



Williamson, Kevin (b. 1965)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Screenwriter-producer-director Kevin Williamson has been called "the most successful openly gay hyphenate in Hollywood." He is perhaps best known as the writer of the clever, self-referential horror film *Scream* (1996) and the thriller *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), as well as the creator of the groundbreaking television teen soap opera *Dawson's Creek* (1998-2003).

Williamson has said he knew he was gay "as far back as I can remember." Although he came out to his family in 1992, it was not until 1998 that Williamson outed himself in the public arena. While promoting an episode of *Dawson's Creek*, which introduced a homosexual theme into the popular television series, he realized the time was right to come out publicly.

"I just reached a point," Williamson recalled, "where [I thought], I'm gay, I've told my parents, all my friends, everybody I know knows I'm gay." Previously, when asked about his sexuality, Williamson said he had simply evaded the issue, and had been "more coy than in the closet" about it to the media.

Williamson has described his work as "very personal and autobiographical." With the remarkable success of his early screenplays, he increasingly has been able to establish gay themes and characters in his projects, particularly the gay teenage character on *Dawson's Creek* and the closeted soap opera actor on his short-lived series, *Wasteland* (1999).

Kevin Williamson was born on March 14, 1965 in New Bern, North Carolina. His family moved to Texas while Williamson was still a young child, first to Aransas Pass and later to Fulton, both near Corpus Christi, but returned to the Carolina coast when he was in his early teens.

Obsessed with movies since a child, Williamson applied to New York University's film school and was accepted; however, he could not afford the school's tuition and decided to attend a college closer to home, East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina, where he earned a B.A. in Theater Arts.

After graduating, Williamson moved to New York to pursue a career in acting. Unfulfilled by bit parts, particularly on soap operas such as *Another World* in 1990, he relocated to Los Angeles.

In Los Angeles, he also struggled to find work as an actor, landing only a few small roles in television, films, and music videos. Taking temporary jobs as a dog walker and word processor, Williamson decided to turn his attention to writing.

While taking screenwriting classes at UCLA, he wrote his first script, the dark comedy *Killing Mrs. Tingle*, which was bought by a production company in the early 1990s but not actually produced until 1999, with Williamson himself directing, and the title changed to *Teaching Mrs. Tingle*.

Williamson's career jump-started in 1995 with the creation of the horror movie *Scream* (originally titled "Scary Movie"). His script was layered with playful allusions to horror-movie classics, such as Sean S.

Cunningham's *Friday the 13th* (1980), Wes Craven's *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), and especially John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978), and populated with hip, quick-witted high school students savvy to the clichés of the horror-movie genre.

Williamson reportedly wrote the script in three days and hoped that even if it did not sell, "at least he could use it as a sample" of his work to get hired as a writer for a teen-related television series. He was stunned, however, to learn that his script had launched a bidding war among several major Hollywood studios. It was eventually bought by Miramax for its newly-created label Dimension Films.

Directed by the master of the genre, Wes Craven, *Scream* was a critical and popular triumph. It became the highest grossing horror movie of all time, and was credited by *Time* with "reviving the moribund [horror] genre and lifting its author into Hollywood's screenwriting elite."

Williamson's screenplay won a 1997 Saturn Award for best writing by the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films. He was also named one of *Entertainment Weekly's* Entertainers of the Year in 1997 and was included in *Premier* magazine's "Power 100 List" in 1998.

The tremendous success of *Scream* led to the equally successful sequel, *Scream 2* (1997), also written by Williamson, which in turn spawned *Scream 3* (2000), with a screenplay by Ehren Kruger and based on an outline by Williamson.

Williamson followed up *Scream* with another self-referential thriller, *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), directed by Jim Gillespie and loosely based on a novel by Lois Duncan. Characterized by the screenwriter as a "morality tale" and set within a small North Carolina fishing village, the film concerns four teenagers who make a secret pact to cover up a hit-and-run accident. Although the film did not garner the critical acclaim of *Scream*, it was nonetheless another commercial success for the writer.

Williamson also served as co-executive producer of *Halloween H20: 20 Years Later* (1998). He was originally hired to write the script for this sequel (also known as *Halloween 7*) directed by Steve Miner. Although his script was not used, a treatment he wrote for the film heavily influenced the final version.

Williamson next wrote the script for *The Faculty* (1998), a science-fiction send-up directed by Robert Rodriguez, in which a group of high school students are convinced that their teachers have been taken over by evil space aliens. The film received rather tepid reviews, but found moderate success at the box office nonetheless.

The following year Williamson was given the opportunity to direct one of his own scripts, *Teaching Mrs. Tingle* (1999), which he had written while still a screenwriting student. The movie, a revenge fantasy centered on a group of high school seniors and their malicious history teacher, was scheduled for release shortly after the 1999 shooting deaths of students and teachers at Columbine High School. In deference to that event, the film's original title, *Killing Mrs. Tingle*, was changed. The film, however, met with derisive reviews and low ticket sales and was Williamson's first professional failure.

Looking to enter the lucrative world of television, Williamson had been working for several years on the creation of a television series that he had named *Dawson's Creek*. The show chronicled the complicated love lives of a group of teenagers in a small coastal town in North Carolina. In December 1995, Williamson pitched the idea to executives at the Fox Network, but it was rejected. Several months later he pitched the same idea to Time Warner's fledgling WB network, which immediately bought the show.

Dawson's Creek premiered on January 20, 1998 and was an immediate hit with its young core audience. Many reviews noted the show's sharp, smart, nearly hyper-articulate dialogue. As one critic remarked,

"Instead of talking down" to the show's viewers, Williamson "compliments them. [He] shows teens a reflection of how they want to be seen: witty, urbane, and always armed with a perfectly barbed, sarcastic comeback."

Williamson introduced a gay theme into his semi-autobiographical series in October 1998 with the character Jack McPhee (played by Kerr Smith). Williamson explained in interviews that he did not want to make the gay theme "an open-and-shut one-episode situation." Instead, he wanted "to explore the complexities of a young man coming to terms with his homosexuality, very much the way I did in a small town."

Williamson left *Dawson's Creek* after its second season--although he returned to write the two-hour series finale which aired on May 14, 2003--to create a new show for ABC.

Williamson's new series, eventually titled *Wasteland*, premiered on October 7, 1999 and focused on a sextet of recent college graduates living in New York City. The group of friends included a character named Russell Baskind (played by Dan Montgomery Jr.), a gay soap opera actor struggling to come out of the closet. After airing only four episodes, the network canceled the show, due to low ratings and harsh reviews.

Williamson returned to television in 2002 with the mystery drama series *Glory Days*, set on a Northeastern vacation island. The show debuted on the WB network as a mid-season replacement on January 16, 2002, but was canceled two months later.

In 2005, Williamson wrote the screenplay for *Cursed*, a Wes Craven-directed horror film about young Los Angeles werewolves. The film was reportedly recast, reshot, and recut before being released to lackluster reviews.

Also in 2005, Williamson wrote the script for *Venom*, directed by John Gillespie, which tells the story of teenagers lost in the bayous of Louisiana, beset by a mysterious evil and voodoo spells. Released shortly after Hurricane Katrina devastated south Louisiana, the film seemed unfortunately prescient.

Williamson's latest project is the writing and producing of *Hidden Palms*, a television series for the CW network. Set in Palm Springs, the show is described as a coming-of-age drama about a troubled teen who moves into a gated community with his family and discovers several dark secrets about the neighborhood. The series is planned to be a mid-season replacement in 2007.

Williamson currently resides in Los Angeles.

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About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.