WORDS FOR HIRE

BY WILLIAM C. DIETZ

Television & Movie Tie-ins

Traditionally most tie-in novels have been based on movies and television programs. A quick check of the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers (IAMTW) website provides dozens of examples including *Maverick, Murder She Wrote, James Bond, Batman, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Star Trek, STAR WARS, Diagnosis Murder, Highlander* and many more. But how do these deals get done? Who initiates them? And how are writers chosen?

In order to answer those questions and more I interviewed two experts and asked them a set of identical questions. I found their comments to be instructive—if not very encouraging. So it looks like my plan to support myself by writing Brady Bunch tie-ins isn't going to work. (Yes, there were some.)

Lee Goldberg is a two-time "Edgar" nominee whose many TV writing and/or producing credits include *Martial Law, Spenser: For Hire, Diagnosis Murder, The Cosby Mysteries, Hunter, Nero Wolfe, Missing and Monk*. He's also the author of many books, including *My Gun Has Bullets, Beyond the Beyond, Unsold TV Pilots, Successful Television Writing, The Walk, The Man With The Iron-On Badge*, as well as the *Diagnosis Murder* and *Monk* series of paperback originals. Goldberg is also a co-founder of the International Association of Media Tie-In Writers.

Paula M. Block is Senior Director of Product Development and oversees the publishing division of CBS Consumer Products (formerly Viacom Consumer Products), which includes the *Star Trek* titles published by Pocket Books. She was the co-editor and judge of the annual *Strange New Worlds* series, and contributed the story *"The Girl Who Controlled Gene Kelly's Feet"* in volume I. She has also worked on *Where No One has Gone Before, The Paramount Story, The Tribble Handbook,* and *The 4400–The Official Companion.* With husband Terry J. Erdmann, Block co-wrote *Star Trek: Action!, The Secrets of Star Trek: Insurrection*, the *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine Companion*, *Monk, the Official Episode Guide,* the recently released *Star Trek 101* and the introduction of the *Prophecy and Change* anthology. I would like to thank both for Lee and Paula for agreeing to be interviewed.

Dietz: *"Do TV/film production companies think about tie-in books and other merchandise before they go into production–or is that a follow-on activity?"*

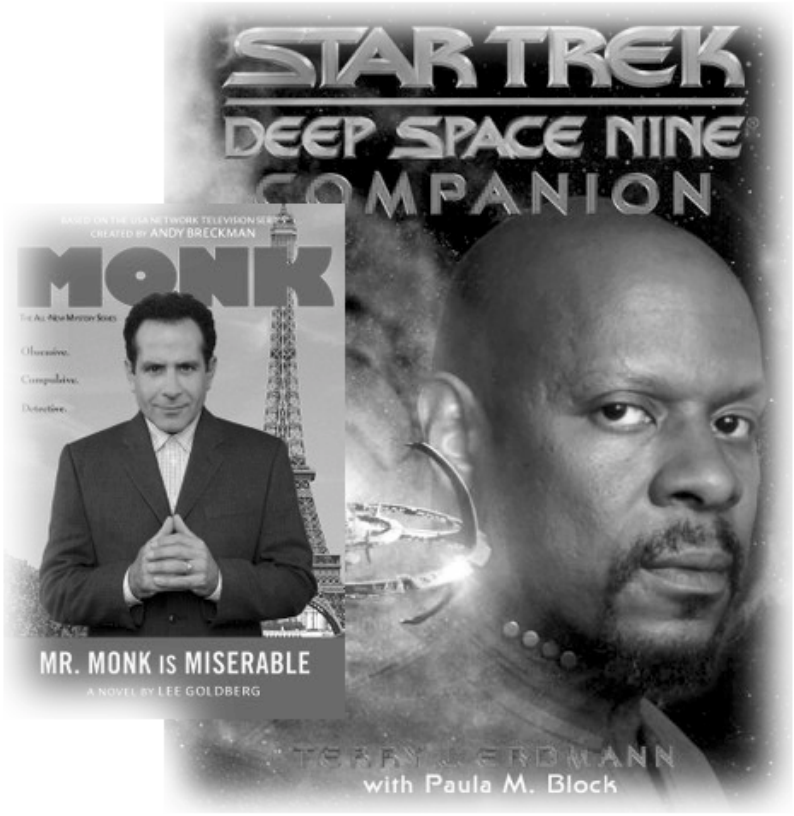
Goldberg: "It's usually an after-thought. It's so far at the bottom of their list after trying to get eyeballs onto their screens.... It's less about the content of the books than the promotional value. The show has to be up and running for awhile before publishers become interested."

