



Beyond the Book®



Upfront and Unscripted Series – From Book Expo America 2008

JEFF SHARP

Q: All right, well, welcome to another edition of *Upfront & Unscripted*, which is a presentation of BookExpo America, and podcasted on BookExpocast.com. My name's Chris Kenneally, I'm the director of author relations for the nonprofit Copyright Clearance Center, and also host of a program called *Beyond the Book*. I want to welcome Jeff Sharp. Jeff, welcome.

A: Thank you very much.

Q: It's good to have you here. Jeff Sharp is easily one of New York's most prominent independent film producers. And over the past ten years he's produced several notable features. I'm not going to recite the whole list –

A: (laughter) That's all right.

Q: – but certainly notable among them, it would be *Boys Don't Cry*, which came out in 1999 of course to great acclaim, and won Hilary Swank several awards including the Academy Award and the Golden Globe award for Best Actress. For that film, Jeff was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award in the Best Picture category. He's also produced Kenneth Lonergan's debut film *You Can Count on Me*, as well as *Nicholas Nickelby*, adapted by the writer/director Douglas McGrath from Charles Dickens's novel. His most recent release is the multi-generational drama *Evening*, starring among others Vanessa Redgrave and Natasha Richardson.

Welcome, again, and you're here to tell us about a kind of new way of looking at the relationship of film and books. It's an old relationship, a long-standing one. I'm put in mind of David O. Selznick's great line about the writers on his back lot, in the days when it might have included William Faulkner and others –

A: That's right.

Q: – he called them schmucks with Underwoods. So it hasn't always been a very friendly relationship, but Hollywood has understood they need good writers, and need good content, which is what we call it now. But the way you're coming to it with HarperCollins is different. Tell us about that.

A: Thanks, it's great to be here. Thanks for coming to join us this morning. As an independent producer, and being a New York based independent producer, we've always looked to the publishing world for inspiration for the films that we make. A book is in many ways the most tangible kind of genesis for an idea for a project. It's a easy and compact way to share an idea with a writer or writer/director. And some of the films – actually, most of the films that I've produced in my career have been based on books. So it was logical to look to the publishing industry for some sort of unique partnership. Random House and Focus Features quite famously really pointed the way about three years with their original partnership, which produced the film *Reservation Road*, which came out last year. It's run by Peter Gethers. And –

Q: And we'll talk about their relationship, Focus and Random House, is itself a different kind of relationship than yours.

A: It is, it is. But, nevertheless, that sort of planted a seed in my mind, and sparked a conversation between myself and Jane Friedman – we serve on a charity board in New York called Literacy Partners. And at one of our events that we were working at, we started talking about the Random House/Focus partnership, and thought that we could do something quite unique in taking a film production company and a independent producer, such as myself, and move actually into the publishing offices. And essentially set up a first look, where we would have an opportunity to review the material coming into HarperCollins as well as the backlist.

Q: And even before they've signed the author. I mean often with film, once the book has found a publisher, it then goes out in search of a producer.

A: That's right.

Q: You were there at the table, even as they're making decisions about what they're going to put on their list.

A: That's correct. That's correct. So it's an amazing opportunity to collaborate from the very beginning with an editor, with a publisher, and the author, and really create a cohesive vision for a book and a film, and developed simultaneous with the book's editorial process. These things never quite – I can't imagine we'd ever have a day and date release of the film and the book, but nevertheless, I do think that we'll substantially shrink the window between the publication of the book and the release of the film.

