

Book to Screen

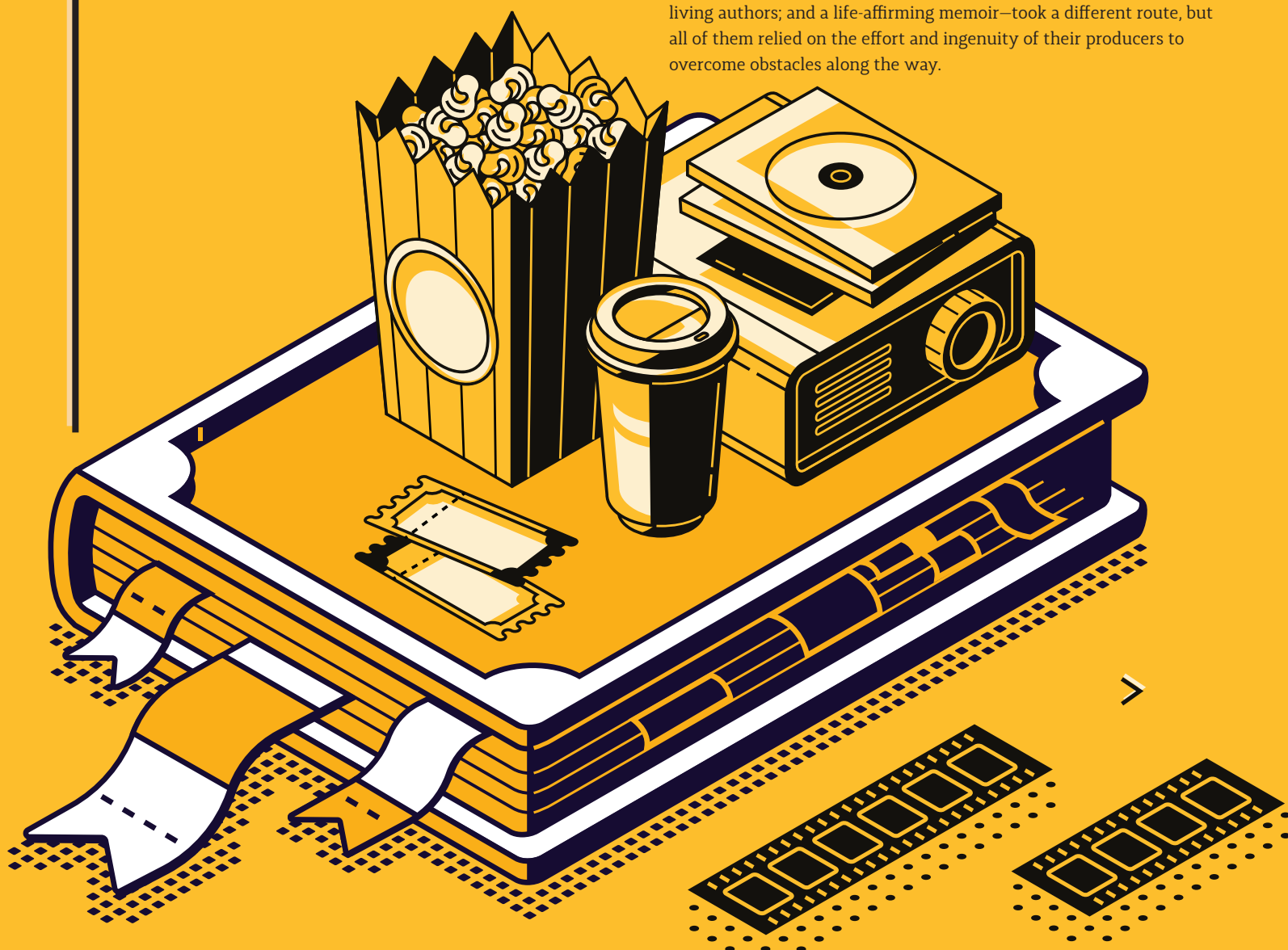
THE ROAD FROM NOVEL OR MEMOIR TO SUCCESSFUL PRODUCTION BEGINS WITH SAVVY SURVEYING OF THE LITERARY SCENE.

