

# Premium Coverage

Coverage for: Tracking Board

Title: PRIVATE  
Writer(s): PRIVATE  
Draft Date: None Listed  
Pages: 130

Genre: Drama/Period Piece  
Period: 1940s, 1972, 2000  
Setting: USA, Russia, Alaska  
Locale: Urban  
Budget: High

Story: So-So  
Structure/Pacing: So-So  
Dialog: Good  
Writing Style: So-So  
Commercial: Not Good  
Visual Elements: Good  
Title: Good  
Characterization: So-So  
Set Up (First 15 Pages): Not Good

Consider for:  
Writer: PASS  
**Script:** PASS

Analyst: DB

Logline:

A dying woman recounts her horrific experience during the siege of Leningrad to her daughters.

Comments Summary:

PRIVATE is a powerful story of a woman's desperate attempts to survive under impossible circumstances, while trying to be the best mother she can be to her children. It's filled with devastatingly sad moments of tremendous misery, which are rendered in brutally vivid detail. Vera/Anya's determination and survival against all odds make her a protagonist we cheer for, and suffer alongside. Unfortunately, the script seems convinced that Vera/Anya's Leningrad story, on its own, is enough. To bolster it, the screenplay also has a parallel fairy tale metaphor narrative (which eventually transitions into the Leningrad material), alongside a framing device where Vera/Anya is telling her story years later. Both are not just unnecessary, but also actively hurt the power of the main plot. Cutting these flourishes out, and telling this story plainly and chronologically, could instantly elevate the script.

Synopsis:

In 1972, MEREDITH WHITSON (12) and NINA WHITSON (8) talk to their father EVAN WHITSON (40s) about a play they're going to perform, they are worried about whether or not their mother will like it. They perform the play for their mother ANYA WHITSON (40s) and assorted GUESTS. Anya grows furious at the performance and smashes her glass. She bemoans creating the fairy tale that the children are performing.

In 2000, in Meredith's home, she wakes up from a bad dream (Meredith is now 40). She gets a phone call that her mother's had a heart attack. At the hospital, Meredith finds Anya (now 81) determined to leave. DOCTOR LARSON (50s) tells Meredith the damage to Anya's heart is so severe that they can't do anything for her but make her comfortable. Nina (now 35) comes to the hospital as well.

Anya tells the girls that their father (now dead), made her promise to tell them "again of the snow kingdom". Meredith doesn't want to hear any fairy tales from her mother, but Nina agrees to listen. Anya recounts the story of VERA (15), a poor peasant girl who lives in the enchanted Snow Kingdom. Her parents PETYR (40s) and MAMA (40s) argue about Petyr's writing, which Mama believes is endangering their family. Anya notes that a "dark knight" wants to destroy the kingdom. A STRANGER wants Vera's sister OLGA (12) to try "essence of wormwood". Vera tries to intervene, and PRINCE SASHA ALEKSANDER (17) shows up in a white carriage and scares off the Stranger. He asks Vera to meet him on the "Enchanted Bridge" at 11 o'clock. When she meets Sasha on the bridge he performs magic for her by manipulating the color of roses. Vera warns him that magic can get him in trouble. They hide when they see a black carriage pulled by dragons coming down the street.

FOUR TROLLS come out of the carriage, dragging a FRIGHTENED MAN (40s) who identifies Vera's home as the residence of "a writer" and "a poet", Petyr. The LEAD TROLL turns the Man to smoke. The Trolls go inside and take Petyr out. Sasha says no one can help Petyr, his family is in prison and the "Black Knight" is too powerful. Anya stops the story there. Meredith was secretly listening from the hallway outside the room. Meredith and Nina take Anya home.

Meredith snoops around the house and finds a lock-box, with a letter from the University of Alaska wanting Anya to help with a "Leningrad Study". Anya resumes telling the story. Back in the Snow Kingdom, things have grown literally darker, with the snow turning black and puddles of bubbling black tar with tentacles that draw people in. Vera is 17 now.

