

Copyright
by
Katherine Elizabeth Craft
2017

**The Report Committee for Katherine Elizabeth Craft
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following report:**

**Deconstructing Superheroes:
The Writing Process of *Magnificent***

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Cynthia McCreery

Stuart Kelban

**Deconstructing Superheroes:
The Writing Process of *Magnificent***

by

Katherine Elizabeth Craft

Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

August 2017

Abstract

Deconstructing Superheroes: The Writing Process of *Magnificent*

Katherine Elizabeth Craft, M.F.A.

The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

Supervisor: Cynthia McCreery

The following report describes the writing process of the television pilot *Magnificent*, including early ideas, initial conception as a feature, rewriting, feedback, and finally re-imagining as a one-hour pilot. This report also contains commentary on the entire creative endeavor, and reflection on its various stages.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Embracing Genre	1
Chapter 2: Unlikely Inspiration	5
Chapter 3: <i>Magnificent</i> Model Films	8
Chapter 4: Getting Into Structure.....	10
Chapter 5: Writing the First Draft.....	12
Chapter 6: Tear It Down, Build It Up	14
Chapter 7: Feature to Pilot	17
Chapter 8: What’s the Tone?	19
Chapter 9: <i>Magnificent</i> Pilot Key Changes	22
Chapter 10: What’s Next?.....	24
Appendix A – Original notes on <i>Magnificent</i>	26
Appendix B – <i>Magnificent</i> Minute by Minute.....	33
Appendix C – <i>Magnificent</i> Reel by Reel Rewrite Outline	36
Appendix D – <i>Magnificent</i> Pitch for HBO	48
Appendix E – Illustration of Main Characters	53
Bibliography	54

Chapter 1: Embracing Genre

I've always been a reader – I was that kid with her nose in a book 24/7. I read a wide variety of fiction but what I really latched onto was fantasy. Classic authors like Madeline L'Engle, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, but I wasn't above devouring fantasy novels like *The Secret of the Unicorn Queen*, a series that detailed the adventures of an ordinary teen girl who falls into a mad scientist's portal and finds herself in a magical land populated by warrior women who ride unicorns. What I wanted was to be transported, like that teen girl, into marvelous lands full of talking animals and adventure.

My first short story, written in first grade, was about a magical (of course) golden horse who escapes its stable and roams the land. I embraced mysticism at a young age, and through high school most of my stories revolved around ponderous metaphors involving wolves, goddesses, magick, and ominous weather. In high school I also discovered Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* graphic novel series, Anne Rice, Stephen King's Dark Tower series, *The Stand*, and Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon*. I also devoured our high school reading curriculum, Jane Austen being a particular favorite, but I was still deeply rooted in fantasy.

The other side of this has been my prevailing interest in social justice. My mother ran an emergency youth shelter for homeless and runaway youth in our neighborhood of Oak Cliff in south Dallas for fifteen years. My first career-path job was at the shelter as a counselor, and from a young age I saw firsthand that other young people lived in very different situations than mine. This fueled my already strong desire to “change the world,” and fight injustice. My mother was also a radical feminist and I attended rallies and political events with her, and had lunch with Gloria Steinem – an event that had a deep and lasting impact on me.

When I wasn't writing fantasy stories, I was writing songs and plays that lifted up the plight of the downtrodden. The songs were achingly sincere folk ballads about abused children that I cringe to think about now, but I discovered that I had a knack for playwriting. My one act play *Kid Fears*, based on a newspaper article I read about a fifteen year girl tried and sentenced as an adult for shooting someone in a drug deal gone wrong, won a city-wide award and was produced at the Dallas Theater Center.

These preoccupations with both fantasy and social justice continued in college, but my short stories became more grounded in the real world as I discovered magical realism in authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Isabel Allende. I dived into African-American and Latin American studies, and continued to make theater. I also got more into graphic novels – reading Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and David Mack's *Kabuki* among others.

After college, I moved to Austin and got a job at Half Price Books. Suddenly, I was surrounded by other book lovers but I quickly realized that my love of genre wasn't universally embraced, and was actively scorned by a large contingent of the staff. I scrambled to make up for lost time, reading literary classics that the cool kids at Half Price were into, eventually making my haphazard way through most of the white men (and some women) I'd never bothered to read before. Although I loved French authors like Celine and Sartre, doing a deep dive into French existentialism didn't do much to help my naturally depressive tendencies, and a series of disastrous medical events derailed me for a couple of years.

During these years, I eschewed fantasy altogether in favor of Russian authors and Modernist poets, and developed a deep sense of shame around the "frivolous" fantasy books I'd loved so dearly. I was an intellectual now (pronounced with a French accent because I was also taking a French class at the local community college) and I wasn't going

to engage in what “the masses” did. I was too good for all of that. Unsurprisingly, no one really wanted to hang out with me at this time in my life, even my long-suffering family.

Then I watched *Buffy: The Vampire Slayer*.

I’d seen episodes off and on in college but never made the time to actually catch it in any kind of sustained fashion. But when my boyfriend (eventually husband) insisted on watching the entire series from beginning to end (he also worked at Half Price and the DVD box sets frequently came through), I rolled my eyes and loudly declared that *he* could do that but *I* was going to be reading Dostoevsky. Or something. But I’d walk by the television and it looked like so much *fun*. I’d stand across the room and watch, pretending to do something else until I finally realized how ridiculous I was being. I made him start over from the beginning and we watched it all together, then moved on to its spinoff *Angel*.

In *Buffy*, I saw many of my preoccupations deftly handled onscreen: justice, feminism, great storytelling, the families we build for ourselves, grief, abuse, and on and on. I realized what a prat I’d been for the last few years, and made my halting return to fantasy. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. I read Philip Pullman’s entire oeuvre, tore through Marvel and DC’s best superhero runs, and scouted out new fantasy authors – particularly women and women of color.

My playwriting also swung back to fairy tales and fantasy. My first produced, full-length play, *The Story Seekers*, was about a princess transported to a fantasy world where the children trapped there have to re-enact gruesome version of fairy tales for an evil Storyteller. Like *Buffy*, I tried to use the fantasy framework to tackle deeper issues in the story.

At this point in my life, I still try to hide the terrible covers of fantasy novels but that doesn’t stop me from buying a whole stack of them. I also read literary fiction, poetry, and plays, and consume a mix of tent pole superhero movies and arthouse films. I’m most

interested in good storytelling, wherever I find it. For me, this means seeking out a diverse variety of writers and storytellers, and never depriving myself of a good movie, book, television show because someone else might consider it lowbrow.

All of this led me to write my own big, genre movie: *Magnificent*. I'll discuss in further chapters the particular inspiration for this story but generally, it springs my desire to use the fantasy genre to tell stories that highlight social justice in fun, compelling ways.

Chapter 2: Unlikely Inspiration

Magnificent was originally inspired by the Keanu Reeves film *John Wick*. I'm not a huge fan of action movies but I went to see this with my husband, and was pleasantly surprised by how much I enjoyed it. I found one detail of the film to be particularly ludicrous though – the sheer number of cookie-cutter tough guys that John Wick single-handedly takes out. At the end of each fight sequence, it seemed like dozens of bodies would litter the floor while John Wick walked away, cool and collected.

After the movie, I kept thinking about all of that cannon fodder. Wouldn't it be funny, I thought, if after John Wick walked away, all of those dudes (not really any ladies in this) all got up, dusted themselves, and clocked out? What if there was some kind of talent agency that rented out this expendable muscle to any bad guys (or good guys) who needed them? I began to construct an entire world in which villains couldn't find henchmen anymore because everyone was sick of getting beat up, so they had to rent them. In the spring of 2015, before I entered the MFA program, I started to develop the idea that would eventually become *Magnificent*.

This original story synopsis was about a black woman in her late twenties, Trina, fresh out of prison for low-level drug dealing, who wants a legit job but no one believes she's ready to turn her life around. When she's finally recruited by a militaristic organization called SOMA, she dives into a seductive world of superheroes, villains-for-hire, and the promise of invincibility. But when Trina comes face-to-face with the ugly

truth of SOMA, she'll have to overcome her pride to learn who she can trust. (See Appendix A for my original notes on this story.)

