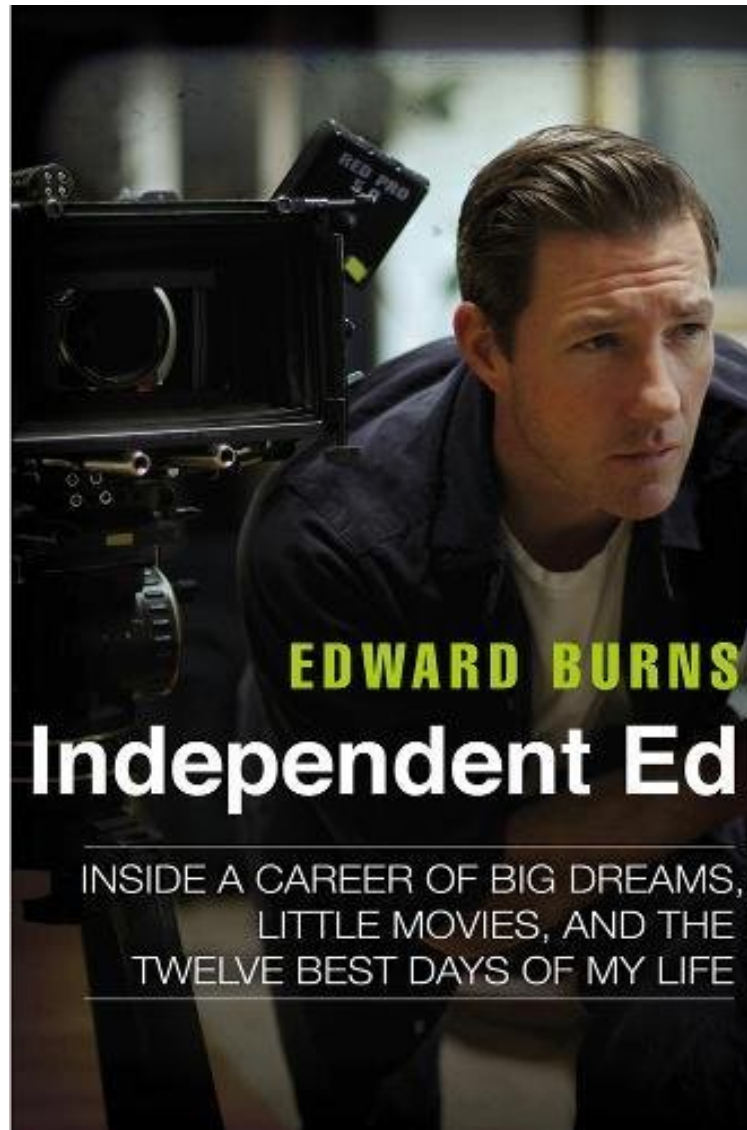


# Independent Ed: Inside a Career of Big Dreams, Little Movies, and the Twelve Best Days of My Life

Edward Burns, Todd Gold

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**Edward Burns, Todd Gold : Independent Ed: Inside a Career of Big Dreams, Little Movies, and the Twelve Best Days of My Life** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Independent Ed: Inside a Career of Big Dreams, Little Movies, and the Twelve Best Days of My Life:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. Tale of a Great Entrepreneur By Hock This was a surprisingly candid account that details Edward Burns entire career as a filmmaker. Although he doesn't mention this even once, what it

also is, is a great story about entrepreneurship. I'm an entrepreneur (and I've written one screenplay, collecting dust on a shelf). We think of filmmakers as filmmakers and entrepreneurs as entrepreneurs. Burns is both. He's got a product line - films. Films have a life cycle, like all products, and he proceeds to create a product, learn, take a few steps forward and repeat over the course of twenty years until he's really honed his game. Even more so than that Burns is his own investment portfolio. Outside of his other projects he's made 10-11 films to date. Two or three were big hits, five or six (in his own words) were failures and the remainder were solid singles or doubles that sounded like good experiences, if neither a commercial success nor major failure. Based on the book Burns considers himself a filmmaker over an actor and, although he didn't expressly say it, I believe he probably considers himself a screenwriter above all else. I would have liked to know more about that specific aspect of the process since screenwriting is the part that interests me the most. Perhaps an idea for a follow-up book. Burns also (inadvertently) reminded me just how incredibly difficult it is to sell a script, get a movie made and ... the part that was most eye-opening to me ... get it distributed correctly for commercial success. It is a long, uphill battle that can likely never be won as a side-hobby. Burns has certainly earned his stripes with a career-long devotion not only to writing but to learning, understanding, leveraging and reacting to changes in his industry. Congrats. 3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Multi-talented Burns offers education and inspiration

