BAFTA & BFI Screenwriters' Lecture Series: Nick Hornby

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Jeremy Brock: Hello, I'm Jeremy Brock. On behalf of BAFTA and the BFI welcome to the sixth, I'll say that again, the sixth year of the International Screenwriters' Lecture Series. Those of you who have attended one of these events before will know that without the generosity of Lucy Guard and the JJ Charitable Trust this would all be an illusion, a fervid screenwriter's fantasy, a script in permanent turnaround. You are not an illusion, I am real, which is a good or bad thing depending on your point of view. I would really though like to thank Andrea Calderwood who has given us her expertise and knowledge, helped to shape this sixth series, it's been hugely helpful. I'd also like to thank United Airlines who have flown in our international screenwriters. It's terribly important to me that we continue to reach out to the best screenwriters in the world, and so we're very grateful to United Airlines for their help in doing that. We have Beau Willimon, Andrew Bovell coming in from Australia, and we're very excited about both those events and we hope that you'll come along.

It gives me enormous pleasure to introduce tonight's opening speaker. Nick Hornby, author of multi award-winning global bestsellers *Fever Pitch*, *High Fidelity*, *About A Boy* and *Funny Girl*. He's also the Oscar-nominated screenwriter of *An Education*, *Wild*, and the upcoming *Brooklyn*. Nick's extraordinary talents have put him at the top of two very distinct and separate professions, and they put him in a unique place and allow him to speak to the interplay, disjunctive or otherwise, between novel writing and screen writing. And so we're very honoured to have him introduce this first opening lecture of the sixth year. Nick will be in conversation with Francine Stock, the broadcaster. They will talk and then, as always, we will open up to questions from the floor. So ladies and gentlemen, Nick Hornby and Francine Stock.

[Applause]

Francine Stock: Ladies and gentlemen, good evening, I'm absolutely delighted to be here to talk to Nick. And thank you Jeremy for the introduction. Before we start, I suppose the first, the obvious kind of question, is you're a very successful novelist, essayist, you've written in all sorts of other ways. Why would you bother with all the complications and the collaboration and the disappointment and the endless development that writing for the screen entails?

Nick Hornby: There are a few answers to that. I think to begin with, next year I will be celebrating my 25th year of sitting on my own in a room, which I'll probably celebrate with a flapjack and an espresso and a look at the Guardian crossword, same as every other day. It won't be marked in any special occasion; it will be marked in a lonely way I expect. And I felt a few years ago that something had to change if I was going to keep writing rather than going on endless committees and literary festivals and just doing something to find some company somewhere. And films are nothing if not companionable, there are many other people involved. And even though it still comes down to sitting on your own in a room writing for most of it, you work with very talented people, and then you, if you're lucky, get to have some fun when the film comes out as well. So there's that.

I started out trying to be some kind of scriptwriter, I don't know what it was I was trying to do, I didn't think I could write prose, and so there was a sense of some unfinished business I think. I like writing dialogue very much and I love movies and TV. A friend of mine who's an artist who I know through my children, I saw him one day and I said, "How was your day?" and he said, "Oh you know, genius wanker." And I couldn't believe that someone else understood the way that I spend my days.

[laughter]

And of course the genius part lasts for about five minutes, and the latter tends to last a lot longer in the course of the day. And there are two things with films that I think help with that. One is that, when you get to a certain point in your novelistic career, unless you really, really screw up badly, the book's going to come out. And it's just you, and you don't particularly know how to judge it, and I guess the genius wanker thing then comes into overdrive. You'll read a review that says you're a genius and you'll believe it, and then read one that says you're the opposite and then believe that but for much longer.

[laughter]

But with a screenplay there are all these hurdles to jump over which seem to have some kind of objectivity to them. And of course films don't always work out, but if you've written a screenplay that attracts the interest of a producer, and then attracts the interest of a cast and a director, and then finally and the biggest thing is some money to make the film, then you feel I think as if you've proved something – to yourself at least – by that point. And it doesn't matter who you are as a writer, they are not going to fund you on the back of your name; they fund you on the basis of the director and the cast, but not the writer. So the screenplay has to work, and I enjoy that, even though it is depressing and it takes a long time, I enjoy the jumping over hurdles. The other thing from that is that I find it very difficult to take pride in my work that I've done by myself. I think you're much more likely to be critical of it than to really love it, but the films that I've been involved in, even if I wince at my own work, I can take enormous pleasure in other people's, and it feels like something I can back in a way that I can't back in one of my novels. So you know seeing *An Education* or *Brooklyn* for the first time and seeing what Lone Scherfig had done and what John Crowley had done and what the amazing cast had done, I felt very glad to have been a part of it without being entirely responsible for it.

FS: When you said that you were interested early on, possibly, in becoming a screenwriter, was that because you had been aware when you watched films early on that there was something driving them in terms of the actual craft of the writing?

NH: That's a good question. I think the films that I'd liked the most, I think I'd responded to the writing rather than direction or performance. So things that made a huge impression on me like quite a few of the screwball comedies and particularly Robert Altman's *Nashville* which I saw when I was, well 17 I guess when it came out. And I couldn't believe that screenwriting could be like that: so loose, and so, you know it had so much bottom to it, it did things that I hadn't seen a movie do before, and I watched all of Altman's films after that. So yes, I think I was responding to writing.

FS: Because your first screenplay was actually from one of your own books, which is for *Fever Pitch*. So did you approach that in the way that you sort of analyse what you're going to do in terms of the craft, or were you thinking first of all, 'this is my book and this is the way that I'd like it to come over'?

NH: Well *Fever Pitch* sort of happened, it felt to me, accidentally. When the book came out I was approached by a young director who was working for *The Late Show*, and I got very excited because he said he wanted to do something about the book for *The Late Show*, and that seemed enormous to me, the book hadn't yet come out. And he said, "Yeah, but what I really want to do is make a movie of it," and I thought, 'yeah, good luck with that'. You know it's a memoir, it spans 25 years, it's about a football team. But he'd had a clever idea for it, which was to try and condense as much of the book and the themes of the book into one particular period in the life of a fan and that football club's history. And it wasn't as if I had to be persuaded to do it because this was 1992, I'd never written a novel, I was just about to become a father, I was in absolutely no position to turn down any work, and he said, "Let's see if we can get you some money to develop it and we'll go from there."

