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Review of The Beecroft Series screenplays
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Note: A full annual polish of the series was done and many of the issues highlighted in this review, where applicable, were addressed at that time
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Overview

The Beecroft Series is a sweet and scary series of stories inspired by the Italian legend of Befana, the old lady who brings gifts and sweets to good children and coal to bad ones. But it soon becomes apparent that her skills as a witch extend well beyond the limits of life and death. These the protagonist inherits, as she leaves her prior life as 'Lily' and becomes 'Befany.'

Genre. The fairytale genre is an ancient one which has traditionally been used to transmit cultural and moral instruction in a compelling and often 'scary' way. Mrs. Madison – a sort of socially conscious vampyre, presents the idea that characters who have always conjured up fear could possibly have a purpose in the service of life. The old genre is blended with well-told stories, interesting conflicts, distinct characters and current social and cultural elements.

Rating. It's difficult to predict with any certainty what will or will not be allowed in certain categories, but the series feels that it falls in the PG-13 realm primarily because of scary moments, mild violence and occasional language.

Audience. This series is well suited to a 12 to 18 demographic. It is in some parts, a little too scary for younger kids; in others, too traditional - read 'predictable' for older ones. The dilemma, as a writer, is to present a human/supernatural conflict that is gripping without wrenching fear.

Characters. The personalities in this series are well-rounded. As the stories develop, Sam and Befany reveal themselves as kids and grow appropriately, but it is the magical secondary characters such as Mrs. Madison and Ron who stabilize the stories – creating a moral common ground in this world of monsters and mystical happenings. They are juxtaposed by Rachel, Sam's mom – a loving, hard-working but mystically myopic woman – and Marshall, her new boyfriend, whose journalistic bend apparently prepares him to be open to the craziest of situations. In a way, they are exact opposites.

Setting. Although Beecroft begins as an everyday place, it becomes a place, not unlike Hogwarts, where one never knows what one will encounter next.

Dialogue. The ages of the protagonists seem a little older than ten and eleven. It would seem more natural to their speaking patterns if they were 12 and up.

The story. Sam's ambivalence toward the Lily/Befany transition, Alfred's sadness, Davey's death and Ron's sacrifice and unjust damnation give the viewer reason to relate to and cheer for the characters. Amongst all this, of course, is young love and while that 'scary' element remains, it is softened by the characters' well-balanced emotional arcs and the cat-and-mouse element of the stories.

Standing Out From The Crowd. Fantasy screenplays face formidable competition in today's young adult and juvenile markets. The creation of an authentic fairy tale in a meaningful way must face head-on, not only the challenge of creating a relevant storyline and characters, but most importantly, a creative and visual approach to the presentation.

This does not necessarily mean more special effects, although they certainly should be carefully visualized in the writing. It does require, however, a carefully conceived world that carries the tone of the story – the smoldering threat that underlies the conflict. It must be a world that is slightly uncomfortable from the outset; one that is not exactly what it seems. Also, the tone of the story needs to carry that same uneasiness, a darkness that feeds the unsettling sense that we're not in Kansas anymore.

Individual Screenplays

The Hag of Beecroft

Summary. In this creative adaptation, the Hag, Lily, is an ancient and witchy lady living in the Beecroft Home for the Aged who becomes attracted to Sam, a young black boy living in the rundown apartment project across the street. With the help of her mystical powers she periodically transforms herself into a girl, Befany, who befriends the boy. A sweet, young romance begins and together they confront some of the villains who threaten the neighborhood and the old folks at the Beecroft center. But! As Sam falls in love with Befany, he becomes increasingly aware that she is something more than the little girl who reads to her great grandmother at Beecroft. In the meantime, the young villains are hunted down and disappear, most probably to be transformed into delicious pastries a la Hansel and Gretel.