By Barry Sparks Ed Burns is a multi-talented guy--he's a writer, producer, director, filmmaker and actor. Burns worked at a production assistant for Entertainment Tonight for four years before making his first film, *The Brothers McMullen*. He made the film for \$25,000 in 12 days, and it changed his life. The film won the top award at the Sundance Film Festival, even though it was rejected by hundreds of other film festivals, including the Long Island Film Festival (Burns is from Long Island and the film was shot in Long Island). Despite the success, Burns went for eight years without equaling the success of his first movie. He became adept at making small films, with many of his friends serving as actors, on small budgets. Burns said, "You can always make a movie, but the real problem is how do you get people to see it once it's made." Much of the book details how Burns fought to get his films seen. Burns has been an innovator in using different technologies to release a film. He has become a master at making "microbudget" movies. He said, "For the first time in the history of the cinema, filmmaking does not need to be a capitalist enterprise." Burns, who almost gave up his filmmaking career several times, has sound advice for others: "There are no bad movies. Making movies is a gift, a joy." "We do this because we have no choice; it is who we are." "You must love what you do and do it with everything you have." "Independent Ed" is educational and inspirational, regardless of your aspirations. You do not have to be a budding filmmaker to enjoy this book. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Grade A. By Chris Kasparozza Slim, quick, to the point, a wonderful set of lessons can be derived from Burns' tales of life in the movie trenches. I really enjoyed this and so should fans of his movies, but, particularly, those trying to make their first/micro-budget movies would gain a lot from it. It was written for them more than his audience. This book was not about his personal life, it is about what it takes to succeed doing what you love. Highly recommended if you traffic in The Arts!

An entertaining and inspirational memoir by one of the most prominent practitioners and evangelists of independent filmmaking, and the acclaimed writer, director, and actor (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Friends with Kids*, *Entourage*) whose first film *The Brothers McMullen* has become an indie classic. At the age of twenty-five, Ed Burns directed and produced his first film on a tiny \$25,000 budget. *The Brothers McMullen* went on to win the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival in 1995, and established the working-class Irish American filmmaker as a talent to watch. In the twenty years since, Burns has made ten more films (*She's the One*, *Sidewalks of New York*, and *The Fitzgerald Family Christmas*), while also acting in big budget Hollywood movies (*Saving Private Ryan*), hit television shows (*Entourage* and *Mob City*), and pioneering a new distribution network for indie filmmakers online and with TV's On Demand service (why open a film in twenty art houses when you can open in twenty million homes?). Inspired by Burns' uncompromising success both behind and in front of the camera, students and aspiring filmmakers are always asking Burns for advice. In *Independent Ed*, Burns shares the story of his two remarkable decades in a fickle business where heat and box office receipts are often all that matter. He recounts stories of the lengths he has gone to to secure financing for his films, starting with *The Brothers McMullen* (he told his father: Shooting was the twelve best days of my life). How he found stars on their way up including Jennifer Aniston and Cameron Diaz to work in his films, and how he adhered religiously to the dictum of writing what you know, working as if he was just starting out, and always looking for the next twelve best days of my life. Chronicling the struggles and the long hours as well as the heady moments when months of planning and writing come to fruition, *Independent Ed* is a must-read for movie fans, film students, and everyone who loves a gripping tale about what it takes to forge your own path in work and life.

"Every young, hungry, creative person should view this as a textbook.... It's a how-to." Matt Lauer, *Today*

*Independent Ed* is Burns' inspirational speech to filmmakers wondering how to begin, or how to keep going. *Newsday*

Mr. Burns' charm stems largely from his ability to play the nice, real guy the sort of guy who, despite landing roles in Hollywood films like *Saving Private Ryan*, gets excited when Al Pacino says hi to him in a restaurant. *The Wall Street Journal*, *Weekend Journal*

