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An Education

Nick Hornby

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From the New York Times bestselling author—the shooting script to his award-winning film, with an original Introduction and vivid stills from the movie. Jenny is a 16-year-old girl stifled by the tedium of adolescence; she can't wait for her sophisticated adult life to begin. One rainy day her suburban existence is upended by the arrival of David, a much older suitor who introduces her to a glittering new world of concerts, art, smoky bars, urban nightlife, and his glamorous friends, replacing her traditional education with his own version. It could be her awakening—or her undoing. This edition of Hornby's adapted screenplay, which includes stills from the film, is a perfect accompaniment to the highly anticipated movie, which stars Carey Mulligan as Jenny, Peter Sarsgaard, Emma Thompson, Dominic Cooper, and Alfred Molina. It is a must-have for fans of Hornby's novels, featuring his signature pitch-perfect dialogue, mordant wit, and the resonant humanity of his writing. Watch a Video

About the Author Nick Hornby is the author of six internationally bestselling novels (*High Fidelity*, *About a Boy*, *How to be Good*, *A Long Way Down*, *Slam*; and *Juliet, Naked*); and several works of non-fiction, including *Fever Pitch*, *Songbook* and *Ten Years In The Tub*, a collection of his 'Stuff'; 'I've Been Reading' columns from the *Believer*; His screenplay for the film *An Education* was nominated for an Academy Award. He lives in Highbury, north London. Excerpt. copy; Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

INTRODUCTION The First Draft I knew the moment I'd finished Lynn Barber's wonderful autobiographical essay in *Granta*, about her affair with a shady older man at the beginning of the 1960s, that it had all the ingredients for a film. There were memorable characters, a vivid sense of time and place; an England right on the cusp of profound change; an unusual mix of high comedy and deep sadness, and interesting, fresh things to say about class, ambition and the relationship between children and parents. My wife, Amanda, is an independent film producer, so I made her read it, too, and she and her colleague Finola Dwyer went off to option it. It was only when they began to talk about possible writers for the project that I began to want to do it myself; a desire which took me by surprise, and which wasn't entirely welcome. Like just about every novelist I know, I have a complicated, usually unsatisfactory relationship with film writing: ever since my first book, *Fever Pitch*, was published, I have had some kind of script on the go. I adapted *Fever Pitch* for the screen myself, and the film was eventually made. But since then there have been at least three other projects; a couple of originals, and an adaptation of somebody else's work; which ended in failure, or at least in no end product, which is the same thing. The chief problem with scriptwriting is that, most of the time, it seems utterly pointless, especially when compared with the relatively straightforward business of book publishing: the odds against a film, any film, ever being made are simply too great. Once you have established yourself as a novelist, then people seem quite amenable to the idea of publishing your books: your editor will make suggestions as to how they can be improved, of course, but the general idea is that, sooner or later, they will be in a bookshop, available for purchase. Film, however, doesn't work that way, not least because even the lower-budget films often cost millions of pounds to make, and as a consequence there is no screenwriter alive, however established in the profession, who writes in the secure knowledge that his work will be filmed. Plenty of people make a decent living from writing screenplays, but that's not quite the same thing: as a rule of thumb, I'd estimate that there is a 10 per cent chance of any movie actually being put into production, especially if one is working outside the studio system, as every writer in Britain does and must. I know, through my relationship with Amanda and Finola and other friends who work in the business, that London is awash with optioned books, unmade scripts, treatments awaiting development money that will never arrive. So why bother? Why spend three, four, five years rewriting and rewriting a script that is unlikely ever to become a film? For me, the first reason to walk back into this world of pain, rejection and disappointment was the desire to collaborate: I spend much of my working day on my own, and I'm not naturally unsociable. Signing up for *An Education* initially gave me the chance to sit in a room with Amanda and Finola and Lynn and talk about the project as if it might actually happen one day, and later on I had similar conversations with directors and actors and the people from BBC Films. A novelist's life is devoid of meetings, and yet people with proper jobs get to go to them all the time. I suspect that part of the appeal of film for me is not only the opportunity for collaboration it provides, but the illusion it gives of real work, with colleagues and appointments and coffee cups with saucers and biscuits that I haven't bought myself. And there's one more big attraction: if it does come off, then it's proper fun, lively and glamorous and exciting in a way that poor old books can never be, however hard they try. Even before this film's release, we have taken it to the Sundance Festival in Utah, and Berlin. And I have befriended several of the cast, who, by definition, are better-looking than the rest of us . . . What has literature got, by comparison? I wrote the first draft of *An Education* on spec, sometime in 2004, and while doing so, I began to see some of the problems that would have to be solved if the original essay were ever to make it to the screen. There were no problems with the essay itself, of course, which did everything a piece of memoir should do; but by its very nature, memoir presents a challenge, consisting as it does of an adult mustering all the wisdom he or she can manage to look back at an earlier time in life. Almost all of us become