Impoverished, she, Olga and her Mama move in with Meredith's grandmother, ZOYA (60s). Vera tries to visit her father at the "Great Hall of Justice" but is told, "no one of that name is known here". Sasha (now 18) visits her and tells her his remaining family has gone into hiding and that things with the Black Knight are getting worse. Sasha's been studying to be a poet. Sasha sneaks

Vera into the “Grand Theater”. Vera and Sasha make love, and Vera becomes pregnant. She introduces Sasha to her Mama.

Back at the house, Meredith (still eavesdropping and caught by Nina) and Nina discuss how the story has changed since the last time they heard it. They compare the facts of the story to comparable elements of Leningrad and feel the fairy tale is a metaphor for Stalinist Russia. But if Anya is Vera and got pregnant at a young age, that would mean they have a sibling somewhere. Meredith confronts Anya demanding to know the truth.

Anya agrees to tell them, and launches back into the story, only now we’re no longer in the fictional “Snow Kingdom”, but in the Russian city of Leningrad. Vera (now 23) and Sasha have two children, ANYA (7) and LEO (5).

The Nazis attack Leningrad. Sasha leaves Vera to “find out what is going on, and try to help”. Vera returns home and learns from Mama that the bread factory where she works has been bombed and Zoya is dead. Sasha joins the army. Mama tells Vera that Stalin is evacuating all the children from Leningrad. Vera says goodbye to Anya and Leo. Unable to take the heartbreak of leaving her children, she sneaks onto the departing train to be with them by posing as a worker. The war extends to the path of the train, and everyone flees off it into a nearby farmhouse. Afraid to just sit there, Vera takes her children and leaves. Moments later the house is obliterated by a bombing. Vera and the children return home.

Wanting to aide in the war effort, Vera travels to the outskirt city of Luga to help build fortifications, under the command of COMRADE PRITKIN (40s). Olga hallucinates two SOVIET CAPTAINS turning to smoke. Vera tries to calm her war-traumatized sister with the fairytale story. Olga later dies when they are attacked. Vera returns home to her children.

Anya stops telling the story and decides she wants to speak to the University doing the Leningrad study. Meredith doesn’t want her to go, concerned about her health. Anya continues the story. Vera and her family struggle with harsh winter and limited rations in Leningrad, Mama grows ill. Sasha returns home with food and lifts their spirits. But he has to leave shortly after to continue the fight against the Germans.

On her deathbed, Mama asks Vera to tell fairy tales to her grandchildren to give them hope. Mama dies. Meredith agrees that Anya’s story is important and that they should go to Alaska. They travel to Alaska. Anya apologizes for her outburst when Meredith and Nina performed the play years ago. By now the doctor that contacted Anya is quite old and in a nursing home. VASILY ADAMOVICH (90s) and his son MAKSIM (40s) listen to the story and record it. Anya reveals her real name is “Veronika Petrovna Marchenko”. She tells them Leo developed scurvy. They got word from Sasha to meet him in Vologda.

During the journey Leo becomes increasingly ill, to the point that a NURSE tells Vera she must get on the train to Vologda and leave Leo behind, as he will surely die but herself and Anya could survive. Vera can't bring herself to leave Leo, and sends Anya on the train alone to reunite with Sasha. Leo dies. Vera makes it to Anya and Sasha in Vologda. As she sees them a bombing kills them.

Vera was later taken prisoner by Germans and placed in a work camp, which was eventually liberated by Americans. Meredith and Nina's father was one of them. Vera changed her name to Anya in honor of her daughter. After hearing the story Max asks Anya to deliver the recordings to someone his father used to work with. When she does she discovers STACEY (60s)... who is actually Anya, her daughter. She survived the bombing. 10 years later, Anya finishes a journal telling her story. She has a vision of herself reuniting with Sasha and Leo before she dies.

