**, but the sales documents intended to sell produced shows are shorter, edited versions of the same screen idea, and these pre-date the 1970s.

As a series format, **(F)** has similar components and a similar approach to the Selling Bible **(B)**. It also needs to enthuse and stimulate the reader, but this time it is also going to include 'para-Bible' information: showbiz information about the cast and production team, the success of the series domestically and detailed information on each episode. This is not dissimilar to a film 'pressbook'. It will probably foreground the genesis of the series and its unique selling points, especially if it's a spin-off. A

random example from a collection of historic sales booklets from the UK distribution company ITC is for a half-hour filmed TV series called *Whiplash* (1960-61) (Fig. 5), shot in Australia and starring Peter Graves, the brother of James Arness (famed for playing Western heroes, such as Matt Dillon in *Gunsmoke* (1955-75)). The emphasis is on locations, history and the stars, with the clear hope that tales of the old Australian Outback will rival the then popular tales of the old American West.

INSERT Fig. 5: *Whiplash* Sales Document c.1962 (F)

When selling formats, the British company ITV Studios does not produce international Bibles for their long-running soaps *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street.* ITV's John Whiston says they do an initial summary pitch document which 'sums up the show and what makes it tick.' This includes four key things for any Bible – the overall concept/rationale, information about setting/place, character biographies, and some storyline examples. Whiston presents a short powerpoint offering 'the DNA' of the serial which, for *Emmerdale*, he summarises pithily as 'beautiful, but claustrophobic'. And then, if there is interest in buying it, an ex-producer or storyliner with significant knowledge of the soap will work with the new production company (as a 'flying producer'[13]), and ITV will give them access to the back catalogue of stories and characters, to create 'some sort of amalgam of the shows with the local taste and appetite.' So the whole archive of records – format Bible, scripts and produced seasons – becomes the primordial soup from which to create new life. It starts the process again, of re-thinking the screen idea for that different market; what

[13] In Jean Chalaby's phrase (2016:15).

they did, says Whiston, with the Chinese version of Granada TV's *Coronation Street*, called *Joy Luck Street*.[14]

What Bibles contain

So, what do these Bibles contain, usually? There's the usual internet advice on this (e.g. Hay 2016), but its authority is unclear. From my random sample I concluded that, as well as gimmicks or spin designed to sell the project (in Bible type **B** in particular) eight or nine elements are likely to be found to some degree (listed below). Of these, there are probably **four core narrative elements – of concept, place (including setting, and perhaps shooting location), character, and some storylines**, shown below as **(1)**, **(2**&**3)**, **(4)** and **(9).**

There is always **(1) some indication of what the basic story is about; the premise or basic concept.** This is likely to refer to format as well as genre. Conventionally this is summarised first in one or two lines, such as this one from a recent Selling Bible **(B)**:

> [A] continuing drama based around a busy... police station. Starting on the day a long dormant feud between two local families is brutally re-ignited.
>
> *Bible X*[15]

Then there is **(2) place, story settings.** The screen idea cannot be understood without this, as it affects the drama. A story of bitter jealousy and rivalry may play out differently when set in Antarctica, to the same story set in the Seychelles, for

[14] See Poole (2000). Occasionally the DNA works the other way and prevents a sale. Whiston mentions another territory which was interested in *Coronation Street,* but who stipulated nobody could have extra-marital affairs because that was culturally unacceptable. That eliminated such a large proportion of the *Coronation Street* storylines that there was no deal. Information from interviews with Whiston in 2012.

[15] I have anonymised the Bibles donated to this study, as here.

example, and the setting is likely to be important to the intended audience. Related to this, but more relevant to the purpose of costing out the proposed production, is **(3) locations.** If there is a need for 18th century Georgian London for a period series, re-creating this must be clear for cost purposes, and the Bible has to be written with an awareness of what might be feasible in production.

All the sources I have trawled mention **character biographies (4)**, or at least key character traits. A biography may include some character backstory, or not. Part of this is about seeing the potential for inherent antagonism between characters, as well as their individual flaws and skills, unfulfilled desires and motivations. It is likely that within the current orthodoxy, the Bible might highlight something that identifies key characters as unique – perhaps difficult but still noticeable in Bibles in the familiar genres, like police and crime series.