Rating: PG-13. The palpable fear and suffering because of the threat of violence. Georgia's demise is particularly painful. The view of the dead boy's legs might be frightening for younger kids. That said, fairytales traditionally illustrate the high stakes of life, the punishments of transgression, intractable lessons in how to not end up in a cupcake – probably extreme by today's standards, but ...

Thoughts. The first in the Beecroft series, *The Hag* must establish the world and the characters in a way that makes viewers want to watch the rest of the series. That means it must be the darkest of the series. Right now in the opening shot, we are introduced to a normal-looking but rundown neighborhood and the Beecroft folks -- not a lot of tension. And while there is an argument for establishing a quiet scenario to contrast with what is to come, the tension, the uneasiness with the setting should begin at the outset. Consider starting with a close up of Lily's scary face, a whispering of Italian. We're unsure of her intent. She's clearly a scary person and sets the tension at the outset.

Too many bullies! Nearly 20 or so. It's hard to keep track. One unrelenting gang would suffice and strengthen the antagonistic force.

Dialogue. It feels real and flows pretty well. Don't tell us what is going on before you show us. Pg. 35 the bully tells us that Lily is muttering, and then you show us Lily muttering.

The Vampyre of Beecroft

Summary. As one might expect, old folks occasionally die in a place such as Beecroft but, unexpectedly, it is a shock to learn in the opening, that Mrs. Madison is such a compassionate vampyre that her services are welcomed by those moving on. Sam, on the other hand, is unnerved by his understanding that his crush, Befany, is really Lily, the old Hag of Beecroft. His affection wanes and as he languishes in the doldrums, he meets Beyonce, a pretty but rather vapid distraction from Befany. It is the catalyst that causes Lily to decide to become Befany forever. Mrs. Madison understands because, of course, she also leads a double life – one as the benevolent director of Beecroft and one as a vampyre. As such she often finds herself challenged by such terrible people as Mr. Procter's family. Sam becomes entangled in the family conflict just as Lily makes her final transition into Befany – a Befany who doesn't remember their past relationship. And as Mrs. Madison lets down her hair in order to save Mr. Procter (who isn't such a good guy), Sam begins to realize the extent magic and mystical characters play in Beecroft.

Rating: PG-13 The palpable fear and suffering because of the threat of violence. Also, multiple uses of the word, 'bastard.'

Thoughts. Mrs. Madison enabling the passing of a resident is a brilliant set-up. It upsets all our presumptions about vampires and develops Mrs. Madison into a hero.

Sam's misgivings feel heavy with trepidation and moral conflict and Lily's decision to give up her 'life' to be with Sam makes us feel nervous about how this is all going to turn out. The internal conflicts of the characters are well-written in this story.

The Procter family conflict feels very real primarily when we understand that Mr. Procter himself is a pretty unlikeable guy and probably deserving of his nasty family. It also more than qualifies him (them) for the mystical justice meted out by Mrs. Madison and Befany.

The Story. This story delivers a substantial emotional arc for each of the characters. The play is a poignant example of internal dialog and set-up for what's to come, and the conversation on page 69 where Mrs. Madison explains Lily's leaving to Sam is perfectly toned. The scene carries the sadness, the fear and the ambivalence that both Sam and Befany/Lily are feeling. Sam's subsequent dream in which he says good-bye to Lily is a well-drawn scene that expresses his simultaneous revulsion and love for this old woman. Very satisfying story resolution.

The Rougarou of Beecroft

Summary. Christmas has barely passed and another mythical being prowls the halls of Beecroft. For the most part, the residents seem to be taking it somewhat in stride. They discuss what sort of beast it might be – all except Alfred, the old fellow who had a crush on Lily – he's depressed; drinks special teas to get to sleep. Befany gives Sam a puppy for Christmas and they resume their friendship. 'Doggie' has yet to bond with his new master and there is concern that something is wrong with him. Perhaps, they speculate, Doggie is possessed. No one at the outset mentions the word 'Rougarou' but at least one resident is convinced that 'The Thing' is a werewolf. In many fairytales – especially in the American South, the Rougarou is a form of werewolf that kills apparently indiscriminately – except in this story. In this story, it has its sights set on Sam.