And so I did it without thinking about it really. I just thought, 'well I don't know if this film will ever be made, but I'll just keep writing drafts and maybe someone will pay me eventually'. But we found very sympathetic people, a sympathetic young producer, my wife… She's the sympathetic young producer by the way.

[laughter]

It sounded like two separate people, but she was young and she was sympathetic… a long time ago.

[laughter]

It was a first time writer, first time producer, first time director, and we just wanted to see how far we could get, and we got all the way to production and Colin Firth. And that felt like phase one of a screenwriting career, because then I didn't do anything for quite some time.

FS: But was there a sort of great revelation from that first experience in terms of the way it worked?

NH: No good revelations really. I mean I learned that it all took an incredibly long time and there was a lot of messing about, and at the time I thought, 'I'm not sure this is for me'.

FS: So the years go by and in the meantime other people start adapting your work, but you weren't tempted at that stage?

NH: No, never. I mean *High Fidelity* got optioned just before it was published and I thought, 'oh, okay, so this happens and it wasn't just *Fever Pitch*, it might happen again', but it was a novel and it seemed to me either a straightforward adaptation or not. *Fever Pitch* was a memoir, and if someone was going to mess around with my life I thought it was better if it was going to be me, and it did become something very different in the telling, whereas *High Fidelity*, it was what it was. And the big thing about writing novels is they take me two years and then the idea that, having put everything into these books for two years, you then spend the next five taking two thirds of it out again really doesn't strike me as a very attractive proposition. I'd rather take stuff out of other peoples' books than my own.

[laughter]

FS: So you just left the people who adapted your books, whether it was *About a Boy* or whatever, you just left them to it completely?

NH: Yes, completely. I mean both of those films; they took five years too, really. And they disappeared for long batches of time; I didn't know what had happened to them. Every now and again somebody would say something that turned out not to be very true about what was happening to it.

[laughter]

And then the very strange breakthrough with *High Fidelity*, or when I knew that it might happen, I used to work on Highbury Hill which is the road that leads down to Arsenal tube station, and right next to the tube station is a kiosk that sold cigarettes and newspapers. I used to buy my cigarettes and newspapers off this guy who was an Arsenal fan, we used to talk. And one day he said, "Oh, this bloke wants you to phone him," and he gave me a piece of paper. And on the paper it said: Stephen Frears, 227somethingsomethingsomething, and that was how I knew that Stephen Frears was going to make *High Fidelity*.

[laughter]

It's, as I discovered, a very typically Frearsian way of doing things.
FS: But irresistible.

NH: But irresistible, I did call him, yes.

FS: So, *An Education*, Lynn Barber's memoir, I mean how did that come about, and what was it particularly that convinced you that that might be a good film?

NH: Well that all sort of came in stages. One of the things that was happening at the time was my, now not as young as she was, wife – and still sympathetic – she was returning to work after having children. And as an independent producer, one of the things that you notice is that the stuff you get a shot at, unless you're established, then you know the really, really big books go, and then the really, really good books go, and you're sort of scrabbling around trying to find something that's either out of the ordinary or accessible or gettable in some way. And I think we'd been talking about that, and I read this issue of Granta, which had this six-page essay in by Lynn, about being seduced by this older man when she was a teenager. And you know it was a piece of journalism rather than a short story, so it actually covered quite a lot of territory, and it had this kind of sting at the end, the revelation that he'd been married all the time.

And it spoke of these two worlds colliding, you know the young clever girl who wanted to go to Oxford but also wanted things to happen quicker than she could see them happening, and this guy who was offering her a way into those things that she loved: art and music. And it seemed to have a potential to say lots of things about our country at the time, but also a particular mindset, and it felt very rich. And also you knew, or we knew that no one else was going to sort of chase after it and option it, so I said to Amanda, "I think this would be a great film," and she went off and optioned the piece. And when she started to talk about who she would want to employ to write it, I suddenly felt incredibly possessive of the material. I felt that I knew the character and I knew the film I wanted to see, so I asked if I could have a stab, and she very graciously, for nought pounds nought pence, allowed me to have a go and we went on from there. And it took a long time, not just because it was hard to fund, but also it took a long time for me to find the shape of it. And there were several sort of breakthroughs that I had about the character, which meant that she became more complicated I think as things went on.

FS: Because it's quite an unusual situation to have something that is as relatively brief as an article, I mean it's not like going for an established novel, which has a very definite structure. I mean in the sense that the architecture was largely yours then.

NH: Well yes, but I mean she'd sketched out this thing which was she'd met a guy, she was charmed and seduced by him and the world, and then she was left high and dry, so it had a kind of shape to it. And there were little hints of scenes, you know the vileness of her headmistress at school and her anti-Semitism, and I think going to an auction. And these wonderful minor characters who were played by Dominic Cooper and Rosamund Pike in the film where, I think something we've all experienced, which is you look at someone and you think they look fabulous, and then they open their mouth and you think, 'oh my God, they're so stupid'. And Rosamund's character was such a gift and such a joy to write. So it seemed to combine really the best things about writing novels, which is sort of spinning off things like that, while at the same time having a structure and a clear world to work in. It was a good gig.

FS: But of course it was memoirs so it's first person narrative, so that's a very particular perspective. How do you alter that for film?

NH: Well I didn't, is the short answer. I mean Carey is in every single frame. You never go off really with the parents, you never go off with the Peter Sarsgaard character because you want to keep her cocooned like that anyway because it would be the spoiler alerts if you went off to follow him, particularly. So really I just kept her right at the centre of it, and we had a very brief voiceover at the end, but I didn't want to use voiceover. And actually Lynn's piece wasn't that kind of piece, it wasn't sort of elegiac, it was quite spiky, as Lynn can be, and very shrewd. And so I used it for material rather than for something I could layer across the top.

