

THE DEAD ZONE

WRITER'S GUIDE

Season 4

INTRODUCTION

A few to-dos before you come in to pitch.

1. Be familiar with the series. Watch as many episodes as possible.
Key episodes in the on-going series arc include:
 - #1001 "Wheel of Fortune" (the pilot)
 - #1002 "What it Seems" (pilot conclusion)
 - #1013 "Destiny"
 - #2002 "Valley of the Shadow"
 - #2007 "Scars"
 - #2010 "Dead Men Tell Tales"
 - #3001 "Finding Rachel, Part One"
 - #3002 "Finding Rachel, Part Two"
 - #3012 "Tipping Point"
2. Read "The Dead Zone" novel by Stephen King.
3. Watch Frank Capra's *Meet John Doe*.
4. Watch Martin Scorsese's *The Last Temptation of Christ*.

Some don'ts:

1. Although Johnny should help someone in most every story, 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 story arcs that run multiple episodes. What we need from you are self-contained stories.
3. We do not want to hear any pitches based on previously seen material -- whether film or television. Those kinds of story ideas occur to everybody -- including *The Dead Zone* staff. Johnny Smith is a fresh and unusual character, never before seen on television. We want fresh and unusual story concepts that likewise have not been seen on television. If it can be said of an idea "*Star Trek* did that" -- or "*Buffy*" or "*The X-Files*" or "*Twilight Zone*" -- then that is not an idea you should pitch.

4. Some additional things to avoid in your pitches... Please:
 - (a) No ghosts
 - (b) No exorcisms
 - (c) No visions of Walt getting killed
 - (e) No literal angel/devil stories
 - (f) No magic
 - (g) No dueling psychics -- (we want to keep Johnny unique)
 - (h) No straight forward crime of the week/serial killer stories

Some wants:

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. We've learned that visions must drive Johnny to action and action must drive Johnny to the next vision. We run into trouble when Johnny acts like a crystal ball at will when the script seems to need a new vision.
3. We'll embrace new and interesting ways for Johnny to use his powers (as well as new ways to visualize those powers on screen) as long as they stay within the boundaries we've established for his abilities (more later).
4. 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

In season one, we had Stephen King's novel to guide us much of the way. Now, our job is to stay true to the book's characterization of Johnny and the general blueprint of his life's journey while we create new, original stories for him. 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. 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 broaden our audience appeal.

Although the character arcs continue to move forward, and we will continue to follow the relationships and conflicts introduced last season, plots for each episode need to have a

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 usually help someone. At the same time, Johnny will continue to evolve in a classic hero's arc, searching for his destiny in life. As he explores the breadth and meaning of his powers, so will the audience.

Please be aware that Johnny's powers are, for the most part, the only supernatural phenomena in our show's universe. Ghosts, vampires, aliens, etc. are not part of our landscape.

tone

This is a serious genre piece and we want to give the audience a thrill most 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); Retrocognition (seeing things from the past).

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.

King book has been our constitution, then we've tried to interpret the precedents he established for each new situation Johnny encounters. These parameters have emerged:

-- Johnny's power is object-based. By touching a physical object, he is able to "read" moments from the history of where that object has been and where it might be in the future. This is a very simple concept. It gets a little more complicated when the "object" is a human being, but the principle is the same: by touching a person, Johnny can see glimpses of where that person has been in the past, and where they might, or possibly, or probably WILL BE in the future. The future is NOT written in stone, so Johnny is SOMETIMES able to change that future by altering a situation in the present. (Though the idea of glimpsing a very bad but absolutely unavoidable future situation is itself an idea for an episode.)

-- Johnny is able to view the past or future of an object or person in "third person omniscient" as an objective observer, or "first person singular" by seeing through the other person's eyes (we could even do a story where Johnny "becomes" an animal or inanimate object.)

-- In his visions, Johnny only sees reality - what actually happened, what actually will happen (if he doesn't act). He does not see perceptions, delusions, hallucinations, etc.

