



# THE WRITER'S TALK

AFTER WORKING ON *28 DAYS LATER*, ITS WRITER WENT ON TO BECOME ONE OF THE UK'S MOST CELEBRATED DIRECTORS, WITH A RUN OF CEREBRAL AND CHALLENGING — AND CRITICALLY ACCLAIMED — GENRE MOVIES. STEVE O'BRIEN LOOKS AT THE LIFE AND CAREER OF THE PEERLESS **ALEX GARLAND**...

**T**here aren't many exalted novelists who make first-class screenwriters, and even fewer who become premier-league directors. Alex Garland, then, is a genuine one-off – someone who, just 30 years ago, was believed to be the great hope of the Brit literary scene after his first novel, *The Beach*. That book, based on his experiences travelling across Europe and Thailand, was a sensation when it was published in 1996, famously described by Nick Hornby as “a *Lord Of The Flies* for Generation X”.

Then 26, Garland, who was the son of cartoonist Nicholas Garland and the grandson of writer Jean Medawar and Nobel Prize-winning biologist Peter Medawar, was hailed as one of the most exciting new authors in years. Yet after two more books, he abandoned the literary world for cinema. It was a second act like no other.

“The truth is,” he told *Interview* magazine in 2015, “I hadn't grown up really wanting to be a writer. The whole thing was a weird aberration in some ways, and I didn't feel personally connected to the level of success I had with it.”

Though harbouring plans to move into movies, he had little involvement with the film adaptation of *The Beach*. As director Danny Boyle would have been acutely aware, novelists adapting their own books for the big screen rarely works out. Instead, Boyle turned to his trusted collaborator on *Shallow Grave*, *Trainspotting* and *A Life Less Ordinary*, John Hodge, to shape Garland's book into a screenplay.

Unbowed, Garland was beaver away on his own script, an original story about a virus that decimates the United Kingdom. After finishing his first draft, he showed it to *The Beach* producer Andrew Macdonald, but was told it needed work. “There's something in this,” Macdonald told him, “but, look, it's formatted all wrong and these scenes are way overwritten.” He gave Garland an example screenplay and said, “This is what a script looks like.”

“There's one massive problem with coming from writing novels into screenplays that I've discovered over the years, which is that you've got too much facility on the page,” Garland





told *Interview*. "In novels, you can persuade people of things that work that don't really work."

The success of *28 Days Later* led to the writer being commissioned to adapt the video game *Halo* for the big screen, though the project was eventually cancelled. His next screenplay would be another original story, a dark, lofty-minded science fiction script titled *Sunshine*. Again teaming with Danny Boyle and Andrew Macdonald, it was to be a less happy collaboration this time round, as Garland reflected in 2015 to *The Playlist*: "What I really want to underscore strongly, is the most significant failings in *Sunshine*, from my point of view, were not in Danny's direction, they were in the script. They predated the shoot or editing, and what we were never able to do was to fix the problems in the script. Because we had a different methodology in terms of how that fix might happen. And, it would be completely wrong for me to either state or discreetly imply that the issues in *Sunshine* that exist rest at Danny's feet. That's not how I see it."

When asked in the same interview if, after their experiences on the movie, he'd ever work with Danny Boyle again, Garland simply answered: "I don't think we will."

Of course, by that point he'd already established himself as a director in his own right. No longer being forced to trust someone else with his vision, he'd first got down and dirty on the studio floor in 2010 with *Dredd*. Not that it was ever intended that way. He'd originally penned the script, based on the cult 2000AD comic strip, for Duncan Jones (*Moon*) to direct. Eventually Jones departed, telling *Digital Spy*, "I had such a strong idea of what I wanted to do with a Dredd movie, I could not bring myself to take it on and not do it my way." (More recently, Jones has taken on another 2000AD mainstay, with *Rogue Trooper* out later this year.)

The movie would eventually go to Pete Travis, a British director whose only previous feature had been the 2008 thriller *Vantage Point*. But the shoot was a fraught one. Although Travis was credited as director, its star Karl Urban maintains it's really Garland's film. "A huge part of the success of *Dredd* is in fact due to Alex Garland," the actor told *JoBlo* in 2018, "and what a lot of people don't realise is that Alex Garland actually directed that movie."

In 2012, Urban explained to Yahoo how involved the film's writer was



## A NOVEL APPROACH

Your at-a-glance guide to Alex Garland's complete bibliography...



### THE BEACH (1996)

Garland's debut novel was a genuine word-of-mouth

affair, and became one of the defining books of the 1990s. It tells the story of a twenty-something traveller's discovery of a legendary, idyllic beach and his experiences with a group of international backpackers who call the island home. "Part of the novel's astonishing success at the time," raved *The Guardian* in 2016 on the book's 20th anniversary, "was its hotwiring of the zeitgeist."