Block: "Actually, the production companies/producers *seldom* think about tie-in books and merch. It's the rare exception that do—like George Lucas, whose interest in such products really made licensing into the industry it is today.

It's typically the consumer products (CP) department of a studio that thinks about tie-ins before the shooting on a film or TV show begins—that's what they're there for, after all. They help contribute to the bottom line of a studio's revenue.

The CP department keeps in touch with studio execs to find out what films have been green-lighted, or what pilots are a go for the coming season. The CP folks discuss internally and decide which projects have the most potential for spin-off products. Certain genres are better than others at lending themselves to adaptation and are the most successful—say science

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fiction, fantasy, action, and teenagers doing what teenagers do. After that the CP department reviews their prospects with legal to see if merch is even possible. Some actors and/or producers have zero interest in merch, some love it—(this is sometimes addressed in their contracts) and then typically CP will initiate communication with the production company."

Dietz: *"At what point during the process is the decision made to commission a tie-in novel?"*

Goldberg: "I was the Executive Producer of *Diagnosis Murder* for many years—and nobody came to us looking to do tie-ins. That program skewed too old.... After *Murder She Wrote* went off the air, Penguin/Putnam started doing *Murder She Wrote* tie-in novels, and they have been a tremendous success. They're up to thirty some titles in the *Murder She Wrote* series.

So Penguin looked at the success of the *Murder She Wrote* book and said we need to do something else like that. And looking at the demographics that's how they came to do *Diagnosis Murder*. For Paramount that was found money. So they were licensed, I wrote eight of them, and they were successful...."

Block: "....If the film or TV show is based on an existing book, obviously a tie-in novel is out of the question, although you may be able to do other 'merch,' like toys or t-shirts. You may even be able to do a behind-the-scenes making of a book about the film. But if a movie/TV show is licensable, and it's not based on an existing book, doing a novelization tends to be a given, and plans for that are initiated immediately, since a book tends to take longer to produce than a t-shirt."

Dietz: *"Why do production companies license tie-in novels?"*

Goldberg: "Eyeballs on screens, royalties to lots of people, and there's some ego involved. The creator of a show likes to be able to walk into a book store and see books on the shelves. And sometimes they see it as an opportunity to tell stories or explore characters in a way they can't on the TV show. Others find it to be a total irritant and they hate it. That's why there's been one *Law and Order* book—and one *Jag* book."

Block: "On the most basic level, a tie-in novel serves as good publicity for a film or TV show. That's the studio's point of view. And it brings in a bit of revenue although not very much unless you're talking about a blockbuster production or the hottest TV show of the year...."

Dietz: "When the typical production company goes to choose/cut a deal with a publisher what criteria come into play? And which are the most important?"

Goldberg: "The production companies don't have much to do with it. The studios like Paramount, Disney, Sony, Universal all have big licensing departments. And when a show begins to break out like *Burn Notice*, if publishers haven't already started to court them, they go out to find a publisher.... The criteria the execs use may not be solely financial, it may have to do with personal relationships, corporate relationships, and which writers the publisher might be able to bring to the project."

Block: "Well, not to sound crass but money has a lot to do with it. Everybody wants to cut a good deal, right? But a publisher doesn't necessarily want to pay what the studio wants. So there's a lot of give and take in that area.

But beyond mercenary reasons, there are people in our CP department who have enough experience to know which publisher is going to do the best job on a tie-in. Company 'A' may have an amazing production department that will create the most beautiful book you can imagine—but they can't afford a big licensing fee. In that case, the CP department may accept a lower bid because they are concerned about the quality of the end product.

Novelizations are different—the publisher is almost always locked into using some kind of approved key art (one-sheet art) for the cover, so there's not much room for creativity, other than who the publisher chooses as the author. But more often than not, the CP department doesn't know in advance who the publisher will choose to use, so that doesn't tend to be much of a criteria. Speed may be a more important criterion—can they find an author who can turn in a manuscript in a month? That may be the most important thing to the publisher and the studio. You just have to hope that somebody who can write fast is also a good author!"