*Independent Ed* doubles as a handbook for aspiring filmmakers who need to stay afloat in an ever-

mutating business. Metro New York [Ed Burns] prides himself on his ability to pitch, making it feel like I was telling a story while sitting at the bar with a beer in my hand. Fortunately, that's also the easy tone of his memoir, which focuses on his hardscrabble moviemaking career after his initial brush with success 20 years ago. Entertainment Weekly His book is an attempt to dispel some of the myth surrounding filmmaking, and to explain it's like any other craft. A unique voice, thick skin, and a deep love of the work are required and while he makes clear they don't by themselves ensure success, he's used them to find his own fulfillment and to help keep the self-doubt that confronts any artist at bay. The Week Chronicling the struggles and the long hours as well as the heady moments when months of planning and writing come to fruition, Independent Ed is a must-read for movie fans, film students, and everyone who loves a gripping tale about what it takes to forge your own path in work and life. Red Carpet Crash About the Author Edward Burns is a writer, director, and actor. In 2015, he will star in the TNT series Public Morals. He lives with his family in New York. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved. INTRODUCTION My first film was released in 1995. It was The Brothers McMullen, a comedy about family, relationships, sibling rivalry, and growing up after you're already grown up. Shot for \$25,000 in and around my parents Long Island home, it won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, scored at the box office, and got me labeled as one of Hollywood's hottest young independent filmmakers. A few years later, I couldn't get a movie made. You should know that I did not set out to become an indie filmmaker or to make an independent film. I've never given any consideration to those labels and definitions. Besides, what is an indie film? Some people argue that it has to do with subject matter. Some people think it has to do with the size of your budget. Others believe it has to do with how you got your financing or who distributed your film. I've always defined it as a film that is independent of outside influence. And that's all I wanted. The goal has been to make films my own films on my terms, the way I have envisioned them, without any interference. And that last part is tough to pull off. It has required belief, courage, and an unflinching streak of independence. The result has been a labor filled with far more love than frustration, and far more a sense of accomplishment than defeat. And that's the story I have told in this book. As of January 2015, it will have been twenty years since I took McMullen to Sundance. Since then, I have written and directed another ten films. Many of them have had seven-figure budgets (my biggest budget was No Looking Backs \$5.5 million); my last three have cost so little they have been labeled microbudgets. To dwell on the budgets, though, would be to focus on the wrong thing. Independent Ed is about my education as a filmmaker, a producer, and a writer. It's the kind of book I would have wanted to read back when I was in film school or before then, back when I first got the idea of writing scripts and putting those stories on film. In those days, I didn't even know if making a movie was possible. More important, I didn't know it was impossible. I was dumb enough and young enough to believe in my dreams. I like to think I still am. Dumb enough, that is. Which is the message I hope to convey here. In this book, you will read about how I have made movies, why I have made them, and what happened along the way. You will see that the business side of making films is as crucial as the creative process. But nothing can replace the commitment you have to make to your work. If you want to make a film, you simply have to find a way to make it. An important thing to remember: There are no rules when chasing your filmmaking dreams. That's the big takeaway. There is no right way or wrong way to make a movie. You've just got to figure out a way to get it done. And it won't be easy. But that's not why we do it, is it? We do it because we have no choice. It's who we are. And most likely, you'll find that those days on set will be the best days of your life. Eddie Burns Tribeca, New York City 2014 ONE The middle of three children, I was raised in a neighborhood of Irish, Italian, and Jewish families in Valley Stream, Long Island. My dad, Edward J. Burns, was a sergeant with the NYPD. Later, he became the department's media spokesman. My mom, Molly, worked for the FAA and has to get the credit for turning me on to Woody Allen. Soon after we got our first VCR, sometime in the early eighties, she brought home a VHS copy of Take the Money and Run, which, needless to say, I loved. That was soon followed by Bananas and Sleeper. A few years later, it was Annie Hall and Manhattan. But at this point, I had never given any thought to how movies got made or who wrote them, and I certainly had no dreams of becoming a writer myself. Not yet. But my father did. When I was in sixth grade, I wrote a poem that won first prize in the Catholic Daughters of the Americas Long Island poetry contest. It impressed my dad, and from then on he always encouraged me to write and tried to turn me on to writers and novels he thought I might enjoy. One day he came home with two books, a collection of Eugene O'Neill plays and J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye. I never looked at the O'Neill plays, but I immediately fell in love with Salinger's classic coming-of-age story. It was after taking the journey with Holden Caulfield that I first thought about the possibilities of telling stories of my own. I was always a pretty good storyteller. You had to be in my house if you wanted to get airtime at the dinner table. I also never had any problem sitting down for a few hours to tackle a creative writing assignment at school. That was not true of my science fair projects, and I usually received good grades and encouragement from my English teachers over the years. My senior year of high school, I wrote a short story that my English teacher, Mrs. Maxwell, thought was terrific. But much to my dismay, she wanted to include it in the school's literary magazine. I was at first absolutely against this. I thought the story was too sensitive, and I knew my friends would rag on me endlessly. I did not need that abuse going into my last summer before college. However, after sleeping on it, I said okay but with one condition. I asked her not to put my name on it. I would get the satisfaction of seeing my work in print and I wouldn't have to worry about my reputation. Thankfully, Mrs. Maxwell ignored my request. She published the story with my byline, and while there was

