

Having decided to share his navigation research at Harvard, Huth first crafted a freshman seminar. From there, the material grew into a General Education course, Science of the Physical Universe 26: Primitive Navigation. (SPU 26 shared many features of Harvard College's longest-running course, Astronomy 2: Celestial Navigation, which is still offered, but was intended as a broad survey of navigational techniques and history, rather than an in-depth introduction to celestial navigation.)

I participated in the last iteration of "PrimNav" (as undergrads dubbed the popular class) before the book's final editing. Not surprisingly, it closely mirrors the proceedings of the course. Huth begins with surveys of basic land navigation based on "dead reckoning" and progresses to the more sophisticated application of compasses and maps. From there, he examines celestial navigation via stars, sun, moon, and the horizon. He next heads seaward, discussing waves, tides, currents, wind, and sailing vessels. He also includes a long, informative section about weather.

Interspersed throughout are narratives of navigation from other cultures—particularly those of Arab traders, Vikings, and Pacific Islanders.

In the age of "my world is my iPhone," Huth's book will provide most readers with new, useful, enlightening information—the space beyond the screen, as it were. In fact, I would rather have read the book than taken the course: when curiosity is your motivating force, you'd rather soak in the information than worry about assignments and grading. But class participation did have its merits. Our assignments sent us out into the Cambridge streets, across the Charles River bridges, and up to both of Harvard's observatories—successfully putting the practical back into science.

My own experience of the world has certainly changed since I spent a semester studying primitive navigation. Now, I always orient myself to the cardinal directions based on the sun's location and the time of day. I notice the passing of the seasons based on the angle of the sun's ascent. I can track

the approach and arrival of warm fronts and cold fronts, and understand what sorts of winds and precipitation these weather patterns will bring. I can entertain a nighttime crowd by pointing out constellations beyond Orion and the Dippers. And I am confident that when I am out in a sailboat (my own maritime hobby), I, too, will have the tools to avoid getting lost.

The Lost Art of Finding Our Way should be a field guide, not merely an armchair exercise. As you read it, you *must* try its techniques out in the world. If Huth has done his job, and I think he has, then all his readers will turn this valuable book's last page feeling similarly enlightened and confident about setting forth into Cambridge, across land, and even out to sea. If you become lost some day—or, God forbid, your phone's battery runs out—there will be nothing but your eyes, ears, and mind to guide you home. ▢

Former Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow Isabel Ruane '14 is a history concentrator and co-captain of the sailing team.

The Screenwriter's Toolbox

Danny Rubin teaches the "impossible" craft.

WRITING A SCREENPLAY "isn't that hard," says Danny Rubin, Briggs-Copeland lecturer on English. "It's only impossible." In other words, turning

out a 120-page script—the standard length for a two-hour feature film, computed at one page per screen minute—isn't an especially difficult challenge, but writing "one that actually works, that reaches the audi-

ence, comes alive, engages us emotionally" certainly is. In 2008, when the English department decided to add screenwriting to its creative-writing offerings, it tapped Rubin, who has written dozens of screenplays in the past two decades. Three have been produced, including his big hit, *Groundhog Day*, the 1993 existential comedy starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell.

In Cambridge, Rubin has taught the screenwriter's craft to Harvard undergraduates, graduate students, and even Nieman Fellows in workshop-format courses, "Dramatic Screenwriting" I and II. His students write short films of eight to 10 minutes; in many other screenwriting courses, students frequently attempt a full-length movie but end up completing only the first act. (The standard formula breaks feature films down into three acts, roughly equivalent to the story's set-up, development, and resolution.) Rubin wants his aspiring writers to have the experience of finish-



Screenwriter Danny Rubin at home

ing a full story, with a beginning, middle, and end. “Anyone can write a first act,” he says, “but when you are done with my course, you will have the tools to write a feature film.”

