



Sentient USA – Ten questions from the Author Joseph DiFrancesco

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1. Does the hook, (the inciting incident of the storm) immediately grab the reader?

Yes, I think that is done well. The storm appears in a number of places throughout the script, in a way that disrupts the chronology. Jumping back and forward in time is not a bad thing in general, but I think in this single episode, it might be better to adopt a more standard chronology.

2. Are the individual set-ups (supporting character scenarios) compelling?

In general, yes, the individual story threads start well. The most obvious exception to me is the zoo sequence. This is the only arc we pick up some days following the storm. The other three arcs are either before and during the storm (JJ and Lena) or in the immediate aftermath of the storm (Reese). I wonder if an opening to this arc could be created that introduces these characters (or some of them) at an earlier stage of the narrative. The zoo arc is probably the weakest of the character threads.

3. Are any of the characters lacking in the ability to create viewer empathy?

See my full notes. JJ needs to be more consistent. I don't buy him scoping out targets for Sal at all. This is not his character. There is a chunk there that can be removed completely to better serve both JJ and Sal. JJ needs to be the squeaky-clean good guy. Sal can be the tough guy that ends up doing

some bad things for good reasons (I'm assuming he takes out Dallas in the opening of the second episode, allowing his character something of an "I told you so" moment with JJ). I see him (at this early stage) like John Locke in Lost. I could be wrong – you may have different plans for him. But JJ, Lena and Reese all need to maintain the hero role without compromising their ideals.

4. A slow arc is being created. What short or long distant evolution do you see, or can you envision for certain characters?

See above. JJ is being set as the hero, the main protagonist. He will be challenged, he will be tested, and he will be tempted, but he needs to maintain his moral code and his integrity. If he is to be the saviour of mankind, then we need to hope he is saving the best of us. I see Lena in a similar vein. I think she's stronger than she realises, and she will grow in confidence and influence as the series continues. Reese seems an odd one out at this point. So far he's been resourceful, but little else. With most electronics knocked out, his specialist skills will be of limited use. Sal has the potential to be the bad guy / good guy – the one that is prepared to do the dirty work that no one else will do. He has a conscience, but he also has a strong survival instinct, and he won't let the former get in the way of the latter. The coal miners could be a returning menace. The zoo staff – I don't know where they're going. There is currently no real "alternative" leader emerging. It could be Sal, but he's about the only candidate at the moment.

5. Is the overall pace effective?

I've mentioned in my full notes that there are a few places where I feel some characters are wandering around aimlessly, or in circles. Reese is the obvious one – he starts in his plane, heads for the airport, checks out the inside of the terminal, heads back to the airport, then back to his plane again. None of his wandering seems to have a purpose at this point. This could be tightened up considerably, making the reveals more tense/dramatic and the clues more cryptic. JJ also seems lost for a time. He says he wants to get to the damn to check on his fiancée, but then allows himself to be delayed and distracted for an unclear number of days. If that is his goal, he should be more determined about it. There are also a couple of places (mentioned in my full notes) where one scene leaves a character somewhere, and the next scene picks them up at some later time – for example, JJ falling asleep under a tree. This passage of time could be covered by bringing snippets of later scenes with other characters forward to break up the story lines. There are also one or two instances where characters leap ahead somewhat, in a way that makes it seem like some intermediate, explanatory scenes have been removed – for example, Lena and Reese waking up in the barn.

6. Are Sentient being under or over introduced?

I would have to say they are not introduced at all. With the possible exception of Syd's ghost (which I don't particularly like), I see no evidence of any actual Sentient presence. That's not necessarily a bad thing. This script reads well as a "WTF just happened?" introduction. The sentient can be introduced gradually in subsequent episodes. This is very much the "unseen enemy" part of the arc, and it works well in that way. Any introduction should be gradual, hinted at initially, and in the shadows. Plenty of time for monsters later.

7. What scenes need improvement? Why? How?

See my full notes. There are several scenes that can be improved. There are a couple that don't ring true to me for various reasons – for example, the small creek wouldn't be flooding because of water released at the dam, and can JJ empty the shells from a gun into his hand with just one hand. There are other instances where I think the INTERNAL logic fails – for example, if we're establishing an EMP from the storm that has already killed the radios, how do the two guys start up the truck to run away? We also need to be true to the characters and maintain their consistency and integrity. For example, would our hero really buckle under Sal's insistence and scope out bad guys for him to kill, or would he get away from him somehow to avoid doing that? Sure they need to be tested, sure they need to confront seemingly impossible situations, but they must overcome them in a way that is real, consistent with the story arc, and consistent with their characters.

8. What scenes are the strongest? Why?

9. What direction/s do you see USA going in?

Stakes need to be high. Think of the competition currently out there in the marketplace. Blood, guts, gore, sex, nudity, tension, drama, terror – so many shows out there already offering many or all of these in spades. This show can afford to raise the realism more, raise the stakes more. There can be extreme tension in so many of these scenarios. At the moment, this episode reads like the first one or two episodes of Lost or Walking Dead – major event, what happened, how will we survive, here's my idea, no my idea is better, this is what the event has turned me into ... To be better than those shows, the tension needs to be greater, the drama needs to be greater. That means every situation needs the stakes to be higher.

10. What direction should be avoided?

Avoid cheese at all costs. Keep it gritty. This is a survival-against-the-odds story, so the stakes need to be high. Don't construct/contrive things that feel unnatural just in order to meet a required plot point. Don't invent stupid obstacles just to give the protagonists something to fight against or overcome

– that was one of the weakest things I found with the Lost in Space reboot.
Everything has to be consistent and real.