wiser as we get older, so we can see pattern and meaning in an episode of auto biography –; pattern and meaning that we would not have been able to see at the time. Memoirists know it all, but the people they are writing about know next to nothing. We become other things, too, as well as wise: more articulate, more cynical, less naïve, more or less forgiving, depending on how things have turned out for us. The Lynn Barber who wrote the memoir –; a celebrated journalist, known for her perspicacious, funny, occasionally devastating profiles of celebrities –; should not be audible in the voice of the central character in our film, not least because, as Lynn says in her essay, it was the very experiences that she was describing that formed the woman we know. In other words, there was no ‘Lynn Barber’ until she had received the eponymous education. Oh, this sounds obvious to the point of banality: a sixteen-year-old girl should sound different from her sixty-year-old self. What is less obvious, perhaps, is the way the sixty-year-old self seeps into every brush-stroke of the self-portrait in a memoir. Sometimes even the dialogue that Lynn provided for her younger version –; perfectly plausible on the page –; sounded too hard-bitten, when I thought about a living, breathing young actress saying the words. I had been here before, in a way, with the adaptation of *Fever Pitch*. In a memoir, one tries to be as smart as one can about one’s younger self –; that’s sort of what the genre is, and that’s what Lynn had done. In a screenplay, however, one has to deny the subject that insight, otherwise the character is no drama, just a character understanding herself and avoiding mistakes. The other major problem was the ending. Lynn Barber nearly threw her life away, nearly missed out on the chance to go to university, nearly didn’t sit her exams. And though lots of movie endings derive their power from close shaves, they tend to be a little more enthralling: the bullet just misses the hero, the meteor just misses our planet. It was going to be hard to make people care about whether a young girl got a place at Oxford, no matter how clever she was. Lynn became Jenny after the first draft or two; there were practical reasons for the change, but it helped me to think about the character that I was in the process of creating, rather than the character who existed already, the person who had written the piece of memoir: I could attempt to raise the stakes for Jenny, whereas I would have felt more obliged to stick to the facts if she had remained Lynn. Some stories mean something, some don’t. It was clear to me that this one did, but I was not sure what, and the things it meant to me were not and could not be the same as the things it meant to Lynn: she had found, in this chapter of her life, all sorts of interesting clues to her future, for example, but I could not worry about my character’s future. I had to worry about her present, and how that present might feel compelling to an audience. It would take me several more drafts before I got even halfway there.