WRITTEN BY ISAAC FELDBERG

Hollywood's streaming era has created a boom for content, as networks, studios and digital platforms hustle to find new stories to bolster their online libraries. Quite often, the answer sits on bookshelves of actual libraries, and requires the muscle of producers who can envision the potential of the written words.

The market for books to be adapted into films, series, or prestige miniseries is thriving, but rarely is there a straightforward path from the bookshelf to the box office or the on-demand hub. *Produced By* takes a closer look, presenting three case studies in adaptation that speak to the unique and ever-evolving roles a producer can play in bringing a book to the screen.

Each of these stories—a heartwarming teen Christmas tale; an unsettling exploration of artistry and marriage by one of the greatest living authors; and a life-affirming memoir—took a different route, but all of them relied on the effort and ingenuity of their producers to overcome obstacles along the way.



EX-MAS (AMAZON)

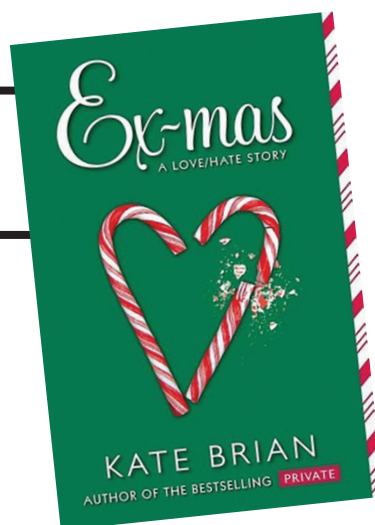
AT ALLOY, BOOKS LIKE EX-MAS ARE BLOCKBUSTERS IN WAITING.

When it comes to adapting young-adult fiction for film and television, Leslie Morgenstein has become an expert. The president and founder of Alloy Entertainment has transformed the teen-savvy book publisher into an ultraprofitable, industrially efficient book-to-screen pipeline.

Between feature adaptations like *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and TV franchises including *Gossip Girl*, *The Vampire Diaries* and *Pretty Little Liars*, Alloy has defined a generation of teen entertainment over the past three decades. When it comes to the company's biggest successes, they usually start with a book Morgenstein and his team believe has crossover appeal.

Many story concepts are hatched during internal brainstorming sessions, then paired with novelists who write the books as Alloy sets the wheels in motion for films or TV series. Others originate with authors. Alloy then assumes the editorial responsibilities of a traditional publisher, but also stays on to produce the on-screen adaptation. "Originally, the business was very much book-focused: How do we take books and adapt them into TV and film," explains Morgenstein. "Now, it's much more hand-in-glove, where we're developing properties that will have a life on multiple platforms." Morgenstein has received PGA's Producers Mark for the feature adaptations of *Everything, Everything*, *The Sun Is Also a Star* and *Work It*.

Consider *Ex-mas*, Kate Brian's 2009 novel about two 8-year-old boys who embark on a mission to save Santa from climate change—forcing their older siblings, who used to date, to set aside their differences and give chase. Hearts



are warmed and sparks most certainly fly.

Brian teamed up with Alloy on its *New York Times* best-selling *Private* books, about teenagers at a prestigious academy. Alloy created a web series from those novels and once planned a feature film, which stalled in development. So when *Ex-mas* landed on Morgenstein's desk, he added the title to a running list of internally well-regarded properties to be paired with screenwriters. A slim paperback nestled into holiday and YA romance genres, *Ex-mas* had a self-limiting audience in book form, but Morgenstein saw bigger potential in a film adaptation. "Christmas movies not only have marketability in that window when they often release, but if you do them right, there's a timelessness to them where it could become a classic, something people watch every year," he explains.

Morgenstein also thinks audiences will be swept up in the will-they-won't-they dynamic of *Ex-mas*. "You're with someone you both love and hate, and you cannot get away from them," he explains. "I love that tension." He sees *When Harry Met Sally* as one north star for the project and will focus on casting leads with simmering chemistry.