a fair bit of ball-breaking from my friends, some were impressed, and the girls... well, long story short, when I went away to college, I thought maybe I would become a writer. I was a pretty good student and a pretty good athlete. If I wasn't playing ball, I was watching it on TV or reading about it in the sports pages. So I figured maybe I'd be a sportswriter. I started my college career at SUNY Oneonta in Upstate New York while being wait-listed at SUNY Albany. After one semester at Oneonta, I was accepted to Albany, where I soon declared myself an English major. During my sophomore year, I started to entertain the idea of becoming a novelist. The picture I had in my head of a novelist's life appealed to my nineteen-year-old sensibilities. I'd write during the day and go out at night. I was getting good feedback on a handful of short stories I had written and decided it was time to start my first novel. I got about fifteen pages into it and realized I was not going to be a novelist. The major issue being that I was enjoying too many nights out and not enough time in front of the typewriter and in the classroom. I was put on academic probation, and it turned out to be a blessing. My advisor issued a blunt warning but also offered a stay-in-school-and-dont-get-your-ass-kicked-by-your-father strategy. Look, if you don't get your grades up, you're going to get kicked out of school, he said. But as an English major, you can become a Film Studies minor, where you watch a bunch of old movies, write a paper, and you're pretty much guaranteed an A. You'll get a couple of As, get your GPA up, and we won't have to kick you out of school. What do you say? The next semester, I took my first film appreciation class. It was called Four Directors, and it focused on Orson Welles, John Ford, Alfred Hitchcock, and Billy Wilder. I was enamored from day one. These men were the heart of the lineup of post-World War II filmmakers, and I tried to watch every film they made. On the first day, we watched Wilder's Academy Award-winning classic *The Apartment*, which I immediately flipped for because it reminded me of the Woody Allen films I loved. It was a New York comedy, small and intimate, and it felt honest. After seeing it, I went up to the professor and asked, All right, who is this guy Wilder? Tell me everything. Fill me in. A Jew from Austria, Wilder fled Hitler and Nazi Germany, where he had worked as a journalist in Paris and then Hollywood. In 1939, he cowrote *Ninotchka*, which earned his first Academy Award nomination and heralded the arrival of an unparalleled talent. The real pleasure of learning about Wilder, though, was watching *Double Indemnity*, *The Lost Weekend*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Seven Year Itch*, and *Some Like It Hot*. His range was astounding, and he wrote and directed like Woody Allen, my reference point in any discussion of film at the time. Now I had another master to revere. I spent that semester devouring film. I was constantly searching for new discoveries. I watched everything: Hollywood classics, French New Wave, Film Noir, Westerns, Italian Neorealism, and of course the great American films of the late sixties and early seventies. One such film from that era was the Peter Bogdanovich coming-of-age movie *The Last Picture Show* starring Cybill Shepherd and Timothy Bottoms as high schoolers in West Texas, and watching it was a life-changing experience, as good art is. You're one person before, then different after. Here was an honest look at friends and families in small-town America. Although Valley Stream, Long Island, is a long way from Texas, I felt like I knew those people. After seeing that film, I knew those were the kinds of stories I've always responded to and those would be the kinds of stories I would like to tell. But the dream of becoming a screenwriter still wasn't born. My eyes opened wider after seeing François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. I had never seen a film like this. Again, I found myself relating to the story and falling in love with the honest approach to the storytelling. That put me on a Truffaut kick. *The Man Who Loved Women*, *Stolen Kisses*, *The Woman Next Door*, and *Day for Night* all reminded me of what I loved about Woody, the delicate balance in tone between drama and comedy. After immersing myself in these films, something else happened. I was no longer thinking about writing novels or short stories. I was thinking about writing films. I was thinking about becoming a screenwriter. So I called my dad and told him that I wanted to write movies. We talked it out. I told him about the movies and filmmakers that were turning me on and that I really felt like I had to make movies. A few days later, he sent me the book *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*. That was my dad; if we wanted to do something, he supported the effort. So I found myself with this book, and the next step was up to me. I had no idea then, but this Syd Field how-to is the bible for every aspiring screenwriter, and for good reason. It tells you exactly how to do it. It delivers on the promise of the title. I had never even seen a screenplay before, but the format I saw in the book excited me; it seemed within my grasp. It was all dialogue. I loved writing dialogue. I would finish a chapter, process the information I'd read, and say to myself, Okay, I can do this. **FILM SCHOOL** That summer, I went to the video store every day and rented movies. I watched with a new attention to detail and determination to learn. *Mean Streets*, Martin Scorsese's first full-length film, and *Spike Lee's She's Gotta Have It*, another breakout first feature, spoke to me. All had a similar sensibility. They were scrappy, intimate films. They were indies before anyone coined the term indies. I returned to Albany for my junior year and signed up for every film class the school offered. Before the end of the semester, I wrote my first screenplay, a semiautobiographical story about my high school basketball team. I thought it could really get made into a movie. Maybe everyone thinks that about their scripts. Why else write them? However, my belief in this script was so strong and passionate that I didn't see any way I could hand my script off to some guy in Hollywood and let him massacre my masterpiece. (I have since reread said script, entitled *Apple Pie*, and it is no masterpiece.) He wouldn't know me. Nor could he understand my experiences. This was a passion project. I was going to have to pull a Spike Lee and learn how to make movies myself. So I began looking into film schools. At the time, my dad, who had gone back to school and gotten his masters while still a cop, was an adjunct professor at NYU. He taught one class each