FS: We're going to see a little bit, the first of our clips now, which is obviously from *An Education*. This is the point when Jenny, because she's called Jenny, I mean the names were obviously all changed, she's called Jenny in the film. And David her, well, at this point the man who would be her lover, has come to her house where her parents, well he arrives unannounced doesn't he, that's the first surprising thing.

NH: Yes, well one of the reasons I chose this clip was I can remember having written a version of this scene which, what he's trying to do is persuade Jenny's parents to let her go with him to Oxford, and she's basically bet him that he'll never manage it in a million years, that they're much too strict with her and mistrustful of him, and he takes the bet. And I think that in, as far as I can remember, in one of the early drafts he just came in and sort of was very charming and said, "Oh please can she come to Oxford?" and they sort of said, "Okay then." And I think Lone said to me, "We need something more than that. You've either got to make him more persuasive or think about it again." And it was, I remember being very glad that she pushed me that hard to think about it, because then I thought of a different way of doing it where he is seducing the parents.

And I've noticed lots of times, with books and films really, that there are points in the narrative that you're writing that are really hinges. That of course the interesting thing is going to Oxford with this man, and this is a scene that enables her to get there. And if you think of those scenes as only doing a job for you I think that the film is more boring as a result, and I tried to make this scene something in its own right. I think the other thing about it is that the film really started to take shape when I realised that Jenny was complicitous. And I don't think Lynn really sees that in the piece, but of course she's old enough to have made her own decisions, and you'll see David tell a lie, which she knows is a lie, but which serves a purpose for her at the time that he says it. And by going along with it she sort of is the author of her own downfall as well.

FS: And so in this so-called hinge scene we're actually learning something about everybody.

NH: Learning something about everybody, and it's got hopefully a bit of fun in it as well.

FS: Let's see the clip.

[Clip of *An Eductaion* plays]

[Applause]

So Carey Mulligan, Peter Sarsgaard, Alfred Molina and Cara Seymour, fantastic, you learn so much. And I find it almost, it's really funny, but it's also kind of painful because they want so much, they're so aspirational the parents, and in the end the great con is actually perpetrated on them isn't it, by both of them.

NH: Yes, and you know that scene pays off later, and I think the most moving scene in the film where everyone's discovered that he was married all the time, and Alfred Molina's talking to Carey through her closed bedroom door, and he says, "I heard CS Lewis on the radio the other day, he was talking about his time at Cambridge," and he said, "but I knew that wasn't right because you'd seen him in Oxford." And she weeps even more, because she knows that she told him the lie more than anybody. And there's something, there is something heartbreaking I think about all of our parents who came out of the war and wanted the best for their kids. And you know I'm the first person in my family to have gone to university, and that was repeated all over the country I think in the 50s and 60s and 70s, and there is something sad and moving and brave about it as well.

FS: And so it's a love story but not necessarily between Jenny and David in that sense. And something unusual, something a little bit bittersweet or complicated, those things are the things that attract you?

NH: Yeah, tonally that essay seemed to me to be a gift because it made me laugh and it was shocking and it seemed to have the power to move. I think my tastes as a reader, my tastes as a TV watcher and as a cinemagoer; it's always the same. I don't like things that stay in the same groove, and it's one of my big beefs with a lot of literary fiction that you can tell on page one that there isn't going to be a joke for the next 300 pages. You know and it seems crazy to me, people laugh when they're at a parent's funeral, someone will make a joke, and you think 'how have you managed to find the one slither of 300 page life that contains no humour whatsoever?'. And you know the trick, and the people I admire the most I think, are the people who can turn on a sixpence and kind of make you laugh and then punch you in the gut emotionally, and that piece seemed to have the potential to do that at least.

FS: But I suppose that sometimes takes you to slightly tricky areas, which may be more difficult to sell because people are sometimes quite conservative in what they expect in a film.

NH: Well, I mean this film was hell for producers I think in particular because we knew that we would have to cast an unknown person in the lead, there were no actresses of sufficient talent actually who could play a part that young, we had to get an unknown and she's on every page of the script. And you can't, it's something that will come up I'm sure again, but you can't go to financiers unfortunately and say, "You should give us money for this because it's going to be really good." They want more than that, they want to know that there is a cast member who they know for a fact brings people into a cinema, or a director that brings people into a cinema, and we didn't really have that.

The other thing is that the male romantic lead, no male romantic leads wanted to touch it because he's preying on young girls, and it's not the sort of Hugh Grant-y type of role. So we knew that we would have an unknown in one lead and effectively a very brilliant character actor in another role, and we tried to do what we could with all the minor characters. And you know we got Alfred and Emma Thompson and all sorts of people, and Rosamund who was just completely brilliant. But it was like pulling teeth, and it took years and years to find the right people to finance it, and then of course you want to say to them, "See, you know it would have been worth it if you'd put the money in," but all we had was the guarantee of quality, we had nothing else, and there's nothing you can do about that, that will never change I don't think.

FS: And was there, I mean given this was, you know you hadn't done a screenplay for a while, was that quite disheartening at that stage? But you had other fiction presumably going at the same time to keep you…

NH: Yes, I think we estimated later that I'd written two books and we'd had two children during the course of the development process. I mean at that stage, there were a couple of other things I'd tried in the intervening years between *Fever Pitch* and *An Education*. Emma Thompson and I had tried to write something together and it just sort of died of inertia really, we were both too busy to give it proper time. And my friend D. V. DeVincentis who adapted *High Fidelity*, he and I were asked to adapt together Dave Eggers' book *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. We wrote a draft of that and then the whole project immediately collapsed: I don't know whether those two things are connected..

[laughter]

I don't think it could have been after one draft. So there were a couple of aborted attempts, but this one I did believe in, and it was, I remember feeling frustrated and I'm sure I was moany at home about it. But it was ever thus and it ever will be thus I think with something that's that kind of unwieldy, that doesn't easily fit into any box.