Movie storytelling, he explains, boils down to “three basic things: who is your character, what do they want, and why can’t they have it?” Suspense helps drive the narrative, and its most basic form is: “How does this story turn out?” Suspense can also energize a scene, keeping viewers on the edge of their seats: “You have to expect something to happen, and then it doesn’t.” Expectation alone can do it: an Alfred Hitchcock scene might show two people conversing, and then reveal a bomb beneath the table. “Now that conversation becomes filled with dramatic energy,” Rubin explains. To keep the audience hooked, “You ask a question and then don’t answer it. Keep that ball up in the air as long as possible. Once you answer the question, the dramatic energy is over.”

Perhaps the most fundamental tool is writing in a *visual*, not literary, mode. “One of the things I have to train out of prose writers is the idea that it’s about the language,” he says. “The script uses a visual language: that means scenes where people are *doing* things, not *saying* things.” A novelist can describe the inner experience of a character in great detail—think Henry James—but that doesn’t exploit the power of film, which tells its stories in pictures, with a strong assist from sound. “We get a lot more information that way than we realize,” Rubin explains. “In the first 10 minutes of *ET*, for example, there isn’t a single line of dialogue. You don’t want characters *telling* the story. Free up the dialogue to do more interesting things, like crack a joke or establish a character.”

A standard screenwriting technique is to externalize the characters’ inner states. For example, “You can give value to an object,” he notes. “Like taking a wedding ring and throwing it into the toilet. Or later reaching into a toilet to *retrieve* a wedding ring to show a change of heart.” Another tool is to build a routine and then



In a scene from Rubin’s 1993 “existential comedy,” *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray swigs from a carafe of coffee before a horrified Andie MacDowell.

break it. A character might line up for his daily bus ride to work, get on the bus, pay the fare, and then get off the bus before it leaves. “That could show that somebody has changed his mind,” says Rubin. “If the story has set it up, we’ll already know where the character has decided to go instead.”

During his five-year Harvard appointment, now nearly complete, Rubin has written and sold an original script, completed two rewrite jobs, and also pub-

lished the book *How to Write Groundhog Day* (2012), which contains the screenplay, Rubin’s notes, and his saga of how the classic film came into being, via the tortuous Hollywood path of agents, studios, producers, directors, and actors.

It isn’t, though, a “how-to” book on screenwriting, of which there are dozens. “Everyone in Hollywood reads these books,” he explains, “and they *think* they understand how to write a screenplay. But it’s like looking for the secret of how to live your life. You go to see the philosophers, and each sage has a different piece of wisdom. The books give guidelines and rules to follow, but the craft is knowing when and where to apply them. No one can tell you how to live your life.” —CRAIG LAMBERT

Jewish Jokes, Theoretically

Does in-group humor displace political action?

by DANIEL KLEIN

OY, SUCH A provocative book this is—I’m telling you, I can’t tell you.

But funny?

Not so much, the comical picture of Groucho on the cover notwithstanding. Delving into the history, anthropology, sociopolitical utility, and moral value of Jewish humor has the same built-in limitations as analyzing sex—you really had to be there to fully appreciate what all the *tzimmes* [fuss] was about. Come to think of it, the book’s title may be intended to warn the reader *not* to expect a totally satisfying *shpritz*. Sarah Silverman, author Ruth Wisse is not.

What Harvard’s Peretz professor of Yiddish literature and professor of comparative literature does offer is a far-reaching discussion of the essential role humor plays in an

ethnic group that historically has dwelt in the margins of the nations and cultures of others. Clearly, irony and satire often provided a palliative outlet for the Jewish outsiders, but this is only the starting point for Wisse’s analysis; she goes on to raise questions about both the appropriateness and the effectiveness of making funny when anti-Semitism has reached dangerous levels. Can humor abet the oppressor? Can it neurotically internalize the prejudices of the other? Can it subvert creative energies that would be better used to take effective political action?

Much of *No Joke*’s focus is on the extent to which Jewish humor traditionally has been aimed inward, satirizing the Jewish storyteller himself and other members of

Ruth Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* (Princeton University Press, \$24.95)