

BOOKS-TO-FILM

Talking film on the Riviera

US film studios are hungry for more books to adapt, and a thriving European co-production market also offers new opportunities for agents. **Joel Rickett** reports from Monaco's annual books-to-film forum

Hungry for fresh ideas, the film world is increasingly turning to literary material. The runaway success of adaptations from Harry Potter and "War of the Worlds" to "Brokeback Mountain" has fuelled an insatiable demand from producers, but there is no obvious forum to start a dialogue with literary agents and publishers.

In its fifth year, Monaco's Cinema & Literature International Forum, bankrolled by Prince Albert II and wealthy benefactor Hans-Stephan Kreidel, is making slow but steady progress towards filling this gap on the book and film industry calendars.

The core of the three-day event is the pitching room, where 150 publishers and literary agents present literary properties to producers in half-hourly meetings. The French film and TV businesses dominate, with development executives from UGC, TF1, StudioCanal, Canal+, Pathé Renn and Fidelité meeting French publishers such as Flammarion, Actes Sud and Gallimard.

But the forum also wooed a smattering of US and international talent, including Focus Features, The Weinstein Company, Warner Independent Pictures, BBC Films, and Canada's Screen Siren Pictures.

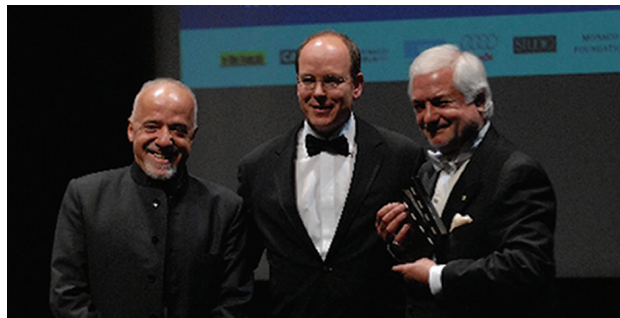
Global view

One forum first-timer was Jane Startz, the New York-based producer of children's and family films, and TV series, whose roster includes an adaptation of Judy Bloom's *Deenie* for Disney. Startz said that LA studios were now more open to international material.

"There's increasingly an acceptance by US studios that they need to finance adaptations from around the world," she said. "The European children's book market is fantastic. There is a tendency for English speakers to gravitate to English language properties, but it doesn't have to be that way. A good story is a good story."

The biggest hitter at the show was David Gerson, creative executive of Focus Features. Gerson is a fluent French speaker and often reads French material before translation; last October he closed a major deal on acclaimed novel *The Attack* by Yasmina Khadra.

Gerson agreed that international partnerships and material were



Gold touch: from left author and Monaco Forum patron Paulo Coelho, Prince Albert II and actor Jean-Claude Brialy



Casino royale: agents Lesley Pollinger right and Ruth Needham of Pollinger Ltd

increasingly important to the US. "The movies doing well right now are those doing well overseas. We have to make stories for all audiences—and get funding from around the world." Focus is hunting for literary material to "excite" international directors such as Fernando Meirelles, Sofia Coppola and Ang Lee.

Screenwriter Jeremy Leven was honoured with the forum's Prix du Meilleur Scénariste d'Adaptations Littéraires. Leven, who has just finished a script for *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and is writing and directing Jodi Picoult's *My Sister's Keeper* for film giant New Line, was also on the hunt. "This is the first time I've been looking for books to bring to studios," he said. "I found a few books that may be possible [to adapt], from Greece, France and the UK."

Publishers and agents reported intense interest in a wide range of literary material at the forum. The books most in demand were for docudramas, documentaries, family and teen movies, thrillers, and romance films.

Lesley Pollinger of Pollinger Ltd, the only London agency to make the trip, said it was "far more productive than I expected". Three Pollinger

titles seeing heavy interest were D H Lawrence's first version of *Women in Love*, coming-of-age fantasy *Corbenic* by Catherine Fisher, and John Wyndham's short story "Random Quest".

"German and French companies are doing so much more co-production," Pollinger said, "so why limit yourself to Brits and Americans?" She now sells language film rights, limiting subtitles to distinct markets, so several European productions of the same material can run simultaneously. "It still leaves world English language rights free, so they wouldn't impact on anything we wanted to do with LA."

Intimate setting

At leading French literary house Flammarion, publisher Patrice Hoffman said the forum was an opportunity to meet producers in an intimate setting. "In Paris the same meetings would take two months to organise. Here the film and TV people are available, curious and interactive."

Claire Tisne, vice-president of Random House US, pitched new novels from authors including Daniel Price and Steve Berry. "Ultimately, a smaller deal with a European producer can be more relevant and actually get made," she said. "The best thing for film is someone who gets the story and can be a bulldog to find money and talent."

Monaco regular Anna Soler-Pont of Barcelona's Pontas Literary & Film Agency said it was the strongest event so far, with producers clearly targeting certain literary properties. "The Frankfurt Book Fair is comprehensive, but you see people for only 15 minutes. Here you meet them several times—that's what makes Monaco unique."

The event is still young, and has yet to reach critical mass—some attendees criticised the quality of their scheduled meetings. But it has the potential to become a "cradle" of the new dialogue between US and international film producers and agents, said Gerson of Focus. "[The organisers] need to attract premier European material and talent, and create an atmosphere to help them start building relations with US material and talent. No amount of emails can replace sitting down over an espresso and discussing stories that move you both."

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