semester in communications and mass media. I thought that provided me with an inside track to getting in, and I told him I wanted to transfer to NYU, like Marty and Spike, the following year and study filmmaking. I expected him to say he'd make a few calls and see what he could do. He seemed to know everyone. Plus, he was a great dad. He was present and involved in our lives. If my brother, sister, or I had a dream, he was there to help us get closer to them. My mom was the same. But as soon as I mentioned NYU, he said, Look at your grades and look at my salary. And then let's rethink NYU. After researching film programs at other city and state schools, I enrolled for my senior year at Hunter College on Manhattan's Upper East Side. Tuition was about \$600 a semester. My first class was Film Directing 101, and on the first day, the professor, Everett Aison, stood in front of the class and asked which of us wanted to direct films. Everyone of course raised his or her hand. Then he asked how many of us had any acting experience. This time no hands went up. How do you expect to work with actors if you have no idea what you are going to be asking of them? We were silent. He had a good point. What we were going to do this semester is divide into groups of four and you'll create and perform a three- to four-minute play. One of you will be the director, one will be the writer, and the other two will act. The first time, I was picked as one of the actors. A classmate wrote a short five-minute piece about a young Eurotrash couple living on the Upper East Side of New York. I played Jean Paul, and the woman opposite me was Gabrielle. We rehearsed once before class, and we were pretty terrible, which is understandable since I hadn't acted since third grade. And just as I would be years later on day one of Saving Private Ryan, I was scared shitless. But when it was time to put the play up on its feet, something happened that will forever be a turning point to remember. About halfway through the play, I forgot I was in a classroom. I forgot about my nervousness. I forgot about everything except what I was supposed to be saying, thinking, and reacting to in that moment. In other words, I lost myself to the role and became that other person, and it was fun. I now had the acting bug. Afterward, my classmates were generous with their praise. A few of them said I should think about doing more acting. And I did. I put myself in the first film I made, *The Shadow*, a five-minute black-and-white silent movie about a guy who leaves his Upper West Side apartment one night and is followed by a shadow that eventually kills him. Not much acting was required in that one, but I loved the process and knew I was headed in the right direction. **THIS IS WHAT I SHOULD BE DOING** I didn't do any writing until the second semester, when I finally took my first screenwriting class, and this was the next important moment for me. The professor assigned each of us to write a ten-minute film about an isolated incident. I wrote a comedic scene about a high school couple losing their virginity. The next time the class met, the professor announced he was going to read our pieces in front of the class. It was the first time anything I'd written would be read aloud in front of people, and I was terrified. What if my script fell flat? What if no one laughed? What if it turned out I couldn't write? All those thoughts ran through my head as I sat in the classroom waiting for the professor to read my pages. Mine was second or third in line. Hearing the title read, followed by my name, I steadied myself. The professor was a good reader; he got the voices and the rhythm. I turned my head slightly to look around and saw people paying attention. Then came the first laugh. I exhaled, feeling relief. More laughter followed. People were into the piece. I could tell they were caught up and anticipating what was going to happen next. It was one of the greatest feelings of my life, both relief and exhilaration. To this day I can remember exactly where I was sitting in that classroom and can hear myself say, I can do this. This is what I should be doing. The first attempt at writing, directing, and acting: playing the title character, Sco, wielding the murder weapon. For my senior project, I made my most sophisticated film yet. Titled *Hey Sco* and running thirteen minutes, it was about two nineteen-year-old dirtbag losers hanging out behind the bleachers of their old high school. As they drink beer and talk about how they have nothing to do, one of the guys—the character I played—who's holding a shovel but won't say why, finally reveals that he killed their mutual best friend the night before and buried him beneath the football field's fifty-yard line. The writing of the *Hey Sco* script was originally influenced by Paddy Chayefsky's 1955 award-winning movie *Marty*, which my mom had recommended (and I now recommend to you if you haven't seen it). The script had a lot of *Whatchya want to do, Marty?* I don't know. What do you want to do? Again, another story I could relate to and characters I felt I knew. I figured I could make the film for about \$1,000. And luckily for me, the screenplay won a \$500 grant from the college, which covered half of my budget. My dad kicked in the other \$500. (He still says, Without that five hundred dollars from Hunter, where would you be?) I had a three-man, all-student crew, and our equipment came from the school: an old 16 mm CP-16 camera and a Nagra sound-recording device. The two-man cast included myself and my friend and classmate Chris McGovern, now a New York City fireman. We shot behind the bleachers of my high school football field over the course of one long, rainy day, and despite various technical glitches, delays from the weather, and other obstacles I can no longer remember, it was the greatest day of my life. The only part of the process that made me question my decision was syncing sound in postproduction, a process today's film students probably won't ever know. Lucky for them. *Hey Sco* was shown on the local public broadcasting station as part of a student film festival. I couldn't believe it when I got the call. My work was going to be on television! I can remember thinking I had made the big time. It also screened during the Independent Feature Film Market (the IFFM), at the Angelika Film Center, the Greenwich Village art theater that I frequented. You got to screen your film if you paid a fee. I knew that people who bought indie movies as well as journalists and other filmmakers would be there, so I paid the fee and planned to launch myself as a filmmaker. I photocopied five hundred flyers in my dad's office, featuring an image from the film and the