BBC Films

The first time I had a formal conversation with outsiders in the film industry about *An Education*, it didn’t go well. Somebody who was in a position to fund the film –; because Amanda and Finola, as independent producers, do not and cannot do that –; had expressed an interest, read my first draft, invited us in to a meeting. His colleague, however, clearly was not convinced that there was any potential in the film at all, and that was that. This reflected a pattern repeated many times over the next few years: there was interest in the script, followed by doubts about whether any investment could ever be recouped. Sometimes it felt as though I was in the middle of writing a little literary novel, and going around town asking for a pound;4 million advance for it. Our belief in the project, our conviction that it could one day become a beautiful thing, was sweet, and the producers’ passion got us through a few doors, but it didn’t mean that we were not going to cost people money. Another problem with the film’s commercial appeal was beginning to become apparent, too: the lead actress would have to be an unknown –; no part for Kate or Cate or Angelina here –; and no conventional male lead would want to play the part of the predatory, amoral, possibly lonely David, the older man who seduces the young girl. (Peter Sarsgaard, who responded and committed to the script at an early stage, is a proper actor: he didn’t seem to worry much about whether his character would damage his chances of getting the lead in a romantic comedy.) The good people at BBC Films, however, saw something in the script –; either that, or the desperation in our eyes –; and funded the development of *An Education*, which meant paying me to write another draft, and giving Amanda and Finola some seed money. The meeting we had with David Thompson and Tracey Scoffield went the way no conversations of this kind go, in my experience: as we talked, their professional scepticism was replaced by enthusiasm and understanding. This is supposed to be the point of meetings, from the supplicants’ point of view, anyway; but in my experience (and probably in yours, too, whatever your profession), nobody who was previously doubtful is ever really open to persuasion or suggestion. The fact that the thirty minutes or so spent talking to David and Tracey was not a waste of time is more remarkable than it should be. I did not need money to write another draft of the script, of course; I am well paid in my other profession, and there is very little to be earned in British film, especially at this early stage. But money has a symbolic value, too. We all needed some indication that others in the industry felt as enthusiastic about *An Education* as we did, otherwise we could be pretty sure that any future energy poured into the project would run right through it and down the drain. BBC Films gave us a sense of purpose. They were not in a position to fund the film, but they could help us get the project into shape so that others might want to.

The Banana

In the original piece, and in the film itself, our heroine’s seducer produces a banana on the night he wants to take her virginity, apparently because he thinks it will result in ease of access. It was a strange and revealing detail that I wanted to keep, because it indicated something of David’s gaucheness. At a BBC script meeting, David Thompson, then head of BBC Films, started to muse aloud about this particular scene. ‘The banana,’ he said hesitantly.

