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Animation Writer

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JOELLE SELLNER, ANIMATION WRITER

March 2, 2015 · by Shari Raymond · in Animation, Interviews, TV

Joelle Sellner is an accomplished and versatile animation writer for TV, web series, video games, and comic books. Her long list of credits include animated shows such as Mary-Kate and Ashley in Action!, Jackie Chan Adventures on Kids' WB!, Sonic Boom, and Cartoon Network's Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi, and TV-spinoff comic books like Saved by the Bell and Punky Brewster. To learn more about Joelle Sellner's work, check out her [online portfolio](#).

How did you get started writing for animation?

My former writing partner and I had written some [spec scripts](#) to use as writing samples. We sent one over to a friend of his who was story editing *Mary Kate and Ashley in Action*, an animated series featuring the Olsen twins. She liked our script and gave us an episode to write. The execs were really happy with it so

we ended up writing three episodes for the season. The show didn't get picked up, but we had three produced credits, which helped us get our next job.

What are the specific skills needed to be a successful animation writer?

It's important to be able to think visually. Even if you write amazing dialogue, that's not enough to hold the viewer's attention for more than half a minute. If you're writing a scene that involves two characters eating dinner, what can be funny or imaginative about the meal? As with any other kind of writing, you have to be able to handle notes. It's a very collaborative process, and you'll get input from everyone, including animation directors, toy designers, and educational consultants depending on the kind of show you're writing.

And always meet your deadlines. Your script is the first part of a long production process involving voice actors, animators, composers, and a ton of other people. If they can count on you to get the script in on time – no matter how short your deadline is – you'll have a better chance of getting asked back.

How is writing for animation different from live-action writing?

In an animated script, the action has to be very descriptive. If you're writing an action scene, you can't just say "they fight" like you might in a live action script. You have to choreograph the action. I'd watch kung-fu movies to get a sense of what a visually interesting fight sequence would look like. The advantage to animation is that you're not as limited by sets as you are in live action. For a recent live action project, I wrote a scene that took place in a zoo. There was no way we had the budget for that. So I set my next animated script in a zoo and it was no problem.

What is the relationship like between the scriptwriter and the animator? Which comes first: the animation or the script?

The script is first. Once the final version is approved, it gets recorded. Sometimes I'll go to a voice recording session if it's local. Then it goes to the storyboard artists and the animators. The animators use the voices as a guide that tells them when to have the characters move their lips. One show I worked on, *Shin Chan*, worked the opposite way. Since it originally aired in

Japan, we had to use the existing animation and write dialogue to match the lip movements. It was a lot of fun to do it that way, but very challenging.

As a freelance writer, I don't have any interaction with the animators. A majority of the shows I write for send their animation overseas so I don't see the final product until it airs.

What advice can you offer aspiring writers?

To break in as a writer, you have to balance your time between working on your craft and meeting people who can hire or mentor you. Your scripts have to really stand out for people to take a chance on somebody new, but you also have to get out there and meet as many people as you can. Take people to lunch or coffee and find out how they got where they are. If they give you notes on your script, listen to them. And be passionate about writing. When I'm staying up all night to meet a deadline, it helps that I love what I do.

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