FS: But it was recognised, I mean you were Oscar and BAFTA-nominated for that screenplay. But then when you go on, you go on to tackle a subject that potentially is actually even more difficult, which is *Wild*, Cheryl Strayed's memoir which has a lot of walking, and it has sex, and it has drug use, and it's quite tough. But what you have there is you have a big star attached to it from the beginning, so how does that change it?

NH: Well one of the many happy by-products of being nominated for an Oscar was being introduced to Reese at a party. And she knew my work, in fact she wanted to, I was very taken aback, but she wanted to talk to me about a short story that I'd written for a charity anthology, which if you'd asked me what she was going to say when she began her sentence, "You wrote…" I absolutely would not have been able to guess the next word, which was "*Nipple Jesus*" in fact. And anyway we had a chat, and then she said, "Can I call you if I come to London," and she did and we went out for a meal, and she said, "Well what do you want to write?" and nothing really came of that. And then I read *Wild*, I read it after a beautiful review actually in the *New York Times*, and I ordered the book straight away and read it and completely fell in love with it, and asked my agent to find out whether the rights had gone, and if so to whom. And she came back and said, "Well Reese Witherspoon's bought it," and I thought, 'oh okay, maybe I've got half a chance'. And I emailed her straight away, and at the time I think the job had gone to somebody else who then pulled out, so she called me up and said, "Will you do it?"

And yeah it was really different. It was being developed independently through Reese's company, there wasn't a studio involved, but you kind of knew that it would be made if we got the script right, and we were on quite a tight schedule. Reese had a sort of window of opportunity. I think I was given the job, the first sort of conversation I had was in October of 2012, and she wanted to be filming in October of 2013. And you know this was in one way what I'd wanted; I thought you want to see a clear path to production. But then you get home and think, 'Oh, the only thing that's stopping this film from being made is I haven't written a word of the script and it might not be any good once I've finished it'. So I thought, 'Oh, perhaps it was better the old way where you just rubble on for five years and no one wants to make anything'.

[laughter]

But I had a clear idea of what I wanted to do with the book in terms of the timescale of it, and it's such, it's such an amazingly packed book, it's about divorce and grief and drug abuse and promiscuity. And when I went through making notes I realised that I could easily write a two-hour movie that would be quite compelling that didn't have any walking in it, but it is actually a film about a woman on her own on a walk. So it was really about boiling everything down and finding enough interesting things to do on the walk which didn't mean that you wanted the backstory all the time, because the backstory was where the juicy stuff was happening. Which meant, quite often with the walk it meant minor characters, and then you thought, 'oh but it's actually about a woman being on her own on a walk, so I've got to take some of the minor characters out too and give the impression of loneliness'.

So technically there was a lot to deal with, but I did I think two drafts and Reese and Bruna. Reese was a wonderful person to work for, just read super quick, and she gave me her email address – it was her email address as opposed to an assistant's – and she would always read within 24 hours I would say, or 48 hours. Because the book was very special to her too, she had a lot invested in it. So you know everything did go very quickly until the part about finding a director who was available at that short notice, but we got one.

FS: But in terms of the structure, as you say you had to pick certain incidents, does that mean that sometimes you make composite characters out of the minor characters? How do you decide on that?

NH: There were some composite characters with some of the hikers who tended to be the same kinds of people anyway, and some of them had interesting backstories. The people she meets kind of off-piste as it were, there's a wonderful character called Jimmy Carter who says, "I'm Jimmy Carter, no relation," who is the self-appointed editor of a magazine called *The Hobo Times*, and is convinced that she's a woman hobo and can't be shaken from the conviction that she's homeless and without hope. There were people like that who I kept as was, but the kind of younger people on the trail tended to be a bit more composite.

FS: But again, every encounter has got to do something hasn't it; it's got to work.

NH: Every encounter has got to do something.

FS: So we're going to see a clip which occurs on the morning after she's stayed over with a couple, an incident that starts out in quite a threatening way.

NH: Well, one of the things I loved about the book is that there's quite a lot of threat in the book, but none of the threat turns out to be awful until there's a dodgy incident towards the end. But it's really about goodness and actually lots of people being better than you might have anticipated. So the part we're going to watch, Reese has had to come off the trail because she hasn't packed the right gas for her stove, she's got nothing to eat, she's had to walk for days actually just to find some kind of civilisation. And one of the staggering things about the book is realising that California, there are great chunks of it that are nowhere near anywhere, and this trail runs from Mexico up to Canada.

FS: It's called the PCT.

NH: The PCT, the Pacific Crest Trail. So she's had to come off and she finds this guy working on the road on his own, and she also finds that he has a gun in his glove compartment. The night before he's reached into the glove compartment but brings out some liquorice which he offers her, and then asks her if she'd like to come home with him and his wife and have a shower and a meal, and there's nothing untoward about it at all. This is him dropping her off the next morning.

FS: So if we could see that clip please.

[Clip from *Wild* plays]

[Applause]

Reese Witherspoon and W Earl Jones [Brown] there. Now, that kind of conversation, is that taking some of the interior monologue and giving it to somebody else?

NH: No, one of the reasons I chose it is because it's fictional and probably autobiographical actually. I have a great deal of sympathy with Frank when he says, "I'd quit anything." And I think it's one of the great things, the bits of fun you can have adapting which is you've got the shape of somebody else's work and you've got, again, suggestion of a minor character, and that character allowed me to say something that I wanted to say in the film which was… There are all sorts of sappy versions of that film I think, and maybe we made one, but not in the way that was the obvious pitfall which is the kind of American redemption story of, you know, hard grit and you get somewhere. And I wanted to convey the impression I had from reading the book which was that it wasn't about being brave, it was about having no other choice whatsoever apart from having to do this walk because she simply didn't know what else to do. So when Frank talks about quitting, she's thinking about it in exactly the same way but reversing it, as in she can't quit because she hasn't got a choice either. And it's the kind of miserable, English, negative version of doing an inspirational hike, which I do think was in Cheryl's book even though she is a you know bold, brave, brilliant American woman, and the book is full of inspiration. But I think there is a kind of desperation and recklessness in the book that I wanted to preserve and that guy gave me a good chance to do it.