With offices in New York and Los Angeles, Alloy's day-to-day marks it as a hybrid of the film and book publishing industries. "We're a little unusual in that, in most cases, we're on the ground floor of development," says Morgenstein. Alloy regularly seeks out in-demand creatives to pair with its properties. "We're producers,

not cowriters," he adds. A division of Warner Bros. Television Group since 2012, Alloy frequently partners with the mega conglomerate's branches to adapt properties, but it does business all around town—including with streamers, which can often move fastest to capture the attention of younger, perennially online audiences.

Morgenstein and his team first met with writing-directing duo Chris Hazzard and Michael Fontana after reading their script for comedy feature *Drunk Bus* and presented them with a few potential projects. Selecting *Ex-mas*, the pair came back to the table and developed a pitch with Alloy. Though WarnerMedia partners ended up passing, Amazon Studios snapped up the feature.

Alloy doesn't exclusively operate in the YA space—one successful adult thriller is Caroline Kepnes' *You*, adapted into the popular Netflix series of the same name—but the company has shepherded nearly a hundred YA best sellers to market. "There's a universality to coming-of-age stories," says Morgenstein. "Even grown-ups relate to stories about defining who you are as a person. That's a lot of what these books are about."

Ensuring projects find the right home is a priority for Morgenstein, no matter how long it takes. "We've had projects that have gone from selling to being in production within a year, and then we've had projects that take 10 years," he says. Being able to roll with the punches is an essential part of his business. "Sometimes you have your strategy, the market speaks back to you, and it's not always the answer you want," adds Morgenstein.

Case in point: *You* was developed at Showtime and purchased by Lifetime, which aired its first season to limited success before a Netflix streaming debut finally turned the series into a global sensation. "It's not always consistent, and sometimes it's a crooked path," he says.

FATHERHOOD (NETFLIX)

AT THE HEART OF FATHERHOOD IS A TRUE STORY OF TRAGEDY, PERSEVERANCE, AND HARD-WON TRIUMPH.

Based on Matthew Logelin's best-selling 2011 memoir *Two Kisses for Maddy*, *Fatherhood* stars Kevin Hart as Logelin, a first-time father struggling to raise his daughter after the unexpected death of his wife one day after giving birth. The film debuts June 18 on Netflix, a decade after the book's release, having survived its stop-and-start journey through Hollywood largely thanks to the tenacity of former Sony exec David Beaubaire, the producer who never gave up on it.

Beaubaire describes how "the tremendous humor and humanity" of Logelin's story stood out to him as the memoir climbed the *New York Times* Best Seller list. From the personal (Beaubaire's young daughter is named Maddie) to the professional (the book's universally affecting themes), he knew *Two Kisses for Maddy* was a story he wanted to tell.

The producer reached out to secure the rights, landing on Logelin's radar early on. "David was the first name I heard that, at least in my agent's estimation, was somebody to trust and who could perhaps get something done," recalls Logelin.

In early conversations, Beaubaire conveyed his empathy for Logelin as another father and husband, one who'd weathered an unimaginable loss with grace. He also didn't beat around the bush: In Hollywood, there's no guarantee a project will get made, no matter who's involved. Regardless, Beaubaire promised Logelin he'd honor the story each step of the way. "You're playing with someone's life," says the producer. "You have to be able to respect the trust they're putting in your hands."

But Beaubaire wasn't able to option *Two Kisses for Maddy* first. After Logelin's

wife passed, the author had to face the harsh reality of his household losing half its expected income. He agreed to meet with Hallmark and Lifetime, despite not being enamored with either company's output. "In the back of my head, I was listening to whatever my late wife was telling me," Logelin recalls. Most pressingly, she told him to seize any opportunities to secure their daughter's future. When Lifetime made him an offer, he took it; they optioned the memoir twice, both times unsuccessfully.

