

**private  
peaceful**



# ***PRIVATE PEACEFUL***

## **SIMON READE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT**

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## ***1. What was your route into screenwriting, and what skills does it involve?***

Yeah, my route into screenwriting was, it was quite long I suppose, but it was through the route of being a dramatist. I think of myself more as a dramatist than a screenwriter, partly because I wrote a lot for, or do still write a lot for theatre, as much as for film. But that route to being a dramatist is the same as the route to being an actor or the same route to being a director or the same route as being a DOP probably, actually, in that I, you know, conventionally studied English at university but then went on to work on, flip-flop really, between television and theatre as a kind of script doctor or script editor or dramateur as they're called in theatre now, or literary manager. And that was really getting into the guts of other people's plays and new plays and classic plays and deconstructing them and then fixing them all back together or taking a Shakespeare play, I was the literary manager at the Royal Shakespeare Company for a few years, and most of the time is spent cutting those plays or making sense of complete nonsensical Elizabethan puns. So, that was sort of, you know, over about 20 years I suppose, I was absorbing myself in other people's drama, which then led me to adapt stories for the theatre and then eventually, through theatre, adapting them for the screen.

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## ***2. What appealed to you about working on Private Peaceful?***

Well, I first came to work on *Private Peaceful* because I was engaged in the story and I heard Michael telling the story on the radio, on a news programme, on the Today programme on Radio 4, and I was lounging in my bath one morning and I was immediately gripped by the opening of this story and this idea that it's one young man telling his whole life, looking back on his whole life that is about to be cut short by the firing squad. That led me to dramatise it for theatre and then there was a whole kind of rollercoaster, sort of, that led up to the film. But I think working more and more on the story that I've got engaged with it, both because it's dramatic, but also because it's very truthful about a young person's experience and for me it's the experience of a childlike curiosity where the whole world is seen through the eyes of this very young boy and actually what he is witnessing and bearing witness to is the hypocrisy and the injustices of the so-called adult world, and that's the same as in a story like *Alice in Wonderland* or the same in a story like *Aladdin and the Enchanted Lamp* or the same in Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* when you look at Lyra in Oxford, and that's what draws me to these kinds of stories and this story in particular obviously because it's about war and it's about a young man who's growing up in rural England, which is not a place that you often find articulated in literature, you get a lot of the kind of, you know, the cheerful chappie from the city or you get the urban Tommy; most of literature actually from the First World War is told from the point of view of or written by the officer class and this person isn't from the officer class. So, there's an awful lot of things there that are obviously overlapping that drew me to it but then kept me going and compelled me to keep re-telling this story in different ways. So, actually now I've dramatised it four times: as a one-man show for the theatre; as a piece to be enacted by an entire class of people, of 30 people; as a radio play; and now as a film. So, obviously I'm looking forward, you know, to the podcast on Mars, I think is the only challenge I have left!

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### **3. What are the different challenges of adapting that novel to the screen?**

When I adapted it the first time for theatre, I was very much true to the integrity of the novel which was one person's narrative voice re-creating all these other people that we meet in the story but totally told from this one person's point of view. So, it's a one-man show and he plays, I think, 40-odd different characters in the play but you always know that you're getting Tommo's perspective on this. When we moved it to the screen, we didn't want to do that, we wanted to flesh out this entire community and indeed all the other characters as well. And so, what you do is that you're working less in the world of the imagination, and by that I don't mean it's unimaginative and it's unthinking and it's all literal but I suppose, in the theatre, if you've got one actor and a bare stage, then you're creating everything in your mind's eye and you're doing it entirely through the power of the word. Now, of course, in film, being a visual medium, it's about pictures, it's about the juxtaposition of images, you're able to tell things more succinctly, you're able to give an enormous amount of back story and depth to something without having to write a monologue or, indeed, you know, write an essay about it. So, bringing something to the screen, for me, was an opportunity to really explore both worlds of pre-First World War rural England and then the horror, really, of the trenches. However much you can conjure that in words, however much you can imagine that in the theatre, when you're actually shooting in real mud and real rain, and that's just in the fields, that's not even when, you know, that's not even when you, you haven't even got to the trenches yet, you get a very visceral sense of the reality of it all. Of course, working on screen as well, you're working with directors a much longer period, a whole load of actors who then bring their own sensibilities to bear on the story.