‘Could it . . . Would it work?’ He directed the question at Amanda and Finola. They shifted uncomfortably in their seats. There was a silence. Jamie Laurenson, one of the executive producers, cleared his throat. ‘I don’t think . . . I don’t think it would be a peeled banana,’ he said. ‘Ah!’ said David. ‘Unpeeled! I see.’ We moved on, gratefully. Directors It helps to attach a director to the project, too, for exactly the same reasons. Beeban Kidron read whatever was the most recent draft, liked it, met to talk about it, and then worked with me on the script for the best part of a year. (These years slip by, so it’s a relief to remember that other things were happening while *An Education* wasn’t being made. I wrote my young adult novel *Slam*, and my third son was born; Finola was off making the HBO drama *Tsunami*. We have something to show for that time.) I loved working with Beeban, who lives round the corner from my office and could therefore meet within five minutes of receiving an email, if she was around; it was through talking to her, thinking about what she needed from the script as a film-maker, that I made several important improvements to the script. Certainly Jenny’s complicity in many of David’s deceptions, her willingness to manipulate her parents, came out of my work with Beeban; we took as our cue Lynn Barber’s admission, in the original piece, that when she witnessed David stealing the map, she didn’t do anything about it. The decision we made during that time made the script more morally complicated, and the film is the richer for it. Beeban and I had a cloud hanging over us, however. She was attached to another movie which, like ours, had spent a long time in development. Eventually it became apparent that she couldn’t do both, that they were going to clash, and reluctantly (I think and hope) she decided to go with the project which had predated ours. We were back to square one. We talked to several more directors after Beeban’s departure. Most wanted to develop the script further, which was fair enough; the trouble is that no two directors could agree on the route we should be taking. One young director even wondered whether the whole 1962 thing was a red herring – had we thought of setting it in the present day? No, we hadn’t. I was particularly keen to work with a woman director – yes, I had female producers to keep a watch on Jenny as she developed in the script, but the value of a woman director who could work with our young actress on set would, I felt, be incalculable – and when Lone Scherfig, the Danish director of *Italian for Beginners*, expressed an interest in making the film, we all wanted to listen to what she had to say. Lone turned out to be smart about the script, endlessly enthusiastic, and with an outsider’s eye for detail; after she’d taken the job, she set about immersing herself in the look of 1962 England, its clothes and its cars and its cakes. We were lucky to find her. The Cast So then we were four: Amanda, Finola, Lone and I. And, for some time, we’d been talking to casting director Lucy Bevan. I’m quite often asked how much input I have in the various processes of film-making – do you have a say in the casting, for example? And though I’d like to claim credit for just about everything, the truth is that I simply don’t know enough about actors (or directors, or editors, or designers, or composers) to contribute to these decisions in any meaningful way. How many young actresses did I know capable of playing the part of Jenny, for example? None at all. What about male actors for the part of David? Well, there was Colin Firth, of course, who I knew from *Fever Pitch*. And John Cusack (*High Fidelity*), and Hugh Grant and Nicholas Hoult from *About a Boy*, and the guy with the haircut from *No Country for Old Men*; which I’d just seen, probably, right before I was asked for my opinion . . . OK, not one of these was right, but they were all I could think of. Lucy Bevan’s job is to read a script and come up with scores of imaginative suggestions for each part, and she’s brilliant at it. On the whole, it’s best that the casting director, rather than the writer, has a say in casting. Every now and again I’d say, ‘Oh God, you can’t task him.’ Not because the actor in question was bad, or wrong for the part, but because it seemed to me insulting and embarrassing to offer it to him. Lucy, Amanda and Finola were ambitious for *An Education* in ways that I could never have been, which is why we ended up with Alfred Molina, Dominic Cooper and Rosamund Pike, rather than, say, me, my friend Harry and my next-door neighbour. We were helped immeasurably by Emma Thompson agreeing to play the headmistress at an early stage: she gives any project an aura of authority and potential excellence. It was Lucy who knew about Carey Mulligan, of course – she’s been in *Bleak House* and *Pride and Prejudice*, and those who had worked with her all talked of her phenomenal talent. But when I was told that they were thinking of casting a twenty-two-year-old as a sixteen-year-old Jenny, I was a little disappointed (my exact words, Amanda tells me gleefully, were ‘Well, that’s ruined it all’); it would, I thought, be a different kind of film, with an older and as a consequence more knowing girl in the lead role. But when I saw the first shots of Carey in her school uniform, I worried that she looked too young, that we were involved in a dubious remake of *Lolita*. When Carey’s mother visited the set, she told us that Carey had always cursed her youthful looks, but here they worked for her: I cannot imagine any other actress who could have been so convincing as a schoolgirl and yet so dazzling after her transformation. And, of course, she can act. This was a huge part for any young actress – Jenny is in every single scene – but I don’t think one ever tires of watching her. There’s so much detail, so much intelligence in the performance that it’s impossible to get bored. My only contribution was a small panic when I’d watched her audition on DVD – she was so clearly, uncannily right that I was concerned when I heard she hadn’t yet been offered the role. And yet this small panic, expressed after producers and director and casting agent had seen the audition, and long after she’d been cast in other high-profile productions, is easily enough for me to claim that I discovered her; so I will, for years to come. Orlando Bloom: ‘Oh God, you can’t ask him,’ I said. Well,