- Q: And have you noticed – I mean this is still very fresh, it’s only been since the fall that you’ve been doing this. Have you noticed at all how this has changed either your approach to looking at material, or how the editors in the room look at it, because you’re there with them?
- A: I do, actually. I’m new to publishing, so I was really blown away.
- Q: But if I can say, not good to – sorry, not new to good stories.
- A: Not new to great stories, exactly. So I have a real nose for great material. But the environment within HarperCollins is a very collaborative one, and it’s sort of the nature of that – that’s the personality of that company. And so editors have been very forthcoming about material that they feel has film viability, and vice-versa. I am on one of the main editorial floors, so I’ll go around and informally have conversations with various editors and say what’s coming down the pike, what do you feel about this, what is your sense about this. As do they stop by my office with material that they feel is worthy of our attention. So it is a very interesting dynamic that we have.
- Q: I’m curious, have you had to help them understand better what makes a good film? Because is there a difference between what makes a good story, a good novel, and what makes a good film? It’s about character, at least, right?
- A: Yeah, I have to say that there’s a strong sense of what makes a good movie inside the publishing team. I think they have a real nose for it. Of course they’re always working with agents and oftentimes producers. So they’re pretty savvy, I have to say. But, nevertheless, I certainly bring my experience to bear as a producer. I have a slightly different prism with which I’m looking at material. Can it be made on a certain scale? If not, can you attach a star? Is there a probable, possible way to get this thing off the ground? Some material just is daunting, or too elusive, or just impenetrable in terms of a screenwriter actually going in and adapting it.
- Q: There was a quote in some story I read preparing for this from Hemingway who talked about his relationship with film. And he said he would – he suggested that authors just drive up to the border in California, throw the book over, wait for them to throw the money over, and go no further than that. And what struck me about that was this made this even more compressed, because you’re New York based, of course Harper is New York based, Hollywood’s there on the other side of the country. Has that made any difference and does that play a role for you? I mean are you happy to hold them at arm’s length?
- A: I’d like to think I’ve had a great relationship with my authors over the years. Oftentimes they’ve adapted their own work into screenplay for me, they’ve served as an executive producer. Famously in the case of Armistead Maupin and his book *The Night Listener*, which I produced a few years ago. Armistead, who lives in San Francisco and is quite well-known there, bicycled a copy of his book and the script

down to Robin Williams, and asked Robin if he'd be interested in playing him in our film. And Armistead really took a produceorial (sp?) role in the adaptation of his book into a film. And Robin signed onto the film. And it was no illusions there. Having the only reason that Robin agreed to do it is because of his relationship with Armistead. And I mean obviously he thought it was a great role. But as we know, these things, material doesn't often doesn't get into the hands of a star like Robin Williams that directly.

So, Michael Cunningham I've worked with on two films, adaptation of his novel *A Home at the End of the World*, which he adapted for us and served as an executive producer. And on *Evening*, Michael adapted Susan Minot's book, actually with Susan, so I worked with Susan as well, and they both served as executive producers on *Evening*. Michael was on the set with me every day. Once again, Meryl Streep, Vanessa Redgrave, Glenn Close, Toni Collette, these actors were there because they loved the material, but also I think they really were thrilled at the idea of seeing Michael Cunningham on a director's chair behind the monitor every day.

So it doesn't have to be that way. As an independent producer I think you have to make great use of the resources at hand, and I can't imagine any better resource than the individual who created these characters and this world. So we try to incorporate them as much as they want. We're working with Meg Cabot right now on an adaptation of her series *The Queen of Babel*. And Meg was thrilled with the success of *Princess Diaries*, but didn't really play a direct role in the adaptation or the production of that film, and has made it very clear that she really doesn't have an interest, other than she's thrilled that these characters will come to life.

Q: When we talked earlier about Random and Focus and your relationship with Harper, they are, if you will, echoes of each other but still very different. In the case of Random of Focus there's a financial interest that Random I believe is taking in the films.

A: That's correct.

Q: And with Harper, it's more a supportive role, a partnership role. Although it's been written in the trades that because Harper itself is owned by Fox, there is this opportunity for synergy. I don't know how you feel about the word synergy, you might cringe, but what do you think about that?

A: (laughter) I think it's intriguing. We haven't had an opportunity to really test its limits yet, but we do have a dialogue, an ongoing dialogue that happens once a week where we share a list of the projects that we're tracking with our colleagues over at Fox, Fox 2000, Fox Searchlight. They're a very smart and very talented group of individuals over there, and they put out some great movies. So we'd be thrilled to find something to collaborate upon together.