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## ***4. How did you make decisions on what changes to make from the original story?***

Yeah, what's interesting is that I hope people will think that this is very close to the original novel and certainly the spirit of the novel is what informs it all the way through. There was no sense that I came along with my own ego wanting to trash the original work of Michael Morpurgo and impose my own story on it, that's absolutely not the case at all. However, if you look at it scene by scene, you may discover that there are very few scenes in the film that occur in the book, certainly not word for word in the book, despite, obviously there are a few set pieces, because what we'd done is that we'd gone into the worlds of these people that Michael shows people working on a farm and describes people working on a farm but it wouldn't necessarily be dramatic, it would be a fantastic piece of novel writing, and so we've had to choose a moment where there's a confrontation say between, and tension between young Charlie and young Tommo on the farm and that is not something that would occur in the book but you would think it's in the book and you probably remember it being in the book if my screenplay is working properly, which I always hope it is. I mean a lot of things that we've, I suppose we've added or changed is we've extended the stories of the father; we changed the introduction of Molly - in the novel she's already there, in the screenplay she arrives as a result of Tommo and Charlie's father dying, because her father is the man to replace him. So, at every, I suppose, at every step of the way, we didn't just want to re-create the novel but we wanted to increase dramatic tension, we wanted to introduce hurdles to leap over for the story and I suppose that's always the driving thing behind the story, behind the dramatisation. Also, working with a director, they bring their own vision and I was very lucky, as opposed to the director coming in at the end of this process, which is often the case with the screenplay writing, I worked hand-in-glove with the director all the way through all the drafts. And so there's one sequence in particular which does not occur in the book which is the dance at the village hall, which is before the young boys go off to war, and that came partly from Pat O'Connor's remembrance of his childhood - he grew up in rural Ireland - and also partly from his own kind of

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dramateur gene in that he's done those scenes before and he knows that they work in films, in *Dancing at Lughnasa* in particular and I was able to therefore bring together the whole community, the people that were leaving, the people that were staying behind - I have Charlie staying behind, he only joins later, whereas he joins up with his brother in the novel - and able to write what I hope, you know, are little touchstones and expressions of feeling without having to say too much because it's all expressed in this bittersweet dance which is the end of one era and obviously the beginning of the next era. Overall, I think the intention of the screenplay was to make Tommo active rather than passive. I think in the novel, for very, very good literary reasons, he's a sort of, he's a sponge and he absorbs the world around him, and that's why the novel works so well and I think talking with Michael, he was very conscious that once we had that protagonist on-screen, he couldn't just be an observer, he couldn't because you'd lose interest in him as somebody watching the film. So, we, all the way through, I was thinking, "Well, how do I make Tommo make decisions? How do I give him the tools to be the master of his own destiny as opposed to just, you know, allowing things to happen to him?" And that tension was very good actually, being able to have the novel in one hand and the imperatives of storytelling on-screen in the other, and to flesh out and write up the characters in that way.

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## **5. What are some of the significant moments in the screenplay?**

Significant moments in the screenplay for me are multifarious, I think. I mean, there are moments where I have absolutely translated almost word for word what Michael has written in the novel and when I actually saw that being screened was very moved and one in particular is the death of the father who is felled by the tree as he's trying to save his son; what leads up to that I've slightly expanded upon, and what provokes that, I've written myself; but that was a great moment for me, and particularly when we shot it because we could only do it in one take because you don't want to chop down too many trees and so we had three cameras on it, all going at the same time, and it's a very risky business and we all had to clear out of the way while it was done; but it was a very, very important moment, that one, for me, because it was absolutely faithful and true and, as I say, a kind of literal translation of what happened in the book.

There are then moments in it which do not occur in the book at all that I'm very proud of because I think it both takes Michael's story to a place where he might have pushed it had he written a screenplay and had he not been a novelist in the first place, but also, that it does, I mean I said earlier I didn't have an ego, but it does come from me as much as it comes from the story and I suppose those are moments of political anger, I think, and one of the moments that still makes the hairs on the back of my neck tingle is when Charlie confronts the Colonel in the pub when he's sent home from the war, which is sort of in the, it is there in the novel, but precisely what he says is much more politicised than how Michael chose to write it originally. Some of the humour comes from me or comes from the actors that we were working with.