theyrsquo;dalready asked him, and hersquo;d already said he wanted to play the part of Danny. Arrangements were made forthe care of his dog.A couple of weeks before shooting, I was asked totalk to him about a couple of lines in the script. Hecalled me at my office and told me that, much as headmired the writing, he wouldnrsquo;t be able to play thepart. He hoped wersquo;d be able to work together onsomething else. Confused, I called my wife and toldher that, as far as I could tell, Orlando Bloom had justtold me he wouldnrsquo;t, after all, be playing the part ofDanny. Amanda spoke to his agent.lsquo;No,rsquo; she said. lsquo;There has been a misunderstanding.rsquo;(It was clear, I felt, from the tone of her voice,who had misunderstood whom.) lsquo;He just wanted totalk to you about the script.rsquo;I replayed the conversation in my head. We alreadyhad a wonderful cast lined up, but Orlando Bloomrsquo;sfan club would, it was felt, help the box office of a small British film no end. How had I managed todrive him away, in under three minutes? What had Isaid?lsquo;Hersquo;s going to call you at home later,rsquo; she said.Donrsquo;t mess it up, she didnrsquo;t say. But thatrsquo;s what Iheard anyway.He called that night, and we had exactly the sameconversation. I strode around our kitchen, listeningto Orlando Bloom talk about his regret and sadness,while I made throat-chopping gestures at my wife. AsI wasnrsquo;t doing any of the talking, she could see andhear that I wasnrsquo;t doing any of the damage, either. Ihave no idea what any of it was about ndash; why hersquo;d turned us down, why hersquo;d said yes in the first place,whether hersquo;d ever intended to do it, whether it reallywas Orlando Bloom Irsquo;d been speaking to.Incredibly, the brilliant Dominic Cooper steppedin almost immediately.The Read-ThroughIn the strange world of independent cinema, everyone ndash;director, writer, cast, producers ndash; proceeds on the basisthat the film will be made, even though there is still nomoney with which to make it. If itsrsquo;s not make-believe(after all, we were all being paid to pretend, which childrenarenrsquo;t), then itsrsquo;s a particularly committed form ofmethod acting: we were inhabiting the bodies of independentfilm-makers, thinking their thoughts at alltimes in the hope of convincing someone that this waswho we were. And eventually somebody believed us.The American financiers Endgame Entertainment likedthe script and the cast and the director; this, togetherwith the not insubstantial contribution of the BBC, wasenough to enable the film to happen. So suddenly we were all sitting around a table, reading the script outloud to see how it sounded. (I say lsquo;wersquo; because I read,too ndash; Alfred Molina couldnrsquo;t make it, so I played thepart of Jennysquo;s father, Jack. This I did by shouting a lot.)I have been to a few read-throughs, and if they go well,as this one did, they are completely thrilling, not leastbecause this is the only time that the script is read frombeginning to end in its entirety, so itsrsquo;s the only chancethe writer ever gets to listen to his words in the right order, in real time. The film isnrsquo;t shot that way, andscenes get chopped, or never shot in the first place . . .For the writer, the read-through is the purest, most fullyrealised version of the script, before the actual filmmakingpart of film-making gets in the way.At one point in the afternoon, Matthew Beard, thebrilliant young actor who plays Jennysquo;s first boyfriendGraham, got a laugh from the word lsquo;hellorsquo;; there wasno such laugh in the script, and you suddenly see thepoint of a cast ndash; while at the same time, of course,slightly resenting their talent.The ShootI wasnrsquo;t there much, so donrsquo;t ask me. I had juststarted a book (Juliet, Naked, available now in allgood bookshops), and wanted to make it longer; andin any case, being married to the producer of AnEducation played havoc with childcare arrangements.Some directors like to have the writer on set, butLone didnrsquo;t seem to need me much, not least becauseshe was so gratifyingly determined to be faithful tothe script as it was written. And in any case, any questionsshe might have had could always be asked viaAmanda, who could pass them on, quite often late atnight or over breakfast. Lone was always perfectlywarm and friendly if I did show up, and actors arealways interesting people to waste time with. Butthatsrsquo;s what filming is, time-wasting (even, most ofthe time, for a lot of the people directly involved);past experience has taught me that there is really no other way to characterise it. Our budget was tight, soeveryone had to move fast, but this still meant thatseveral hours a day, literally, were spent moving lightsaround, or re-arranging furniture. In the words ofHomer Simpson: lsquo;Irsquo;ve seen plays that are more interesting.Seriously. Plays.rsquo; All a writer can really do ismarvel that an activity so solitary, so imprecise and soapparently whimsical, can result, however many yearslater, in the teeming humanity of a film set.The EndingI was struck, in Lynnsquo;s original piece, by lsquo;Davidrsquo; comingto find her in Oxford; it seemed like an appropriateending for the film. And yet any event that happensafter the main timeline of the scriptrsquo;s narrative wasalways going to seem more like a coda than a climax ndash; Ican see that now, but it didnrsquo;t seem so obvious duringthe writing nor the shooting of An Education. We shotthe scene, and included it in all the early edits, but itnever really worked: it didnrsquo;t give the actors enough todo, apart from restate their positions with as muchvehemence and/or self-delusion as they could muster.The actors, meanwhile, had effectively found their ownending. The bravura performances of Carey and AlfredMolina during the emotional climax of the film, inwhich Jack talks to Jenny through her bedroom door, and reveals that he and Jennysquo;s mother had learnedthat the trip to Oxford had been a con trick, wereenough, we felt; that, plus Jennysquo;s smile to herself whenshe receives the letter from Oxford (a moment that wasnrsquo;t scripted ndash; it was something cooked up on thephone during the shoot). It all works, I think. But ifyou needed any further proof that film is a collaborativemedium, here it is. That ending was created byLone, Carey, Alfred and Barney Pilling, the editor. Andme, I suppose, although not in the way I had intendedto create it.The Music1962 was, I think, the last time that British youthlooked across the Channel for inspiration, rather thanacross the Atlantic. The Beatles and the Stones existed, but hadnrsquo;t released any records when Jenny met Peter;and yes, we could have