### Character Breakdown:

Age	Name	Role	Description
15-91	Vera/Anya	Lead	Strong-willed, survivor
12-40	Meredith Whitson	Supporting	Anya's bitter daughter
8-35	Nina Whitson	Supporting	Warmer towards her mother
40s	Petyr	Supporting	Vera's poet father
17-25	Aleksander/Sasha	Supporting	Loving, poet
12-20	Olga	Supporting	Vera's kindhearted sister
7-60s	Anya/Stacey	Supporting	Vera's daughter
5	Leo	Supporting	Vera's son
40s	Mama	Supporting	Vera's tough mother

Script Analysis:

ORIGINALITY/CREATIVITY:

Sometimes, being original doesn't always work in the favor of the project. There's no denying that the script's approach, mixing vivid fantasy ingredients (trolls, goblins, dragons, magic) alongside a period drama, with an additional more contemporary plotline also involved, is unique. This is not a traditional period piece for long stretches, particularly in the front half. The question for the author to consider is whether the script's creative touches are the best choices for this material.

COMMERCIAL:

Period dramas are arguably the most difficult projects to get off the ground. PRIVATE doubles down on its commercial challenges by making itself extremely expensive because of all the F/X required in rendering the fantasy "Snow Kingdom". Many times what's better for the story may not always be the most commercial choice, but in this case the more straightforward treatment of the script is not only more commercially appealing, but a more natural fit for the storyline.

PREMISE:

The premise listed above in the logline would be wildly misleading, but is about the simplest way to explain the story. If one were to write a premise based on the first half, it would be "A dying woman tells her two estranged daughters a fairy tale story". The script pulls the switch conclusively on p48-49, but before then we're still seeing a lot of fairy tale material. Of the two pitches, the Leningrad one is stronger, and the most accurate summation of the bulk of the screenplay. But the script has a mixed focus in this regard by virtue of its design.

STORY:

As has been discussed several times above, the story has a tough time balancing all three plots, and placed together, they hurt each other. The framing device, wherein we meet Anya as an old, dying woman, and she tells us her story about Leningrad, promises the reader that Anya/Vera will not die in Leningrad. That alone takes out potential narrative tension.

The fantasy sequences, which go for broke with exotic visuals (more on this in the "Visual Elements" section), are too tonally dissonant to cleanly connect with the Leningrad material. In other words, it's hard to go from dragons and trolls to real world death and misery and to take both elements seriously.

Once we fully immerse ourselves in Leningrad, the bulk of the material there is extremely powerful. Time and time again the script doles out a simple, specific visual that is heartbreakingly "true" because it's using such small, relatable ideas. Vera has to force her way to get a little piece of bread in a food line (p80). Vera and a dirty woman fight each other nearly to death over some firewood, only for someone else to steal it (p104). Vera is so desperate to feed her children that

she makes soup out of wallpaper (p106). There are dozens of these little moments, and they all work.

However, not everything in the Leningrad material is as effective. Why does Sasha hear that Leningrad is under attack and immediately rush off, saying, "I need to find out what is going on, and try to help," (p52). Is Sasha in the army? We learn he's not when he returns home to announce, "I've joined the People's Volunteer Army," (p54). So is Sasha's behavior motivated in this moment? As he says, "I am a university student and a poet. You are the daughter of a criminal of the state. If ever there were a forbidden love..." (p54). If anything, doesn't this suggest that Sasha is the last guy that would run to join the army?

It also seems extraordinarily risky to leave two children alone in a war zone (p53)? Vera points this out, "I cannot just leave them here, locked in," (p53), and it seems like Mama's answer is meant to satisfy this concern, "From now on, you will have to do a great many unimaginable things," (p53). But why can't Vera, Olga or Mama go alone to get supplies from the store and take money out of the bank? Are three adults so vital to completing these tasks that it merits leaving children alone in a war zone? It doesn't read like a hard choice in the face of war, it comes across like a foolish, unnecessary risk. This may be a moment where an explanation as to why these tasks require all three of them would be better.