There are other moments where we were five, six weeks into an eight-week shoot and the director would turn up at 7 o'clock in the morning and say, "The scene we're about to shoot in half an hour, I think it needs a re-write", and because I happened to be on the shoot and on location because I was also the producer, I would then very

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calmly, and try not to look like a frightened rabbit, go away in that next half-hour and rapidly re-write a scene and some of the best scenes actually came out of that, one of the scenes is the final farewell of Charlie and Tommo in the cell, which is a mixture of how Michael presented it but also responding to the particular location we had, the particular actors and where we were on the journey of actually shooting the film as well. So, it's very difficult to pinpoint one moment where I think, "Oh, that's the one I'm most proud of," because there's a whole mixture of things that is a mixture of invention, a mixture of faithfulness to Michael's vision, a kind of inevitability that has been thrown up by the new dramatic situations that we have created in the film.

There are a couple of things that would only really ever happen in a film, or in a very bad novel, which are moments of back story, which is a kind of real Hollywood cliché and I kind of, when I was asked to write these things, these moments, I cringed a bit because I thought, "Oh, dear, that isn't necessary to the story, if it was, Michael would have included it." I'm quite glad in the end that I have done, and there are two in particular: one came about because of the casting of Sergeant Hanley, which was Pat O'Connor's old collaborator, John Lynch, who in the novel, it's kind of indeterminate where he's from but John is from the north of Ireland and he chose that part of the world for Sergeant Hanley and that made us realise that there was more of a connection between Hanley and Charlie on-screen than there had been necessarily in the novel, and actually they were two peas out of the same pod and that was partly why Hanley took against Charlie because he saw so much of himself in Charlie and Charlie exposed that or was like a mirror to Hanley and, you know, everything that Hanley hadn't been and so there was a lot of disappointment I suppose from Hanley that was projected onto Charlie which is why he takes against him and that's the kind of back story that Michael had not gone into and why would he need to in a novel and that didn't come from me as the screenwriter until I realised that we had John playing Hanley and I think the day after he arrived on set I sort of rapidly set about, you know, re-writing these little moments.

There's another very moving moment which actually was suggested by my fellow producer, Guy de Beaujeu, which is from the mother - who I actually gave a name to,



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Michael doesn't give a name to the mother, I gave her the name Hazel, Hazel Peaceful - where she talks at the grave of James just before the marriage of her son Charlie to Molly, and she speaks out loud, very simply, at the gravestone, and the idea came from Guy and then I kind of wrote it up and I think I'd written a great big speech and in the end thought, no, this can be expressed in a very simple sentence about her, Hazel, identifying with Molly and Charlie as a kind of reflection of the marriage that she'd had with James Peaceful, which her family had kind of said were from the wrong, he was from the wrong side of the tracks, as it were, and she'd married beneath herself. So, that's a long-winded way, really, of saying I've taken things and pushed them to their, either to their natural conclusions or to their extremes, but whatever, I've hopefully made them as exciting as the novel is to read, I've made them as exciting as a collective experience in the cinema.

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## **6. How did you find working with Michael Morpurgo?**