used music by Little Richard or Elvis, but pop had no kind of cachet among the young, clever middle classes, not yet. I want to be French, Jenny says — because she loves French music, French films, French food. London was on the verge of swinging, but only a select few could have felt the first sensation of movement; London right at the beginning of the sixties still bore more than a passing resemblance to its wartime self. It is strange to think, for example, that Jenny would have experienced the privations of food rationing for the first half of her life. This was one reason why the UK needed interpreters of American music like Lennon and McCartney, people to transform it so that it made sense: American rock 'n' roll, with its cars and girls imagery, was a product of American post-war affluence, but Britain had been ruined by the war. An English teenager waited in the rain for a bus. Jenny's daddy didn't have a T-Bird — nobody's daddy did. We wanted to give a sense of the uniqueness and the difference of this time aurally; that meant no electric guitars, no blue suede shoes. Jazz, chanteuses and classical music would all help place Jenny precisely in her cultural context. This didn't, however, make the music any cheaper. Well-known songs can command in excess of a pound; 10,000 each for publishing and recording rights, and these sorts of sums are almost never within reach of an independent production. We lost one song by Juliette Greco because of the publisher's high demand; and we were only able to licence our final choice of Greco recordings — at a rate we could afford — after Lone and I wrote to the singer herself for permission. Mostly this was music I knew very little about — it's salutary to be reminded that what one thinks of as personal taste, an aesthetic that has taken years to achieve, is actually little more than the inevitable product of being born in a certain place at a certain time. The Film So, was it worth it? Yes, as far as I'm concerned, emphatically so. I am as proud of *An Education* as of anything I've ever written — prouder, if anything, if only because it's so much easier to take pride in other people's work. Whatever I think of the writing, I love the work of the actors, and Lone's direction, and Andrew McAlpin's beautiful design, and John de Borman's camerawork, and if nothing else, I can take enormous pleasure in helping to create a structure in which this work was possible. You probably can't wait to start another one; somebody said to me after the Sundance Festival, where *An Education* was received well and won a couple of awards. It should work like that, of course. But the simple fact of the film's existence, let alone any quality it might have, is miraculous, a freakish combination of the right material and the right people and an awful lot of tenacity, almost none of which was mine. And how many miracles does one have the right to expect, during the average working life?