Many of the elements of this original idea did not survive the next iteration but a few key characters did. Mr. Magnificent, the cheesy, too-good-to-be-true superhero, stuck around as did his nemesis The Darkness. The themes of deception and conning the public also made it into the feature version of *Magnificent*, and the main character is still a black woman who can't get a fair shake because of her past.

When I began the MFA Screenwriting program in the fall of 2015, we had to bring in several feature ideas. We were told that we'd be working on one feature screenplay all year, so we needed to choose an idea we were willing to spend quite a bit of time with. I immediately thought about *Magnificent* but I wasn't happy with it in its current form. After much thought, I decided to make it a more traditional superhero story and I lowered the age of the main character, whose name became Janelle, and re-imagined the story. Now the story was about Janelle, a super-powered teen living in foster care in Chicago, who competes on a reality show to become Mr. Magnificent's sidekick. Mr. Magnificent morphed into an over-the-hill superhero who had a failing reality show that needed a ratings boost.

I could still explore many of the same themes but in Janelle, I could create a character based on the women and girls I had met and befriended during years of working in youth shelters and prisons. I wanted to explore how, even in a world with superpowers, girls of color – especially girls that come from disadvantaged backgrounds – would face

more challenges than their white, middle-class counterparts. And to put it in a fun, superhero framework with lots of fight scenes and the occasional explosion.

When I brought this idea into class, no one was excited about it. I had two other loglines that got more love in the room, but I was determined – I had already been thinking about this idea for months, and I knew I would be happy spending the next academic year figuring out how to make it work.

Chapter 3: *Magnificent Model Films*

While writing my first draft of *Magnificent*, there were a number of films and television shows I drew on for inspiration. The main ones I looked to for reference were Pixar's *The Incredibles*, Tina Fey's *Mean Girls*, and the television show *UnREAL*.

The Incredibles was an obvious choice – it tells a traditional superhero story but it also deals with public perceptions of superhero's, and how a family has been hiding their superpowers in order to blend in. My protagonist, Janelle, was also hiding her superpowers, and my main character, Mr. Magnificent, is similar to Mr. Incredible – a self-important, somewhat pompous man who has to learn a lesson about heroism. I loved the characters Violet and Dash – young people who are figuring out how to handle their powers while they try to be normal kids. I especially love Violet – I have a soft spot for teens – and how she steps into her power by the end of the film.

I drew upon *Mean Girls* because it is a classic teen outsider movie, and it showcases how hilarious teen girls being mean to each other can be. My rich, white-girl-snob character Whitney certainly draws inspiration from queen bee Regina George, and I love the competitiveness of the girls with each over seemingly ridiculous trifles. *Mean Girls* does a great job of world building, and helping the viewer understand why these events are life and death for the characters. *Mean Girls* explores both the positivity and toxicity of female friendships.

Finally, the Lifetime show *UnREAL* also proved to be a valuable reference point. *UnREAL* follows the behind-the-scenes shenanigans of the producers of a *Bachelor*-type reality show. It delves into many of the same themes I wanted to explore by including a reality television frame: racism, classism, sexism, romance, and manufactured melodrama.

Female mentorship and friendship also take center stage in *UNnreal* – the friendship and rivalry of Rachel and her bad-bitch boss Quinn electrifies the show.

I also watched many, many Marvel movies while working on *Magnificent*. No one film springs to mind but their general ethos of self-awareness, comedic storytelling, and fun struck a chord with me. Superheroes are inherently ridiculous and Marvel (mostly) embraces and acknowledges this, in a way that invites the viewer to be in on the joke.

Chapter 4: Getting Into Structure

Once I settled into this iteration of my idea for *Magnificent*, it was time to write the first draft. I was enrolled in Cynthia McCreery's Intro to Screenwriting class during this process, and it proved extremely helpful. Until I started to learn about screenwriting, my writing lacked essential structure. I had very creative ideas but was unable to execute them to my satisfaction. My plays suffered the most – they always started out pretty well but generally became a mess by the climax and didn't end in any kind of satisfying way.

Before starting the MFA, I read Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat* and took an Austin based screenwriting workshop with Jill Chamberlain that introduced me to her own structure she calls the Nutshell. Both were helpful – the Nutshell for a big picture view and *Save the Cat* for very prescriptive, page-by-page instructions, but both had flaws. The Nutshell doesn't do much to address the challenges of writing a successful second act, and *Save the Cat* is so precise that it doesn't leave much room for story exploration.

In her class, Cindy introduced us to the Minute-by-Minute format, which seemed to be the best of many worlds for me. It combines high-level, big picture story with enough structure and detail to help you successfully tell the story. Before we could begin writing, we had to complete treatments and a minute-by-minute breakdown of our idea (see Appendix B for the minute-by-minute of *Magnificent*).

The minute-by-minute helped me plot out Janelle's character arc from beginning to end. She starts very closed off, wanting nothing more than to hustle her way into a better situation and keep her head down. By the end of the film, however, she wants to do what she feels is right – she wants to be a hero. Plotting that out in advance helped ensure that I wouldn't miss important character beats in the middle of superhero antics and reality show challenges.

It also helped me track all of my characters. Janelle is the lead, but by the end of the film four of the reality show contestants – Whitney, Amina, Isabel, and Janelle – have formed a team of their own. It took quite a bit of story wrangling to get them there, so figuring it out ahead of time saved me many tears (although not all of them!) later on.

After doing a minute-by-minute and treatment, we had to outline our entire screenplay. This was something I had never done before – I would usually outline the first act, write it, then outline the first half of the second act, write it, etc. This meant less work up front but it also meant I would get stuck with no way to figure out the next step of the story. This led to convoluted second acts and tepid thirds. Getting notes in workshop on my *Magnificent* outline helped me craft the story in a totally new way.

Before I started exploring screenwriting, I was very anti-structure. I thought it was too much work, quashed creativity, and made your work just like everyone else's. My experience crafting *Magnificent* in Intro to Screenwriting, however, made me a believer. In all my writing, I now work in stages to ensure that the story is well structured before I write a line of dialogue.

Chapter 5: Writing the First Draft

Once I had the outline finished, I was ready to go. As I quickly learned, having a completed outline was a tremendous asset in the writing process. Even when I felt stymied, I could force myself to sit down and just plow through the outline, writing scenes that might not be top notch, but would at least give me something to work with.

This was an extremely helpful attitude to have because I struggled with my lead character, Janelle. Who was she? Was her want strong enough? Did her choices make sense? I wanted to make sure I wasn't writing a racist stereotype – I'm a white writer writing a black, teen character and I wanted to make sure I was getting it right. To this end, I read screenplays with black characters written by black screenwriters – like *Empire* and *Boyz n the Hood* – to see how they handled African-American Vernacular English (AAVE) in dialogue. I decided to mostly eschew writing Janelle's dialogue in dialect, in order to avoid caricature. I avoid dialect for most characters – I'll capture their rhythm and word choice but I don't want to write out someone's exact accent. The playwright and screenwriter Martin McDonagh is a good example of this – his characters have thick Irish accents, but he doesn't phonetically write that out. He incorporates Irish rhythms and slang, and lets the readers and the actors sort it out. I decided to do the same for Janelle.

Once I had a better handle of Janelle and was plowing through my outline, I realized quickly that I had too much story. This became a recurring theme in workshop, as I would turn in too many pages, apologize, ask what could be cut and hear from many, "It's too long but I don't know what to cut. I like all of it!" It was great to hear that people liked so much of the story but my first draft ended up being almost 130 pages long. The combination of reality show challenges, superheroes and villains, and teen drama ended up being too

much to try and cram into a single feature. I made a valiant effort, though, and was at least able to get through the whole thing.

Intro to Screenwriting only required that we write the first half of the screenplay in class; the second half we were instructed to write on our own over Christmas break. This was liberating, as I didn't have to turn in pages every week, but also terrifying because I felt like maybe I was writing utter garbage and there was no one around to help me course correct.

As I got deeper into acts two and three, I realized just how much story I had to grapple with. I was trying to flesh out the characters of Whitney, Amina, and Isabel, while tracking Janelle, Mr. Magnificent, The Darkness, and Mr. Magnificent's producer Monica. Several lovely, quieter scenes with the girls ended up on the chopping block because I had so much to get through that it seemed a waste of pages to let the girls just chatter at each other for two to three minutes. This process began my ongoing realization that I try to load too much story into everything I write. I have many great ideas for what should happen, and I think that all of them will fit.