I have worked a lot with Michael since *Private Peaceful*, that was the first thing we collaborated on, and obviously you have a dance with a writer when you, as a fellow writer but in a different medium, are working with him, I mean, I think Michael would freely admit that he's not, first and foremost, a dramatist, either for theatre or for the cinema, although he does have experience in both, and I'm not first and foremost a novelist either, so, we respect each other's crafts and he's obviously much more experienced than I am, just in terms of life experience and longevity and all the rest of it, however, there was..., because I've worked, before I worked on *Private Peaceful* with, particularly with Michael's, on Michael's mentor Ted Hughes' *Tales from Ovid* when I was at the Royal Shakespeare Company and also on Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, he knew that I was able to work with, kind of, great literary works and writers and work in a sensitive way. What's lovely about working with Michael is that he's not always right instinctively about something that might work in the theatre. I mean, he famously, when we were casting *Private Peaceful*, the one-man show, for the first time, didn't want the brilliant actor who ended up playing it because in the audition he wanted the actor who already gave the finished performance whereas I was able to say, because of my theatre experience, "Michael, in an audition, you don't want someone to give the finished performance, you want to see the potential, you want to know that they've got somewhere to go and they've got depths to dig in to." What he also, because he's worked on so many war stories and he has a particular view of war, I think, which is about - I mean, whoever thinks war is right other than the people who make money out of it, I suppose - but his particular view is what is the damage it does to children but also I think there's kind of responsibilities it gives to young people as well, and that's where he comes from, whether it's..., and I've worked with him on *Private Peaceful* and then *The Mozart Question*, which is a story that has the holocaust at its heart and on *Toro! Toro!*, which is about the Spanish civil war, and I've also worked with him in concert; I've worked with Michael as an actor as well, you see, because I think that's an interesting thing, that he, I mean, I haven't been the actor, he's been the actor

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and so I've been the director and we've done some concerts together where he and other actors perform, with some musicians, his stories and that's been very interesting. So, we've built up over nearly a decade now quite a lot of trust as director and performer, as one kind of writer and another kind of writer. I'm very keen for him to see each draft. I make him sit down and watch a dress rehearsal if it's in the theatre, or a preview, rather than come to the swanky opening night, and he was a bit disconcerted on *Private Peaceful* to actually watch the, what's called the director's cut, which is before it's graded, before the sound is done, before all the music is put on, which can actually be quite a deadening experience if you're not used to watching that kind of thing and he didn't enjoy having to do that at all and I dragged him there unwillingly. He was deeply impressed but he was also able to see the whole process and understand all the different layers that are added on afterwards and have some kind of input into it. It's very important I think when you are working with a living writer, I said earlier I've worked with Shakespeare, and working with dead writers is a real shame because there's nobody to have a dialogue with and being a writer is a very lonely business and being a novelist is a very lonely business, but what Michael's been able to do, and what he's enjoyed, is working in these theatrical or in these cinematic contexts, as a writer, to be able to interact and see his pieces made flesh so that it's not just about the relationship between him and a reader. But yeah, he and I have a good relationship. I will always check things with him, sometimes to a point where he says, "Get on with it yourself. Don't bother about me. Trust your own instincts. You don't have to keep referring back to me." But I just think it's important to remain in touch with the originating voice, with the person who had the very first vision of it and I think Pat would say the same as a director, that although he very much makes the film his own medium, all the early development work were very, very long conversations with Michael, going to see him and wander the places where he sets the story, which is in his home village in Devon, with very specific fields and very specific rivers and very specific geography that he has, even though we then ended up shooting the film somewhere else, it was important to see where the story came from. Michael was also an executive producer on the film *Private Peaceful*, and I think that that responsibility to the larger demands of film-making, he was very good at, actually, he didn't just say, "Oh, I'm just the writer."

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Don't bother me with the things about raising money or the agonies of casting or the delays in filming or the weather or, you know, when things go over budget or go over time," all that sort of thing. He enjoyed being kept in the loop of that and I think that's really important. I mean, I'm a writer, who also directs, who also produces, I'm also a father of four children, I like this whole kind of multi-tasking thing, and I think, as a creative artist, it's very important to have as many experiences and to juggle all these things that you can at the same time and Michael's certainly been very good at that and in parallel with being a writer all these years, he was running a charity and a farm and bringing up three children as well, so, you know, he's... I suppose the two of us probably have more in common than we, yeah, than you might think at first sight, which is why we get on. I'm actually the same age as his sons, I guess, and he was born in exactly the same year that my father was born, I don't have a father anymore and maybe there's a kind of surrogate thing going on there but this isn't the analyst's couch so I won't go into that anymore.