times it would screen during the three-day event. I taped them up on every lamppost in the vicinity of the theater, all over Mercer and Houston, and then repeated the exercise every two hours because some other filmmaker would have thrown their flyers over mine. I also sent VHS copies of the movie to every producer, production company, and distributor in the phone book. My cover note explained that I had written my first screenplay, that I of course would be directing in addition to playing the lead role. (Remember when I said I was just young enough and dumb enough to not know any better?) Then I waited eagerly for people to respond. And one person did. The indie film consultant Bob Hawk. Bob came to my screening and saw some promise in my short film. Bob became a friend and a trusted advisor. Years later, when I brought McMullen as a work in progress to the IFFM, he passed it along to Amy Taubin of The Village Voice. In her IFFM wrap-up article, she mentioned McMullen as a title to watch.

TWOThe summer before I started at Hunter, I went to work at a local TV news station, Fox 5, in New York City. It was an unpaid internship. My dad called a few people he knew and I ended up on the assignment desk that summer. When my classes started in September, they let me work around my schedule, which was a good deal for me. The work was interesting, the people were cool, and the office was off the same subway stop as Hunter. Eventually, I moved from the assignment desk to a paying production assistant gig at another show they produced, The Reporters. As the job got more real, I started attending night classes at Hunter. It was my third semester and, as it turned out, my last semester. My boss at The Reporters was a woman named Alison Meiseles. In charge of hiring and scheduling news crews, she took me under her wing. As a PA, you're expected to bust your ass and hope that someone notices you're working harder than everyone else, which was what happened to me when Alison took me aside and said she was moving to Entertainment Tonight. Were looking for PAs, she said. How would you like to come over there? We can pay you eighteen thousand a year. I didn't even have to think about it. I was making nowhere near that at Fox. I immediately said, Absolutely. I'm there. And that was it. In three semesters, I had taken every film class at Hunter College and shot Hey Sco. I left nine credits shy of graduation and went to work at Entertainment Tonight. The production office, which also included the East Coast studio, was located on the third floor of the Paramount Building in Columbus Circle, now the Trump Hotel. Every day I fantasized about running into one of the Paramount executives from out west, handing him my screenplay, and having my script green-lit there in the lobby. Never mind that I was in New York, not Hollywood, and the execs who ran the studio from out there rarely visited the building. If and when they did visit, I didn't know it. They weren't roaming the halls, making themselves accessible to lowly PAs. I worked at E.T. for four years. Yes, four years—the equivalent of going to college all over again. Like college, some great things happened to me there. My job was to drive the van and help haul equipment to movie junkets and interviews. In between setting up the camera and the lights and then breaking them down, I listened to the interviews. The great thing about E.T. was that we interviewed everyone who came through town to promote their movie. I paid attention to whoever we interviewed, and absorbed everything. Lugging gear as a PA for Entertainment Tonight I remember listening to Al Pacino talk about Scent of a Woman. Only a fraction of the interview made it on the air, but Al sat in the chair for an hour and gave us a master class on acting. I also remember when we interviewed Robert Rodriguez for the release of his debut feature, El Mariachi. We were close in age and he had done what I dreamed of doing. Rodriguez talked about his filmmaking process and it was like a motivational speech. I was getting closer to figuring out how I was going to make this crazy dream of mine a reality.