Unrelated Quote: "A fire-eater must eat fire even if he has to kindle it himself." – Isaac Asimov

Dietz: *"When it comes time to hire a tie-in writer is that decision left to the publisher? Or does the production company team typically get involved?"*

Goldberg: "It depends on the deal that the show runner (the Executive Producer and/or creator) has. Sometimes they have approval rights and sometimes they don't. It really depends on the deal that the creator struck. Any deal I pitch always gives me control over what tie-in writer will be hired if I get a deal.

One of things IAMTW is trying to change is the perception that tie-in writers are hacks. Unfortunately some tie-in writers *are* hacks. And that gives everyone a bad name."

Block: "That decision is almost always left to the publisher. On an extremely high profile movie, a producer *may* want to be involved, but that's not always a good thing. They may want an author who they've heard is hot, but who charges a huge fee. That's not so good for the publisher, who may know of an equally good author, good in the particular genre, who will cost them less.

Fortunately, not too many want to get involved. As for veto power, they only have that if the deal they made with the studio says they have it. Very few have thought ahead to request such power. Novelizations are not exactly the top thing they're thinking about when they cut a multi-million dollar deal with a studio.

I know that may disappoint the writers out there. To them I say: 'Write screenplays.' The producer *still* won't think much about you, and you still won't have much power—but you'll have more money to keep you warm at night!"

Dietz: *"What sort of qualities/background are production companies typically looking for, assuming that they participate in the choice of an author?"*

Goldberg: "They want to be wowed by the writer. They want someone with a serious history. They want someone with some success besides writing tie-ins. They want someone with a track record of success. It says this isn't just a tie-in—it's a book! It says something if the writer has been a success on his own."

Block: "I think I covered that above. There are occasional happy exceptions. Every now and then a producer will actually *know* what he or she is looking for, beyond a big name. Some producers actually read! My husband (Terry Erdmann) had the rare experience of being requested for a tie-in book because the producer had read an earlier book of Terry's and really liked it. But that doesn't happen very often."

Dietz: *"When it comes to dealing with tie-in writers what sort of virtues are production companies looking for?"*

Goldberg: "They expect the tie-in writer to be not that much different from a freelance television writer. They expect the tie-in writer to be someone who can work with the room (the writer's room) and the creator to capture the voice and color of the show and to, as we say in TV, articulate the franchise. Capture what makes the show unique and sets it apart from other shows in the same genre."

Block: "Depends on the type of book. Timeliness is always next to godliness in everyone's mind. With a behind-the-scenes book, someone with good communication skills is a blessing, because he/she must have a professional demeanor in addressing/interviewing the actors and other people in addition to skill at putting the manuscript together. The author of a novelization generally doesn't have to worry about that."

Dietz: *"What's the worst sin a tie-in writer can commit from a production company point of view?"*

Goldberg: "Not capturing the show.... Where the book would actually do the show harm. It doesn't feel like the show—a badly written book that reads like a hack job. It has to stand on its own as a book. The last thing they want is published fanfic."

Block: "Two sins come to mind. Publishers need to remind their writers about 'pecking order' so to speak. If the writer says he/she needs something, say photos for reference or an updated script, that request should go to the editor, who will then contact the CP department, which has the authority to request such things from personnel at the studio. Some writers get a little too proactive and start making phone calls on their own to the production people and invariably this gets back to the CP department—generally in the form of complaints from the higher ups. 'Why is so-and-so calling and asking me for a script? Who the hell is he?' At that point, the author has muddied some strategic waters and now it becomes more difficult for the CP department to get what he and the publisher needs.

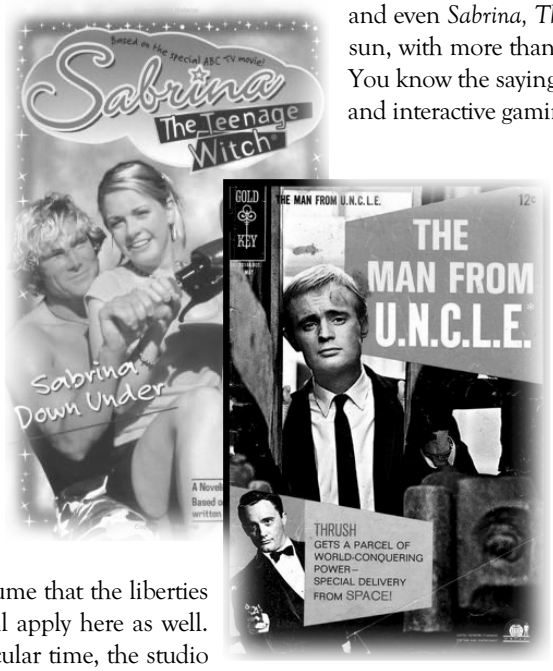
The other sin would be to change too much in translation from the script to the book. That would include changing dialogue because the author feels the screenwriter's words 'didn't flow...' or adding too many of the author's own inventions including extra characters, extra scenes, plot changes. As someone who reviews the manuscripts for the books, I've developed my own policies in this regard. I do allow authors to add things by extending scenes, and sometimes filling in missing

