



Turning a Book into a TV Series

Article Author:

[Tony Bradman](#) [1]

[6](#) [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Tony Bradman describes how the TV series was made.

'Making a television series is very much like making a scrambled egg,' says Roger Singleton-Turner, a director for the BBC. 'First you get your ingredients, then you make them into a nice, tasty mixture. Gradually, as it comes to the boil, things begin to solidify and the whole thing begins to take shape. You just have to hope that it doesn't end up sticking to the bottom of the saucepan.'

TONY BRADMAN tells what went into the making of

Break in the Sun

Bernard Ashley

<!--break-->

which is on our screens in February.

Take One Writer and One Producer

Bernard Ashley, writer, and Anna Home, Executive Producer of BBC Children's Drama, were the first ingredients. The two met at a party to launch Children's Book Week, in October 1978. 'I'd read all Bernard's books as they came out,' said Anna. 'I liked them very much, and thought they would make good television because they're absolutely bang up to date, contemporary stuff. But I just hadn't been able to do one up to that point.'

A Kind of Wild Justice had just been published, and although Anna thought it would make a good series, it was 'too late' - her schedules were booked up for two years ahead. So she suggested to Bernard that he should send her the manuscript of his next novel *before* it was published.

Add a Book

Bernard obliged, in April 1979. Anna liked the book very much, but - as Bernard says - 'things went dead.' It wasn't until he came back from holiday in August of that year that he found a letter waiting for him, making an offer for the television rights to **Break in the Sun**, long before the hardback was published by Oxford University Press. In fact, from that time onwards, Bernard was sending Anna 'updates' regularly as he made slight corrections to the proofs.

And a Scriptwriter

Stage two of the process was having a script written. The choice of scriptwriter in the case of **Break in the Sun** was a happy one. Alan England, who is a lecturer in Education at the University of Sheffield, had actually been a teacher in the area where the book's action takes place, and so for his first major children's television script he was very familiar

with the locations and 'the idiom of the local kids'.

Anna Home gave him the manuscript of the novel in the autumn of 1979, and he set to work on writing a first draft of the scripts, dividing the book into six episodes. 'There were a lot of problems,' he said. 'Much of the book is in the form of interior monologue, but for television you have to have visual action. So it was a case of translating thought into action and direct speech.'

Anna Home says that what she looks for in a book is 'a good strong story line, not too many characters, and it should be reasonably self-contained in terms of place.' **Break in the Sun** has the first two advantages, but presents real problems in terms of locations, which range from the Thames at Deptford to Dreamland at Margate, with several stops on the Kent coast in between. The fact that it also involves a boat created some headaches.

'It's a question of practicalities. Most children's drama is done on film because it's the best way to do it, but location filming is enormously expensive,' said Anna Home. 'It takes a long time, and involves a whole caravanserai of people - over 30 people for **Break in the Sun**, for example - who have to be paid and put up at hotels at our expense.' This meant that several minor characters in the novel were dispensed with immediately, to save casting costs.

Choose Your Locations

Roger Singleton-Turner, the director, was very closely involved in the script conferences that took place between Alan England and Anna Home in January and February 1980. It is the director who has to go and look at the locations and work out the practicalities of actually shooting the series.

'Those conferences served a dual purpose,' he said. 'Part of it was artistic; we were looking at the draft script to see where there might be problems in dramatic terms, but I was also looking at it from the point of view of actually scheduling it for filming, and the costs involved. That's where we started to think about ways round the problem of locations.'

For example, in an attempt 'to save licence payers' money', Roger decided to shoot the scenes which take place in the book in a block of flats at Deptford in a block of flats just behind BBC Television Centre. Bernard Ashley was also called in to give help on the locations, and he was able for one scene to tell Roger exactly where three grain towers which play an important part in the book were, because he had based that part of the book on his own experiences when living in that part of Kent.

Bernard's clarifications were not all quite so helpful, however. The boat - which plays a large part in the book - enters harbour at several stages, and tides are a real problem when it comes to filming. 'Shooting one three-minute sequence can take a whole day,' said Roger, 'and when it involves a boat, you can find yourself starting to shoot the scene with the boat very low near the quay and by the time you've finished it's riding very high.'

Much travelling had to be done to find the right locations to fit in with the original story, and make filming as smooth as possible. The result is that, at one stage, one shot was done in one place, and the next was done 20 miles away - 'and you just have to hope that the joins don't show,' said Anna.