It may be that the Bible includes **(5) a rationale.** In other words, why this idea, why now? It may well be a direct address to the potential buyer, or a justification submerged in another section. For example, when talking about structure and style, it's not unusual to mention similar series or touchstone movies, in order to prompt visual images and recollection of narrative style, as well as associations with previous success. For example, *Bible X* says it is '*ER* meets *House* meets *24*', and goes on to explain the screen idea in terms of real-time 'ticking clock' dramas, and that 'the real-time concept provides the defining concept for the series'. This is hyper-textual allusion, in commentary form rather than within the narrative of the Bible. Throughout a Bible, the placing of the reader varies, some elements presented as a direct telling of the proposed narrative, elements of the story-world and so on; and others where the project is being described at one remove, introducing relevant material contextual to the project as a production.

**(6) Structure and style** are probably linked. The phrase 'continuing drama', for example, could suggest the lower end of budget TV series in many aspects of production, with a structure of inter-mingling storylines, each of which lasts a week or two, with these storylines climaxing and ending, one after another like waves on a beach, endlessly. But, if the same Bible suggests 'each episode [is] a mix of crime of the week stories... and the ongoing serial arcs', it might suggest a different style of doing things, closer to *The Bill* than to *Emmerdale*. Writers and viewers are both perhaps aware of the potential for more complex TV, as the use of terms like series arc and character arcs in this recent example suggests (see also Mittell 2015 *etc.*). If the Bible is trying to sell the show, it might at this point include claims of working against formula, of its originality, including examples of how this might happen, as with this example, also from a Selling Bible **(B)**.

> Tiny moments are dropped into the action where we get glimpses into the character's personal lives. These moments are intentionally intriguing, enough to whet our appetites, but not so much that (a) we feel we know where the story's going and (b) we feel we're watching another one of [these types of] melodrama that crowd the TV schedules already.
>
> *Bible Y*

Some series, particularly those in familiar genres like medical, police and period dramas are going to depend on **(7) research** into procedures, routines and specialist knowledge, including of innovation in the real world. The need for novelty in new series product can sometimes be answered by new factual knowledge like new developments in policing, or the establishment of new Major Trauma Units sitting alongside the old Emergency Room. The realism of the eventual production will need to be underpinned by incontrovertible facts like police terminology or known practice, plausible staff hierarchies, accurate terminology and so on, if it is not to be

undermined by knowledgeable viewers and their trivia pages. The Screen Idea Work Group (SIWG) will need a reliable level of knowledge, and the Bible presents something of this, specifically in order to gain trust from the SIWG and those who commission its work.

Faith in the realism, and consistency throughout the storyworld and series history extends to **production detail (8)**, which is particularly relevant once the series is running and the Bible becomes an Archive, a resource for the writers to refer to when they need it **(version E)**. This is 'case law', where long-running series establish certain fixed elements of the story-world, such as where people live, what drinks they prefer, and the price of these drinks, even someone's mother's maiden name (as the writer Jane Espenson has pointed out in relation to *Frasier* (Espenson 2008)). Place also comes up again here in an overlap with set plans and location maps – in other words, how the drama can be choreographed.

Finally, once the Bible reader has been introduced to the screen idea as a whole, we get to examples of **individual storylines or episode synopses (9).** Unsurprisingly these can be short synopses or longer, more detailed treatments and step outlines, often of episode 1 in the Selling Bible **(B)**, or of more episodes in Season Bibles **(D)** and Format Bibles **(F)**. With some Bibles, episode 1 might already have been worked up into a full script.