Once I finished, I was eager to get into the spring semester because I felt like there were still mountains of work to be done on the script, and I wanted to get started. *Magnificent* is an idea that I've never really gotten tired of, which is fortunate because finishing the feature draft was only the first of many steps to follow.

Chapter 6: Tear It Down, Build It Up

In the spring of 2016, I was in Beau Thorne's Rewriting class. We all came prepared with our completed screenplays, and embarked on a methodical process of evaluating and rewriting our scripts. We started with a diagnostic, where we each read each other's scripts and pointed out its strengths and weaknesses. After this, and much discussion, we each mapped out a plan for our rewrites, and pitched it to the class.

In order to plot out our revisions, we divided our scripts into eight reels. Using one structure to write the first draft and a second structure to rewrite it, allowed me to look at my story from several different angles. Dividing the script into eight discrete chunks, and labeling each reel, helped me see how the story progressed (or didn't) and what parts were lacking.

I received mostly positive feedback on my first draft. I was surprised by how little work the workshop felt it needed. This changed as we got into it, but the initial impression I got from everyone was that it was a strong story that needed a little bit of tweaking. In my rewrite pitch (see Appendix C), most of the revisions were minor and didn't involve any huge, structural changes.

One element of the script that needed work was the reality show frame. In my efforts to focus on Janelle's character arc, I had let the fact that they are on a reality show slip away. In my eight reel pitch, I added several more scenes where we see actual scenes from the reality show (edited to make Janelle look bad), and more reality show events – publicity appearances, moments of minor characters watching the show, and reactions from the girls about how they're being portrayed.

There was also an extended sequence in the first draft where Whitney has a necklace stolen from her, and she thinks it's Janelle. It turns out in the end to be Monica,

trying to stir up drama and make Janelle look even worse. This was another storyline that kind of petered out and got lost in the mad rush to the climax. I ended up cutting it, trusting that Janelle was besieged enough by Whitney and Monica in other scenes. I also cut the challenges outside of Chicago. In the first draft, the girls were traveling the country, doing appearances and challenges in various cities. This felt too unwieldy, and took up too much space with plane rides and explanations of where the girls were and why.

I pitched an entirely new third act. This is where, in my opinion, the story really falls apart in the first draft. *Magnificent* is the first really big, heavily plotted feature that I had tried to write at the time, and it showed. I felt that, like most superhero movies, it needed a big action/fight sequence at the end but was unsure how to write it on the page. Act three went through several iterations, and in the eight reel pitch it was all about saving Chicago from The Darkness, who has finally gone rogue.

After the pitch, we rewrote our scripts reel by reel. Every week, we rewrote a reel and brought it to workshop to discuss. Although we all gave and received notes on each reel as we went, we weren't allowed to go back and rewrite. We could add notes to the end of each reel detailing how we planned to rewrite it, but we had to keep pushing forward.

This was both liberating and frustrating. There were elemental changes that I really wanted to make, but I had to just note them, let them go, and keep moving on. I had to trust that at the end of the process, my notes would be enough of a blueprint that I could execute a final rewrite. It became fun, after a while, to write down the notes and imagine the best version of them as I went into the next sequence.

Throughout rewriting, I became aware that I was still struggling with the character of The Darkness. Superhero villains are almost harder to create than heroes – it seems like every iteration of every lunatic bad guy has already been created. Was The Darkenss a Joker knockoff? Was he like Bane? I wanted something unique but every idea I had already

existed. My husband is a comic book aficionado and he informed that even the name “The Darkness” had been used before. In the end, I decided that since no idea was new, I would just go with what I liked. The Darkness became a cross between a mad scientist and a scary clown – building carnival-esque toys that carried bombs inside of them. He was chaos personified, and his villainy lay in his desire to destroy things.

My other struggle, I realized, was my action writing. As I wrote giant action sequences, I had to learn how to pare down my language even more to create clean, compelling scenes that flowed well on the page. I started watching superhero movies even more closely, and finding scripts when I could. *How did they write that?* I started asking of every action sequence I saw. This helped my action writing in general – I now have a clean and (I like to think) evocative style that retains my voice while giving the reader a clear picture of what’s happening.

At the end of the semester, I had another giant mess – a rewritten script full of notes about what the next revision should like. The RTF department hosts a departmental screenwriting competition, and there was only a week between the end of the semester and the deadline. I hunkered down and once again tore through a complete revision. It was a difficult and painful process; I felt under the gun and obligated to use a sledgehammer when I wanted to use a chisel. I turned the next draft in by the deadline, but it was riddled with typos, and I was embarrassed by its mistakes.

I cleaned it up and submitted it to the Austin Film Festival. I was finally able to put it to bed for a while, but I wasn’t completely happy with how it turned out. It was an ambitious story that I loved, but I still felt like it needed some more work to really shine.

Chapter 7: Feature to Pilot

In the fall of 2016, I learned that *Magnificent* had made it into the second round of the feature competition of the Austin Film Festival. I was surprised and excited, so I posted the news on Facebook. A friend from college, who used to work for the Weinstein Company and still lives in Los Angeles, asked to read it. I sent it over to him with big dreams – that he would get it into the right hands and it would be made into a summer tent pole starring Will Smith. Hollywood, here I come!

The reality, of course, was a little less exciting. He passed it over to his development person, who had a lot of notes on it. They were similar to my notes – there was too much story, not enough character development, and that the reality show construct was hard to fit into a feature. The tone was also uneven – was this a show for teen audiences or for adults? The script veered between light-hearted comedy and darkness. They told me I should also decide if I wanted to rewrite the feature or turn it into a one hour pilot.

The more I thought about it, the more the idea of a pilot appealed to me. Although I would love to sell a feature, I want to write for television. I love working collaboratively, and I feel like I would thrive in a writers' room. I promised to think about it, but I was quickly subsumed in the academic year and our discussion tapered off. I decided that I would work on *Magnificent* as my thesis script, and put it out of my mind.

Over the 2016-2017 academic year, I wrote two half-hour comedies and one half-hour comedy spec of *BoJack Horseman*. I had never thought of myself as a comedy writer before, but apparently that's what I was becoming. The half hour format was fun to write, and seemed to suit my talents. I started to have doubts about working on *Magnificent* again – it's important to have writing samples that are similar to each other, and can define you as a writer. Two comedies about social issues plus one hour long about superpowered teens

didn't seem to match. Should I even be working on this script? But I knew I wasn't finished with this story, and my friend in LA really wanted me to rewrite this so he could show it around town. I decided to not worry too much about what box I fit in as a writer, and decided to tackle it again.

Chapter 8: What's the Tone?

This question comes up over and over again in my writing. I have a hard time defining, and then sticking to, any one tone. I want to include comedy, tragedy, sweetness, and cruelty. This can make my work hard to categorize, and can also make it difficult to determine who the audience is for any particular script.

In the summer of 2017, I met with my thesis committee for the first time to discuss what a pilot of *Magnificent* could look like. I received conflicting notes, but was urged to reconsider my pilot as a grounded, realistic, dark show for premium cable. A show that could appeal to adults. We discussed big story changes, such as getting rid of Whitney altogether, and taking out the reality show aspect completely.

In this new iteration, the girls would be part of an underground resistance network, much like present-day antifas (anti-fascists). Janelle would be recruited into this organization by Amina (formerly Sara) after she tries to save her friend who's being deported. The big bad of the season would be a white supremacist group – who had their own superpowered teens – and Mr. Magnificent would be pretty irrelevant to the whole thing.

I got excited about this idea, and decided to plot out the story. The tone would be dark and would deal more with Janelle's challenges living in foster care. I'd keep her in her south Chicago neighborhood, and the show would also be about the neighborhood itself and how, while there might superheroes in the city, they never bothered to go down to the south side, unless they were harassing people. Mr. Magnificent worked with the police and with ICE – he was only a hero to certain kinds of people.

