

Big Bucks in Teen Book Series Adaptations

Girls Drive Success of Teen Stories at Bookstore and Box Office

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This Friday, at midnight, as you walk out of the movies with your loved ones, take a peek at the Barnes & Noble next to the theater, and you're likely to see thousands of teenage girls – along with their moms and possibly even grandmothers – lined up out front.



They'll be eagerly awaiting their copies of "Breaking Dawn," the fourth and final book in Stephenie Meyer's "Twilight" series, a vampire romance saga that has launched a fanaticism not seen since the likes of "Harry Potter."

The first three books in the series have sold a combined 8 million copies worldwide. That's staggering, considering the high-end print run for a teen novel is 500,000. In fact, Entertainment Weekly ran a cover story on the author and her "Twilighters" -- what the fans have dubbed themselves -- as they gear up for what many bookstores have dubbed Vampire Weekend.

The success of the books has spawned a hotly anticipated film version, due to hit theaters Dec. 12 and starring Kristen Stewart ("The Messengers," "Panic Room") as Bella, an average mortal girl who falls hard for a godlike vampire. Fans have been tracking every move of the film's production on the Web and even sporting T-shirts that delineate whether they're Team Edward or Team Jacob, playing out the love triangle in the books.

But "Twilight" is hardly the only teen novel to get the big-screen treatment. "Harry Potter" aside, there's big bucks to be made in teen book adaptations.

Just ask Les Morgenstein, president of Alloy Entertainment. For years, Morgenstein and his bicoastal crew have been churning out hit teen books -- the original company was formed to support the "Sweet Valley High" books. Alloy set up "Roswell," a series of books for teens about humanlike aliens in high school, which later became a TV series on the WB.

"Roswell" was the lightbulb moment for me that these books we were doing could really translate to film and TV," Morgenstein said. "We had developed the book property, and then when Hollywood bought the rights, we were sort of pushed out of it. So I thought, 'Why shouldn't we get in on the ground floor? It's all about owning the intellectual property, the concept.' So now, in New York, we're developing the book concept, finding the right writer. And in L.A., we're finding the screenwriter and developing the script. We're not just in on the ground floor, we are the ground floor."

More than 50 of the publishing company's titles have hit the New York Times Bestseller list, and Alloy has developed book-to-film projects such as "The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants" and its Aug. 6 sequel. The series author, Ann Brashares, was an Alloy editor when she first started writing the books, which have sold more than five million copies.

"When I wrote the series, I never expected it to be turned into a movie," Brashares said. "But with the success of films like 'Sex and the City,' it seems like Hollywood is more open than ever to doing these adaptations, because, after all, we're all just looking for good stories. And I guess this story really resonated with the audience."

Alloy returned to the television market with the CW hit "Gossip Girls," which is based on a series of 10 (and counting) books by Cecily von Ziegesar. On Sept. 9, the company will debut the CW's "Privileged," based on another teen tome, "Surviving the Filthy Rich."

"Other than Marvel, which obviously works a very different way, we're really the only company that's doing this," Morgenstein said. "We're not just focused on selling books anymore. We're focused on building brands. We view the projects as competitive entertainment properties, concepts that translate easily to other media like film and television. At the heart of it all is the story, but it has multiple lives. From book to film or TV show to Web property to mobile content and so on. The kids are all over the place these days. So we are too."

While it's hardly a new trend -- remember "The Princess Diaries" and "Ella Enchanted"? -- why is it booming now?

"There's definitely a lot of spending power there that Hollywood is discovering," Morgenstein said. "But like everything in Hollywood, it's cyclical, it comes in waves. And right now, especially with teen girls, we're in an upswing."

If the upcoming slate of Hollywood films from teen books is any indicator -- including "Nick and Norah's Infinite Playlist" on Oct. 3, "The Secret Life of Bees" on Oct. 17 and "Sex Drive" (adapted from the Alloy book "All the Way") on Oct. 10 -- the trend will continue.

And let's not forget the "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince," the sixth film in the series, due Nov. 21. Also in development are film adaptations of "The Keys to the Golden Firebird," Marina Budhos' "Ask Me No Questions" and the "Au Pairs" series, penned by "Gossip Girls" producer Stephanie Savage. Plus, Alloy plans to release a straight-to-DVD version of its best-selling series "Clique" on Nov. 11.

Professor Richard Walter, UCLA's screenwriting chairman, believes the girl power thing plays into it a bit. "The success of female films parallels the expansion of female talent among writers, producers and studio chiefs," he pointed out. "Coincidence? I don't think so. Maybe there's a keener sense of what sort of programming would appeal to women."

And there's a keener sense that female audiences can stir up big box office. Former Scholastic editor turned film producer Jane Startz, who has produced film adaptations of teen books such as "Tuck Everlasting" and "Ella Enchanted," suggests it's the young readers themselves who are creating the demand.

"This trend doesn't come as a surprise to me at all. As with all businesses, it's a viral phenomenon," said Startz, who's currently developing a string of teen book-based projects, including Judy Blume's classic "Deenie." "Girls are voracious readers. They spend money on books. So if you're making a film version of a successful book like 'Twilight' or 'Traveling Pants,' you're one step ahead already. It's a presold audience."

But UCLA's Walter also sees the flip side of this coin. And it is all about coin. "Whatever happened to the original?" he laments. "Everything is an adaptation or a remake or sequel or prequel or franchise. Hasbro has a deal to turn board games into movies. What drives this? Executives' need to blame someone or something for the anticipated failure of the particular venture. It's, 'Hey, it's not my fault it lost a zillion dollars; it's based on a bestselling book or a popular movie or TV show or board game.' To me the obsession with adaptation and the reluctance to produce original fare represents the suffocation of the imagination. They don't want to take risks, even though adaptations are themselves risky. Most of them fail, don't they?"

Not so, said Startz, again citing the success of "Sex and the City" and the allegiance women had to its theatrical version.

"In this market, the rule of thumb is that you cater to males, but there are other segments of the population out there, waiting to be entertained," said Startz, whose latest adaptation is a teen series based on "The Squad," by Jennifer Barnes, for cable network The N. "And with females, once you're hooked, you're hooked. When they find something they like, they'll go back over and over and over. The appetite is there, especially with these book adaptations. They're invested, they've formed a relationship with these characters. What better way to get girls -- and their moms -- to the box office?"