Example: *The Wire* (2002-08)

What seems to be the Selling Bible **(B)** for *The Wire* (2002-08) can be found online (Simon 2000). It's dated 6 September 2000, nearly two years before first transmission, and is 79 pages long (already breaking the advice on Bibles from

several bloggers), a length which may be explained by a note from David Simon at the end of the introduction which says,

> [B]ecause this show relies on the singular spine of one wiretap case to link every episode and propel the story, more advance work has been done on the beats than might otherwise be necessary with another drama.
>
> Simon (2000:3)

This apparently minor explanation turns out to be a statement of intent around a concept, showing the clarity of David Simon's vision for structural innovation, and his intention to work outside the mould for conventional police procedurals. The Bible here has conventional elements – an overview, followed by notes on the setting, followed by character notes, followed by what he specifically calls the Bible – a series of treatments for 8 episodes, detailing from between 18 to 27 beats for each one. In just that note, and in the treatment for any one episode, we have what viewers will recognise as two of the signature tropes of the series, already in place, apparently before the script stage; the long series arc and the multiple protagonists/ensemble approach that is so effective in presenting breadth in the story-world, and different viewpoints.

The treatment of characters in *The Wire* Bible is significant. Scrolling down the character list, we can see that McNulty, named McCardle here, is 'very good at his job, arrogant... divorced, iconoclastic and indifferent to the caprices of authority' (Simon 2000: 7). In other words, quite close to any conventional flawed but brilliant maverick hero we've seen over the years, from David Callan in *Callan* (1967-72) to Alec Hardy in *Broadchurch* (2013-2017), to refer just to UK examples. You might be forgiven for thinking this is the conventional hook that gets the HBO executive reading on. But thereafter we find the range of police characters that make *the Wire*

so particular, as clear as day to the post-series reader. Herc is described as ‘white, muscular.. dumb as a box of rocks. [He] lives to do street-level rips and nothing more’ (Simon 2000: 7). On the other hand, the street characters are less connected to the ones we finally saw on screen – Bubbles is described as ‘sixty... an AIDS case who quickly becomes a willing informant... a simple but valuable source of basic-street-level info’ (Simon 2000: 9). The final character of Bubbles, played by Andre Royo, is so much more than just a change to a younger man, by the time we see him on screen. Similarly Omar is described in the Bible as ‘an independent soul... [who]...is stupid fearless’ (Simon 2000: 9), but there’s no hint of the later discovery that he is gay, in a gangster world where that might be a danger in itself. What comes across is both the huge range of characters involved and David Simon’s clear vision of them as individuals. The screen idea clearly works in the order of setting, characters, and story, as one might expect (and as Beau Willimon is reported to follow with *House of Cards* (Anderson-Moore 2015: 3)).

Commandments, or Building Blocks?

How are these Bibles used and understood? Once past the early development stage, is it treated like a tablet of stone, with immutable rules designed to keep the series framework intact, or is it more like a biological formula, which can be used to grow different and variant stories, but all belonging to the same family?

The religious association with the word ‘Bible’ suggests a desire to have a document to be followed and obeyed, and this chimes in with the discourse of screenwriting manuals like McKee (1999). However Jonathan Ames, the creator of TV series *Bored to Death* (2009-11) and *Blunt Talk* (2015-2016), explains how the story infrastructure becomes established in a more flexible fashion.

> Before I meet with the writers, I spend a month or two putting together a big document of ideas and images and snippets of dialogue, storylines for the characters, arcs, where I see the season going. It's kind of a big thing of clay. Then what I do with the writers is we spend about two months taking that big thing of clay and chopping it up into episodes. By talking about it, the clay transforms and new ideas emerge and as a team we plot everything out and come up with very strong outlines for everything. Then we go to script.
>
> Ames (2014)

One experienced UK TV and radio drama writer is clear that the Bible can be, and is, rewritten during the whole life of a TV series. Having become a template, says Writer B, the Bible becomes a reference point for the showrunner, a statement of the series' over-arching purpose, with notes on the tone, the purpose, the character, a sense of the target audience. However, it is not just about the document(s) but about its use, development and interpretation by the Screen Idea Work Group, in response to external factors including season renewal and audience reaction, and internal story possibilities. The soap *Emmerdale Farm* (1972-1989) changed to cover the whole village of *Emmerdale* (1989 to 2017), for example.[16] While the screen idea for a single drama or a film is developed through several stages until production is complete, the Bible for a TV series refers to an ongoing process where the template might need to be firm over a season, but is then open to re-development between seasons.