-- Johnny's power has a psychological element. In other words, it is mediated by Johnny's mind, and Johnny's mind is not always a pure channel. This is why we can have an episode like "Enemy Mind", where his power is warped after ingesting a hallucinogenic substance. But other variations are possible. In other words, an element of doubt is always present and adds an element of tension to the use of Johnny's power -- he can never be 100% certain of the truth of ANY vision. But he still has to act according to his own conscience and the information he has been given.

-- Johnny's power can be influenced by his will. Johnny's power can be seen as an ability or talent, that he can use to his own ends. If a track star wanted to jump over a high wall, he or she should be able to gauge the height and clear it, reaching the other side. If a psychic wants to find out a certain piece of information he or she should be able to focus their attention to that end, and the information will be revealed. Sometimes the jumper's muscles aren't warm enough, or the wall is higher than they thought and they fall down. In Johnny's case, he is just beginning to learn how to make his powers work for him. Sometimes the psychic's "brain muscle" isn't warm or the situation is more difficult than they expected, and the information doesn't come. Which leads us to...

-- Johnny's power has a "mind of its own." Like every psychic or medium or oracle or mystic or saint or shaman throughout human history, Johnny is never in complete control of his power. There are times when it won't respond and there are times when it comes unbidden, providing him with completely unexpected knowledge about an object or person that he wasn't remotely interested in. And that can lead to unexpected developments, i.e. stories for episodes. Johnny's power also seems to have an inherent intelligence that can drive him in the right direction at critical junctures. It HAS to be this way, because the alternative is chaos. If the power was random, he could NEVER get the information or answer he is seeking by touching an object or person, because that

object or person has been through a near-infinite variety of past moments and will experience a near-infinite variety of future moments, any of which could be revealed to Johnny by his power. Again, if that power were undirected and a matter of brute force, it would show him nothing but random images and we would have no episodes. And finally...

-- Johnny's power is leading him to a greater destiny. The essence of the original novel and film of the Dead Zone suggests Johnny's fate: he has been chosen, beyond his will and understanding, to be the one who will save the world from Death. In our case, a holocaust. There is an escalation to the instances of Johnny's power in the sense that they not only "solve problems" but provide him with lessons about the range of his power (that he can not only see the future but change it, for example). Those lessons help reveal to him the "higher reason" that he has been "given" the power.

-- As a story unfolds, Johnny must work hard at interpreting the confusing messages being sent to him by his dead zone to assemble a clear picture of what he needs to know. This is the mind we're dealing with after all - a damaged one at that - it isn't linear and it doesn't speak in proper English or complete sentences. But Johnny's mind is trying to drive him in the right direction and his actions during an episode ultimately lead him to make sense of what his mind has been trying to say. Take a look at the script of "The House", for example. In the climax, Johnny gets a vision of a neighbor about to commit suicide. Why didn't he see this vision in act one? Because he must work through the entire mystery of his own mother's suicide before his conscious mind can make the connection to the threat to the woman next door. If you look closely at the structure of the visions, his power seems to be pointing him in this direction from the beginning.

-- Johnny also has occasional visions that involve his own future. In effect, his brain is in touch with his own body. (This is not a spurious claim - the psychic relationship between the brain and physical body has been studied for years - it is applied in medicine all the time, i.e. biofeedback for pain management, see Norman Cousins book on cancer recovery). Thus, when Johnny's dead zone senses something traumatic in his own isolated future, the message it sends Johnny through visions and nightmares does not have to be stimulated by any outside source. It can come from within Johnny himself.

-- Only Johnny can change the future.

It might also be helpful to tell you some powers Johnny does not have. He can't read someone's thoughts, 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 can sense psychic traces of people who once walked in the same space and are now 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.

