

WRITER'S GUIDE

TO: WRITERS COMING IN TO PITCH

FROM: MICHAEL PILLER

RE: SEASON ONE

SOME DON'TS:

1. Although we want stories in which Johnny helps people, we don't want this to become "Touched by an Angel". We must find interesting, unique and fresh ways to tell stories. No preaching please. Find the unexpected twist.
2. Don't pitch stories out of the book. We'll be integrating elements of the novel into character development for the first season. (i.e., Don't come in and pitch 'Johnny meets candidate Greg Stillson'.)
3. Don't leave a Sarah-Walt subplot out of your pitch.
4. Don't pitch story arcs that run multiple episodes. What we need from you are self-contained stories.

SOME DOS:

1. We love mysteries. Letting Johnny see a fragment of an image and trying to figure out what it might mean while a clock is ticking will work well for us. Johnny's visions do not have to be as clear as they were in the pilot (and the book); they can be obscure and create puzzles for him to solve. Note: Do not confuse mysteries with crime solving. We do not want to see Johnny solving a new crime every week.
2. I'd love to find a story told from Sarah's point of view.
3. We'll always embrace new and interesting ways for Johnny to use his powers. (As well as new ways to **visualize** those powers on screen.)
4. We'd love a humorous episode in the first thirteen.
5. You'll make a good impression with the boss if you bring us a story that is **about something**. We intend to explore the world in which we live through this series. Smart pitch technique: begin with, "this is a story about..." and then tell us the **theme** you want to explore (i.e. "This is a story about mass paranoia and the dangers of mob rule, a la the Salem Witch hunts. It begins when Johnny's car breaks down in a small Maine town and...")

SHOW PHILOSOPHY FOR THE FIRST SEASON

Every series defines itself during the course of its first season, and this series won't be any different. But we have a huge advantage in my opinion: we have Stephen King's novel to guide us.

Thus, we will use the novel as our tentpole to the first season. Each episode, however, needs to have beginning, middle, and end.

Creatively, that means two things will be happening: in each episode, Johnny will use his powers to solve mysteries, resolve a central dramatic conflict, and often help someone. But at the same time, Johnny will evolve during the first season in a classic hero's arc. As he explores the breadth and meaning of his powers, so will the audience. To this end, we will continue to follow the relationships and conflicts introduced in the pilot that form the basis of the novel.

We are dedicated to satisfying the very smart and very demanding Stephen King fan base. The way to do this, we believe, is to treat King's vision with a reverence they will appreciate. At the same time, we'll bring enough new elements and twists to our episodes that will not only keep it fresh for King fans, but will also broaden our audience appeal.

TONE

This is a serious genre piece, and we want to give the audience a thrill every week. But, and this should be underlined so I'll underline it, humor is an important component of this series. We want to maintain the dry wit and sense of irony that is common to all of Stephen King's work. The humor should never undermine the credibility and it should always come out of character.

We believe one of the most crucial elements of success, and one of King's signatures, is a continuing sense of lurking danger. There should be a driving tension throughout each episode. We feel there is a power to the combination of idyllic New England life and the strange supernatural underpinnings of Johnny's experience.

We want stories that will appeal to women as well as men, and believe that can be best accomplished by clearly placing the franchise elements into an emotional and personal context.

WHAT'S THE FRANCHISE?

The powers are the franchise. We can go anywhere with this series. However, we are far more interested in telling character-driven stories than big sci fi, super hero ideas.

What are his powers? Although we're trying to avoid a label, Johnny's powers can best be understood in a psychic context. Some of the standard descriptions that would apply would include: Psychometry (sensing images, histories and impressions from holding an object); Clairvoyance (visions of the past, present or future – sometimes foggy – also coming out in dreams); Clairsentience (sensing what has occurred in a room, house, field, etc.); Precognition (sensing events in the future); and Retrocognition (seeing things from the past).

In Johnny's case, the powers are initiated by touch. He either touches someone or touches an object that someone has recently touched. And it doesn't always work. He never knows when it will and when it won't or why it does when it does. But when it does, there's usually a certain emotional urgency involved.