The mystery of where this Rougarou comes from, and why it's after Sam, builds through confrontation after confrontation and almost all of the action is centered around trying to outrun the nasty beast. It is during the last of these that sweet Davey is killed. Davey's spirit finds a new home in Doggie so he can remain with his friends and to protect Sam.

Rating. PG-13 for the palpable fear and suffering because of the threat of violence. This beast is pretty scary. And Davey dies.

Thoughts. While the stakes – Sam's life – are high, the antagonist, the Rougarou, operates throughout all the confrontations, at an unrelenting intensity. This leads to a certain level of exhaustion for the audience. While we see an occasional flicker of awareness, there is no calculated menace in its actions. It's not until the end when Davey dies that we see any consciousness in it – a softening. One of the hallmarks of a good antagonist is that it is clever and conniving, increasing the tension as we slide into the bottom of the second act.

Poor Alfred's sadness at Lily's passing triggers the beast's appearance in a hat tip to the traditional idea that the werewolf represents a struggle within oneself. Nice. Gradually increasing the connection between Alfred's profound sadness, his dream state and the beast would help with motivation and let us tie Alfred's emotional arc with that of the beast – maybe a scene where the Thing looks fondly for a moment at Befany or tilts his head like a dog would, trying to understand. The Thing's sad howling at the end softens our hearts.

Dialogue. The characters speak very fluidly, very normally and seem a little older than the first story.

Story. In spite of the fact that these stories are meant to be scary, there is a pervasive sweetness that makes them watchable – especially in this one. There is a strong emotional through-line that establishes a nice balance between the fearsome tension, the mourning Alfred and the day-in-the-life-of-a kid (in extraordinary circumstances) that makes it all work.

Narrative. Periodically, a character tells us something rather than letting us see it.

The Boogiemán of Beecroft

Summary. A well-designed story. Again we begin on a quiet normal day. But just wait. Befany, it seems, by transitioning from her ancient to her new self, has opened a portal between this world and that of the unseen. In this story *whether* by luck or by fate, another powerful denizen, Il Maestro, is attracted to this corner of the city. It's almost the fourth of July when a tall, dark, scary man in a top hat appears at the front desk at Beecroft. Both Befany and Mrs. Madison recognize the man as a 'boogiemán,' a sort of zombie from the old country. Everyone wonders why he's there. Il Maestro apparently tours undercover in a traveling metaphysical fair, snatching bad children for his repasts. And again, although his main prey is Ronald, he is also interested in Sam.

With each confrontation the stakes increase until finally poor Ron is killed and transformed into a zombie. Sam also is wounded which intimates that he and Befany will have a much longer relationship than a normal human lifetime.

Rating. PG-13 for the palpable fear and suffering because of the threat of violence and a pretty frightening maggot.

Characters. Il Maestro is a wonderful, classical villain who 'loves living in hell' and whose evil agenda to spread his kind is what we'd expect of a good bad guy. His language, his style, his sense of having walked the centuries in his soulless quest make him an almost archetypal fearsome antagonist, one who deserves nothing less than a ghoulish confrontation with a giant maggot – brilliantly creepy. If only it had destroyed him.

Uncle Ron' heroic fight to the end, knowing what will become of him, is a poignant counterpoint to Il Maestro.

The **action sequences** are well-thought out although occasionally they go on a bit and are written to a detail we might see in a novel. And while telling a compelling story is important, it might be worth revisiting to see if they can be tightened – although given the prowess of the aforementioned antagonist – maybe not. As a script device, there's fighting for fighting's sake and then there's fighting that reveals character flaws or unforeseen powers and then there's fighting that brings us to the point of hopeless exhaustion. While the maggot is a brilliant solution to the undead, a bit of a foreshadowing - Befany's struggle in unearthing (pun intended) this solution would have brought a bit more satisfaction at this all-is-lot moment.