NO EMPTY HOURS There was another great thing about working at E.T.: It provided me with a place to do my own work. You have to be resourceful when you're starting out, and this was a good example. On some days, I would have to show up early in the morning for an interview at the Today show or Good Morning America. We would get people as they made the rounds of interviews. But our next assignment might not be until four P.M. And so I would spend those empty hours at one of the desks in the crew room and write screenplays. I should correct myself. There were no empty hours. I was always cranking out screenplays. Over the course of the first two or three years I was there, I wrote five or six screenplays. I was hungry. I had stuff to say. I had people in my head clamoring to get out. I also understood that if you're going to be a writer, you have to write. If you don't, it's not going to get done. If you don't do it, that dream ain't gonna happen. And I was determined that something was going to happen for me. Why not? It was happening all around me. I saw Quentin Tarantino's Reservoir Dogs and was blown away. He was the guy I wanted to be: a writer-director-actor who had figured out how to get that first film made. Suddenly, it seemed, the indie film movement was the most exciting thing to happen to American cinema since the arrival of Scorsese, Coppola, Woody Allen, and all the other greats in the late sixties and seventies. Sex, Lies, and Videotape had ignited the fire. Every year, another new filmmaker burst on the scene with a debut feature that was made on a shoestring budget. In 1989, Hal Hartley, a kid from Long Island, made The Unbelievable Truth for \$75,000. A year later, Whit Stillman, another young filmmaker from New York, made Metropolitan for \$225,000 and received an Oscar nomination for Best Screenplay. These budgets were a fraction of a typical Hollywood movie, yet their work was distributed and taken seriously. In 1991, I saw Richard Linklater's film Slacker, another movie from a guy who seemed like me—a kid writing, directing, and shooting a movie about his experiences (he appeared in it), in a world that he knew and that others recognized as their world, too. I read up on it. Budget: \$23,000. The following year, 1992, El Mariachi, Reservoir Dogs, and Nick Gomez's Laws of Gravity, made for \$35,000, hit theaters. I felt another jolt of immediacy. Like the five-figure budgets for The Unbelievable Truth and Slacker, \$35,000 seemed within reach much

more so than if that figure had included one or two more zeros. It was exciting to see guys making small, personal films. They were released in theaters along with big Hollywood films, based on nothing more than merit, because their films were well written and featured talented up-and-coming actors. This was about the time that I started to believe, in earnest, that I could do it. If you don't believe it, if you don't buy into the vision, you're going to have a hell of a time selling someone else on it. Afterward, I had an epiphany. While I was convinced this kind of moviemaking was within my grasp, it dawned on me as I thought about my work that I was not writing the kind of scripts these guys were making. Their films were personal, inspired by their lives, and pulsing with the energy of a new generation. My scripts, on the other hand, were derivative. They were imitations of the filmmakers I'd studied in school. I was copying instead of creating my own path, and in the most important decision I made as a writer, especially as a young writer, I realized I had to find my own voice.