FS: So there's no choice, there's no fork in the road, you just…

NH: No choice, no fork in the road, yeah.

FS: However, with later drafts of scripts there are choices and forks in the road, and sometimes you may, you know you may work with directors or people later on who will want rewrites and you have to keep on. And there must sometimes come a point where you think, 'I think this script is good to go', but they don't. Is that, I mean given that when you're a novelist you're pretty much in control until you start working with an editor, how hard is that?

NH: Well, I'm going to say something that you should never say which is that there are two types of something, because there's always a million types of whatever it is you're talking about. But in this regard, I think there are two types of director. There's the kind of director who is effectively an editor, who wants to bring this script to the screen, and if there is any obscurity or incoherence or things that are not working then they will suggest to you that there is a better way or a quicker way or a more elegant way or a funnier way of getting there, but they are still working effectively during development as an editor I think, in the way that I would work with a book editor. And then there's another type of director, who is basically an auteur I think, who says, "Oh okay, well this scene isn't the kind of scene I want in my film so it needs to be something else or it's going to go completely," and that is when it gets hard I think as a screenwriter. Because you've written, you know I feel as though they're books, I feel as though they're finished and ready to go, and *Wild* was the hardest in terms of the development process because Jean-Marc is much more of an auteur than anyone I'd worked with before.

FS: And once production actually starts are you on set, do you make changes there, or are you down the end of a phone if they need you?

NH: I've been asked to make changes; I don't go to the set. People usually seem very disappointed to see you there..

[laughter]

So I've usually paid a polite visit and then got out. It's, I mean as probably everyone in this room probably knows, it is staggeringly boring on a film set. The first time I went when *Fever Pitch* was being made, I couldn't pick up the rhythm of work at all because nobody seemed to be doing anything. Because they were moving lights around and they were fiddling and faddling, and you know when you think that two or three minutes a day is regarded as a stonking day's work in film, I think I'd rather do a 14-hour writing day and maybe write half a script than watch people move lights around. And it is, you know once it's all up and running it's a difficult relationship I think between writer and director, especially for the writer because usually you've built some kind of bond in pre-production and development which you know is then gone, they're not interested in you anymore and it's kind of sad.

FS: They've got a new family.

NH: Yes, they've got a new family, you are divorced and they have a new family, and maybe there will be a reconciliation when the film comes out, but not until then.

FS: Well let's move on to *Brooklyn* and Colm Tóibín's novel which is now extremely well known, is a set text and all kinds of things. This did not seem, to me at least, to be an obvious candidate to make into a film because it's a novel without much dialogue and it's a novel that builds up its atmosphere quite slowly; there's a lot of things that aren't said. Did it strike you as a challenge initially?

NH: I wish there was a more complicated way of saying no.

[laughter]

It didn't, I could see how to do it. I liked it that there was no dialogue because that gave me kind of creative free reign. It's not a very internal book. I think when people have expressed surprise or talked about its technical challenges they've quite often said, "Oh well it's inside this girl's head," but actually she's a very watchful young woman and most of the things in the book are external, and in fact Eilis is maybe quite opaque. What I think I did do was turn the volume up, and I hope it's not too loud and vulgar, but that's what it felt like doing, was writing the dialogue and just turning everything up a little bit, the humour and the heartbreak, because you have less time to do it and less time to work the atmosphere that Colm creates in the book. We extended the book very, very slightly as well because Colm's book ends on a very poised and enigmatic note that I didn't think would work for a movie, so there aren't too many changes to narrative. I mean of course there's things that have been cut that we were sorry to lose, but it's pretty much the book but with the volume turned from maybe 4 up to about 7.

FS: And I think it works tremendously well because, I mean she is a tricky character in some ways because, as you say, she is opaque and she's very self-contained, or apparently self-contained in a lot of ways, so that and the tremendous performance from Saoirse Ronan. So a lot of the way that she responds to other people, that has to be the way that we learn a bit about her, and we're going to see two scenes of her, both at the dinner table in fact.

NH: Yes, I've suddenly realised I'm not really pitching this film very hard, two people, I mean three people eating dinner… twice.

[laughter]

The film's livelier than this, but I wanted to show these two scenes because they mirror each other and they are the two significant men in her life.

FS: For anybody who doesn't know, sorry, this is Eilis, this girl comes from County Wexford and she goes to America, to Brooklyn where she meets, for a sort of new start, at least a temporary new start.

NH: A temporary new start and then, through personal reasons, she has to come home, and she gets drawn back into Irish life, and in the end the film is about the decisions she must make. So these are the two significant young men in her life, one in New York and one in Ireland. And the reason I've chosen them is to show how Saoirse changes in the two scenes and how the performance shows that, and also there's a story about the second scene that I'll tell you afterwards.

FS: So the first scene that we're going to see is when she's, this is sort of her first date really.

NH: Her first date in a diner in New York.

FS: With a young Italian-American, so if we could see that clip please.

[Clip from *Brooklyn* plays]

[Applause]

Just a wonderful performance from…

NH: Shall we see the second one as well, or do you want to…

FS: Yes, well the only thing we need to set up is she goes back, she will go back to Ireland and this is where the second one is, in Ireland, and we'll see this and this will be the counterforce as it were.

NH: And if you go to the cinema in November you can see lots more about the double-entry bookkeeping system.

[laughter]

FS: Let's see the next clip please.

NH: Hours of it.

[laughter]

[Clip from *Brooklyn* plays]

[Applause]

FS: So, the reason that that second scene is, I mean they balance each other so beautifully, but I mean not just because of her performance, what I particularly love is just, I noticed it again looking there, is what happens with her back. In the first one her back is really kind of fluid because she's fitting in, and in the second one the spine is quite rigid.