Around the same time, I learned that I was a finalist for the 2017 HBO Access Writing Fellowship. I had submitted my half-hour scripts *Shmabortion* and *Shaky* to the

competition, been interviewed by HBO executives over the phone, and now had to fly to LA and pitch three ideas to HBO. I decided to pitch *Magnificent*, in its grittier form, as one of my ideas. (See Appendix D for the HBO pitch.) Stuart Kelban helped me prepare my pitch, and I felt solid in it as I got on the plane to LA.

In the conference room at HBO, I sat across from four executives and launched in. I pitched *Shaky* first, then launched into *Magnificent*. As I was describing the characters, Kelly Edwards, Head of Talent Development, stopped me. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to be the asshole here – how is this an HBO show? This sounds like it’s for the CW.” I stammered something incomprehensible and fell silent. At least one of the other executives was more encouraging; he asked me several questions about what I was trying to say with the show and why I thought it would work for HBO.

I regained my composure and talked about the current political climate, and how I wanted to see more girls of color onscreen, and how I wanted the media I make to reflect what I wanted to consume. None of this directly answered the question, but we had a discussion around superhero shows as metaphors, and what the metaphor of my show would be. We discussed my work in jails and prisons, and how trauma affects most of the women I’ve worked with over the years. How Janelle is affected by trauma, how her mother’s imprisonment is a passing down of trauma. By the end of the conversation, I had a better grasp of the story I was trying to tell and a liberating realization: *Magnificent* is not a show for HBO or for adult audiences. It *is* a show for the CW or for Freeform. It’s for younger audiences (albeit savvy ones), and it’s for network.

I thought I’d blown my pitch, so I was surprised to be selected as one of the 2017 Fellows. When I asked my mentor, who had been in the pitch, about it, he told me that my willingness to listen to their critique and to engage in a conversation about how the show could be adjusted to fit the HBO brand were points in my favor. Apparently, some of the

other candidates weren't flexible enough to hear what the executives were trying to tell them.

During my first conversation with my mentor, we discussed developing *Magnificent* as my project in the HBO program, but I realized that I didn't want it to be a grim show aimed at adult audiences. I love young adult fiction, movies, and shows, and I feel that *Magnificent*, like *Buffy*, works better as a smart network show that, while not afraid to go darker and address serious issues, maintains a lighter tone in general and keeps the elements that make the show more fun: Mr. Magnificent, the reality show concept, and Whitney.

This was a relief to finally figure out and although I knew there were a few big changes that needed to happen, most of the key elements from the feature would translate easily into the pilot.

Chapter 9: *Magnificent Pilot* Key Changes

Now that I'd made some clear decisions around tone, the pilot became much easier to write. I made several key changes, however:

In the feature, Janelle was living in foster care. In an earlier draft, she was kicked out of her foster home and had to go back to the youth shelter (named Promise House, after the shelter my mom ran). Her caseworker at the shelter, Beverly Gentle, had a heart-to-heart with her about getting her act together. This scene, and the shelter, was cut for space in the final draft of the feature but I put this back in for the pilot.

I cut out the foster mother and foster home completely for the pilot. I have more familiarity with youth shelters than foster care, and I love the character of Beverly Gentle. I wanted a character who was completely in Janelle's corner from the start. Janelle is a tough cookie, so having Beverly around to see the good in her helps the viewer also see Janelle's vulnerabilities and sympathize with her.

I also went ahead and made Marcus her biological brother. Their relationship wasn't completely clear in the feature – I had imagined that they were both in foster care together and she took him under her wing but it was simpler, and made them already closer, to conceive of them as brother and sister. When Janelle is defending him in the opening scene of the pilot, it's easier for her to yell, "Stay away from my brother!" We get it, immediately.

I also eliminated The Darkness. In my new conception of the world, there aren't any supervillains. Mr. Magnificent doesn't really save the world – he works with the police in Chicago to help them out as needed and create PR opportunities for himself where he performs staged heroic feats that are always caught on camera. His main reason for fame is his reality show, *American Hero*, and unlike Mr. Magnificent in the feature, he does not

want to find a sidekick. His producer Monica pressures him to do so, telling him that this is the way to connect with a younger audience and revitalize his brand.

One storyline I brought over from the grimmer version is that Janelle saves her friend from being deported. When Janelle and her friend Adriana are caught shoplifting, they're both arrested. Adriana is supposedly safe under DACA but because of her arrest, she's scheduled for deportation. She calls Janelle for help, but Janelle doesn't know what to do. When she confesses what's going to Amina, Amina immediately decides that they're going to save Adriana.

This storyline gave me the chance to set up the franchise of the show: in each episode, the reality show will require the girls to do some dumb and fairly innocuous "challenge" to supposedly test their suitability to be Mr. Magnificent's sidekick, but Janelle, Amina, and Isabel will be fighting for justice on the down low in their own way. Whitney will eventually become part of the team, but since this draft is a pilot I didn't need to move the characters as far along in their arcs as in the feature.

In the feature, Mr. Magnificent and Janelle also had a bond between them – Mr. Magnificent had also grown up poor and connected with Janelle. In this version, Janelle's connections come from the other girls. Mr. Magnificent is more of a distant figure, not tied into Janelle's life or experiences in any way.

Writing the pilot itself was an interesting experience. It was fun to revisit the world but there's also the feeling: *will I ever get this story right?* I'm happy with my current draft but still feel like it needs work. It's such a big world, and a big story, that I think I could tinker it with off and on for years. I hope someone else takes an interest in it at some point along the way.

Chapter 10: What's Next?

Once I've fulfilled my degree requirements, I'm going to send *Magnificent* out to several people to get further notes. My fellow writers in the HBO program are a great resource – it's a diversity fellowship, so many in the group are women and people of color. Since all of my lead characters are girls of color, I want to get a diverse range of writers to read the script and let me know if characters feel off or stereotypical. There's also a good mix of comedy and drama writers in the program, so getting their different perspectives on the story will be helpful.

When I was in LA for HBO, I had a general meeting with an executive at ABC/Disney and pitched him *Magnificent*. He was intrigued by the idea and asked me to send him the script when it's finished. Once I've finished the next draft, I'll send it to him and hope for the best. I'm still wavering between my identity as a comedy writer, and someone who writes for fantastical fare for younger audiences. I'm aware that I need to stick myself firmly in one camp or the other as I'm starting out, but an opportunity like this is too good to pass up.

Because of my selection in the HBO program, I was also able to secure a manager. I'll be passing the script over to him for notes, as well as to my college friend who encouraged me to write this as a pilot in the first place. I see many notes in my future, and more decisions about directions to take the story.

At this point, I think the biggest weakness of the script is world building. I know what this world looks like, and what roles superheroes play in it and how many people have powers and what they are, but I don't think that comes across clearly in the script. My distaste for exposition might have gone too far in this case. I think superhero nerds will understand what I'm doing, but I want this show to be accessible beyond that audience.

The script's other greatest weakness is Janelle's superpower and how it's utilized. She can stop time – she can freeze the world and move around within that frozen space – but it's unclear if she's stopping *all of time* or just her corner of the world. I'm not a nerd about powers, but I've been questioned extensively about this by several friends who are and I need to make some more specific choices around Janelle's power.

The strength of the script, the characters of the girls, will remain unchanged. Janelle, Amina, Isabel, and Whitney will continue to be the heart of the story, in any of its iterations. (See Appendix E for an illustration of all four girls.)

This entire process has been extremely helpful, both for this specific script, and for learning my strengths as a writer. I have gained confidence and craft, and am excited to take this script out into the professional world.

Appendix A – Original notes on *Magnificent*

Trina, fresh out prison for low-level drug dealing, wants a legit job but no one believes she's ready to turn her life around. When she's finally recruited by a militaristic organization called SOMA, she dives into a seductive world of superheroes, villains-for-hire, and the promise of invincibility. But when Trina comes face-to-face with the ugly truth of SOMA, she'll have to overcome her pride to learn who she can trust.

WANT: To kill Mr. Magnificent

EVENT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING: She kills Mr. Marvelous – he gives her a syringe or a clue that everything is not as it seems

CATCH: She's now on the run and everyone turns against her.

FLAW: She's proud – doesn't want to ask for help.

LEARNS: She can't work all on her own – she needs her friends/family to bring the corp down

HELL: She gets all of her erased memories back. She learns about the conspiracy. She wants Mr. Magnificent to be alive again. She gets her group together and forms The Magnificents – an all woman superhero team to take down the corp.

