



How I Write

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‘**W**HERE DO YOU GET your ideas?’ A question every writer is familiar with. My go-to facetious answer is usually, ‘Waitrose,’ but if the questioner seems serious, my follow-up response is, ‘I honestly don’t know.’ Only if pressed will I go further and talk about the myriad ways in which ideas seem to grow from seeds that blow in from all directions, or have been lying dormant for years.

You know an idea has legs when it simply won’t go away. Sometimes it seems too good to be true. *Surely this has been done before?* is an all-too common feeling about story ideas that appear irresistible. The answer, invariably, is: ‘Well, yes, it has been done,’ (after all, what hasn’t?) ‘just not in this particular way’.

The first screenplay I wrote began with the kernel of an idea about a bigamist. That was it: *What if a man had two wives?*

So, now what?

To answer *that* question, it’s necessary to continue the game of *What If?*

What if one of the wives found out about his double life? What next?

OK, so maybe she divorces him, or takes revenge by shopping him to the police.

So far, so ho-hum.



But...*what if* his wives find out about *each other* and *join forces behind his back* in order to take revenge? Now we have the skeleton of a storyline that feels fresh, and is looking very much like a comedy. Time to put some flesh on the bones. So, who are these people?

Let's call the husband Bill. He leads a double life (which suggests *Double Bill* as a title — nice!) but how does he get away with his deception? By having one wife in one city – say London – at a safe distance from the other, who's in, say, New York. Maybe he's a psychoanalyst, an American who fell in love with a British woman, even though he already had a wife back home. So how does he justify betraying not just one woman but two? He's a terrible husband, obviously, but no one ever thinks of himself as 'the bad guy', so what could possibly be Bill's rationale? Maybe he's managed to convince himself that he's making two women happy. Maybe he tells himself that the institution of marriage was created aeons ago, when average life expectancy was thirty-five, not eight-five, as it is today. Based on his experience as a psychotherapist, he has come to truly believe that no one can realistically be expected to live happily ever after with the same spouse for fifty or sixty years, and this is his solution: being 'faithful' to two wives, each living in blissful ignorance of the existence of the other — until the fateful day when his secret life is exposed.

The rest of the story (how the women take their revenge and ensure Bill gets his comeuppance) was down to plot mechanics, something that more or less fell into place once the basic *What If?* story questions were answered.

All of which makes the process sound very straightforward, whereas we all know the reality is starkly different, especially when it comes to films. It took multiple drafts (at least thirty, believe it or not) and years of 'development hell' (twelve, to be precise) before *Double Bill* was finally made into a film by Working Title. It still shows up on obscure TV channels, at odd hours of the day and night, and began with the most simple of questions: *What if a man had two wives?*