Synergy, it's interesting because, if you look at these media conglomerates, if you look at Fox and HarperCollins, there have been efforts to do this in the past, or cross-pollinate. And I'm sure there were some successes there. But for the most part, I think the film folks are very busy in their own silo, busy making movies, and the editors and the publishers are very busy creating books, and there's not so much of this. And I think one of the exciting things about what we're bringing to the party is that we're sort of that cross-pollination, if you will. We're sort of the little bee that's going back and forth between these entities and spreading information, and looking at it with a slightly different eye. I'm not a scout, I'm not a book agent, I'm not a publishing executive. I have some credibility as a producer, so I think when I'm really excited about something or bring it to Fox, it actually carries some weight. And also, I think there's a real interest on their end as well.

But that's not to say that we're going to produce all of our films with Fox. We intend to really develop across a whole platform, a whole slew of different studios, production partners, private equity maybe in some cases. So we're not tied to any one studio.

Q: And to make it clear, neither is an author who signs with Harper tied to working with you as a film producer.

A: Exactly, absolutely. There's absolutely no – I'm not in there pitching my services to authors when they come in with their manuscript. But if I feel that it is something that we could do and do well – I'm not interested in collecting books on the bookshelf and optioning books for no reason. But if I have a compelling vision for something, it's great to have the opportunity to share that with the author.

Q: Have agents responded at all to this? And how do they react?

A: I think initially there was some – a few dubious agents out there, not quite understanding how this worked. I think they have a very strong vision for their clients and how they want to go out with their material and set up these auction-like environments where they send the book out on a weekend. So there are a number of meetings that I had. Initially Michael Morrison and I would sit down with a few of the key agents in New York and in LA and just essentially reassured them that we're going to act within the boundaries that are established and set up and look forward to collaborating with them and their clients.

Q: For Harper, I want to just go back to them briefly. There's a sense, and I've talked to a number of people at Harper recently, and they say the same thing about the drive for innovation. The atmosphere is rather like a startup, and you had used the image of silos and then talked about bees and I thought, well, it's like you're all living in the same hive, really. Is it like that?

A: It's true. I think that's Jane Friedman and her vision. It is one of innovation and trying new things. And I think – where we started talking about this partnership, I

think that probably most people in her industry would sort of think it was kind of a crazy idea. But life's about taking chances, and there is an entrepreneurial spirit. That does feel appropriate.

Q: If we can, briefly, talk about some of the projects you are working on. I read that you're looking at trying to develop *Lie Down in Darkness*, the William Styron novel, which has famously not been made into a film.

A: It's one of those. We're crazy.

Q: Right, right. Well, what attracts you to it, and I believe you're working with his daughter on it.

A: That's right, with Susanna Styron. William Styron is one of my favorite writers of all time, and this was a book I first started tracking shortly after his death. And I think probably reminded me there are so many essays written upon his death about *Lie Down in Darkness* and how important it was as one of the great American novels, and this extraordinary character of Peyton Loftis. And I tracked the book down through my attorney and my agent, and we got through to Susanna Styron as – she's a filmmaker, and has adapted one of her father's stories, and is on the faculty at Columbia film school, where I went.

Q: I was going to say, where you went.

A: Yeah, so we sort of developed this friendship. And I think she found the idea intriguing to go back into it. Famously, Richard Yeats adapted the book in 1960 for John Frankenheimer, and it never quite happened. But Elizabeth Taylor was considered for the role, as was, oh my god, a whole slew of amazing actors. Henry Fonda. But in the end it didn't happen and he went on to direct *Manchurian Candidate*, and Richard Yeats wrote *Revolutionary Road*, so the script sort of sat there for 45 years. We're going to start fresh. We're going to work with a screenwriter and filmmaker, we haven't determined who that is yet, and really excited about where that's going to take us. I, speaking of Richard Yeats, developed *Revolutionary Road* for Sam Mendes and Kate Winslet to star in. So I like these kind of challenges. I like trying to crack them. And I think for actors, I try to get inside of what they're looking for and what excites them. And I think this kind of material challenge and excites them.