For example, it could be argued that the popular British TV series *The Avengers* (1961-69) followed a period of fairly flexible development in the first three, videotaped, seasons, until associate producer Brian Clemens joined the show, to be henceforth produced on film, from season 4. Then it became quite fixed. Clemens

[16] John Whiston of ITV Studios notes the original village name of Beckindale changed, to distance itself from the fictional plane crash tragedy there; and to move storylines further away from the show's agricultural roots (email 18th Feb 2017).

introduced more ground rules (Rogers 1983:77) and, whether written down or not, Clemens' power and influence clearly chiselled them in stone for the Diana Rigg era. They owe much to a single vision, and Clemens was a showrunner before the term was invented. His vision was clear and detailed. 'We don't kill women in *the Avengers*' he said. And 'you will not see anything so common as blood' (Rogers 1983: 77). Some of these rules would cause problems today, for example:

> We admit to only one class... and that is the upper [class]. Because we are a fantasy, we will not show a uniformed policeman or a coloured man. ... If we did introduce [them] we would have the yardstick of social reality and that would make the whole thing quite ridiculous. Alongside a bus queue of ordinary men in the street, Steed would become a caricature.
>
> (Rogers 1983: 77).

A particular view of Britishness was brought to the fore in this fantasy world, right down to rules about the dialogue – a car is not an automobile, and a lift is never an elevator (Rogers 1983: 77) – arguably a USP for *The Avengers* which still resonates with audiences outside the UK today, for good or ill.

Creative members of the SIWG on a continuing series will always be debating the parameters of that show, in relation to what has been established, and alongside genre and external factors. Discussions around the *Emmerdale* table when new storylines are pitched include, not infrequently, the dismissive 'we've already done that' to the equally damning 'that's too soapy' and the possibly more negotiable 'she wouldn't do that; it's not in her character'.[17] In development and during production this belief in 'real' characters can change the drama and, as producer Tony Garnett says, 'the creation of living characters may result in them pursuing a different narrative structure to the one in the screenplay' (2017: 138). But, when a show hits

[17] Comments noted by the author, at *Emmerdale* story conferences, in 2012.

on a very successful format, like the Diana Rigg-era of *The Avengers*, rules probably become less negotiable, more constraining and perhaps even more formulaic.

## Conclusion

How we regard a Bible – as tablet of stone or as DNA - depends on the way the document(s) is or are being used at that time. The 'forward momentum' of creative development favours building on the DNA; a 'backward-looking' tablet of stone reminds us of the essential unchanging (and successful) character of this particular screen idea. The DNA view runs the risk of developing too far away from the origins. The stone tablet view runs the risk of becoming too constrained, formulaic. Perhaps Ames' (2014) 'tablets of clay' fits, suggesting an appearance of permanence which can still be re-moulded. Perhaps the term 'Bible' is a good compromise description, as TV Bibles, like their religious counterparts, have authority, significance, and the purpose of shaping future behaviour; but they can also be resisted, disobeyed or interpreted in creative ways.

Screenwriting scholarship has an important role to play here, which may involve re-thinking the traditional emphasis on the screenplay. Undoubtedly the screenplay is the most visible and mature document of a scripting process, but even in film production where, arguably, a 'Bible' is necessary mainly for big complex productions or franchises (effectively series), such documents exist alongside, and inform, the screenplay. Film-makers have always relied on personal practices to inform or replace conventional documents, during the developing production. Alex Munt's account of the documents and practices used in the origins and development of Jean-Luc Godard's *Film Socialisme* (2010) is instructive in understanding Godard's 'search for coherence' in Kathryn Millard's phrase (Munt 2016; Millard

2014: 44-5). In mainstream film practice Steven Price refers to Francis Ford Coppola's 'bible text' for *The Godfather* (1972).

