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# BOOKS TO SCREEN

Good luck, better timing, and a great story are all it takes. Easy, right?

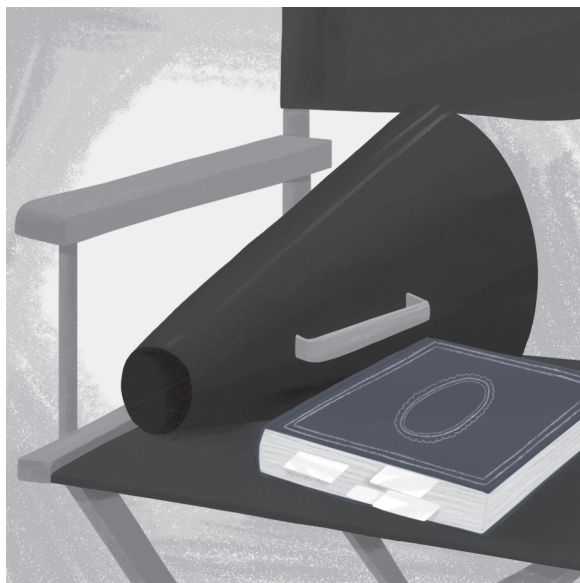
by Barbara DeMarco-Barrett

When asked about selling screen rights to Hollywood, Hemingway is said to have replied that at the California border, “You throw them your book, they throw you the money, then you jump in your car and drive like hell back the way you came.”

It may be apocryphal, but the line captures the sentiment many writers share about Hollywood. It’s almost beside the point whether having your book made into a movie is a great experience or the adaptation is satisfying; the money is good. Very good. And having a book adapted into a screenplay has made it possible for many writers to keep writing the books they want to write.

The reward isn’t only for writers. Hollywood has depended on books since movies were born, and with streaming services multiplying by the day, the hunger for fresh content has grown exponentially. That need has pushed some novelists into expanding their skill sets and writing for TV directly. Others are happy to keep writing what they like to write, with the possibility that their work might find its way into the hands of someone with the power to get it onto a big or small screen.

In fact, one reason Hollywood so loves books is because so much of the work has already been



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done. “When you go into a studio to pitch a project, it’s advantageous to say the project is based on a book or a series of books,” says Daniel Pyne, a novelist, screenwriter, producer, and showrunner for *Bosch*, adapted from Michael Connelly’s Hieronymus Bosch novels and currently airing on Amazon Prime. “True crime stories sell really well because the journalist/writer has already done a lot of research.” Pyne went on to say that in a crowded market, studios look for any advantage to sell their ideas. Having the rights to intellectual properties in hand, whether it’s a classic novel or a recent bestseller, puts them in a good place, and then they can hire a writer like Pyne and package it with “talent.”

It’s a good bet. *Forbes* reports that, worldwide, films adapted from books earn 53 percent more at the box office. While this bodes well for writers, how does it work? How does prose find its way into the hands of a producer or director? Some say having a bestseller or a project that’s generating a lot of attention will get you there, and it’s often true. “Books-to-film agents have a nose for what’s hot,” says Los Angeles–based literary agent Betsy Amster. “What’s sold for a lot of money, what’s

a lead title, what’s getting buzz in other venues, starred reviews, bestseller status, lots of foreign sales. . . . Buzz, of course, also gives agents leverage, which is something every agent wants.”

Tess Gerritsen, author of more than two dozen novels, agrees. “If a book’s a huge bestseller,” she says, “it’s going to catch the attention of Hollywood. Anything that comes with a built-in audience has an advantage.”

BJ Robbins, an agent in Los Angeles, seconds the point. “Material that’s new, hot, and generating a buzz has a greater chance of being sold, especially if it’s selling well [in book form], because from the film company’s perspective, the material has already proven it has an eager audience.”

That’s how it happened for novelist Janet Fitch. Her first adult novel, *White Oleander*, became an Oprah’s Book Club pick and sold to Warner Brothers within a month of publication. “You can’t replicate that,” says Ms. Fitch. “It’s hard work plus a lot of accidents. Who’s to say when you write a book whether it will sell at all, be a bestseller, or languish.”

Her second novel for adults, *Paint It Black*, was also made into a film, but this time she was contacted by Amber Tamblyn, an actress who wanted to play the lead role and write the screenplay. Ms. Fitch met Ms. Tamblyn and loved her vision for the movie. Ms. Tamblyn raised the money herself, not relying on a studio, and directed. “It was the opposite of a studio film,” Ms. Fitch says. “The first movie was big budget stars, corporation to corporation; the second was writer to writer. It was an amazing experience and turned out to be an amazing film.”

