

## Document Citation

Title	<b>The brains behind Beauty</b>
Author(s)	Sean K. Smith
Source	<i>Los Angeles View</i>
Date	1996 Jun 21
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	17
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	Minot, Susan
Film Subjects	Stealing beauty, Bertolucci, Bernardo, 1996



## FILM

The Brains Behind *Beauty*

Novelist Susan Minot Discusses Her Screenwriting Debut

BY SEAN K. SMITH

On the phone from her home in New York City, first-time screenwriter Susan Minot laughs as she reminisces about this year's Cannes Film Festival. In the midst of all the flesh and fantasy, she was offered a stark reminder of the writer's second-class status in Hollywood.

At a press conference for *Stealing Beauty*, director Bernardo Bertolucci's film based on her screenplay, Minot found herself sharing a dais with the film's star, Liv Tyler, and Italian screen icon Stefania Sandrelli. In typical Cannes confusion, the press was handed a rather garbled version of Minot's résumé. "[They] said I used to work at the Grand Hotel," she chuckles (Minot was an assistant editor at the literary journal *Grand Street*). "And you think, it really doesn't matter if I correct them. But there it is, going out to the world press, slightly wrong."

She pauses, trying to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. "They had me working at the Grand Hotel [namesake of the Greta Garbo vehicle], which is cinematic."

The leap from the written page to the silver screen has always been a short one, but recently pulp stalwarts Stephen King, Anne Rice, and John Grisham are having to duke it out with, well, some *real* authors. Along with a raft of adapted classics (*Jane Eyre*, *Moll Flanders*, et al.), Hollywood is greenlighting highbrow contemporary fare with greater frequency. Suddenly, Jim Harrison (*Carried Away*), Paul Auster (*Smoke*), and A.S. Byatt (*Angels and Insects*) are rubbing shoulders with Schwarzenegger and Cruise, and moviegoers are reaping the benefits. Literature, the studio suits have apparently decided, is the perfect antidote to the high-concept blues, and for once, they're right.

Minot is the latest scribe to make the transition to celluloid. Author of two novels (*Monkeys* and *Folly*) as well as a volume of short fiction (*Lust and Other Stories*), Minot was tapped by Bertolucci to pen *Stealing Beauty* after they were introduced by a mutual friend.

"[Bertolucci] was looking for a young woman to write [*Beauty*]," Minot recalls. "I'd never written a screenplay before, but I've always been very much obsessed with movies. I think very visually. It was easy for me to think in terms of film. I wrote a version of the story for him and slowly we worked towards what became a first draft. We ended up working on it for about a year and a half."

The collaboration, she says proudly, was a "master class" in movie-making, taught by a film legend. "Part of the way Bertolucci works is to explore ideas in discussions, see if things strike him, and then maybe incorporate them [into the film]. Because to him, movies are



explorations. He doesn't have a set notion in mind that he's trying to get across. For him, something occurs to him and fascinates him. The movie is an exploration which continues through the editing. He's still discovering it [even then]."

In Bertolucci, she adds, "I was working with someone I was learning a lot from, whose imagination and ideas were fascinating to me. It was a lovely experience."

Unlike much of the director's recent work, which has been on a grand scale, *Beauty* is a chamber piece, according to Minot, "instead of something for an orchestra." In what the two conceived as a 1990s version of Henry James' *Portrait of a Lady*, nineteen-year-old Lucy (Liv

Tyler) arrives at the Tuscan villa of family friends, the Graysons, catalyzing the lethargic household with her innocence and beauty. One by one, the villa's inhabitants are transfixed by Lucy's radiant and unabashed purity, a tonic to their state of perpetual ennui. It's a sort of

**"[Screenwriting] is not a literary form at all. In fact, it's very little about words."**

contemporary pastorate, a drowsy idyll set in the sun-drenched Italian countryside.

Much of *Beauty's* drama, Minot acknowledges, stems from its Chekovian premise, its focus on "a group of people in an isolated house somewhere [who are] not really concerned with anything except each other." Yet it's *Beauty's* filmic influences that make it unique. Minot mentions the importance of the work of Max Ophüls, particularly *La*

*Ronde* (1950) and *Le Plaisir* (1952); Jean Renoir's *Rules of the Game* (1939); and, oddly enough, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

"I just kept thinking about it," Minot says of the Judy Garland classic. "The story of a girl coming to a foreign place with strangers, encountering different characters, forming friendships. The young girl searching...I think [*Oz*] was the first narrative that seeped into me that had that, so it was hard not to have it in mind."

Though movie-conscious, *Beauty* is primarily a writer's film, if such a thing can truly exist in Hollywood. Minot's dialogue crackles, and her words, at times, seem literally to fill the air. Lucy's introspective poetry is scrawled across the screen for us in a girlish hand, superimposed over the action. Want to know what's on Lucy's mind? There it is, for all to see. It's Bertolucci's tongue-in-cheek answer to the externality of film. Despite such unprecedented liberties, Minot expresses her doubts about the viability of writing for the movies. "It's not a literary form at all," she insists. "In fact, it's very little about words. That's not what a screenplay is about. A screenplay is a blueprint for another form, and only in dialogue are the words important. Otherwise, the description of the location and all that...it's not about sentences."

"[Screenwriting] intersects with fiction in terms of having to create character," Minot stresses, "and in terms of thinking how dramatic action is put forward. But you do it in different ways. Since film is a visual medium, it's going to be more affecting if that's how the drama is put forth. In literature, you only have words."

The power of *Stealing Beauty* resides in the moments when words and images coalesce. Bertolucci's prowling camera uncovers many rich nuggets of dramatic action. Minot has her favorites, high among them the scene in which Lucy discovers her father's identity. A polite eavesdropper, Bertolucci's camera snakes around the confrontation, finally withdrawing gracefully behind a massive wooden sculpture.

"I like moving scenes, the scenes that give you a kind of burst," Minot confides. "I think the acting in [the scene] is lovely."

Like Dorothy back from *Oz*, Minot returns from her eighteen-month, whirlwind interlude in the movies a bit dizzy, if somewhat wiser. She's back at work on a neglected novel, tentatively titled *The Bedroom Ceiling*. (Not *The Bedroom Feeling*, as the Cannes hacks called it). And as for further film work?

"I leave the option open," she declares. "Absolutely." ■