FINAL STEP: She and her friends work in the community, digging a community garden.

WANT: a job

EVENT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING: She gets a job at redshirts

CATCH: She's back in an institutionalized environment

FLAW: She's proud – doesn't want to get close to anyone

LEARNS: To open up, to be vulnerable

HELL: She kills Mr. Magnificent. He gives her a syringe – she takes it and gets her memories back and she gets his powers. She and her team mates become the Magnificents.

She doesn't want a job anymore – she wants to tear it all down.

FINAL STEP: She goes back to school.

Trina is in prison – she's smart but she dropped out of college (went to community college) and was dealing to get by. Nothing major but she was high up enough that she got arrested and sent to prison. In prison, she decides to get her life on track – she enrolls programs takes yoga classes, and when we see her, is in a resume writing class. The bored instructors gives them handouts which Trina takes very seriously. She asks about how to comport herself in a job interview. The class is interrupted by shouting. A teacher walks into the classroom, tells the instructor to turn on the TV. He does and the class watches a super-powered man life a car (one handed) off of a woman on the news.

When Trina gets out of prison, she applies to many jobs. They all turn her down. She gets bad advice from social workers. Back at her brother's shitty apartment, her brother's friend Rasheed offers to “hook her up,” but she says no thanks. He tells her it's legit, she's like, “Yeah right – why isn't my brother at this legit job?” Rasheed tells her he's too scrawny and too chickenshit. Her little brother says he'll be fine – he doesn't need some shitty burger flipping job. He's gonna set up a deal and get some money. Trina tells him he can do what he wants, but she's not even supposed to be hanging out with him

because of her probation so don't fuck up and get her in trouble too. (maybe she's staying at her auntie's house?)

At her auntie's, a commercial for SOMA. A vague, Army looking recruitment ad about "keeping Chicago's streets safe," and playing up the fears of superpowered crazies roaming the streets. "To apply for a job, call this number." Mention of good salaries and 401k. A brief conversation about superheroes ensues. Her auntie likes them. Trina is not so sure about the whole thing. "You could apply there," her auntie tells her.

Later that night, Trina's out on the town with some friends, dancing at a club. A really hot woman in a body con dress sidles up to Trina. They dance for a minute, then she slips away. A few men burst into the club and run through the dance floor, fleeing someone. The music stops, screams start. Mr. Magnificent appears in the doorway. "If everyone stays out of my way, no one gets hurt. I'm looking for a woman. Charles steps out in front of Mr. Magnificent. "Hey man, we can handle this peacefully. What's going on?" A scuffle ensues, Mr. Magnificent shoves Charles aside – Charles goes flying and hits his head on a wall, goes down. Everyone panics. The Darkness yanks Trina out of the way. "My brother!" The Darkness hoists Charles over her shoulder, drags them both to safety, then leaves. (Mr. Magnificent is hunting the Darkness and Charles gets in the middle.)

Charles lies in the hospital. The insurance will cover some of it but not all of it. They need money, now. Trina calls the number.

She sits in an interrogation room. An unseen interviewer shoots questions at her. Psychological, physical, "how do you feel about the new superpowered people? What

about Mr. Magnificent?” He can eat a bag of dicks. She’s run through some physical tests – shows off her yoga, reflexes, etc. “You’ll live here, eat here, work here – this will be your life for the duration of your contract.” “Will I get to see my family? What about my brother?” You’ll get leave, paid time off, but you are not allowed to disclose anything that goes on here. “I’m not sure.” They introduce her to who she’ll be working with. It’s the hot woman from the club. “She works here?” Trina decides she’s in. She signs the contract, specifies that half her money goes to her auntie to help take care of her cousin.

She’s immediately ushered into a room that looks just like a prison. “What have I done?”

(in the scene with Mr. Magnificent – he’s tired. He tells her to do it. He takes her gun and puts it to his head. “Do it!” His powers aren’t permanent – they’re maintained by redshirts.)

1. Opening Image (1)

- a. Trina in the dark warehouse with all of her dead teammates around her.

2. Theme stated (5)

- a. “You can’t go it alone.”

3. Set up (1-10)

- a. Trina in the warehouse with Mr. Magnificent. She shoots herself to get away from him. (this will be the break into Act III – we’ll come back to this much later)

- b. FLASHBACK: 1 year ago. Trina is in prison – she’s trying to participate in a yoga class in the common area. A commotion happens. She tries to shush it but there’s something on the television. It’s footage of a flying man. He lifts a car off of somebody. The anchor is talking about superheroes. “Could this be the advent of a new age?” Everybody is whispering about superheroes. “What good does that do us?”
- c. Trina in the cafeteria – women whispering “she’s too good for us.” A new woman sits next to her, asks her what she’s reading. Trina is getting her shit right – she’s not gonna make the same mistakes again. The woman tells her – if you need anything, you come see my man Rasheed on the outside. He’ll fix you up. Trina says she’s getting out of the game, but thanks.
- d. Trina is released. She goes from job interview to job interview – no one will hire her. She’s living with her brother in a squalid place.

4. Catalyst (12)

- a. The big fight with Mr. Magnificent and The Darkness. Trina and her brother are at home. Either in a big city-destroying fight or just because, Mr. Magnificent kills her brother. Maybe her brother is still in the game? Maybe Mr. Magnificent kills him accidentally for some low-level drug dealing shit? I think her brother is in the wrong place at the wrong time and is caught in the crossfire. Either way, Mr. Magnificent kills him and The Shadow comforts her.

- b. A low-rent funeral. Rasheed is there – he tells her that he can help her out if she needs it. Trina lashes out at him – he tells her to watch her step.
- c. Trina sees the recruitment ad for XXX company, seeking people who are adventurous, fit, willing to take risks, and ready for change.

5. Debate (12-25)

- a. She goes in for an interview and is asked about morality, how she feels about superheroes, etc. Trina doesn't think much of them – she sees the Shadow when she's there and makes up her mind. If you're out there protecting them, then innocent people won't get killed in the crossfire – like your brother. (interrogation style scene where Trina is in a spotlight)
- b. **EVENT THAT CHANGES EVERYTHING:** She's brought onto the team. She and her teammates have to kill each other. She's awarded a contract. (maybe she's told it's a blank?)

6. Break into two (25)

- a. Getting hired by redshirts

7. Fun and games (30-55) – a series of assignments plus the B plot love story

- a. Meeting her team (Rocio, Alexander, Sasha)
- b. On assignment – a male villain wants them to be super sexy
- c. Training and bonding (on assignment)
- d. Flirting with the Shadow
- e. Learning about the other offices opening up, people being transferred
- f. Maybe there's a fifth team member who's killed/transferred early on?

8. Midpoint (55)
9. Bad guys close in (55-75)
10. All is lost (75)
11. Dark night of the Soul (75-85)
 - a. HELL: She kills Mr. Magnificent, almost by accident. She takes the syringe he gives her and gets all of her memories back. She realizes that her teammates are being killed and that Mr. Magnificent is actually a creation of redshirts – all of this is supposed to confine and cow the populace. Give them easy things to fear and cheer for. She does NOT want a job.
12. Break into three (85) (CHOICE:
 - a. She and her team choose to be the Magnificents and to go after redshirts.
 - b. The Shadow warns Trina not to do it. “They’ll kill you.” “Just because you’ve given up doesn’t mean I have to.” (The Shadow should help in the final scene.”
13. Finale (85-110)
 - a. Fight sequence
14. Final image/Final Step (110)
 - a. In the community garden

Appendix B – *Magnificent Minute by Minute*

JANELLE’S WANT: To hustle her way into something better

JANELLE’S NEED: To do the right thing

5 Minutes: Janelle (16) watches tv in juvie. It’s the ten year anniversary of the emergence of Mr. Magnificent – the world’s first superhero. There’s a puff piece interviewing Mr. Magnificent – he talks about his commitment to bringing good into the world. The teens are derisive – “he’s a old man. He still around? That’s your boyfriend! That’s not MY boyfriend!”

10 Minutes: Janelle sits before a judge who’s reviewing her case for early release. She looks over Janelle’s paperwork and turns her down. “You still haven’t learned your lesson. You’re causing all kinds of trouble – I’m surprised you have the audacity to ask for early release.”