Jean Hanff Korelitz has had three of her novels optioned. *Admission* was made into a movie, and *You Should Have Known* was turned into the HBO series *The Undoing*. Neither book was a bestseller at the time of publication. Parting company with several of her peers, Ms. Korelitz believes bestseller status doesn’t matter much to the film industry. “Our numbers don’t approach their numbers, for one thing,” she says, “and there have been so many films made from novels that never got near the bestseller lists. And of course,

many, many bestsellers have been passed over for film adaptation. I think it's a question of the right person responding to a book, someone who has a vision for that particular story."

As an author without a bestseller, Mr. Pyne agrees that it's a matter of getting the work into the hands of the people who might respond to it, that is, a production company. "It's best to come from a gatekeeper," he says, "someone the production company trusts. The least successful way is for a writer to query directly." Hiring a freelance developmental editor who has relationships with agents may be another way to get your work into the hands of someone who can make a difference, he says. The editor could help you get your work into shape, and then refer you to an agent. "That's always the thing," says Mr. Pyne, "to get someone to read it, whether it's a script or a book."

What about older projects? Can a book that was published years ago gain traction and generate interest?

"Occasionally I receive offers to option books that have been out for a while," BJ Robbins says, "either because the subject is now more relevant or the TV/film producer has come across it on their own. A book I sold 17 years ago suddenly has a lot of interest from some heavy hitters in Hollywood."

Book reviews can help. Diana Wagman's debut novel, *Skin Deep*, received a favorable *New York Times* book review, and a production company contacted her agent, who put them in touch. The book was optioned, she met with several female directors and actresses, but after several years and multiple expired options, it fell out of consideration.

Often, it comes down to who you know. Ms. Wagman's friend, the novelist Marisa Silver, gave Ms. Wagman's novel, *The Care and Feeding of Exotic Pets*, to her producer husband, who read it and optioned it after its release in 2012. He's continued to renew the option and is now working on a script.

Living in Los Angeles doesn't hurt. Andrea Portes says selling her novel *Hick* to film was an accident. A new friend of a friend asked what she

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## A Nowhere Near Complete List of TV Series and Movies Made from Books and Short Stories

- \* *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott
- \* *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood
- \* *Emma* by Jane Austen
- \* *The Flight Attendant* by Chris Bohjalian
- \* *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë
- \* *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë
- \* *Nomadland* by Jessica Bruder
- \* Novels by James M. Cain
- \* *Breakfast at Tiffany's* by Truman Capote
- \* *The Stranger* by Harlan Coben
- \* *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier
- \* *The Circle* by Dave Eggers
- \* *L.A. Confidential* by James Ellroy
- \* *White Oleander* and *Paint It Black* by Janet Fitch
- \* Novels by Gillian Flynn
- \* *Outlander* by Diana Gabaldon
- \* *Rizzoli & Isles* by Tess Gerritsen
- \* *Eat Pray Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert
- \* *The Firm* by John Grisham
- \* *The Maltese Falcon* by Dashiell Hammett
- \* *Our Souls at Night* by Kent Haruf
- \* Novels by Patricia Highsmith
- \* *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson
- \* Novels by Stephen King
- \* *Admission* and *The Undoing* by Jean Hanff Korelitz
- \* *Mystic River* by Dennis Lehane
- \* *Motherless Brooklyn* by Jonathan Lethem
- \* The Dexter novels by Jeff Lindsay
- \* *A Game of Thrones* by George R. R. Martin
- \* *The Good Lord Bird* by James McBride
- \* *Big Little Lies* by Liane Moriarty
- \* *Devil in a Blue Dress* by Walter Mosley
- \* *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng
- \* *The Orchid Thief* by Susan Orlean
- \* *Laguna Heat* by T. Jefferson Parker
- \* *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett
- \* Novels by Tom Perrotta
- \* *Normal People* by Sally Rooney
- \* Novels by George Simenon
- \* *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout
- \* *The Queen's Gambit* by Walter Tevis
- \* *The Accidental Tourist* by Anne Tyler
- \* *Lean on Pete* and *Motel Life* by Willy Vlautin

And short stories and novels by Raymond Carver, John Cheever, Julio Cortázar, Andre Dubus, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and James Thurber.

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did. She told him she'd just published a novel. "Two months later he called and said he'd read the novel," says Ms. Portes, "and wanted to option it. So it was a happy surprise."

Her second novel has been in and out of assorted directors' and producers' hands, and her third, *Anatomy of a Misfit*, sold to Paramount Pictures in a seven-figure, preemptive deal, following a bidding war. "Most of my books have been optioned," says Ms. Portes, "but it really has to do with being in L.A. and having lived here forever. Having said that, I absolutely think there's a way to get your novels made into TV or film. You just have to be strategic about it and not too greedy, especially the first time around."

