

# The Legacy of FRIDA



BY DIANE LAKE

There's a stereotype of the writer who sits in front of the computer, pounding away at the keys, an observer of life but not much of a participant. I don't think you can write about real people by having that concept of the writer, by being an observer. You need to have the audacity to believe you can feel what your subject felt, to love as he/she loved, to think as he/she thought. In the end, you lose yourself and let the character take over as you write.

*Frida* was my first writing assignment. I'd just been signed by Creative Artists Agency and was ecstatic to finally be paid to do something I loved. Though technically a rewrite, the *Frida* producers told me to go back to the book (Hayden Herrera's *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*) and start over, do a new draft. I jumped right in.

## Not Her

Before getting the *Frida* assignment in 1996, if I'd been in the same city with an exhibition of Kahlo's work taking place, I doubt I would have gone. Her work just didn't appeal to me. I'd written a screenplay on the life of French Impressionist Berthe Morisot, and her art blew me away. It was a joy to bring her alive on the page. But Kahlo? Her art seemed to me so self-involved, almost whiny and just not beautiful. Not that art needs to be pretty, but it needs to focus on some truth, to communicate a realness, to inspire, uplift or take me someplace. Some would say Frida's art does all those things. And as I learned more, I would come to see they're right.

As soon as I started reading about her, it occurred to me that whether or not I admired Frida's art was immaterial. Frida Kahlo's story was how she lived—as the title for her last painting “Viva la Vida” attests. It's Frida's indomitable spirit in the face of adversity that has led people to revere her.

To live with joy through all that came her way ... what strength of character she must have had. Since great film is all about character, I'd been given a gift in getting this assignment.

## Frida the Icon

The first problem: How do you take someone who's become an idol to millions and humanize her? How do you separate her real story from the folklore and idolatry?

Luckily, Herrera's comprehensive book did a lot of that for me. It became my bible for the next year.

Frida's appeal is simply that her story is so universal. All of us have obstacles to overcome in our lives, but few are as severe as those thrown in Frida's path. Frankly, if I walked into a pitch meeting and said “I have this hot story about a crippled woman who endured childhood polio, a bus accident that nearly killed her at 16, a boyfriend who deserted her because of her injuries, surgeries throughout her life to fix her back, a cheating-genius-artist husband who even slept with her sister, multiple affairs of her own, a struggling artistic life, problems with alcohol ... and then she dies young ...” I mean, can you imagine the reaction?

But it really happened. And that's what makes her story so amazing.

I begin by sitting down with Herrera's book and marking the moments in Frida's



Salma Hayek and Alfred Molina in *Frida*

life that particularly resonate with me. I note events that are especially cinematic. In the 500 pages of Herrera's book, obviously, choices have to be made. My main choice? This is a love story—it's Frida and Diego, how they affect each other, how these two explosive personalities connect and grow together.

## The Love Story

I like writing about people who are determined to accomplish what seems impossible. And when those people really lived, there's the great desire to do them justice, to get it right. For me, there's only one way to do that: You try to get so close to them that you see the world through their eyes. You don't write “about” them—you become them.

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Boy did Frida take me over! Most of the people I've written about have one characteristic in common: they're not sexually

repressed. Nearly every screenplay I've written has a main character who not only espouses the concept of free love but also lives it. Frida was no exception. One of her mottos was said to be: "make love, take a bath, make love again." That made me smile. I wanted to capture that, to let people see a strong woman, who could love more than one man and, far from being punished for it, glory in it.

Diego provided his own challenges: Namely, how do you make a disheveled 300-pound guy into the Casanova that he was? How do you get an American audience to accept a romantic lead who isn't classically handsome? Women found Diego devastating. Could Brad Pitt-obsessed America buy that?

But I knew one thing—Frida and Diego were my story.

Yes, Frida's life was full of pain and struggle, and yes, she had to fight for everything she got. But her life was also full of great love—the kind of love most of us only see in the movies. It's that love that becomes, for me, the center of her story. I mean, we can paint paintings, write books, sing songs—the human animal is

capable of creating beautiful things—but most of us never feel that all-encompassing, out-of-this-world love firsthand. And of all the beauty that exists, it's the beauty of two people finding each other that I want most to write about.

### To Mexico

Luckily, the studio was agreeable to sending me to Mexico to do research. Other than a day trip to Tijuana, I'd never been to Mexico. And Mexico City was a revelation. I was surprised at how European it felt—spectacular museums, impressive boulevards, lovely squares full of flowers and surrounded by outdoor cafes. This was not the Mexico of Tijuana. I hoped I would be able to evoke the rhythm of this city, its energy, in the script.

Everywhere I go I see her. Outside Frida's childhood home, I sit and watch today's city dwellers come and go in this pleasant neighborhood. Suddenly, a young girl in a school uniform walks by looking just as I picture Frida must have looked. Inside the house's courtyard, I sit on a bench and spy on the nuances of her life, trying to picture her walking down these paths.



Screenwriter Diane Lake

When I get up and walk down the stone paths, there on a dusty stone before me I see an unusual, black butterfly with yellow markings. The yellow markings are remi-

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(From left to right seated at table) **Antonio Banderas, Salma Hayek, Ashley Judd and Alfred Molina** in *Frida*, written by Diane Lake

niscient of the rows of black watermelon seeds in her painting “Viva la Vida.” The beautiful butterfly keeps trying to fly, but can’t. There is a moment when it almost gets off the ground, but no. Still, like Frida, it keeps trying.