17 Minutes: A television producer visits Janelle in juvie – “you’d be perfect for our new show.” Janelle’s like, what are you talking about? The producer shows Janelle the video her brother made of her. Her brother is lying out his ass, talking about how Janelle only stole all that money to help their sick auntie and he knows she’d want to be a part of this. Part of what? “Our new show – seeking Miss Magnificent. We’re recruiting a sidekick for Mr. Magnificent and it’s gonna be a reality show.” Janelle is like, no thanks.

30 Minutes: Janelle learns that her older brother owes money and is going to get hurt if he doesn't get it. The reality show pays so Janelle agrees to go on it. She calls the producer, who whisks her away.

ACT TWO

45 Minutes: Janelle learns that she's one of ten teen girls competing to be Mr. Magnificent's new sidekick. Janelle does NOT want to be friends with these girls. They are demographically diverse and all fit into "types." They all have to wear absurd outfits and do stupid challenges.

60 Minutes: Janelle stands up for ROSA, a younger girl who's being bullied. She does want to do the right thing. She wins the challenges for the day and gets to have dinner with Mr. Magnificent – they have a real connection and Janelle decides she wants to be the sidekick – to do good in the world.

75 Minutes: Janelle plays dirty to win the competition – she gets what she wants by hustling, not by doing the right thing. She's now Miss Magnificent.

90 Minutes: Mr. Magnificent tells her that he's setting up a big fight with his arch-nemesis The Darkness that's going to destroy a chunk of the city, probably hurts lots of people.

He's going to win the fight and "save the city," and that will finally regain him the popularity he used to have.

ACT THREE

105 Minutes: Janelle decides that she can't let this happen – even if she has to apologize to the other girls and give up her title, she can't let Mr. Magnificent cause this much harm.

She contacts Whitney (her biggest competitor on the show) and tells her everything. Janelle, Whitney, and Rosa come up with a plan to defeat both Mr. Magnificent and The Darkness.

They call all of the other girls who got kicked off of the show, and they use their competition ground to train together, to learn to be a team. They can't stop the fight between Mr. Magnificent and The Darkness, but they're able to save everyone who could have gotten hurt in the crossfire.

Janelle reveals the scam Mr. Magnificent and The Darkness have been running. She concedes her title as Miss Magnificent but the rest of the girls still want her to be a part of the team. They start their own group of teen girl avengers: the Magnificents.

Appendix C – *Magnificent Reel by Reel Rewrite Outline*

Note: changes indicated in **bold**.

- REEL 1: Janelle's World
 - Essentially the same
 - Meet Mr. Magnificent in the publicity stunt with the host
 - Meet Janelle in her foster home with the little kids
 - Janelle gets kicked out, goes back to group home.
 - Gets suspended from school, goes shoplifting with Brittany
 - Is arrested and sent to prison

- REEL 2: Let's Make a TV Show!
 - Also remains very similar
 - Start with Janelle's mugshot on the wall in the casting office, then Monica and the casting directors watch YouTube video auditions of their favorites. We see Whitney's, Isabel's, and Sara's – it's confirmed they'll be on the show. Show a little more of their characters here: Sara's a hijabi punk grrrl , Whitney has a professionally produced video, and Isabel's features her overprotective parents.
 - something – so Monica says she'll try to get Janelle.
 - Monica visits Janelle in prison; Janelle says no thanks.

- Prison is terrible – instead of being drugged, she’s talking to another inmate and realizes just how little she’s prepared for this so that her decision to call Monica is more active.
- Monica comes to get her. Tells her if she behaves, she can get her record wiped clean. If she doesn’t... she’ll go back to prison.
- Monica takes Janelle to the Magnifispire.
- REEL 3: Mean Girls
 - Janelle gets to the Magnifispire – there are cameras everywhere. She’s left alone with the other girls and immediately gets into it with Whitney. Bunks down with Isabel.
 - At breakfast the next morning, Janelle is forced to apologize to Whitney. Monica tells Brad, “This is our big rivalry – let’s push it. It’ll be great for the show.”
 - They go to the costume fitting – **there’s a “red carpet” leading into the building where entertainment reporters pepper the girls with questions.** Janelle is of course terrible at it while Whitney shines. CHANGE TO: Runway walk for the girls in their costumes afterwards.
 - They’re fitted for terrible costumes. Shorten this scene – less time getting into the costumes; focus more on the visuals of them in the outfits and their reactions to them. Add a transition between this and the Carnival of Terror that’s essentially Magnificent Life (Mr. Mag’s

show) footage of the girls in their new costumes and the girls going to their first challenge.

- The Carnival of Terror – tighten this but keep it essentially the same. Instead of showing Monica and Mr. Mag watching – **show a large screen set up with a livestream of the challenge and a large audience watching.**
- Remove the three guest judges and just show Mr. Mag judging this first challenge. Have him talk a little bit about The Darkness.
- When they get back to the Magnifispire, Whitney is rude to Janelle. Add Sara trying to be nice to her but Janelle brushing her off.
- Janelle tries to run and is caught by Mr. Magnificent. They talk on the roof – he inspires her.
- REEL 4: In It to Win It
 - Janelle wakes up the next morning ready to throw down. **Monica tells them they have a publicity appearance today with a guest judge for the next challenge, a famous superheroine from New York –** they need to get into their outfits. Sara tells Monica her veil ripped; can she get another one? Monica agrees.
 - The girls raid the costume department and put together better looks for themselves. They make the appearance and the crowd loves it. **The New York superheroine loves it. Selfies galore. Show that each girl**

has her own fan base. Twitter lights up. Mr. Magnificent loves it – Monica pretends it was her idea.

- The girls are triumphant – laughing and talking – an image of them all crowded together, smiling. Image to show that they’re becoming a team.
- **Insert a very brief scene that shows Mr. Magnificent looking at the girls with pride when out of nowhere, The Darkness appears. They have a cryptic conversation that sounds like The Darkness is threatening them. Mr. Magnificent moves to grab him but The Darkness escapes.**
- **Cut the scene of the three girls talking**
- Go straight to Lake Michigan challenge. Once more, there’s a live stream – show people watching it. Isabel saves the frat bro with Janelle’s help and Isabel gets all the credit.
- **REPLACE jewelry theft scene with a new adventure. Janelle gets a text from Marcus that their foster mother is getting worse. They need help. Janelle, Sara, and Isabel sneak out to get them. Whitney catches them leaving and insists on coming. They grab the kids and take them back to the Magnifispire with them. The girls all see where Janelle is from and what her life was like. The girls put all**

the kids to bed and have a shared moment of joy over their first real mission together.

- REEL 5: The Cracks Begin to Show
 - In the morning, Monica is furious. She accuses Janelle of endangering others and going behind her back. Mr. Magnificent comes in and of course the kids love him and he's not as mean as Monica but still tells Janelle she needs to be careful – they could have been hurt. But they'll take care of the kids (meaning they'll take them back to Promise House).
 - Monica clamps the bracelet on Janelle.
 - **Show clips from the Magnificent Life that show the girls, especially Janelle, sniping at each other. Talking heads bits where the girls all trash each other. Really highlight the Janelle/Whitney rivalry. Then show the girls walking in on Janelle watching this. She's angry but they deny it – say the show is messing with all of their footage. Whitney's kinda like, "Eh – sure I said of it. It's good tv." Sara gives them a rousing feminist speech about not letting the show tear them apart. They all agree. Except Whitney but she's secretly kinda into it.**
 - **Cut the idea that they travel outside of Chicago for challenges – this is all set in Chicago.**

- **Cut the challenges montage.**
- Keep the Starbucks scene but this time have Janelle’s fans comment not only on the bracelet but on things the other girls have said about her on the show. Janelle hasn’t watched any of it, is curious.
- Sara offers to hack Janelle’s bracelet. Janelle agrees.
- The shopping mall challenge – we’ve had so many challenges at this point that I think the girls will walk into the wall and immediately be confronted by The Darkness in some way. **Rather than going through an extended teamwork sequence, they’ll realize it’s a trap and not be able to get out.** Then the ceiling will collapse and trap Isabel. They’ll all be hurt in some way.
- **At the hospital, Janelle and Whitney are in the same room.** They watch the footage of Isabel lifting the ceiling off herself and carrying out an innocent bystander. The two of them realize that Isabel is now the favorite. Isabel and Sara come in – in better shape than Janelle and Whitney. They’re excited about the events but Janelle and Whitney share a moment of, “This is not good.”
- **Cut the scene with Whitney’s dad.**
- REEL 6: Betrayals
 - Back at the Magnifispire, Monica notices that Janelle’s bracelet is missing. She says it came off in the accident but Monica doesn’t believe

her. She pulls Janelle aside and says that she knows Sara has been messing with the bracelet. **One of them is going to go – which one will it be? Janelle rats out Sara, thinking she won't know but Monica announces it to the group.** Sara is hurt and angry – she grabs her stuff and leaves. Monica: And then there were three...