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## **7. Who is the audience for this film, and how do you deal with the more difficult themes?**

A lot of people have asked me who's the audience for this film. When I'm with the marketing people, very specifically, they say, "Well, it's 11 to 15 year old boys who haven't necessarily read Michael Morpurgo's novels", which is a way, I suppose, of really focusing down, as you have to with marketing, about who you want to reach, both because commercially they will bring you more bums on seats, but also because you won't necessarily need to lure people who will come to see it anyway and obviously with Michael's work, he was really one of the first of the kind of publishing phenomena of crossover literature where his work was able to be read by children and adults unashamedly on trains and on planes and in public without having to hide what the novel is, and, of course, with a piece like this, there's an intergenerational thing between grandparents and parents and children. So, it's kind of difficult, which is why the marketing people do pinpoint the audience so specifically because if you say, "Oh, it's all things to all people", that's not that helpful, but that is what it is. What's extraordinary about that is of course, in all Michael's work, and particularly in *Private Peaceful*, and probably *Private Peaceful* more than in any other work that he's ever done, is that he doesn't make any concession to the fact that he is known as a children's author. You find him in the Aged Nine to 12 Section in the bookshops, this film will be, you know, a 12A or whatever, but yet, he doesn't make any concession to the fact he's writing for young people and he deals with very, very sophisticated, very painful, very adult emotions and it isn't just, "Oh, it's because it's about war or it's about love interest and implicit sex", you know, somebody gets pregnant for God's sake out, of wedlock, a hundred years ago, you know, unheard of, not unheard of, of course; he confronts these things absolutely head on and that is why I think, you know, why his books are so popular with parents, with teachers, with grandparents and with children, because he doesn't patronise. There are many very successful children's authors who patronise their readers and those are the authors I never am drawn to adapt. I'll adapt Geraldine McCaughrean, I'll adapt Philip Pullman, I'll adapt Michael Morpurgo

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absolutely because of the seriousness with which they treat life's experience for children. I think the other important thing of course is that a child's experience is more true and more honest and less compromised and less mucked up by what happens as soon as we go through late adolescence and into adulthood where we lose all our ideals and our zeal and we start to talk about evolutionary change and changing things from within and it's all a kind of fudged nonsense that, you know, that leads to dissatisfactions and unhappiness and too many people popping Prozac, whereas kids have a better view of the world and what is so appealing about these stories for an adult is that they reawaken that childlike engagement, not childish engagement, but childlike engagement with life, the curiosity of it, the passion of it, the fascination with it, the belief that you can actually have an impact in a small way, or indeed in a big way, you can change things, you can go on these emotional rollercoasters and come out at the other end better and, in that kind of cliché, better to have loved and lost than to never have loved at all; I mean, it's better to have lived than to have not lived; better to say, "Yes" to experience than to say, "Oh, no, I won't do that because, you know, I've learnt too much about etiquette and adult codes and all that sort of stuff". So, all of these things I think are what make these stories that Michael tells uncompromising, what makes them appeal to everybody and particularly what makes them appeal to young people because, you know, at last a young person has a storyteller that is telling the story as a child sees the world. A child doesn't look at the world and think of themselves as a six-year old or an eight-year old or as a 12-year old, they see themselves as an equal with their grandparents or with their friends in the playground or with their parents. Me being the father of four children growing up, there have been a couple of very interesting moments, for me, where I've really appreciated that. There's a famous statue in Brussels called the Manneken-Pis, it's probably better pronounced in Flemish or French as pis or something like that, which is basically of a legend or maybe a true story where there was a fire in Brussels, a bit like the Fire of London, that was allegedly put out by a tiny little boy who widdled on the flames and so he becomes this kind of hero. What happens is that everybody makes a beeline, when they get to Brussels, for this statue and it's very funny, you know, it's a little boy having a wee, "Ha, ha, ha, he's got his willy out" and there he is, peeing as a fountain. We took my