THE CHARACTERS:

JOHNNY SMITH (**Anthony Michael Hall**)



Johnny Smith once led the idyllic small-town life: working as a high school science teacher, a job which he loved; newly-engaged to a loving fiancée named Sarah Bracknell, a fellow teacher he'd known since childhood; and was a good son to his widowed mother. Johnny's life was nearly perfect... until the day a near-fatal car crash left him in a deep coma for six years. Johnny regained consciousness in October 2001 and discovered that the life he once knew has completely changed forever. His mother has long since passed, Sarah has married someone else - and he has a son who doesn't know him. Even Johnny is not the same person he once was: since his coma, he possesses amazing psychic powers which allow him to see into the past and future through visions triggered by touch. Johnny continues to struggle to find his place in the world while also trying to cope with the knowledge that comes to him through his visions.

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 BANNERMAN (**Nicole deBoer**)



The former Sarah Bracknell, she and Johnny have known each other since childhood. They worked as teachers at the same high school, and became engaged just before Johnny's accident. After Johnny's accident, Sarah was told he would never recover – and she learned she was pregnant with Johnny's son – so eventually she decided to move on with her life. She married Walt Bannerman, the County Sheriff, and the two of them are raising J.J. Sarah has always loved Johnny, and struggles to find ways to make Johnny part of her life for J.J.'s sake without risking her relationship with her husband. After an extended separation in season three, Sarah has committed herself to her marriage with Walt, but continues to support Johnny as a friend.

WALT BANNERMAN (**Chris Bruno**)



Walt Bannerman is Sarah's husband, and the Sheriff of Penobscot County, Maine. Walt frequently calls on Johnny and his psychic abilities to assist in investigations. Although he is aware of Johnny's long and deep-running relationship with Sarah, he eventually comes to respect and befriend him, while at the same time fearing the consequences it may have on his marriage and his relationship with J.J. As the series goes forward, the relationships between Walt, Sarah and Johnny will continue evolve in complex and unexpected ways.

BRUCE LEWIS (John L. Adams)

Bruce was assigned to be Johnny's physical trainer after Johnny woke from his coma. But their relationship quickly developed beyond therapist-patient: Bruce is Johnny's best friend, as well as a continuing source of humor, optimism and inspiration for Johnny. Bruce is the one person that Johnny can always turn to, and someone he can trust with his own life.

In Season Two, we learned that Bruce's laid back and pragmatic attitude is only partly a natural expression of his character, and largely a conscious response to hardship in his own past. Which is not to suggest that the lone black member of our cast fits any prevailing TV stereotype. Far from it. Bruce is no ex-ghetto kid but instead hails from a solidly middle class background. His upbringing also had a deeply religious element thanks to his dad, a strong-willed Baptist preacher. While Bruce no longer shares his father's traditional religious beliefs, he has his own sense of purpose in the universe, and a conviction – at times even stronger than Johnny's – that his friend is crucial to it.

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.

REVEREND GENE PURDY (David Ogden Stiers)

Reverend Purdy, head of Faith Heritage Ministries, became Johnny's legal guardian after the death of Johnny's mother who left control of her estate in Purdy's hands. While he certainly craves power and money, he is no fraud: his ability to influence people and bring God into their lives through his university and ministry is his primary motivation. A man who genuinely believes in what he preaches, he is a hero in his own mind. He views Johnny as someone destined to play an important role in life - perhaps even fulfilling elements of Biblical prophecy. Purdy tries to be helpful in Johnny's personal journey, but struggles to keep Johnny's trust.

Purdy remains an antagonist to Johnny but should not be treated as a master villain. Purdy's financial entanglements with Greg Stillson have forced him to tap Johnny's trust fund to keep his Faith Heritage empire operating, and ultimately led to the murder of Mike Kennedy, his chief financial officer. As his religious and financial empire began to collapse around him, Purdy suffered a major loss of confidence and a mental breakdown at the end of season three, and may face jail time for criminal wrong-doing associated with bad investment deals.