Cast the Parts

At the same time as scheduling was being planned, Roger and Anna were involved in casting the parts. One problem in children's television is finding adult actors who are willing to take the parts. 'Obviously enough,' said Anna, 'children's books are written from a child's point of view, so adult parts tend to be peripheral and shadowy, and it's difficult to persuade good adult actors to do them. One advantage of **Break in the Sun** was that there are some strong adult characters, such as Eddie Green, Patsy's stepfather, but we did have to beef up some of the other adult parts as well. In any case, child actors need an adult to play off against. It helps them enormously in terms of pace and technique, however good they are.'

Roger was having some problems in the spring of 1980 in casting the two children's parts. He found Nicola Cowper at the Corona Stage School in Chiswick to play Patsy - her first major part - but the character of Kenny was still unfilled. Until, that is, he decided to make enquiries at a school he passed every day on the way to work, Southfields Comprehensive in South London. His luck was in. A boy called Kevin Taffurelli was interested in doing the part and seemed right, although he had done no acting before - and he landed it.

Stir Well and Adjust for the Medium

By the early summer of 1980, the mixture was almost ready to go into the pan. The scripts were finalised, the schedules set, the actors cast, and the cameras were waiting to roll. One interesting point is that once the scripts are finally agreed, the book is usually no longer referred to. When the BBC - or any television company, for that matter - buys a book for serialisation, it buys it (in Bernard Ashley's words) 'lock, stock and barrel'. They can do anything they like to it - change the ending, the characters, the whole plot.

In fact, with **Break in the Sun**, Bernard Ashley was 'very pleased' with the way the series was put together. Changes were made, but as far as he is concerned, the book and the television scripts were 'two parallel stories which get to the same place at the end, albeit by different methods'.

Roger Singleton-Turner says that he hopes 'the series - and the film one makes - will be faithful to the spirit of the book, although you may have to use completely different means to achieve it. Essentially, what you're doing is translating from one medium which works one way, into another which works differently, but so long as you keep to the spirit of the original I think you're justified in making sweeping changes.' This is also the reason the book is ignored once the scripts are written. 'Actors don't like to use the book as well as the scripts specifically because of these sorts of changes. It can lead them up blind alleys in their interpretation.'

Start Filming

Filming actually took place between 16th June and 29th August 1980. One problem that presented itself immediately was the weather. As the book's title indicates, fine weather plays an important part in the novel, and as Roger Singleton-Turner says, 'the summer we'd chosen to film in was probably the worst on record.' This meant there had to be changes made to locations and the script *during* shooting. One important scene takes place between Eddie Green, the stepfather, and Kenny, Patsy's friend, in the open air at night. During shooting, the ground was so wet from the steady rain, that the scene had to be transferred entirely to a nearby barn.

But in general, shooting went well. Bernard Ashley was unable to see any of the filming until the last episode was being shot, although he was very pleased at the 'extremely courteous' invitation to attend. He says that the shooting of the final, climactic sequence was so good that it actually made him cry. Nicola Cowper, who plays Patsy, described the whole experience of filming as 'ever so good fun', with real delight in her voice. Brian Hall, who plays Eddie Green, thought it was 'the happiest job I've ever done'. He went on to say that it was also 'one of the most deeply satisfying jobs I've ever done. I loved the part - I usually play psychopaths, idiots or tearaways- and I thought the whole thing had so much depth and so many levels that it was a real delight to do. In fact it's got an unusual amount of depth for a television script, and the two kids involved (Nicola Cowper and Kevin Taffurelli) were absolutely marvellous.'

Prepare for Serving

Even when the series is 'in the can' and filming is over, work isn't finished. There's still the editing to be done, the titles to be prepared, the soundtrack and dubbing to be added. Roger Singleton-Turner was still in fact working on solidifying these particular parts of the mixture in November and December 1980, with only two months to go before the series is broadcast in February 1981- nearly two and a half years since the meeting between Bernard Ashley and Anna Home. when this particular scrambled egg was first thought of.

Page Number:

Source URL (retrieved on Aug '20): <http://mail.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/6/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/turning-a-book-into-a-tv-series>

Links:

[1] <http://mail.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/tony-bradman>

[2] <http://mail.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/6>