Potential content is discovered in multiple ways. Crime novelist Gary Phillips, currently a writer on *Snowfall* on FX, has had short stories, graphic novels, and a novel optioned. Some have been scripted but none yet produced. He credits NetGalley, an online site where reviewers and the media can access prepublication review copies of books, for one of his books being optioned. "I think

this is how our book, *Culprits*<sup>1</sup>, got noticed," says Mr. Phillips. "Used to be, you had to see the physical copy or you had to see a review in the *Times* or *PW*. Because material is now cyberly available, it helps. Also, producers and agents go to mystery conventions scouting for material. The more reviews you can get for your book, the more it is featured in a podcast or a showcase or some unconventional way you can figure out, that helps too."

But as is true in much of life, who you know does help, sometimes. It helped Mr. Phillips get his gig writing for *Snowfall*. "I know Walter Mosley, who has been on the show since the beginning, and he knew John Singleton, one of the creators of the show. John knew I wrote my first Ivan Monk mystery, *Violent Spring*, in the aftermath of the Rodney King beating and riots of '92. Not the same timeline of *Snowfall*, but it demonstrated that I knew South Central. And *Violent Spring* had been optioned twice by HBO as well."

Janet Fitch agrees. "Movie companies read the literary journals looking for writers, looking for story. Or actors looking for strong roles. If you have a short story you think would be a good script and good for a certain actor, send it to the actor's production company. Especially if they're no longer a big star—maybe someone who was unreachable 10, 15 years ago. They might be interested in a story in which they can star."

Leslie Lehr went to film school and sold two screenplays, but found the process so difficult she turned to writing books. She had published both fiction and nonfiction when she hit on the idea that became *A Boob's Life: How America's Obsession Shaped Me . . . and You*, a hybrid memoir. Ms. Lehr worked on the book for five years. When it was done, her agent shopped it around, getting rejections by 30 publishers. "I was going for a big commercial publisher, but they didn't like memoir. Then I went to smaller feminist publishers, but they didn't like memoir either. The person

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<sup>1</sup> *Culprits* is an anthology of 12 crime tales written by eight authors: Brett Battles, Richard Brewer, Joe Clifford, David Corbet, Gar Anthony Haywood, Jessica Kaye, Gary Phillips, and Manuel Ramos, edited by Richard Brewer and Gary Phillips. Polis Books, 2018. It has been adapted as a mini-series for Disney+ U.K., to be released in an unknown near future.

it went to at Pegasus cared about the writing.” Even before the book was picked up by Pegasus, someone Lehr knew at Creative Artists Agency (CAA) got the book to Salma Hayek, who loved it and quickly found a showrunner for it. “You have to keep believing,” said Ms. Lehr, who is doubling as an executive producer for the HBO series. “Persistence and belief in a project is key.”

If, however, you don’t happen to know someone who knows someone, your best bet for getting your book or story to a director or a producer is to have an agent who works directly with Hollywood or who has a coagent who does. Powerful literary agencies like ICM, Writers House, William Morris, and CAA have direct pipelines to Hollywood, and though publishing a book with one of them can’t guarantee a film deal follow-up, your chances of getting a hearing may be higher than with a small agency.

“I can’t imagine not working with an agent/coagent team,” says Betty Amster. “This doesn’t strike me as an industry where a direct approach works. The various entities involved don’t want to be accused of stealing an idea, for one thing—something that doesn’t tend to be much of a worry in book publishing.”

BJ Robbins concurs. “The bottom line is that if the writer has something that’s book-worthy, they should definitely get an agent, get the book published, and when it’s time to sell film/TV rights, their agent will help to secure a film/TV coagent.”

“Great characters matter,” says Tess Gerritsen, “especially for a television series. Producers are looking for unique, powerful characters who can keep a series going. Actors, too, are looking for characters they want to play, and sometimes that’s what can greenlight a series—if the right actor pushes for a project.”

“I don’t advise novelists to tie themselves into pretzels trying to write a novel that can be shot into film,” says Janet Fitch, “but you can make your characters vivid and your dialogue really powerful, working in scenes, the dramatics of storytelling. If you like the conventional way of telling a story and think in dramatic terms, be aware people are out there looking.”

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—JEAN HANFF KORELITZ**

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“As for knowing people in the business,” says Jean Hanff Korelitz, “I imagine that connections can possibly get your book in front of people, but no one has ever made a movie as a favor to anyone else, just as—correct me if I’m wrong—no one has ever published a book as a favor to someone else. Rather than put one’s faith in such an unlikely prospect, I’d advise a novelist to use his or her time and effort to . . . write a novel.” **AG**

**Barbara DeMarco-Barrett** is the author of *Palm Springs Noir* (Akashic, 2021). Her first book, *Pen on Fire*, won the Outstanding Book Award from the American Society of Journalists and Authors. Her fiction, essays, and journalism have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *USA Noir: Best of the Akashic Noir Series*, *Rock and a Hard Place*, *Crossing Borders*, *Poets and Writers*, and *The Writer magazine*. She hosts the radio show *Writers on Writing*. More at [penonfire.com](http://penonfire.com).