NH: Physically I think it's brilliant the difference in those two scenes and her confidence and the twinkle and, you know, almost the sort of sexual aggression in the second scene compared to the timidity of the first. But what I wanted to say about that was that it wasn't there, that second scene, until right at the end of the process. And we had a read through of the script in Dublin which is always an amazing day I think for the writer, because it's the only time you see the script performed as it was meant to be performed. By the time the film comes out there's a lot missing and things have been changed, and of course it's all filmed out of order as well. But when they read it like a play then that's the time that it's most helpful to see if your work has rhythm and whether scenes are playing long or playing short. And we had, it was a wonderful read through, and you've seen the film, there's this amazing cast of Irish girls who are all fantastic, and Julie Walters and Jim Broadbent, and they were all there and they were all great and it was a very exciting day.

But at the end Domhnall came to me and he said, "I'm a scene short." And of course actors always think they're a scene short, you know especially if they're not the leads.

[laughter]

But he made, you know, a very passionate case for his extra scene which was he said, "You know, I'm supposed to be offering her a choice but we're never alone in a room together." And John and I were both sort of rather dumbstruck by this observation; I don't think it had necessarily occurred to with of us. And one of the real technical challenges of this film is that she meets one guy kind of one third of the way through the film and the other guy two thirds of the way through the film, and you've got to try and find ways of making the audience care about both of them and feeling that she genuinely is on the horns of a dilemma. The book is incredible at doing that I think, because when you read it a second time, you cannot believe how late Jim comes into the book, it's sort of 40, 50 pages that he has to play with and you think, 'This isn't going to work'. Because you know that she's going to be lured back into this life but you can't believe that he's going to be able to come up with a convincing case for this life, and he does, and that's the challenge that we all had to respond to.

So Domhnall said, "He needs a scene where he's on his own with her," and I thought, 'that's completely fair enough'. And we were in the production office in Dublin and I went upstairs and I borrowed somebody's computer and I wrote the scene in probably 30 minutes and said to John, "What about something like this?", "And this mirrors the scene that she has with Tony at the beginning.." and he said, "Well I'll try it". And then he came back and he said, "Saoirse and Domhnall like it and they want to try it." And they did it, and I can't believe that it survived into the film – not that there's anything wrong with it, but it kind of drives you mad that you spend four years writing the rest of it and half an hour writing a scene that's sort of gone through intact.

[laughter]

But that all of course comes from having thought about these characters on and off for four years, and from Domhnall's input. That's the real beauty of film as collaboration, where these very fine actors have observed from their perspective what is wrong with your script and have given suggestions as to how to improve it, and if you don't listen to that I think you're mad.

FS: I'm conscious that we'll sort of open it up to questions in a moment, but before we do, there are the, just the sort of, practical things about how many projects you can have going at one time, and you talk about four years of this or however many years it is. How do you ever decide how to apportion your time and how much enthusiasm to invest in things which may, there must come a point where you just think, 'this just really isn't going to fly at all'. How do you do that, how do you keep your morale up about that sort of thing?

NH: Well I think for me that's been the hardest thing in film is keeping morale up, because you know I do have another career where I can see an end point and a point to finishing a book, and I will probably have a finished book in my hand by the end of it, but there may never be a film. I think the one thing that saves you really is that drafts of screenplays are quite short comparatively; it's 120 pages with not very much writing on them. And the reason I think that we do have to do so many drafts is that you can easily get to the end of a screenplay and think, 'oh my God, it's over and I haven't said anything that I intended to say'. And it feels in that way a bit like painting a crimson room white, that the first time you think, 'ergh, I can see everything here', and so you just need to keep doing it, keep doing it, because you can't, literally can't, get the job done in one draft. You have to keep shoveling things in and boiling them down and cutting so that you make room for the rest of the stuff.

But you know sort of ten or twelve weeks is not an impossible target, so I rely on other people that I'm working with really to keep my morale up. I've noticed, especially in British independent film, what happens is that everybody pretends they're making a film, that's what they have to do.

[laughter]

There's no money, there's no cast, there's no director but, "Yeah we're going to make this film," and you kind of have to buy into this myth if anyone is ever going to do anything. The producers have it worst of all, they have to start from scratch and pretend that the film's going to be made. And then there's this sort of weird process where black and white becomes colour slowly and you think, 'oh hold on, now it is going to be made. How did that happen?' First of all they seem to pluck some date at random from the skies and then work towards it, and either hit it or don't hit it, but then it does start to become more real.

I'm at the mercy of other people's timetables I guess to a certain extent, and you know I've had books on the go, and I reach a convenient break-off point in a book and then take 12 weeks out to do another draft, and then it disappears maybe for another year, and in the meantime I can either finish the book or start a new project. And I guess I just work on what needs most attention at any particular time. I've been this last couple of years working on my adaptation of *Love, Nina*, Nina Stibbe's beautiful, funny memoir, letters to her sister which the BBC are filming at the moment, and writing my novel *Funny Girl*, and working on and off on an original screenplay as well.

FS: And just about, if we could get the roaming mics ready for the questions, but I suppose the question, the thing that keeps coming back all the way through this is the status of the screenwriter, and the status of the screenwriter as opposed to the status of the director. Because we do still live in a rather, an area where apart from the 'star' star, the director is the star and films are regularly described as belonging to a director even though the whole idea may originally have been the writer's. Do you think that's wrong?

NH: Well I don't really understand how it's taken hold actually. I mean as I understand it the auteur theory was invented simply because it seemed so unlikely rather than it was obvious; it was a counterintuitive thing which now seems to have stuck, that the director is the author despite not authoring anything at all usually. But I find it mystifying particularly when it comes to things like reviews, and routinely things are attributed to a director that you know he can't possibly have done, that the director did not invent these characters, probably did not invent this timescale. You know there are things that can be done in editing of course, and there are, directors are responsible for an awful lot, but the writer's the author, especially in the way that we work I think in Britain. And yes, describing a director as somehow being the author of the film or owning the film or having a possessory credit, I'm just mystified as much as anything.