Another bit that's unclear is when Mama goes from telling Vera that "Comrade Stalin is surely watching the Germans, and he knows where our children can go so that they will be safe," (p57), encouraging her to send the children away by train, to assuring her when she returns with the children after this ends disastrously, "We will be safe here," (p66).

Later on, it seems like the script is implying that Max somehow knows that Stacey is Anya (p124), but this development could be hinted at a lot more explicitly prior to the revelation. Right now, especially considering their random meeting at the diner before they meet again (p95-96), the Stacey twist comes off as a little too convenient.

Overall, all the threads of the story, the fairy-tale-as-hope-metaphor (detailed on p92), the estrangement from Anya/Vera's daughters, and the Leningrad plot all could still be incorporated in a more straightforward, chronological telling of the story. If the script began with Vera/Anya in Leningrad and went from there, there'd be real tension of her possibly dying. Then when she got to the labor camp and started a new life in America we could see that unfold in either the back half of Act II or Act III. We don't need to actually see the fairy tale in order for that metaphor to effectively resonate. This would also cut down the lengthy page count.

#### STRUCTURE/PACING:

The script has a lot to juggle because of its approach. We essentially start a main storyline on

three separate occasions. First, there's Meredith and Nina and their relationship with their mom. It has an ordinary world section (Anya is cold to her kids and freaks out when they try to stage a play retelling her fairy tales, p3) and an inciting incident (Anya is very sick after a heart attack, p5). Her daughters gather around her, with mixed feelings and strained relationships between them. We're all set for a relationship drama between these three characters. After that story gets set up, on p12 we jump into the "Snow Kingdom". So at that time establishing the world and characters of the "Snow Kingdom" becomes necessary. There's an "ordinary world" (Vera's regular life in the kingdom), her relationship with her sister Olga, and parents Petyr and Mama, along with budding romance with Prince Aleksander. The inciting incident of this narrative is Petyr's arrest (p23).

This narrative builds up steam with the "Dark Knight" gaining in power, and the kingdom growing darker, while poet Prince Aleksander and Vera fall in love and she gets pregnant. But then we learn that this is pure fairy tale (given the amount of emphasis and imagery, a supernatural twist wasn't out of the question in the early stages of the script). Now we jump into our third "ordinary world", Leningrad ("You are right. This is no fairy tale," p48). We can't smoothly transition from the fairy tale world, with tentacles and goblins, to World War II era Leningrad, without needing to reacquaint ourselves with the world. Here we meet Vera/Sasha/Anya/Leo, and learn of Vera's aspiration for another child (p51). The inciting incident for this narrative is the German attack that sends Sasha away from Vera (p52).

Throughout all of this, we sporadically cut back to the contemporary plot, which can't help but pale in comparison to the life-or-death stakes of the fairy tale and Leningrad plots. The Leningrad plot ends on p121 (with expositional details of what happened after on p122), and we get a fairly rushed eight pages where in short order Anya/Vera reconciles with her daughters (p123-124), discovers that Stacey is her presumed dead daughter Anya (p127), and Vera/Anya finishes a journal telling her life story and dies (p130).

It seems odd to say that a 130-page script has anything that feels rushed, but it does because the extraneous fairy tale plot eats up so much page count. With that removed, the script could have time to give these critical events in the story their proper due.

#### MAIN CHARACTERS:

As a lead role, Anya's got everything you want for a major actress. She perseveres through tremendous hardship; she changes (from withdrawn and bitter towards her daughters in the contemporary plot to remorseful and loving). She's tough, but very recognizably human as she makes difficult choices (like giving food to her children instead of her dying mother, a decision she still agonizes over years later, p93).

