



Beyond the Book®



KENNEALLY: I'd like to turn now to Deborah Kovacs. Welcome, Deborah.

KOVACS: Thanks.

KENNEALLY: Deborah is senior vice president of publishing at Walden Media, a film studio specializing in the adaptation of children's classics. You may already have seen some of their movies, I rather think you have. They include *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Prince Caspian*, *Holes*, *Because of Winn-Dixie* and *The Bridge to Terabithia*. Debbie has overseen their publishing activities since joining Walden in 2001 and was instrumental in the formation in 2005 of a publishing joint venture with Penguin. They've adapted more than 20 original works and that includes the newly-published book *Savvy* by Ingrid Law. And most recently Debbie was central to the establishment of Walden Pond Press, a new imprint to be housed at HarperCollins. So welcome again, Debbie. And tell me about Walden's view of the book. Clearly we know it as a film company but you see it in a different way.

KOVACS: Yeah the movie is a ruse to get children to read. This is a literacy company. We happen to make movies.

KENNEALLY: So your sense of content, then, goes beyond the film itself.

KOVACS: Absolutely. Over the last seven years since the company was founded I think we've given away probably 500,000 books based on our movies because yes it promotes the movie but in our opinion, if the kids don't read the book they're missing – we're all missing the point. And all of us at the company are avid, avid readers, believe in story, believe in the importance to kids – incredible importance to kids – of having the story experience and what Paul is describing as the opportunity to form the images in their own mind. Admittedly we do add those images but, honest and true, it is done as an afterword, past – we really, really prefer having the kids having read the books first because it's just – we think it's fun to show them what we did with what they might have imagined, but we would love them to come into it with their own pictures first.

KENNEALLY: Well the reason I wanted you to join us today was because if reading has a future, it has to have future readers and so what you're involved with, your goal here, is to create those future readers and to build an appetite, it seems to me. Does the book itself matter, though, the book as object? How do children today respond to the book as object?

KOVACS: Well I have an anecdotal example based on this book *Savvy* that Chris just mentioned, which I hope all of you have a chance to read it. It's an absolutely fantastic book. But one of the things I like about it the best – I won't go into it too much here but it's a coming-of-age story about a girl who's 12 who's about to turn 13. And when Penguin designed the book they decided to make it a certain kind of compact shape. It's not a normal shape. It's wider and shorter. There it is thank you. That's wider and shorter. And the first time I sat with a group of kids who had read it and talked to them about it, it was the most – I'll never forget it because they were all at a very awkward stage physically and they all had the book tucked under their arm. It fit exactly under their arm.

So the book was a story but it was an object, it was a transference object of a sort that was – clearly they just wanted it right there. They wanted it next to their heart, I guess you could say. Because it's something about the experience that that writer had granted them had become part of them. And to me that's what it's all about. Wherever you find your stories. And I happen to start and finish with books myself but I think it's fine if a film opens minds up too and brings the kids back to the book, that's fine.

KENNEALLY: And perhaps you should tell people a bit more about what Walden is trying to do to reach the influencers in these children's lives. And tell us, too, how the influencers – and thinking parents, teachers, and you can tell us who else.

KOVACS: And librarians.

KENNEALLY: And librarians.

KOVACS: Booksellers.

KENNEALLY: And booksellers. How do they respond? There's such a flood of news that, to Paul's earlier point, points to other media. Do people wonder? Do they ever say to you well gee I don't think kids want books?

KOVACS: I never hear that. We talk the most to teachers and librarians and parents and I have never talked to one who said that, ever. I think they are grateful for anything that can draw the kids back to reading. I think all of us recognize the responsibility that we have to the development of kids' minds by ensuring that they're readers. Because I think that they need that focus and that concentration. They need to use those – they need to do the mental gymnastics that you do when you're reading and when you're following a story in your imagination. It's just extremely important to their development and to their growth and to their future as humans.

KENNEALLY: Well you're also a children's book author, we should say, and working in film I wonder whether that medium has had an impact on your own writing. Or perhaps in reverse, are you and others at Walden who may be more with a planted

in the word rather than the image having an influence on how Walden films turn out?

KOVACS: We are a very collaborative group. We communicate a lot. I think that those of us that are on the book side of the company take on the martinet-like role of we really are strong defenders – when we've chosen to adapt a book we try very hard. It doesn't always work, though because it's a very large and complicated process with many, many, many, many players. But we try extremely hard to be advocates for the original message of the author, which doesn't mean a literal interpretation but it does mean respect for and reverence for the original intent because why adapt somebody's work if you don't revere it? So we – and we often work very collaboratively to find ways to make sure that the arc of the meaning that was in the original story makes it all the way through, if possible. It does not always happen but that's definitely one of the gifts we have in our environment, because we do have that kind of discussion at the stages where the scripts are being developed.

KENNEALLY: Well Hemingway said something interesting about his relationship with Hollywood and the films that were made from his books. He said he thought of it as basically he would drive up to the border of California, throw his manuscript over. If anyone threw money back then he just drove away with the money.

KOVACS: He was a smart man.

KENNEALLY: Indeed. But Walden is it seems to me intentionally bifurcated. You've got the publishing side on the East Coast, not far from Boston. And obviously making movies here in Hollywood.

KOVACS: But we are also in some instances acquiring books which we are then developing into films. And so the relationship – and I think that's probably unusual in that our relationship on some projects now and moving into the future starts at the manuscript stage and it starts with a relationship of trust and understanding with the author from the beginning and hopefully that – we're still at the early stages of that – but hopefully that will be a hallmark for us moving forward. To just really – if we've chosen a story to bring forward in print and then in film we hope to find the best ways to sustain the message of it throughout the process.

KENNEALLY: Well we'll be watching and reading, I suppose, right? Well thank you very much, Debbie Kovacs.