- **Magnificent Life footage of Sara leaving the Magnifispire, almost in tears – a crowd of fans outside. Cut to Monica sitting with the three girls at the kitchen table – dramatic reality show narration of what's about to happen:** this is a critical moment. Who deserves to stay on the show? The girls will vote for who should be kicked off.
- At the table, Isabel smiles at Janelle and Whitney. “We'll all vote for ourselves! Then they can't kick any of us off.” Whitney and Janelle agree, but share a glance. They both vote for Isabel. Monica looks at the pieces of paper: It's unanimous. Isabel, thank you for competing. Good-bye. Isabel bursts into tears and runs out of the room. Janelle runs after her.
- **In the bedroom, Isabel confronts Janelle who tries to defend herself. “You and Whitney deserve each other.”**
- **Janelle lies in her now empty bedroom, trying to sleep. Whitney tells her they did the right thing. “Neither one of us has anything we want to go back to.”**

- In the morning Monica asks if they're ready for their final challenge.
THINK OF FINAL CHALLENGE.
- At the challenge, Janelle cheats and wins. Whitney is angry – accuses Janelle of cheating.
- Mr. Magnificent announces Janelle as Miss Magnificent but puts her off when she asks when they'll be taking on The Darkness. "You're not ready."
- Janelle does one publicity stunt (literally saves a cat) and is unhappy.
- She goes to confront Mr. Mag that night and overhears him in conversation with The Darkness. **The Darkness is asking if he can stop now – he's sick of playing a villain and hurting people. He wanted to be hero – why won't Mr. Mag let him stop? He's famous enough – Mr. Mag can do whatever he wants.** They discuss their next stunt – an attack on downtown Chicago. Mr. Mag tells The Darkness they have to be sure to hit the Art Institute first. Janelle turns to flee but she's caught. Mr. Mag tells her it's okay – she can be a part of this now. Explains the setup – The Darkness is an old friend – he plays the villain so that Mr. Mag can be a hero so he can do good things in the world. Tells Janelle he picked her because she's a cheater, a hustler, like him. And they're planning an attack on downtown Chicago and she can help save the day! She'll be able to do anything she wants after that! Janelle

tells him she won't be a part of it. She tries to run but Mr. Mag catches her. It's suddenly obvious how powerful he is – much more powerful than Janelle. He tells her he won't have her ruining her plans. "Are you putting me back in prison?" He laughs. "Why would I bother? No one will believe you anyway." He claps her bracelet back on.

- REEL 7: Trying to Set it Right
 - **Mr. Magnificent dumps Janelle back at Promise House. Janelle won't tell BGentle why she's back – only that it's over. She wakes up the next morning to a frosty reception – Mr. Mag has gone on national tv and told the world that Janelle is a cheater and a liar. He'd like to introduce the new Miss Magnificent, Whitney.**
 - **Sara and Isabel, each in their respective houses, watch the broadcast. Sara has a bracelet spread out in front of her and is working on it. Isabel eats dinner with her family.**
 - **BGentle doesn't believe Janelle. Neither does Brittany. Janelle realizes that this is her life now. She's still wearing the bracelet.**
 - **Janelle goes to Isabel's house to apologize. Isabel doesn't want to see her but Janelle insists. She tells Isabel she's sorry and that Whitney is in danger. That gets Isabel's attention. "Sara's been**

working on something.” Janelle is hurt that the two of them are still friends and scared to see Sara as well.

- **They go to Sara’s house, and she sneaks out and joins them. She waves off Janelle’s apology – the show brought out the worst in us. On to Whitney’s house!**
- **When they get to Whitney’s mansion, she is completely by herself. “I don’t know where my parents are. France, maybe.” Janelle tells Whitney she can’t be the new Miss Magnificent – it’s all based on a lie. Whitney considers for a long moment then tells them all the beat it – she’s Miss Magnificent now and they’re just jealous and there won’t be an attack tomorrow – The Darkness is not a threat.. Janelle tells her to watch for a certain moment in the fight – a piece of choreography she overheard. “When this happens and you believe the truth, come find us. We’ll be there.” Whitney slams the door in their faces.**
- **The girls go back to Sara’s house for the night to discuss their plans for tomorrow.**
- **REEL 8: Save Chicago!**
 - The girls stand in Millennium Park, waiting. Sara’s working on the bracelets. When is this all going to start?

- **Mr. Magnificent and Whitney stand on a rooftop looking out over Chicago. Mr. Mag's giving Whitney some instruction when BOOM! A huge explosion. "This is The Darkness' work for sure." Whitney's like, "whaaaaat?" She realizes that Janelle might have been telling the truth.**
- The girls hear the BOOM and run towards the sound. Sara puts the bracelets on them but they don't work.
- Mr. Magnificent and The Darkness fight over Chicago, **Whitney trailing behind. Mr. Mag tells her to go help people caught in the crossfire. She does but looks back over her shoulder and sees the piece of choreography Janelle warned her about. A building starts to collapse. Whitney grabs a pedestrian out of the way of falling rubble.**
- **The girls help people on the ground - try to protect them. Whitney lands among them. "I'm in. Let's take these assholes down." Sara claps a bracelet and a headset on her. "We don't know if these are gonna work or not..."**
- Mr. Mag dives straight for them. Janelle jumps into the air out of surprise and starts to fly. Mr. Mag sees her and goes after her. Isabel and Sara grab onto his legs and are yanked along with him. He shakes

them off but they both fly as well. The fight continues with all four girls pitching in with all of their powers.

- **Mr. Magnificent (not The Darkness) catches Janelle and threatens her.** He gets the secret of the bracelets off of her. He takes her and, hoping it will increase his power even more, puts it on. It's the prison bracelet. The girls are excited but then The Darkness drops into the scene. He's furious and think the girls are working with Mr. Mag. Police cars come wailing up. An audience of spectators forms. Mr. Magnificent asks the police for help, saying the girls are bad, etc. Janelle speaks up for herself, then Whitney, then everyone else. **The Darkness, realizing that it's his chance to stop, confesses everything.** Both he and Mr. Mag are taken away. The girls triumph.
- The girls are honored at a ceremony by the Mayor.
- The girls start their next adventure together: high school.

Appendix D – *Magnificent Pitch for HBO*

INTRO

- Past three months have been hard
- Waiting for someone to save us but who?
- We have to save ourselves
- I've met people who already know this - working in youth shelters, teaching in prisons. Met so many young women who are fighting their way through life against impossible odds.
- I'm a comic book nerd and I wanted to write a story with a girl like that as the hero.

CONCEPT

- Magnificent is an hour long drama about a superpowered teen living in foster care in Chicago who teams up with two other superpowers girls to resist the status quo and fight injustice.
- Buffy meets Jessica Jones.
- Superheroes meets Occupy meets Antifas meets the resistance
- Every episode we follow Janelle, a 16 yo girl who can stop time, as she works with three other teen girls to as they resist the status quo and figure out what it means to be a hero.
- The world is pretty much the same as our present day, except that about one in million of the world's population has some kind of enhanced power. They're called "talents," and they're mostly pretty weak: levitating a pencil, seeing more on

the light spectrum. But a few have whopping talents. And there's more of them than there used to be - it's cropping up more in younger people.