**FINDING MY VOICE** This is the crossroads anyone in their early twenties or anyone thinking back on their early twenties can relate to; it's the moment when you plant a stake in the ground and decide who you are and who you want to become. At least you take a stab at it. I talk about finding my own voice. But the voice is already there. It's inside you, and what you have to do is listen. What's it saying? Which way is it telling you to turn? Although, in my heart, I knew something else was wrong. The problem was with the scripts themselves. They weren't that good. Something had to be wrong with my screenwriting. Simply, I hadn't yet started to write from my personal experiences. As I thought about how to improve my writing, and especially how to make it more original, more mine, I saw an ad for the Robert McKee class in story structure. McKee was a well-known writing instructor specializing in scriptwriting and, more specifically, in the tectonics of writing a screenplay, the nuts and bolts of its structure. His three-day course met in the auditorium at the Fashion Institute of Technology on Seventh Avenue and 26th Street, and it turned out to be the game changer for me. It was now 1993 and I was a full-fledged movie junkie. My life was 100 percent film. I watched movies I needed to watch to further my education as a filmmaker and a fan. I read books on filmmakers. I worked at a job where we interviewed actors and directors, and I wrote scripts in my spare time. It consumed me. So sitting in a room for three solid days, listening to McKee deconstruct scripts and discuss screenplay structure and form, was my idea of heaven. I now know that some people take exception to McKee's theories on structure, but I found it extremely helpful. In addition to explaining traditional Hollywood story structure, probably the most important thing McKee said that weekend was "For your first screenplay, what I'm going to ask all of you is to think about your favorite films and what genre they are. Whatever that genre is, I want you to write that kind of script. If you don't like murder mysteries, don't write murder mysteries. He wasn't suggesting we copy our favorite films or filmmakers. He was telling us to identify what kind of movie we liked and to write that kind of movie. To do what felt natural and, who knows, maybe even enjoy the process. When I thought about what films I loved the most, I instantly knew the answer: Woody Allen movies. So I said to myself, "All right, I'm going to write whatever that genre is; whatever Woody's genre is, that's what I'm going to write. Unlike Woody, though, I added, "I'm also going to try and write a film that I can make for twenty-five thousand dollars. Those were my two goals. I knew I wanted to make a personal film. Like the other indie filmmakers who had come up before me, I knew I had to tell a story that was specific and unique. I had to take the audience to a place they wouldn't necessarily know if not for my film. I also wanted to address a peeve I had with most contemporary movies I was seeing. At that time, few of the movies I saw featured guys my age who talked the way my friends and I talked. I didn't identify with anyone. No one seemed like a real person. My buddies and I talked and related to one another a certain way, and I didn't hear that from people on the screen. I knew I wrote pretty good dialogue, so I thought, all right, I know my movie is going to be about guys around my age, with affinities and situations like me and the people I know. In fact, my brother, Brian, played a part in my search for inspiration. We are very close, only thirteen months apart, and we are regular guys. But over a couple of beers, we would drop our guards and have honest conversations about women. It wasn't just "Hey, I want to get laid. It was more "I think I might love this woman or "I'm afraid of getting married someday. I had a few friends like that, too. Tough guys who, at the end of the night, when it was just the two of us sitting at the bar, were able to set aside all the macho stuff and have a real heartfelt conversation about being heartbroken over the girl who'd just broken up with him. With those images in mind, I began to take notes, thinking about both story and budget. I figured a romantic story that revolved around the city I loved would be a good place to start. No expensive stunts or gunplay, just some guys trying to talk to some cute girls walking down some of my favorite streets in NYC. But I wanted to tell it in an authentic male voice. The guys weren't the kind you saw in a Woody Allen film. Nor were they like the guys in other big Hollywood romantic comedies. For lack of a better description, I imagined them as guys like my friends and me, regular ball-busting neighborhood guys who spend most of their time talking about girls. In fact, that's what I wrote down on a note card: **GUYS TALKING ABOUT GIRLS**. It was simple, timeless, and it encompassed everything I knew was important, since, as I was well aware, everything in a young man's life relates to girls. With that in mind, I began to ask myself, "So what is this movie beyond that? What is going to help this little twenty-five-thousand-dollar indie stand out in the crowd? What else can I bring to it that will give the specificity I know it needs?"