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six-year old to see it and he looked around at all these adults laughing at it, at this indignity of this child, and did not understand why all these people..., "What is wrong? It's a boy having a wee. What's so funny about that? Why do people laugh at that?" And I think that's a sort of a long, roundabout way of saying we shouldn't patronise children and we shouldn't tell stories for children because we'll end up stripping it of... well, we'll be imposing something sentimental on it, we'll be stripping it of its truth and its anger and everything that children feel, often, much more than adults can ever reconnect with. I mean, I suppose there are, of course, going to be certain things that you don't want to and don't need to expose people to and in a war film that's going to be blood and guts and some of the terrible ways in which soldiers dehumanised end up behaving, but you can imply it and it can become a more effective way of telling a story than actually showing stuff explicitly, and some of the least successful films, I always think, are the films that do have explicit sex or explicit violence or where everybody swears left, right and centre. I mean, what was lovely in this, knowing that we didn't want this to be a 15 certificate and therefore you couldn't use the F-word in it, which of course all those Tommys, whether they came from rural Devon or from a city, would have done, is actually you could be really inventive with your swearing and you could come up with, kind of, much more significant uses of language and it kind of creates a poetry in its own right rather than a sort of aggressive shorthand, which is all that swearing on-screen ends up being anyway. So, you know, I've enjoyed knowing that there is an audience of around about 12 years old that one needs to write for but also knowing that this story, whatever piece of the story, even if it's the story of the little boys at school, it's telling us something about the whole experience of life and that rite of passage into adulthood and just how grown-ups mess up the world over and over and over again.



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## **8. How many drafts did you write?**

Well, I think these days when writers talk about how many drafts they go through, I don't know whether they downplay or overplay how many drafts they go through, and of course, now, with word processing, it's actually much more difficult to say it went through three drafts or eight drafts, because you're constantly revising and going back on stuff whereas those original drafts, you'd write it all down longhand, then you'd type it up and then you'd have to go away and re-write the whole lot or insert pages and stuff. I actually have a script here, which is very, very interesting because when you do a film, as you can see, this is called the... well, it's actually called the shooting script, it's actually..., can you see this? It's the final shooting script and as you can see, it's all multicoloured. I worked through umpteen drafts, I have to say, with Michael and with the director long before it ever went into production. When you finally go into production and it's affected by who you've cast, obviously, you have a white script called the shooting script and that comes out, that's printed out just before the beginning of the shoot. Often things have even changed in the days leading up to that because of the location scouting and the art department and the budget - there isn't a scene with an aeroplane in this, there is a famous scene with an aeroplane in the book, it's entirely due to the budget and practicalities, let's make no bones about it, you know, there are very pragmatic decisions made. As the filming goes on though, you issue different colours and on the first changes you issue pink pages, and then you issue blue pages, actually, that's a green page, but as you can see, there's a whole rainbow of colours here, there's pink, there's blue, there's green, there's... I think, I can't remember if we called them gold or yellow or something but there are those ones there, and this is really because as hundreds of people scrutinise the script: make-up people, continuity people, the actors coming in to do their one day of shooting on their tiny but significant role halfway through, little nuances change and things change. So, when someone says, "How many drafts have you done", you go, "Well, loads", up to the shoot, and then I was still re-writing until the last minute and sometimes you don't actually have time to go away and print it and circulate it on a multicoloured script, sometimes you are literally scribbling



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down, with a pen, on your sheet of paper and handing it over there and then or even saying it. One of my favourite lines in the whole film, I have to admit, isn't a line I wrote, and it isn't a line that any of the actors wrote but was a line that in post-production, when the film was nearly, nearly, nearly complete - the picture was locked off, all the colour was graded - it was all nearly finished, it was the penultimate day of the post-production, they were just finishing off the sound and there was one scene that needed to work better and one of the assistant sound post-production, I don't even know what they're called because there are so many of them and they're all brilliant, said, "I know what you need there, you need a line, when Charlie is tied to the gun wheel and a soldier leans down and finally undoes the ropes - he's supposed to have been there all day and have suffered this punishment, - you need a line there, because it's not quite delivering the pain and the release and the feeling that Charlie's been through but also what the soldiers think of him" and he just said, "Oh, you should say something like, 'Not so cocky now, are ya?'" and it's fantastic and they put that, they recorded it, I don't know who, whether it was actually him who did it or a folio artist that came in and did it but, you know, when this film gets reviewed and everyone says that's the best line in it, of course, I'll claim it as mine and then will scribble it into, you know, maybe a yellowy pink spots page. But it's really interesting, the whole gestation of a script. Of course you have control over it as a writer but you'll take ideas from anywhere and you'll be delighted if it goes through yet another draft when everybody's finished editing it and when the whole thing finishes just before it's finally delivered in that way.