CHARACTERS

- MR. MAGNIFICENT
- Mr. Mag is one of two superheroes in the US (there's the Silver Bullet in NY), and he's by far the more popular one. "America's Hero," had a reality show, the Establishment - police
- Only comes into Janelle's neighborhood to arrest people and beat people up - he's the police
- JANELLE - 16 yo
- she can stop time for ten seconds
- tough but only because she has to be
- doesn't take shit from anyone
- Cynical - how can anything help?
- Smart, likes school, likes to read
- Doesn't trust anyone - her mom wasn't great and now she's gone
- MARCUS - 9 yo
- little brother - still sunny, still bright
- wants to be a superhero
- somehow stays optimistic, loves Janelle
- AMINA - 17 yo
- 2nd gen Pakistani-American

- punk rock hijabi
- Woke af
- can manipulate electricity
- Always wants to help
- ISABEL - 14 yo
- Mexican-American - also 2nd gen
- baby of the family, petite - seems young
- Likes pink, glitter, Ariana Grande
- Wears cat ears
- Super strength and agility - took gymnastics classes and now she's good
- This is all fun for her - she likes being able to use her skills
- She and Amina met on Tumblr

PILOT

- Janelle's bday - she's in foster care; it sucks. Mom didn't send a card. Marcus is away with his friends so she goes:
- SHOPLIFTING: She convinces Lupe to go shoplifting with her for her birthday. Lupe gets arrested.
- Janelle thinks she's gotten away with it but the next day, Mr. Magnificent is prowling around her neighborhood, looking for her. IT'S HOSTILE
- Janelle sneaks up on him, ties his cape over his head, pantses him: "Superhero shows superdick."
- SNAPCHAT

- Who is this teen? A lot of unwanted attention. Media outside her apartment. Janelle stays inside.
- DEPORTATION
- Lupe calls Janelle - she's going to get deported.
- Janelle promises to help. But how?
- Figures out the bus schedule - she's gonna do something.
- Janelle finds the bus - she stands in front of it. But the bus isn't going to stop - the driver doesn't see her till too late...
- ISABEL leaps in front of the bus, stops it with her tiny hands
- "Who are you?"
- AMINA strolls up to the bus, shorts it out. (both in masks)
- "We've been watching you - we're here to help."
- Isabel rips off the door - Janelle runs inside, grabs Lupe.
- "Run! You're all free!"
- Janelle and Lupe do.
- Lupe's reunited with her family but she still has to flee - Janelle sad.
- That night, at home, a knock on her door. Isabel and Amina are standing there. "Who are you?" "We're part of the revolution. And you don't know it yet, but so are you."

SEASON ONE ARC:

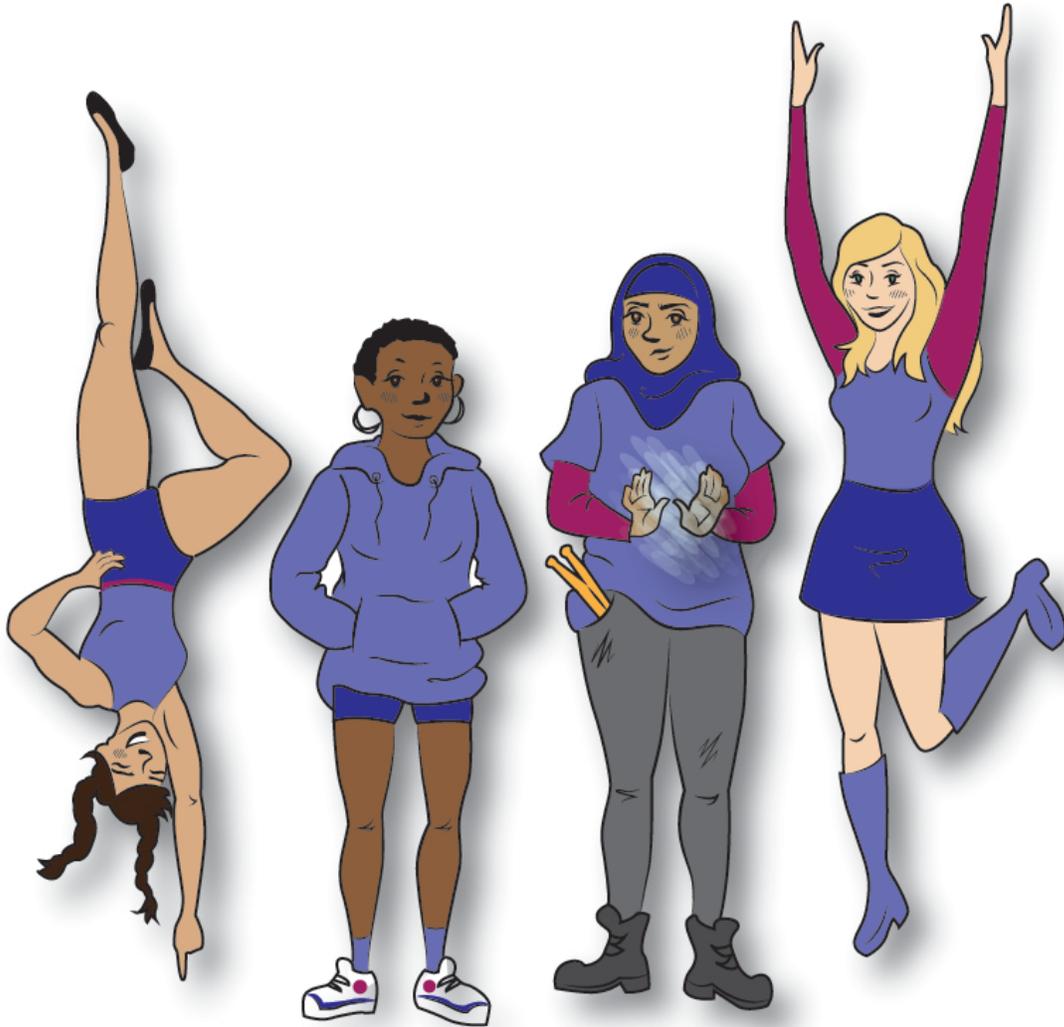
- Very next episode, we see the Governor and Mr. Magnificent condemning the domestic terrorism - "We're going to stop this."
- The girls against Mr. Magnificent and the establishment

- AND against a white supremacist organization that has their own talent
- Rumbings of a white supremacist organization uprising
- Culminates in a terrorist attack on a protest march - protesting the death of a black person by police
- Girls have to put the clues together to figure out what's behind the organization - and they have to do it while being under pursuit by the police.

POSSIBLE EPISODES

- In one episode - a fourth girl wants to join their group but she's upper class/white - can they trust her?
- Another, the girls investigate a mosque that's been obliterated - what kind of power did this?
- Another, Marcus finds out about Janelle's activities and wants to join them.
- FINALE: White supremacist group going to bomb a police brutality event - girls have to stop them and go up against their talent

Appendix E – Illustration of Main Characters



From left to right: Isabel, Janelle, Amina, Whitney

Illustration by Paula Rogers

Bibliography

- Bird, Brad. *The Incredibles*. Pixar, 2004.
- Bradley, Marion Zimmer. *The Mists of Avalon*. Random House Publishing Group, 2001.
- Chamberlain, Jill. *The Nutshell Technique: Crack the Secret of Successful Screenwriting*. University of Texas Press, 2016.
- Daniels, Lee, and Danny Strong. *Empire*. Imagine Television, 2015.
- Fey, Tina. *Mean Girls*. Paramount, 2004.
- Hansen, Gwen. *The Secret of the Unicorn Queen*. Fawcett, 1989.
- King, Stephen. *The Stand*. Doubleday, 1990.
- Mack, David. *Kabuki*. Image Comics, 1998.
- Moore, Alan, and Dave Gibbons. *Watchmen*. DC Comics, 1986.
- Shapiro, Sara Gertrude, and Marti Noxon. *UnREAL*. Wieden+Kennedy Entertainment, 2015.
- Singleton, John, and Stanley Clarke. *Boyz'n the Hood*. Columbia Tristar, 2004.
- Snyder, Blake. *Save the Cat! the Last Book on Screenwriting You'll Ever Need*. M. Wiese Productions, 2005.
- Stahelski, Chad, director. *John Wick*. Thunder Road Pictures, 2014.
- Whedon, Joss. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Season One*. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2001.