She's really the one constant, and the clear lead. Meredith and Nina are as well distinguished as

possible in the time they have (Meredith is the more combative and resentful towards her mother, while Nina is more hopeful but gets hurt because of that fact when Anya is dismissive of her photography career, p9-10). Again though, what should be life-changing moments for them (the reconciliation with their mother) feels rushed because the script is already running long when it happens.

We could really dig into Meredith and Nina if they had more time. Right now some of the touches in their construction seem superfluous, probably because they only get brief glimpses. For instance, why is the character of Jeff Cooper, Meredith's eventual husband, even in the movie? He shows up just long enough to be established as a childhood friend, become her adult husband, then say he's got to go on a work trip and never return (p2-5). It's intriguing that Nina is a "Time Magazine" type photographer, returning from Africa when her mother gets sick (p8-9). Has she chosen to run away because of the pain of not being supported by her mother? Has that made her feel like she has no real home? We could find out if she had more time. By virtue of the various narratives and shifting from fairy to real life, most everyone else is under the "minor characters" section.

#### MINOR CHARACTERS:

One thing that really sticks out for the minor characters is the choice not to name "Mama". Why doesn't Mama have a name? She appears on 40+ pages, but has no first name. This omission doesn't seem warranted by anything in the script, unless this reader missed something. Mama has a tragic arc where she essentially self-sacrifices so that the children can eat what meager rations they have (p83). It's a strong role, but the lack of a name makes it seem like a throwaway. No name-actor wants to play a role that has no actual name.

Sasha's loving nature works nicely, and his tenderness with Vera/Anya is credible. But it'd be great to know a bit more about how he feels fighting with his fellow Russians against the Nazis. This seems contrary to his nature (he's a poet). That contradiction is intriguing, and the script could spend more time exploring that. We could also get more emphasis on his guilt, because right now he flits in and out while Vera/Anya go through these horror show moments of poverty almost always alone.

Children Anya and Leo, while certainly adorable and believable as children, could maybe have more to do than simply be burdens for Vera/Anya to take care of/feed. If they could have more pronounced subplots of their own, that would avoid them feeling like the prototypical innocent/adorable kids in this type of drama.

The subplot with Olga, who seems almost too kindhearted to survive in the bleak landscape of Leningrad, is very effective. Her mental disintegration and eventual death are very elegantly handled and the transition is just gradual enough (p67-73).

#### DIALOG:

PRIVATE is in fine shape dialogue-wise. While there could maybe be a greater differentiation of voice (eventually all the pragmatic but desperate Leningrad residents start to blend together) in some characters, in general everyone sounds natural, and the script isn't too melodramatic, which is an extremely easy trap to fall into with this sort of material. The dialogue is to the point without being on the nose.

#### WRITING STYLE/PRESENTATION:

On the very first page there's a moment where Evan, "picks up the script and looks at it," (p1). No script has previously been mentioned, and the scene has been set with his two daughters painting a castle scene onto a bed sheet. In this case because the script hasn't been introduced yet it should be, "a script". For clarity, we should also know what he picks it up off of. When characters interact with objects not previously introduced, and without enough basic specifics to create a clear visual, it makes for a disorienting read. Having this occur on the first page compounds the issue, giving off a poor first impression.

Minor characters are not always introduced with all caps (examples p2, p22, p29, p40). After the time jump (from 1972 to the year 2000), we're told Meredith has gone from 12 to 40 (p1, p4), a difference of 28 years, while Anya has gone from "40s" (p2) to "81" (p6). Even if she were 49 years old, 28 years later she'd still only be 77. We're introduced to "PRINCE ALEKSANDER (17, confident, handsome)," (p16) but his character heading reads "Sasha" (p16). If he's going to be listed as Sasha, his introduction should read "PRINCE SASHA ALEKSANDER" instead of him having to say in dialogue, "Please, call me Sasha," (p16).

All these little glitches in the presentation throw off what is otherwise a nice read, and should be amended.