FS: Great, well let's have some questions from authors, directors, whoever, whoever's out there. If you'd like to stick your hand in the air. Right, one in the middle down here, and Jeremy, one from the right there.

Q: Hi. First of all thank you for all your books, and thank you for *Brooklyn*. I was at Sundance at the World Premiere and you've made a lot of Americans cry; it was the best reception I've seen for a film ever. So you've, all the adaptations you've made apart from *Fever Pitch* had in their centres women, and you've described all the process and all the stories behind your decisions so far, but is it coincidental that it was, that you were drawn to stories about main female characters, and therefore can you please make your own screenplay for *Funny Girl* because it's brilliant, thank you.

NH: Thank you. Yes I don't know what to say, I find myself curiously drawn to beautiful young actresses as I get older and I don't know what that's about.

[laughter]

I think part of it is a reaction to the early part of my career when I was a guy writer who only wrote for guys about guys, and that was never quite my intention. And so with *An Education* where I wrote about a young woman, there's something, first of all I couldn't think of anything else to say about young men after those first two or three books. And there's something in some ways I think more dramatic about the stories of young women because it quite often involves some kind of, oppression's a strong word when you live in the West, but you know young women who have to overcome obstacles or deal with a set of rules that are not of their making. And there is something I think inherently more dramatic for a screenwriter about that.

Also not many people seem to be doing it. There is a constant complaint about parts for women, there was a big debate about it at the Oscars last year where every single nominated film, just about, was about men, and we have this phenomenal acting talent of young women and older women in fact who I don't think are being given enough to do. So I'm very happy to be given a clear field. I fear that other people will realise what a good time I have and steal my thunder.

[laughter]

But you know I think young women, and I guess period as well, with *Brooklyn* and *An Education* where the rules again are much clearer. We still love Jane Austen even though those rules are absurd to us because we like the clarity of it, we can see very clearly what Elizabeth Bennet has to overcome, what she has to deal with. In this century where actually well-heeled people can do whatever the hell they want whenever they want it's more chaotic to extract a narrative from that I think.

Q: Nick, a question about process. You mentioned interiority earlier on, and I was wondering if you could talk just a little bit about the difference challenges of writing for novels and writing for screenplays, which are essentially an external medium, where you have to find an equivalence. And because you work in both those media, I wonder if there were experiences that you have and insights that you have into the different challenges that you face as a writer in both?

NH: I knew someone would ask me a hard question where I didn't feel qualified to… I do know I think with film that you cannot hope for the best with interiority. I think that there are some arty filmmakers who will point a camera at someone's face for five minutes and some critic somewhere will say, "Oh you can really see what she was thinking." I don't believe that you can, I believe that's pure projection actually on the person watching, which means that you have to find drama always I think. Of course you can have the odd solo moment, but it's always for me finding the situation where you're putting your character in a room with another person and hoping that what happens in that room reveals what you want to say about the character, and hopefully do it in a way that's authentic and hopefully with some wit and some soul at some point. For me the big difference between novels and screenplays is not so much that, it's that thing about time. When we were talking earlier on about *An Education* and saying that it was probably three or four drafts before I realised what it was that was wrong with it, and what I wanted to say about that person in that time. Usually with a novel it's such a big undertaking that first of all you've thought about it quite a lot before you start; all the novels have been brewing for a year or more.

And secondly once you've been writing for that length of time, it's pretty clear by 100 pages what you're trying to do, but of course 100 pages in a screenplay – it's over. And that thing about you know you maybe find a riff in a novel that you can sustain for five or six pages, and nobody, if it's making people laugh or it's working nobody's going to say, "Yeah, it's really good but you have to lose five pages of it." There's no reason to lose five pages of it, but you can't have a five-page scene in a screenplay however funny it is. So it's not for me the interiority that's so much of a problem as just finding the space and fighting for the room for trying to do these things with economy. I think that any novelist who tries their hand at screenwriting, that's the thing that will shock them the most, not the externalising what's internal.

Q: Just a simple question, how does being Oscar-nominated change you as a writer? Because obviously you've talked about you getting, working with Reese Witherspoon. Were there other projects that you had and you know, how does that change you as a writer, does it put more pressure on you?

NH: I've found that if you're an Oscar-nominated screenwriter the only way that people ever know about it is if you introduce a conversation by saying, "I'm an Oscar-nominated screenwriter."

[laughter]

I mean you lot remembered from the introduction that I was an Oscar-nominated screenwriter, so I think the information probably lasts for about an hour. But you'd be surprised how few people noticed at the time. I think that the only way to get work is by doing good work really, and for me the real point of something being good is that it buys me another gig. Not because of the money but because that's what I want to do, and the better the work you've done the better the jobs you're going to be offered. I mean to be fair, once I had got the Oscar nomination then the offers were a lot more frequent I guess, but most of it's rubbish so it doesn't really make any difference. I wouldn't touch most of it in 1000 years. And like really bad, really bad, you can't believe how bad most of the projects out there are..

[laughter]

And then you realise what fills up multiplexes.

But I think the thing that made the most difference to my career was sort of letting it be known that I wanted to do that. Up until *An Education* it had been something that I wasn't really committed to one way or the other, I dabbled, but after *An Education* I thought, 'okay, I want to do both, I definitely want to do both'. And that means that when you start a project you do the drafts and you work it towards production rather than quitting. And as Frank said in *Wild*, I was always a great quitter. I still will quit given half a chance. I would say that that, the commitment to the profession made more of a difference than the Oscar nomination.

Q: You said you love dialogue, and I was just wondering how you tune into it, whether it's period dialogue or American dialogue, how do you tune into it while you're writing?

NH: Well I think in Britain we have been living with American dialogue all our lives. I think the things, probably some of the things we love the most are American, and I think if you have an ear for anybody's dialogue then you're as likely to be able to produce American dialogue as an old lady's dialogue or a Scotsperson's dialogue. I don't think that that's an issue. I can't really, I just know it comes easy, that's the easy thing for me. The structure and plot and everything else I find terrible to do, but the dialogue comes easy which is a blessing and a curse because you always want to dig yourself out of a hole by writing a whole ton of dialogue that doesn't go anywhere and then all has to come out anyway. But the only thing I can say about dialogue is that I know I'm nosey..