Dialogue. The language in this story seems notably older than in earlier ones. It carries with it a confidence in the kids' understanding of their world and a kind of resignation that this kind of magical interruption in their lives is to be expected. In truth, theirs will never be normal.

The Fortune Teller of Beecroft

Summary. It seems that Beecroft Manor for the Aged is a magnet for magical beings. Following a rolling crystal ball that obviously knows where it's going down a hallway is a great opener. Its owner, Abigale Bailey, a Jamaican fortuneteller and an Alzheimer's patient, has taken up residency in the Manor. And while Lily and Befany speak in Italian, Abbie speaks in English/Patois – and in rhyme. She also seems to understand exactly where she has landed and her sensitivity allows her to see who surrounds her. She is a visionary, a seer in the traditional sense, and serves as a sort of narrator of the events to come. Mrs. Madison, Sam and Befany find her interesting although they're not entirely sure of her gift.

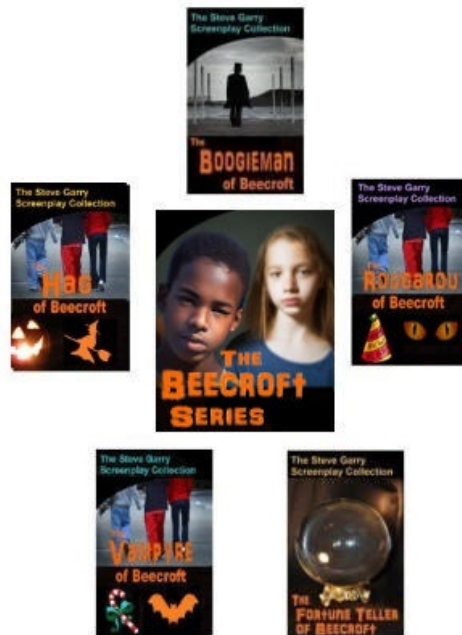
In the meantime, two Goth punks, apparently enlisted by our now zombified Uncle Ron, arrive with the intention of bringing Befany and Sam back in order to placate him. And the magical cat-and-mouse begins. Abbie coaches Befany with her semi-obscure predictions and proves herself heroic in her final curse on Il Maestro – an effort that seems to drain what little mind she has left – at least for the present. Befany, now pursued by another young man, also wonders whether she and Sam are really meant for each other. Abbie's predictions are not clear. And there is the worrisome issue of Sam's zombie bite, a problem that causes him more than a little consternation – which may or may not be caused by the zombie infection.

Rating. PG-13 for the palpable fear and suffering because of the threat of violence although it seems less concerning in this story.

Characters. Abigale is a delight and a good source of humor. The zombie Goth kids aren't as frightening as prior antagonists. We knew that they couldn't succeed from the outset. On page 58, Tammy seems to disappear inferring that she also is magical, but that issue is never developed.

Dialogue. Some of the dialogue is occasionally a little too 'on the nose' and some scenes are obviously intended to tell us what's going on rather than showing us. Occasionally, Abigale's rhyming is difficult to follow. Admittedly, sometimes it's intentional and, while confusion is okay as a story dynamic, the audience can't remain confused for too long. Reading Abigale's dialogue out loud helps but it does interrupt the scene.

Story/set-up for the next story. With Uncle Ron now gone from the apartment and Rachel, Marshall and Sam moving to a house, life presents logistical challenges to the defense against the magical forces that come at them. As a plot point, it's good to bring us back down to earth, but it also causes us to be concerned with the staying power of Sam and Befany's young love. Although Befany comes to understand Abigale's predictions of Sam being 'the one,' all is not settled. Uncle Ron is still on the loose and though he saved the kids this time, he's still a zombie. He's a wild card and we don't know if he'll always be a friend and/or if he'll be vying for Il Maestro's domain. And, of course, Il Maestro is still in room 155. And then there's the Supernatural Council convening in the eternal night – plenty of material for the next story.



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