RECURRING CHARACTERS:

GREG STILLSON (Sean Patrick Flanery)



Former Bible salesman, womanizer, and fundamentally dishonest - yet irresistible - Greg Stillson is Maine's newly-elected U.S. Congressman. Johnny's visions have told him that Stillson and Purdy (and perhaps even Johnny himself) are somehow linked to future world destruction. Stillson is a dangerous and corrupt politician who aspires to the most powerful job in the land, and won't let anybody get in his way - including Johnny Smith. But Johnny is determined to prevent Stillson from destroying the world.

CHRISTOPHER WEY (Frank Whaley)



Christopher Wey is a coma patient in Westchester County, New York. In the future, he will wake up to discover he is an Armageddon survivor. He will have visions that lead him to the ruins of Washington, D.C., where he will find the head of Johnny's cane at the foot of the Washington Monument. When he touches it, it creates a psychic connection with Johnny - and Wey appears to Johnny in visions from the future. Wey is a man with his own agenda, however, never quite telling Johnny everything he knows about the events that lead to the cataclysmic end of the world.

J.J. BANNERMAN (Spencer Achtymichuk)



J.J. - or "Little Johnny" - is the son Johnny never knew because of his six years in a coma. For J.J., Sarah is "mom" and Walt is the only "dad" he's ever known. Sarah has struggled to reintroduce J.J. to his real father, and despite Walt's fear of losing his "son," he has charitably gone along with the plan. J.J. learned the truth in season three and is troubled that Johnny is a source of strife in his mom and dad's marriage.

CHARACTERS FROM PREVIOUS SEASONS:

DANA BRIGHT (Kristen Dalton)



Dana Bright was an attractive and deeply cynical female reporter for the **Bangor Daily News**. She was always hot on Johnny's trail, often reporting on his actions as the local "psychic detective." Her relationship with Johnny quickly became complex, as she struggled to find a way to keep her career ambitions balanced with her developing feelings for him. Their relationship didn't work out, and we assume career opportunities took her out of Cleaves Mills – and Johnny's life – after season two.

REBECCA CALDWELL (Sarah Wynter)

Rebecca Caldwell was a therapist who worked with juvenile offenders in Washington, D.C. She came to Bangor, Maine, in season three after the mysterious disappearance and murder of her sister Rachel, a graduate of Purdy's Faith Heritage University and a campaign documentarian for Greg Stillson. At first, Rebecca suspected Johnny of being her sister's killer, but as she grew to know him, he became the only person she could trust. Likewise, Johnny confided in Rebecca secrets of his visions which he has only ever shared with Bruce. As a result, Sarah became obsessed with avenging her sister's death and with stopping Stillson from destroying the world. At the end of season three she went to Washington, D.C., intent on assassinating Stillson.

LOOKING AHEAD

For better or worse, Johnny Smith is a brand.

Some love him. Some hate him. To some, he's the second coming. To others, the anti-Christ.

But Americans love heroes. Particularly when they're modest, unassuming cute guys like Johnny Smith. And, at least for awhile, they take Johnny to their heart.

Like checking the papers to see if Barry Bonds hit another home run, people check to see if Johnny got "a hit" yesterday.

But don't forget how people love to boo Barry Bonds. The bigger they are, the more we love to tear them down (to our size).

So, in a sense, I see the theme to the next cycle as: THE FALL...

Now, it's very important to say that, except for an on-theme plot or two, I hope most of the episodes will be the same kind of stories we are telling now.

(And how you may ask can he engage in stories of such small potatoes when the future of the world is at stake? It is not difficult to envision a life lesson that makes Johnny understand that there are clues to solving the puzzle of life ending on earth in any and everything he does. Plus any hero on a quest (i.e., to find the Holy Grail) stops along the way to help folks and kill dragons.)

Our core audience has proven to be women so far and we want to keep them happy. At the same time, I want to make sure our stories have male appeal as well.

My favorite kind of stories explore what it's like to be Johnny Smith – what it's like to live with these powers, the moral and ethical dilemmas a psychic might face, the unique,

singular experiences he might encounter because of his powers – that’s the quickest way to sell me a story.

PITCHING ADVICE

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.

Michael Piller
9/10/04