Q: That would seem to be a key, right? There needs to be a challenge there. It's not just the good story, as important as that is, but there has to be something that they can come at and really sink their teeth into.

A: Yeah, and I mean Styron gets inside of his women, his female characters. I mean like *Sophie's Choice* was such an amazing role for Meryl Streep, as Peyton is in this book. I just think the stakes are so high, and it's against this backdrop of the South and early post-war years. It was changing so rapidly. And this family's sort

of caught up in between this push for modernism and holding onto the traditions of their past.

Q: There's another project that is I believe one of the first to come out of the Harper arrangement, which is Michael Zadoorian's book, *The Leisure Seekers*. Tell us about how that happened.

A: Sure, this is a book that came in through Jennifer Pooley, one of the William Morrow editors at HarperCollins. She brought in the book on a Monday morning at the Monday morning read –

Q: So there's a whole group of you in a room.

A: That's right. And the William Morrow meeting. And she was just blown away by Michael's book, and we all got caught up in her enthusiasm. I took it home, read it that night, and I think by Wednesday we had optioned both the – well, the film rights and purchased the book for publication. It's being published next spring.

Q: Can you tell us what the book's about?

A: It's great, yes. Well, it's *About Schmidt*, it's – *Little Miss Sunshine* meets *The Savages* meets – sort of get the picture? It's about two old folks living in Detroit. They've seen a lot in their lives, and during the '70s they crisscrossed the country with their family in an RV called the Leisure Seeker. And their two children are now grown, and he has early stage Alzheimer's, and she's suffering from terminal cancer. They don't have a lot more time left, and the children are trying to get them to think about moving into a managed care facility. But one day they decide that they're going to end their love story on their own terms, and they pack up the RV and they fill up the tires with air, and they put some gas in the tank, and they head off across Route 66, because that's what the map in their Leisure Seeker, their TripTik tells them to do. Of course, Route 66 has changed a lot. Stuckey's is closed and the Caoili (sp?) Campgrounds are no longer there, but they manage to get across the country. And it's really, it's a heartwarming journey. It's very funny, it's told from Ella, the woman's point of view, while her husband that's increasingly senile is driving, and she's navigating while she's popping her pain medication. And they make it to Disneyland. And at the end of the story, they decide that their life is complete, and they close up the windows and they go to sleep, and that's the end.

Q: Wow, sounds great. So will we see the movie, how soon after the book appears? Do you have a timeline (inaudible)?

A: At this point we're out to screenwriters and directors. There's a lot of excitement out there. And just within HarperCollins – this is one of my favorite things about our relationship is I really – you get a sense of the buzz, the excitement within the company, and that translates I think to my enthusiasm when I go out and talk about

the material. But there really is a great love and affection for this material, and so I'm sure we're going to find a filmmaker who also shares that, and go out there next year with it.

Q: Well, we'll look forward to it, Jeff.

A: Great.

Q: Jeff Sharp, thank you very much for chatting with me here.

A: (inaudible), thank you.

Q: Jeff is the producer of a number of notable films and now working with HarperCollins. My name's Chris Kenneally, and thank you for joining us at *Upfront & Unscripted*. If we have any questions from the audience I'm sure Jeff will be happy to answer them. Anybody at all. No films to pitch or anything like that? Oh, there's a film.

F: (inaudible).

A: It's not an exclusive arrangement, but I'm really keen to see this model work, and there's an abundance of material from the list. I mean, we've barely even scratched the backlist, so my focus is then clearly front and center HarperCollins. However, *Lie Down in Darkness* is a Random House book, so I'm not completely monogamous.

Q: Well, again, Jeff, thank you very much indeed. Appreciate your time.

A: Great, thank you. (inaudible). Take care.

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