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gaps that don't mess with the main plot. I know that readers enjoy that kind of thing. But I don't let them run wild with the story and make it theirs. Consistency with the movie is the cardinal rule."

Dietz: *"If a writer has been involved with other tie-in related projects is that good or bad?"*



Goldberg: "The publishers like experienced tie-in writers because they know what they're going to get. Producers approach it differently. They want to be impressed. Who are you getting for my show? Producers want to be seduced. We got you an author who is a best selling author of romance novels. Or he's a Spur winning author of westerns. Or something like that. Of course there are some shows that just don't care."

Block: "Experience is almost always a good thing—so long as the writer doesn't assume that each experience will be the same. Sometimes it's clear sailing for him, so the writer may assume that the liberties he/she took in the previous tie-in will apply here as well. But it ain't necessarily so. This particular time, the studio or the producers may insist on doing things a different way, maybe a more restrictive way, and the writer's attitude will rub them the wrong way."

Dietz: *"How does the future look where TV/film related tie-ins are concerned?"*

Goldberg: "My limited experience is that the midlist is shrinking. The great attractiveness of tie-ins is that they bring with them the great promotional machine of TV shows. Using my *Monk* books as an example, my books come out the same week as the new season, so my books have the advantage of all the bill boards and the show itself...

That said there are fewer and fewer shows that can support tie-ins. Few shows are lasting long enough to generate that kind of viewer loyalty, much less reader loyalty, and how many people read? Are *Knight Rider* people going to pick up *Knight Rider* books? I don't know.

This year the number of viewers for network television is at an all-time low. The TV audience is becoming fragmented. It's getting harder and harder to get a show on the air that can sustain an audience much less a readership. Book sales are down.... People are reading less."

Block: "The Sixties, Seventies and Eighties were good for tie-ins. These days, it's the rare tie-in that does exceptionally well. That's why you see fewer of them. They were a novelty for quite a while, and it wasn't a surprise to see long-running series of books based on one property. *Star Trek* is probably the most successful tie-in ever (with over 500 novels in print!), and *STAR WARS* is certainly popular, but *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* and even *Sabrina, The Teenage Witch* had their day in the sun, with more than 20 titles each. But all good things... You know the saying. I think the existence of the internet and interactive gaming has taken the place of the desire to read adaptations, at least for younger readers."

Dietz: *"Do production companies expect to make substantial sums of money from the tie-ins they license?"*

Goldberg: "They know there isn't a lot of money to made from books. But it is one more way to sustain viewer loyalty. All of the combined stuff makes some money—but it's mostly about promotion."

Block: "As I mentioned above, to the studio the publicity value is the premium. To them, it's a good way to actually get paid a bit to have a publisher put your key art on a book and splash it around. But sadly, substantial sums are a thing of the past except for true blockbusters, like adaptations of *Spiderman, Indiana Jones*, and so forth. Publishing used to be one of the top sources of revenue for consumer products departments. Sadly, that's not true anymore."

All of which means that the process by which media related tie-ins are commissioned will continue to be inaccessible to most of us. However, once a book has been commissioned, it's clear that publishers usually get to decide who they will approach. How does that work? What are they looking for? And how is the tie-in market doing? I'll tackle those questions in my next column.

In the meantime here's something to think about.... Did Paula Block say something about turning out a manuscript in a month? Yes, I believe she did. And, amazingly enough, there are quite a few authors capable of such a feat. (Many of them belong to IAMTW.) Still, it's a daunting thought for most of us.... And one of the things that makes work for hire so challenging.

Unrelated Trivia: The first reference to a handgun was made in an order for iron bullets in 1326.