

## The story behind “Signs Of Life”

The initial catalyst for Signs Of Life happened over 20 years ago. My ideas are often sparked by characters, plot strands, even simply scenes or moments in films or TV programmes. As a movie buff since the early 90s, a film academy graduate in the 2000s, and now a videographer, I’m unapologetic about my influences!

Sometimes the spark is instant; at other times, a fragment will lodge in my mind and then percolate and grow, sometimes over the years.

I’d watched Clint Eastwood’s “Unforgiven”, and it made a significant impact—as it did on others at the time. The key things I took away were the grizzled central character with a past he wants to forget, a dutiful friend, and—significantly in hindsight—the young gunslinger they happen upon. The youth is keeping a secret and is hamstrung by near-sightedness.

I wondered whether I could use those key elements to craft my own Western. At the time (around 2004), I was in a groove of writing screenplays in various genres and decided to turn my hand to a new one.

I wanted to take the idea of a person with some kind of challenge or disability, and considered deafness. How were the deaf treated at the time—the mid to late 1800s? I gathered that ASL was in its infancy and derived from Native American use of hand signs. This created opportunities for conflict, with the white population essentially adopting a tool of their sometime enemies.

As part of my research and to ‘get into the role’, I learned the BSL alphabet and picked up a few basic signs. I think it’s ignited an interest.

If a grouchy middle-aged man—who largely shunned society due to his personal history—happened upon someone who he felt duty-bound to help, but couldn’t communicate with, how would that play out? What if the man was already prejudiced against the less able – “cripples”?

That led to the creation of his and the youth’s backstories. The events needed a catalyst, so this is where the MC’s best friend comes in. He shares more than a passing character resemblance to Morgan Freeman’s sidekick in Unforgiven—the more grounded, calm person who tries to knock sense into the MC, whilst being bound by friendship to follow him everywhere.

In the film, Clint’s character feels compelled to help someone who has fallen foul of bad deeds, fighting his past self and an inclination that things will go wrong if he gets too involved. Earl’s journey mirrors this, with the addition of a love interest to sweep him along.

One of the key differences is that, whilst Unforgiven is also mostly slow-paced with minimal gunplay, Signs Of Life is not a revenge or payback story. I deliberately wanted to create something more reflective and cerebral—a character piece rather than the more plot-driven books I’d written. It’s not meant to be a guns, bandits and horses type of Western.

When the screenplay was complete, it got shunted into the proverbial drawer, along with all the others. I did query a couple of manuscripts in 2005 without success.

The story continued to be something I felt passionate about and pleased with, and I'd toyed with turning it into a book. However, I was nervous about the adaptation because a lot rode on being able to do it justice. I didn't find it hard to make the source screenplay feel evocative—though the 'older me' would probably tear it to pieces—but I wasn't confident I could translate that into prose.

Still, knowing that it couldn't hurt to try, and the process might make me a better writer, in 2019, I began to flesh out the story so that it could fill 80,000+ words.

Covid lockdowns in 2020 were instrumental in making time in my schedule. The first draft was completed over the summer of that year. As I wrote, "Unforgiven" was never far from my mind—especially hearing Clint Eastwood's grizzled and gravelly voice in my head. This, with his sparse verbiage, informs how my MC, Earl, speaks—although the character is much younger.

This draft went to an editor—the first time I'd employed a professional at this stage in a project. The report was mixed but instructive. Act 2 needed significant work, and whilst this was a shock, my solution resulted in a rewrite to include a new plot element, which improved the book in many ways.

At this time, I read Frances Itani's "Unspeakable", a historical romance with a deaf central character, which gave me some ideas for nuances.

I also watched "The Unforgiven" (a much older film), which has a crucial plot strand of a young child taken by Native Americans, adopted by them, and then returned to the Whites. This element was a good touchstone to see the depiction of the prejudices involved in the situation.

The book also has resonances with "The Searchers", in which a young girl is kidnapped and raised by Native Americans.

One of the first alpha readers was a close friend who tends to read all my work. He quickly likened the book to the acclaimed 2003 Kevin Costner film "Open Range". I'd heard about the movie but never got around to watching it.

I sought it out, and in some key respects, I find the parallel clear, and it reaffirms why I think my book works. I love the film's last half-hour, where the grizzled MC, who, like Earl, struggles to speak his mind, finally declares his love for the woman who takes him despite his past and faults.

Coincidentally, the caring, steely, attractive middle-aged woman portrayed by Annette Bening is an excellent depiction of how I see Laura in my book. Neither MC believes they are "good enough" for such a wholesome and appealing romantic partner.

One of my beta readers said “Signs Of Life” reminded her of JoJo Moyes’ “The Giver Of Stars”, so I duly read this book and saw parallels with the gentle pace, depiction of prejudice, and the central character’s desire to make a difference.

Feedback from a London literary agent said, “This is a classic Western story, told with feeling and confidence. There is a real feeling for nature, and for male interaction, elements which make the experience of reading Westerns so satisfying.”

The title? It’s remained the same since the start, and alludes to the sense that it is the learning of sign language which helps Earl to get his life back. The hand gestures are signs of life, in many ways.

Having (apparently) fallen short of the level needed for trad publishing, I’ve remained unbowed and put many more weeks of effort into giving this book the best start on its self-pub journey.

It’s unlikely to be the work which defines my career, but I’m damn proud of it nevertheless.