In general, his visions of the past and present are clearer than his visions of the future. He can actually explore the past within the parameters of a person's specific memories (but he's not really there, he's only in the memory, so he cannot change the past). Future visions are often more difficult for him to comprehend and process.

It might also be helpful to tell you some powers he does **not** have (at least for the foreseeable future). He can't read someone's thoughts per se, he can't move objects telepathically, he's not a firestarter, he's not a healer.

He may very well prove to be unusually empathic (senses emotions in others), and in rare cases may be able to sense the recent dead (i.e., his mother in their house), but it would be a mistake to consider him a medium.

We encourage you to do research into psychic phenomena.

CHARACTERS

Since there is a book and a pilot, I'm not going into the backstories here, but will provide a brief sketch of where we find each of them after the pilot:

- **JOHNNY SMITH** - Johnny is an everyman man pulled between an ordinary life and an extraordinary life... struggling to fit into this world with his new talents. How would you or I (or a member of the viewing audience) adjust to our lives if we were suddenly given magical powers – that's at the heart of Johnny's dilemma and one of our continuing themes. For example, Johnny's abilities will force him to live in the glare of unwanted public attention and celebrity. He will often wonder if he's been blessed or cursed. But through it all, Johnny never loses his natural ability to find humor in even the darkest of circumstances.

- **SARAH AND WALT BANNERMAN** - As the series continues, the relationships between Sarah, Johnny and Walt (her husband, the sheriff of Penobscot County) will evolve in complex and unexpected ways. Sarah will be in love with both men. The guys will come to respect, even like and yet fear one another. In time, they may all decide to have the most unconventional three-way love affair ever seen in prime time.
- **BRUCE LEWIS** - Bruce will become a best friend and a continuing source of comic relief and inspiration to Johnny.

While the plots we tell may be astonishing, **it is his relationships with Bruce, Walt and Sarah that keeps Johnny human and real to audiences.**

Recurring:

- **REVEREND GENE PURDY** - Purdy, who is legally Johnny's guardian and controls his mother's estate, remains an antagonist to Johnny during the first season but should not be treated as a master villain in every episode. To begin with, Purdy is a man who genuinely believes in what he preaches and in his own mind is the **hero** of our story. He is no fraud. Yes, he craves power and money, but it's the power to influence people and the money to bring God into their lives through his university. For a time at least, he sees that Johnny can help achieve his goals.
- **GREG STILLSON** - We think the story of this evil politician will begin towards the end of the first season. Stillson will be introduced to the storyline through Reverend Purdy's right-wing political organization.
- **DANA BRIGHT** - Dana, an attractive but deeply cynical female reporter will be introduced in episode two. Later, she will be recruited by Purdy to induce and perhaps even seduce Johnny to serve Purdy's goals. But as Johnny makes a powerful difference in her life, she becomes dedicated to him. She is a potential love interest for Johnny who suffers when she sees how much Johnny still loves Sarah. (And Sarah may become jealous of her as well.)
- **DR. SHARON WEIZAK** - Johnny will seek, in vain, a cure to his condition. We are exploring the potential of a character, to be introduced early in the first season, who is a leading expert in her field and could help Johnny understand and harness his powers. Like so many of the women he meets, she will be profoundly affected by and attracted to Johnny.

STORIES

As previously noted, while our character arcs continue during the life of the series, we will do episodes that stand on their own.

In your pitches, please be prepared to tell us in the broadest strokes, the beginning, middle and end to your story. Try to describe the arc that one of our central characters moves through during the episode (i.e. “Walt begins the episode as a pure skeptic, but by the end of the story has to acknowledge that Johnny has helped the investigation.”)

Please don't work out all the details of your pitch – I don't like to sit through a long scene by scene description. If we like your idea, we'll break down the structure together after we buy it. This is important. Keep it simple. Sell us on your passion for the idea.

The guest star should never drive the story. Johnny has to be active not reactive.

I encourage all writers to literally think outside the box – I don't want to do traditional television here. Our ambition is to make each hour a classic of the genre that audiences will want to watch over and over again.

Come and help us meet the challenge.