

From Book to Blockbuster – Wendy Orr and the Nim’s Island books

There are no rules for how to write a book that is likely to be picked up for film. It’s like everything else in publishing: someone has to fall in love with it, be convinced that the end result will make money, and then persuade a lot of other people of the same thing. The main difference for that part of it is the size of the investment: a publisher may be able to afford a small run of a risky book they love, but even for a small film, a studio is investing millions. A film deal therefore tends to take much longer to work out and more volatile during the process.

The only rule that matters is: Write the best book you can. Imagine the film in your head if that’s the way you work, but never write to pitch a film.

But if you are offered an option, here are some things to consider.

An option is a contract giving the producer or studio the exclusive right to work towards creating a film from your book. There is a fixed time period such as 18 months, usually with the possibility of extensions. The option price is likely to be 10% of the purchase price. The purchase price is usually paid on commencement of principal photography – in other words, the day filming starts.

Don’t sign anything until you get an experienced film lawyer. If it’s a Hollywood deal, get a Hollywood lawyer: just google Film Lawyers, Los Angeles. Don’t be nervous of asking exactly how their fee structure works: many work similarly to an agent in taking a percentage of income.

Don’t be shy of asking questions about every part of the contract. It’s extremely complicated, and a different language to book publishing.

Never take anything for granted: if you want to go to the red carpet premiere, make sure it’s in your contract.

Don’t quit your day job. Negotiating the contract can take up to a year. Even if the movie goes into production you’re unlikely to become an instant millionaire. Also, movies almost never make a profit, so the purchase price is likely to be the only money you’ll receive from it, apart from an increase in book sales.

Once the contract is signed:

The first step will be the screenplay, although there’s no guarantee that this will happen in the first year or two, or at all. (That’s why you need a time limit on your option.) Many movies go through several screenwriters before settling on a final script. The studio also has the right to fire the producer or director who first contacted you: there may be many changes in vision between the first excited conversations and the final script.

Learn to let go. If you’ve had books illustrated, you’ve learned the first step of realising that someone else’s vision can enhance your own. Build on that.

The studio’s aim is to make a successful film. No matter how much they love your book, they have to be more focussed on making a film that works than a film that slavishly follows the book.

A screenplay works on a rough guide of a page of script for a minute of film. If a book is over 25,000 words, the story will probably have to be condensed.

The film's budget will determine whether and how some of your favourite scenes will be portrayed. The exploding building may end up being an exploding garbage can. A child and a sea lion stowing away on a cruise ship to New York may end up as poachers visiting the child's island: cruise ships, water filming and sea lions on city pavements are expensive propositions.

The difference between writing a novel and a screenplay is not just about the format. You can get a program for that, eg Final Draft, as in the attached page. The differences are more in the defined 3 act structure, and an even stricter 'show don't tell' rule. Screenplays have less dialogue than many books; internal ruminations and background stories have to be portrayed visually.

If you think you'd like to try writing the screenplay, read some and then watch their movies to get a feeling for how they work. There is no guarantee that the studio or producer will be interested in having you write; it would be a separate contract. However you have nothing to lose by asking, unless you want to make it a condition of the rights sale. Personally, I would not want to write a screenplay of one of my books on my own, but would consider it with another screenwriter.

Don't let it take over your life. There's a lot of other writing you could do in five years of preparation for a film that could still be cancelled at the last minute.

When the film gets the green light:

After moving at a snail's pace for several years, activity becomes frenetic. Producers, directors, cast and crew work long, intense hours. If you need to ask questions, keep emails short and to the point.

If you are invited on set, remember that you are a privileged guest in someone else's workplace. Keep out of the way, observe and enjoy, but never try to interfere, or to strike up conversation when actors are preparing for their scenes.

If you're not invited on set, ask nicely. Grovel if need be: watching your characters come to life is an extraordinarily moving experience.

Even the biggest stars are human. If you're delighted with how they've captured your character, let them know.

When you're interviewed, accept that most interviewers are far more interested in your meeting with the stars than anything to do with your book. If they do ask about writing it may be edited out when the interview goes to print. Smile and remember that it's all publicity and your book is still getting more attention than it would have otherwise.

Finally: enjoy the experience. You'll learn a lot about different types of creativity; experience a different side of life, and have a lot of fun. Even if the option isn't acted on, or the film is cancelled, in asking for an option, a producer is saying that they are prepared to spend several years of their lives on your story. What greater compliment could there be to your work?

