

Carmen Culver, Screenwriter: I had worked with David L. Wolper on an earlier film. And as a result of that, he and his producer, Stan Margulies, offered *The Thorn Birds* to me.

Carmen Culver, Screenwriter. Photograph courtesy Carmen Culver.

The first thing that you really have to do is to find the themes. And that then structures everything else. What I felt, of course, what the story is about, is about a priest and a young woman and their lifelong love. And it's also about her family and their life in Australia.

But really, I felt on a deeper level what it was about was man's relationship with God. And then I began thinking in terms of how to support that general theme. Interesting because I know that you had mentioned ashes of roses.

FF: Right.

Carmen Culver: And that caught my fancy as it has that of everyone else, I think. And I began thinking about that, and thinking, what has that got to do with the theme, etc., and how can I use that? And that took me to realizing that Drogheda, the sheep station, as they call them in Australia, could symbolically be made into a place that had a hill and a place of worship.

So that heaven, in the show, is the rose garden. And the love scenes, most of them, not the steamy sexual scene which took place on the beach, but very important decisions about love and life tend to be made in the rose garden, and that, of course, is where Ralph dies also.

And there was a wool shed, which was of course where the sheep were sheared, and which was sort of the emotional heart of the place itself, and it became the cathedral. And that's the place where everyone has his or her confrontation with God.

So as I say, it really became, for me anyway, a story about how each person related to God. Meggie felt that God was her enemy. And by the end of it, if you'll remember, Ralph says that Meggie actually has always had a better relationship with God than he has, because she's always really lived life, and has been able to survive whatever God had thrown at her.

David L. Wolper (producer): So then we had the writer. And of course we had to spend, you know, the writer took some time to write the screenplay. Before you do a screenplay you do what you call a bible, which is an outline of what the story's going to be -- what the story is going to tell. You know what the book is, but you can't tell every item in the book.

And then the network looks at the bible, and you make the changes with the network. And then, once the bible is approved, you go ahead and start the screenplays.

FF: And how long a process did that take for her to do, along with the approvals?

David L. Wolper: Close to a year.

FF to Carmen Culver: So it took a year to write?

Carmen Culver: You know, it's hard for me to remember, and particularly difficult because what happened in the midst of all this, was that there was a five month writers' strike. So I had to suspend what I was doing for five months. So that meant that the whole process took a calendar year, but really the writing time was only six or seven months.

FF to David L. Wolper: Were there many changes?

David L. Wolper: Oh yeah. I haven't seen the script that's been written that there weren't a lot of changes. You always have changes, you know, especially when you're doing such a long screenplay.

Carmen Culver: For me, the bible is very important. I think that the larger percentage of the task of writing a screenplay goes into that bible. Which is, as he said, really an outline. If you can imagine a screenplay without the dialogue, but instead it tells you where each scene is going to take place, what is going to happen in each scene, and how that scene relates to the overall theme. That's what a bible really is.

The bibles that I do are everything, basically, but the dialogue. So that you have very few surprises.

And the importance of that bible is that -- it tells you what the structure is. And one of the ways that screenplays get into a lot of trouble and, therefore movies get into a lot of trouble, is that the structure's not sound.