> This was a kind of private, parallel-text version of the script – a very personal kind of treatment, and one that, for Coppola, in many ways took priority over the more conventional screenplay that he debated with the studio executives. 'The bible' was a huge spiral notebook, resembling the theatrical prompt book (or 'bible') form, on each page of which Coppola pasted a page from Mario Puzo's source novel…
>
> Price (2013: 196)

What these examples mean in terms of a textual politics of the screenplay, to use Steven Maras' phrase (2009: 96), remains to be seen. In simple terms, however, the importance of Bible documents – those intended to set out the early ground-rules of the screen idea – is clear.

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Abstract

The term ‘bible’ is applied loosely to a document setting out the essential elements of a screen narrative, usually a TV series but also a film (especially if it is complex or part of a franchise) or digital medium. Advice from published manuals, and information from professional writers suggest its use, form, purpose and meaning is both vaguely applied and little understood. Investigation of around 40 such Bibles, plus another 90 historic sales documents, mostly from the UK, suggests a series bible can be defined as:

> A document (or documents) which propose(s) a screen idea, in ways which identify it as a unique story-world or narrative context sufficient to host new stories yet to be written.

The term bible covers at least six different types of document: (A) a writer’s framework, (B) a sales document, (C) a re-definition of the elements after purchase; (D) a development tool; (E) a ‘codification’ or archive of story ‘case-law’; and (F) a sales document for the finished screen-text. The elements included vary in each, but the core items are usually concept, place, character and storyline examples. A bible may not actually be a document; it can for example be a wall-chart during development stages (D), or even a human expert in the series’ story history (E) – a ‘walking bible’. The question of how we are to view it, whether as a statement of the DNA (or essence) of a narrative yet to be produced, or as Tablets of Stone whose information is regarded as sacred, depends on how the Bible is being used at the time, i.e. whether the Screen Idea Work Group is looking forward to a new series, or backward to ensure new ideas fit the understood template.

Keywords

TV Bible

TV Series

Format

Pitch

TV Sales

TV market

Screen Idea

Script Development

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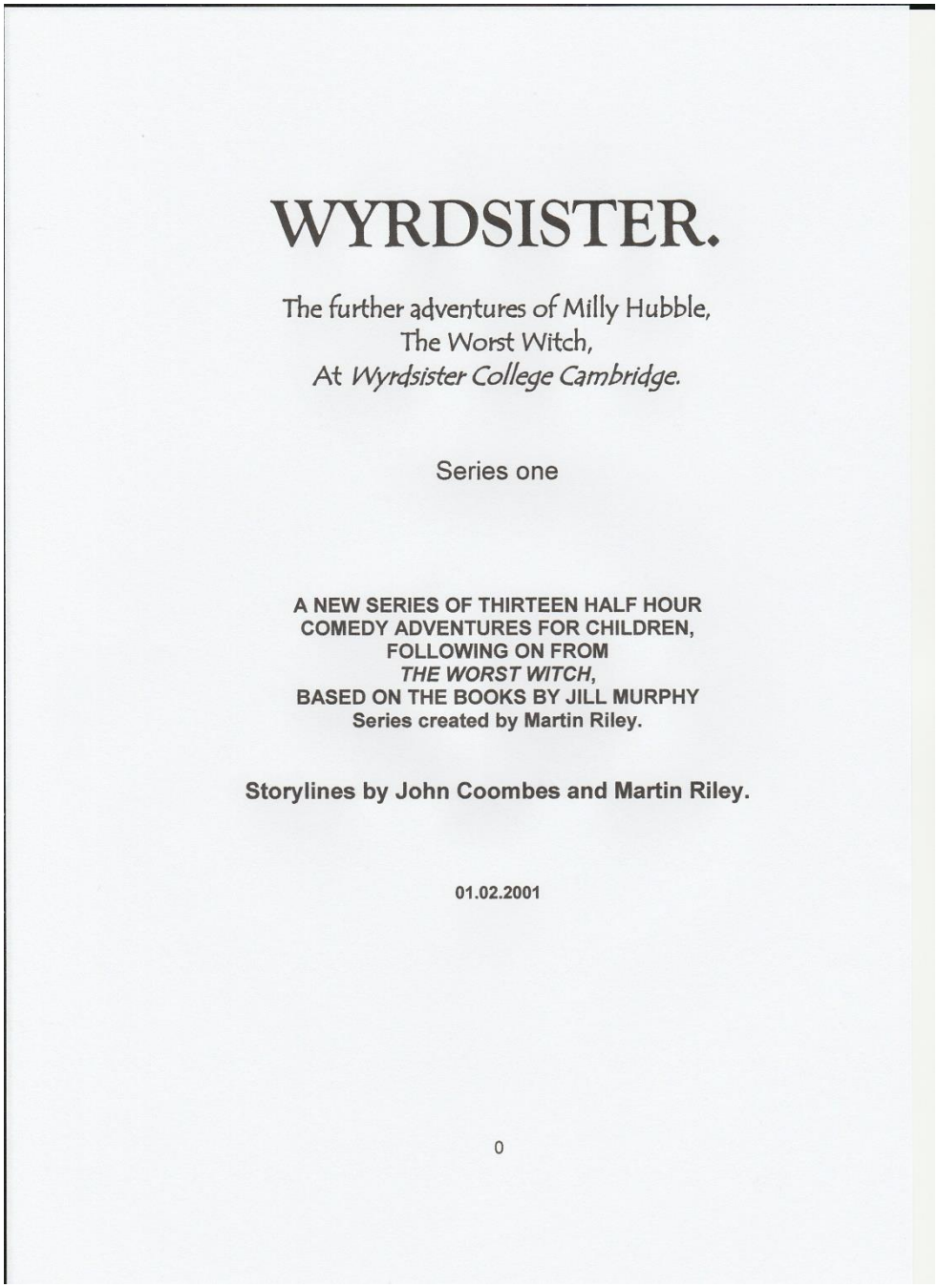
Illustrations