When I see the houses in San Angel that Diego had built for himself and Frida, they’re being renovated. So when I get into the room that would have been her studio, it’s just wooden floors, glass windows, a very clean, modern space for an artist who was beyond modern. I stand at the window, looking at the view of the lovely San Angel neighborhood that Frida would have had as she painted. The fact that her paintings reflect this view doesn’t surprise me at all. Part of her genius was the ability to paint what was inside her—the world within, not the world outside.

When I visit the Preparatoria where Frida went to school, I stand in the auditorium where Frida first met Diego and imagine him painting the mural while she spied on him. Out in the courtyard I see her running with her friends—as one of the few girls at the school, she was bold enough to hold her own with the boys. I can imagine all of them pursuing her. And I can see Alex, the most popular boy in school, feeling lucky she chose him as her boyfriend.

Here in the Preparatoria is the Frida that could have been ... what? ... normal? Whatever that is. But it’s not “normal” really; It’s just ... free from pain. If she’d never had the accident, what might her life have held? Would she have developed the artistic style that she became famous for? Perhaps

she and Alex would have married and had children, and Frida’s art would have been full of happy children at play.

### Accidents

I suppose it’s useless to speculate, but I can’t help it. We’re all formed by the accidents of life. The day Frida left school and got on that bus was the day her surrealistic life began. One minute she’s the most popular girl in school with a boyfriend she loves dearly, and the next minute she’s crippled for life and deserted by that boyfriend. A life of sweet ease becomes a life of endless trials. And she’s only 16.

Some lives require more courage than others. Some accidents are more devastating than others. After their marriage, when Diego slept with her sister, Frida was hurt more intensely than when she’d been in the bus accident. It is the genius—and the salvation—of the artist to take life’s catastrophes and exorcize them through the canvas. I wonder if there’s a way to show that on film ... how incomparable beauty can come out of great tragedy.

So much of what I saw in Mexico made it into the script: the places Frida and Diego lived, the Canals of Xochimilco, the pyramids at Teotihuacán, Diego’s murals at the National Palace and the Palace of Fine Arts. I read about her trips to New York and Paris; I know they, too, need to be dramatized because they, too, helped shape her.

The writing is the best part. It’s just ... so much fun. I’m sorry. I don’t agonize or have to get drunk or avoid deadlines. I don’t get writer’s block. I love it. I love sitting in front

of the keyboard and letting Frida, Diego and all the rest of them start talking.

I smile and laugh and frown and even cry as I recreate their world. I get so involved I forget to eat. I'm in a basement, a windowless room, so I lose all track of time. I'm in heaven.

I happen to be at a friend's house in Washington over Christmas as I write the script, and the computer I work at is next to the laundry room. I interrupt my writing to move a load of clothes from the washer to the dryer, taking a second to hang up a blouse that can't take the dryer's heat. Being too lazy to take the blouse upstairs to hang it in a bathroom or somewhere to dry, I hang it from a cabinet handle near the washer. I sit back down, read over the last scene I wrote before laundry broke in, where Frida and Diego are in New York and she wants so badly to go home to Mexico. Then I look up and see the hanging blouse. Frida's painting, *My Dress Hangs There*, pops into my head. That provides the impetus for my favorite visual, almost surrealist, technique in the script.

Since Frida's art came from her life, I wanted to do something that would help the audience see how Frida's life affected her art and vice versa. I could see her looking at her Mexican dress hanging on the clothesline out of her New York window, and so wanting to be in Mexico and not New York. What if that dress then turns into her painting, which gives the film the transition it needs to take her and Diego back to Mexico. It works. So well, in fact, I use it more than once.

## An End

All good things do come there. Soon the script is finished. I think it's beautiful. I just love it. I head to FedEx® and send it off to the producers. Then I sit back down and read it, intending to bask in my brilliance.

And I hate it.

Now, this is my first writing assignment, so I don't know that this is my pattern. But it is. When I'm writing and when I finish a script and read it over and rewrite and fine-tune, I end up with something of which I'm very proud—something I can't wait for everyone involved with the project to see. But the minute I send it off and read it again, I always think the same thing: How could I have thought this was any good? How could I have let it go?

I'm OK with that, though—now, anyway—now that I know it's just my

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method. I think it's like sending your daughter off to school for the first time. You were happy with her while you could see her, knowing what she was up to, helping her if she needed it. But once out of your sight, who knows how the world will treat her? Will they see how wonderful she is? Will they take time to get to know her? What if they're too busy at school to give her the attention she deserves?

But they do tend to her. In fact, for the next five years, foster parent after foster parent tends to her. She's out of my sight, certainly out of my control, and I just hope for the best.

## "We'll Always Have Paris."

No matter what happens to your script out there in the real world, you always have the writing. You gave those worlds life. You.

So remember what you have: Writing is turning cartwheels naked in the yard on a soft summer night with a full moon above in a starry sky. It's the most fun you can have alone. I swear. (i)

Since *Frida*, DIANE LAKE has gone on to write *Nancy*, an original screenplay for Paramount Pictures based on the life of British aristocrat Nancy Cunard; *Picasso*, a mini-series for NBC; and *A Thousand Cranes*, an original World War II screenplay for Digital Domain. In addition to projects she has in development with Wendy Finerman and Viacom Pictures, Diane is putting together financing to develop the acclaimed Katie Schneider novel, *All We Know of Love*.

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