[laughter]

And I will always listen to anyone else's conversations on buses, trains, anything at all, and I enjoy it and I like to try and recreate the other side of the conversation that I can't hear. But I'm afraid I don't have any tips for how to tune in, just be nosey.

FS: Okay, any more questions? Yes.

Q: I was just wondering if you had any good excuses for not writing?

[laughter[

Any daytime TV shows or anything like that? I'm sure a lot of people here might like that.

NH: Well you presuppose that there's anyone who'd interested in your excuses for not writing.

[laughter]

I've never found anyone who cares one way or the other really.

FS: Well you have now.

NH: I mean if you're doing a piece for a Sunday newspaper and it's Thursday you might need an excuse for not having written, but novels and screenplays, you tend to have to account for you know years rather than particular days in your calendar, I think you can get away with an awful lot. The excuses I give myself however, I, well, I tend to write every day, but I do know that people who work in more sociable jobs waste an awful lot of time talking to other people and having meetings that don't go anywhere. So I give myself permission for Facebook and crosswords and so on because I don't have those opportunities.

I think that the best justification for not working actually is consuming. I don't mean toast, I mean going to see films, going to the theatre, listening to music, reading books. If you take a week off and stuff yourself full of any of that stuff I think it pays off in spades. And the times that I've tended to get most flat and depressed about my work is when for various reasons I've become disconnected from those things, and it's always other people's work that digs me out of the hole. So that's not even an excuse I think, it's just a necessity, to keep yourself, it's fuel, you have to keep yourself topped up.

Q: Just getting back to what you were saying about feeling comfortable with dialogue but less so with story and structure, when you get to writing that first draft do you then just plough through it and see where you end up or do you have a kind of map in your mind's eye or maybe even one that's written down as to where you're going to go?

NH: Ploughing through has never really worked for me. If I know that something isn't right and that it's not going to stay there then I would much rather work on it when I'm doing it, rather than just sort of splurge out and then go back. My work tends to come, it's not that it's slow but it's in really small chunks that it frustrates me. But I've never been a writer who can write 120 pages of rubbish in three days and then go back over it. I wish I could do that; it seems to me a very healthy way of writing. I always think in terms of rather disgusting bodily metaphors, and I feel that my working day is constipated and other people have a much healthier digestive system..

[laughter]

Which you know I won't expand any more than that. But I suppose the advantage of the constipation is that…

[laughter]

The advantage of writing small pieces is that there are only small pieces to work on. And of course with structure, if you know the structure's wrong then it is disastrous to carry on through to the end because then you might as well throw the whole thing away. If plot and structure aren't right then it doesn't matter what your dialogue is, it can't be rescued I don't think.

FS: We are just about out of time, I've just got one final question for you which is about original screenplays as opposed to adaptations, because we've been talking about adaptations, and indeed if you look at most of the films they are, even if it's from you know a magazine article, do you regret the fact that there are so few original screenplays?

NH: Well of course. I think, the note of caution actually is to say that most people don't know that they were books in the first place. We are, this is quite a rarified audience and you know you're a very well-read person, but even something like *Brooklyn* which we think of as being a hit book, nobody's ever heard of it and nobody knows who wrote it. I once had an argument with a woman on a plane over whether I'd written *High Fidelity* or not.

[laughter]

It was a very embarrassing and unfortunate argument, but I started talking to her and we started talking about films and she said her favourite film was *High Fidelity*. And I said, "Oh that's funny, I wrote the book." And she said, "No, it wasn't a book." And I said, "Well it actually was, and I actually, you know I really did write it." And she said, "I've watched that movie so many times, if that was a book it would have said at the end and I would have seen it." And I said, "Well I think it does say somewhere that it was written…" "No, no." And she wouldn't have it, we sort of, she just fell into a rather grumpy silence and we didn't speak to each other again.

It's only a certain section of the population that cares that there are so few original screenplays I think, and then of course we see rather inexplicably that books then go into the bestseller list when people have seen the films, which isn't the way that a lot of us want to do things but that's what happens. I have discovered, I mean I love doing adaptations because I think there comes a point in your career when you maybe get sick of who you are, and however many different ideas you try and come up with, and however different you try and make the books, I am me and I have my voice and I have my concerns and my style. And if I'm given something like *Wild* I think, 'I could never have written this book in a million years. You know I'm not a woman, I've never been on a hike'. But I can use whatever skills I have as a dramatist and I can access this material. And I've started to think of it a bit like the end of *The Truman Show* where Jim Carrey bumps up against the sky, and I feel as I get older that I'm constantly bumping up against the inside of my skull. I think, 'oh, I've got some, this is new, this is new. Oh, it's me again'.

So it feels fresh to do *Brooklyn*, to do *Wild*, to do *An Education*. The big problem the industry has I think is that because directors are so prized and writers are less prized, I mean I've never I don't think I've been taken out by a producer saying, "We want to make your original screenplay. Go off and write it, here's some money, bring it back to us, we'll make it." That doesn't happen, ever. So your original screenplay tends to be your hobby, and my original screenplay, which I've had, going for the last few years has effectively been a hobby because I haven't been paid for it. And that's not to say that I need to be paid money, but it does mean that I owe other people work who have paid me for work, so *Brooklyn* comes first and *Wild* comes first and the original goes to the bottom of the pile. And people pay you because they're on a clock. You know if you option a book then you've got 18 months, and then another 18 months, so everyone has to kind of chuck their original screenplays and get on with the work that's on the clock. And that, I don't know what you do about it. I think that if people are really serious about wanting original screenplays then they do need to court writers who are capable of writing them and say effectively, it sort of doesn't matter what it is, we like your voice. That voice and cinema, it's a difficult area.

FS: Well thank you very much for your questions, but most of all for your insights Nick Hornby, thank you.

NH: Thank you very much.

[Applause]