# WYRDSISTER.

The further adventures of Milly Hubble,
The Worst Witch,
At *Wyrdsister College Cambridge.*

Series one

**A NEW SERIES OF THIRTEEN HALF HOUR COMEDY ADVENTURES FOR CHILDREN, FOLLOWING ON FROM *THE WORST WITCH*, BASED ON THE BOOKS BY JILL MURPHY**
**Series created by Martin Riley.**

**Storylines by John Coombes and Martin Riley.**

**01.02.2001**

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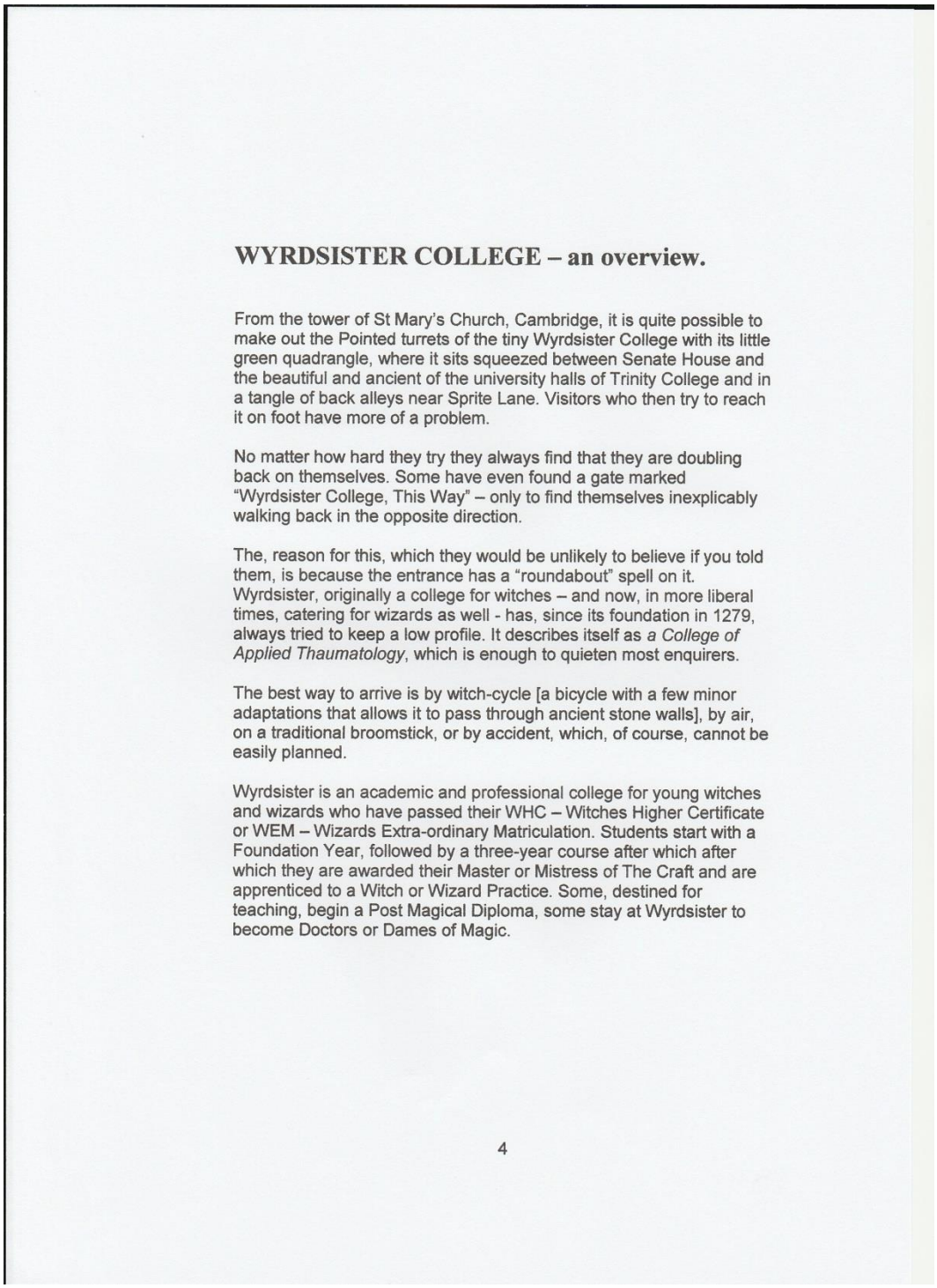
Bible Type B: Selling the screen idea 2001. *Wyrdsister* (Riley 2001)



## WYRDSISTER COLLEGE – an overview.

From the tower of St Mary's Church, Cambridge, it is quite possible to make out the Pointed turrets of the tiny Wyrdsister College with its little green quadrangle, where it sits squeezed between Senate House and the beautiful and ancient of the university halls of Trinity College and in a tangle of back alleys near Sprite Lane. Visitors who then try to reach it on foot have more of a problem.

No matter how hard they try they always find that they are doubling back on themselves. Some have even found a gate marked "Wyrdsister College, This Way" – only to find themselves inexplicably walking back in the opposite direction.