#### VISUAL ELEMENTS:

The Snow Kingdom world is very rich visually. There are dragons and trolls, people get turned into smoke (p22), shadow-tentacles grab people, and drag them into bubbling black puddles (p29). While the merits of this section are questionable for the story, their appeal on a pure visual level is definitely there. We get plenty of brutal images of poverty in war (the specifics of which are discussed above) in Leningrad as well.

#### SET UP (FIRST 15):

The first 15 pages of PRIVATE are more confusing than anything, and taken on their own wouldn't really draw one in to the read. This seems to be a result of the fractured narrative approach, as we transition from one setup (for the relationship drama between two daughters and their sick mom) to another (the "Snow Kingdom"), without really knowing where the story is going.

On a more specific point, the abrupt wake up from a bad dream beat is a screenwriting cliché at this juncture, and may not be the best way to transition us into the year 2000 with Meredith (p4).

TITLE:

As drama titles go, PRIVATE is a solid one. It works as an ironic thematic echo of Leningrad itself (whose harsh winter is vividly detailed), a literal reference to Anya's garden (which pays off a couple times in the script, p24, 25, p127-130). and is linked up well enough to the storyline that the meaning of it grows as you watch the film.

### Market Analysis:

Simply comparing PRIVATE to other period pieces isn't really accurate, but there aren't too many stories that attempt this heady mix of fairy tales and period war drama. A few of them do exist though.

The one that comes to mind first is "Pan's Labyrinth" (2006), which mixes war drama tropes with wild fantasy sequences. Grossing 83M on a budget of 19M, "Pan's Labyrinth" should be exhibit A if the author intends to stick to this fantasy approach. The difference between them is that "Pan's Labyrinth" doesn't drop the fantasy material halfway through.

Another relevant film is "Bridge to Terabithia" (2007). The film grossed 137M worldwide (various estimates put the budget at 20-25 million). This film also mixes real and fantasy worlds within a dramatic context. In this one the fantasy world is slowly built by the characters, but we, the audience, are always aware that this world is in the imagination of the protagonists.

And finally "Big Fish" (2003) has a similar device of fantasy stories from a potentially unreliable narrator, and that film took in 122M against a 70M budget. So films taking this mixed approach have been successful, but the comparison isn't clean as all three of them linger more on the fantasy material than PRIVATE.

As for movies about Russia, set in Russia, during WWII, there are a finite amount of examples worth considering. The Russian film "Stalingrad" (2013) was a major success for a contemporary Russian film, grossing 68M worldwide, and the burgeoning local Russian film business seems poised to only go up. "Enemy at the Gates" (2001) was modestly successful with 96M worldwide on a 68M budget, but both of these films are straight war movies, and have an action appeal that PRIVATE doesn't.

The recent drama "Unbroken" (2014) delivered a strong box office performance (161M on a 65M budget) and shares a lot of thematic similarities with PRIVATE'S story of survival against the odds during wartime (specifically World War II). This would be the prime example for the script should it remove the fantasy components.

Looking at the comparisons above is further reason to consider going one way or the other with the fantasy elements. If they are removed completely, the script seems like it could easily be pitched as the next "Unbroken". If they are kept, it might be worth considering integrating them into the entire storyline, in which case the comparisons to the above-discussed fantasy/drama films would be more accurate.

The Grid:

	EXCELLENT	VERY GOOD	GOOD	SO-SO	NOT GOOD
<b>Originality /Creativity</b>			X		
<b>Commercial</b>					X
<b>Premise</b>				X	
<b>Story</b>				X	
<b>Structure</b>				X	
<b>Main Characters</b>			X		
<b>Minor Characters</b>				X	
<b>Dialog</b>			X		
<b>Writing Style/Presentation</b>				X	
<b>Visual Elements</b>			X		
<b>Set Up (First 15)</b>					X
<b>Title</b>			X		

(SCRIPT) RECOMMEND:

CONSIDER:

PASS: X

(WRITER) RECOMMEND:

CONSIDER:

PASS: X