### THE TESSERACT (1998)

The writer's sophomore novel didn't

quite reach the same commercial heights as its predecessor. More epic in scope than *The Beach* (*The New York Times* described its structure as "a four-part narrative collage"), this Manilla-set story was, like his first book, made into a movie. Moving the action to Bangkok, it was directed by Oxide Pang and starred Jonathan Rhys Meyers.



### THE COMA (2004)

Published in 2004, eight years after *The Beach*,

Garland's final – to date – book describes the illusory interior life of a man left permanently semi-conscious after being beaten up on a train. More novella than novel at just 208 pages, it was greeted with mixed reviews, with *The Independent* saying of it: "Most annoying of all is the knowledge that he can be a genuinely thrilling writer; what he needs now is a story as strong as *The Beach*."



during shooting: “We had the benefit of having Alex Garland on set for pretty much the entire shoot,” the actor revealed. “It seemed quite natural that when I had a question about the character I wouldn’t turn to the director, I would turn to the guy who wrote it.”

The *LA Times* had reported the year before that Travis had been frozen out of the editing process, with Garland fully taking over in post-production. Eventually, Travis and Garland released a joint statement: “During all stages of the filmmaking, *Dredd* has been a collaboration between a number of dedicated creative parties,” it read. “From the outset we decided on an unorthodox collaboration to make the film. This situation has been misinterpreted. To set the record straight, Pete was not fired and remains a central part of the collaboration, and Alex is not seeking a co-director credit.”

To those in the know, however, *Dredd* was seen as an Alex Garland film, and his first job as director. It didn’t exactly set the box office alight, but it was reviewed well, and led in turn to his official debut as a director with 2014’s *Ex Machina*. Garland would find himself nominated for an Academy Award for his literate, thoughtful screenplay, also winning a British Independent Film Award for Best Director. As he told *The Guardian* at the time of its release: “I feel more strongly about this film than anything I’ve worked on up till now.”

Other features would follow – *Annihilation* (2018), *Men* (2022) and the critically love-bombed *Civil War* (2024). He even moved into television in 2022, with a typically cerebral science fiction drama, the miniseries *Devs*.

After *Civil War*, however, nobody could have predicted Alex Garland’s next move. Fans of *28 Days Later* had long hoped for another buddy-up between its writer and director, but, after their experiences on *Sunshine* and Garland now an established filmmaker in his own right, it looked improbable. “We had a falling out,” Boyle reflected to *Empire* earlier this year. It was, the director stressed in the interview, a professional falling out, not a personal one. Yet Garland felt the need to apologise, writing Boyle what the director described as “a very sweet note”.

With their relationship mended, the pair began throwing around ideas for a sequel to *28 Days Later*: “A whole idea for a trilogy just sort of came – bing! – into my head,” Garland enthused to *The Guardian* in 2024. “It makes me really question what creativity is. I feel like an observer, a lot of the time.”

So with the third film in the *28 Days* series, Garland is back in the writer’s seat, with Danny Boyle returning as director. Also this past April, Garland’s latest film, *Warfare*, was released. A collaboration with former soldier Ray Mendoza, it follows, in real-time, a platoon of Navy SEALs on a mission through insurgent territory in 2006.

But will *Warfare* be Alex Garland’s final directing credit? In March 2024, he made an astonishing admission, telling *The Guardian* “I’m not planning to direct again in the foreseeable future.”

If *Warfare* is to be Alex Garland’s directorial swansong, then so be it, but we will have lost one of our greatest and most idiosyncratic filmmakers. Certainly, he has no plans to hang up the pen, and is indeed behind all three of the next *28 Days Later* sequels. But with

## LIGHTS! CAMERA! ACTION!

Alex Garland wasn’t the first novelist to try his hand at movie directing...

### MICHAEL CRICHTON

Many of Crichton’s novels became successful movies, including *The Andromeda Strain*, *Rising Sun* and, of course, *Jurassic Park*. But the bestselling author also went behind the camera for several of his adaptations, including 1973’s *Westworld* and 1978’s *The First Great Train Robbery*.



### NORMAN MAILER

This literary giant remains best known as the author of such classics as *The Naked And The Dead*, but he was also an accomplished director. His first three films – *Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond The Law* (1968), and *Maidstone* (1970) – were fairly experimental, but his fourth and final movie, *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, was more conventional.



### PAUL AUSTER

As an author, Paul Auster is considered one of the American greats, penning such acclaimed novels as *The New York Trilogy* and *The Book Of Illusions*. He was less successful as a filmmaker. One of his three films – 1998’s *Lulu On The Bridge* – has a rare 0% rating on Rotten Tomatoes.



Danny Boyle directing the next film in the series, and Nia DaCosta the one after, how brilliant would it be to see Alex Garland behind the camera for the third? Who knows, it may still happen (other directors, such as Steven Soderbergh, have in the past announced their retirement, only to go back on their word), but if he really is a screenwriter-only from here, there’ll still be more to cherish. Alex Garland’s third act is only just beginning. ■