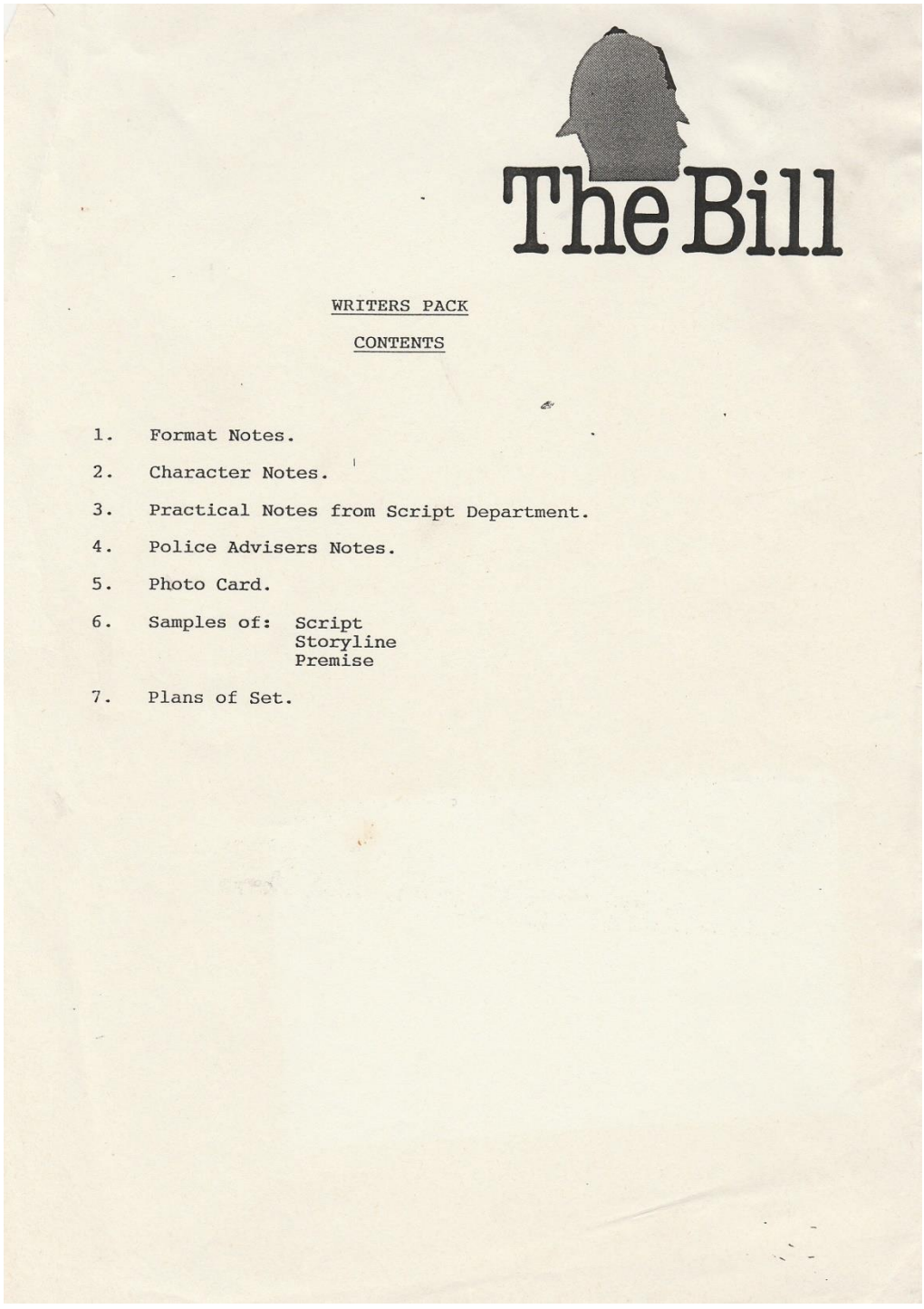
The, reason for this, which they would be unlikely to believe if you told them, is because the entrance has a "roundabout" spell on it. Wyrdsister, originally a college for witches – and now, in more liberal times, catering for wizards as well - has, since its foundation in 1279, always tried to keep a low profile. It describes itself as *a College of Applied Thaumatology*, which is enough to quieten most enquirers.

The best way to arrive is by witch-cycle [a bicycle with a few minor adaptations that allows it to pass through ancient stone walls], by air, on a traditional broomstick, or by accident, which, of course, cannot be easily planned.

Wyrdsister is an academic and professional college for young witches and wizards who have passed their WHC – Witches Higher Certificate or WEM – Wizards Extra-ordinary Matriculation. Students start with a Foundation Year, followed by a three-year course after which after which they are awarded their Master or Mistress of The Craft and are apprenticed to a Witch or Wizard Practice. Some, destined for teaching, begin a Post Magical Diploma, some stay at Wyrdsister to become Doctors or Dames of Magic.

4

Bible Type B: Selling the screen idea 2001. *Wyrdsister* (Riley 2001)



The Bill

WRITERS PACK

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1. Format Notes.
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4. Police Advisers Notes.
5. Photo Card.
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Bible Type E: Writer's Pack c.1990. *The Bill* (1984-2010)

Bible Type E: Writer's Pack, 2012. *Emmerdale* (1972-2017)

Bible Type F: sales document, c.1961. *Whiplash* (1960-61)