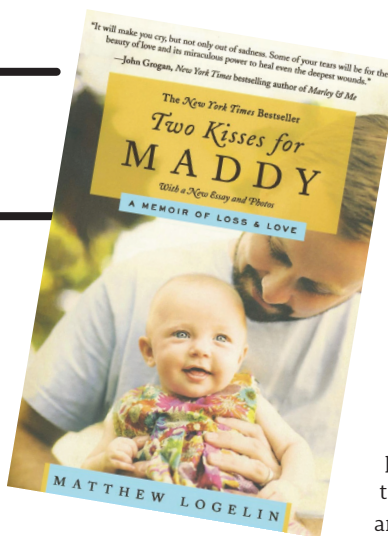
As the project spent years languishing, Beaubaire strengthened his relationship with Sony's Columbia Pictures and moved again to option the memoir and set it up there. "I was blown away by that," recalls Logelin. "I'd given up completely by that point, so for somebody to come back again and tell me they were interested was an inspiration." Logelin said yes, gratefully.

"Knowing David had been so deeply involved—how he believed in it so much that wherever he went he was going to try to make it happen—gave me hope," recalls the author. "I felt like, if this was going to get done, he was the one who was going to do it."

Beaubaire enlisted Marty Bowen and Wyck Godfrey, the power producers behind *Dear John*, *The Fault in Our Stars* and the *Twilight* franchise. They were close friends, and Godfrey's wife, an ob-gyn, had even delivered Beaubaire's

daughter. Channing Tatum, who'd starred in *Dear John*, was then approached to produce through his Free Association production company, as well as to potentially play Logelin in the adaptation. Dana Stevens (*City of Angels*, *Safe Haven*) penned the script. "It's very sensitive to take someone's personal tragedy and take creative license with it," says Beaubaire, looking back on the project's early stages. "We walked a line in a graceful way I'm really proud of."

Many of Hollywood's leading men circled the project over the years, but it



wasn't until Kevin Hart and his HartBeat Productions came aboard that *Fatherhood* moved forward. Better known as a comedian, Hart had been seeking more dramatic work. Beaubaire was won over by both his sincerity and the surprise factor of seeing Hart in a movie like *Fatherhood*. "It is unexpected to see Kevin in a more dramatic role," he says. "And at first blush, Matthew and Kevin don't quite look alike, but that's what made the movie fresh."

Beaubaire also sensed that Hart could build on the wide-reaching appeal of Logelin's story. "This crosses all races, all

nationalities," he adds. "It's a universal story about being a parent and losing a loved one."

Sony's decision to license *Fatherhood* to Netflix was not made easily. Beaubaire says the studio held out through nearly a full year of COVID-related turmoil in hopes of releasing it theatrically. But that was sweetened considerably by Higher Ground, the production company of former President Barack Obama and Michelle Obama, coming aboard as official presenters of the film.

Even before *Fatherhood* earned such a

prestigious endorsement, Logelin felt the production had steered true by not losing sight of the people at its center. "David didn't just care about the story itself," he says. "He's surrounded himself with people who all had one goal: to make me, my daughter, my wife—all of us—proud. That was really special."

For Beaubaire, there was no other path to producing *Fatherhood*. "Matt didn't do it by himself; he had the support of family, and a world out there that wanted to help him—and so it is with making a movie," he says. "It takes a village."



Kevin Hart stars in Netflix's *Fatherhood*, adapted from Matthew Logelin's memoir *Two Kisses for Maddy*, out June 18.

LISEY'S STORY (APPLE TV+)

ONE OF STEPHEN KING'S MOST PERSONAL STORIES RECEIVES FITTINGLY SENSITIVE TREATMENT.

From *The Stand* to *The Shining*, Stephen King's best-selling novels combine the drama of everyday life with the allure of the supernatural, navigating an otherworldly membrane between the two. At once thrillingly cinematic and uniquely calibrated, his stories have long presented an intense yet irresistible challenge for producers and filmmakers.

Buoyed by blockbuster adaptations like *Pet Sematary*, *Castle Rock*, and Andy Muschietti's *It* franchise, Hollywood has reaffirmed its commitment to King in recent years. For the latest King adaptation, miniseries *Lisey's Story* on Apple TV+, which debuts in June, the creators explain that the project was



elevated by a special level of commitment from the author himself.

"Stephen was intimately involved," recalls producer Mary Rae Thewlis, who marveled at the fact that King not only wrote all eight episodes of the series himself, but also executive-produced and regularly visited set to converse with series director and executive producer Pablo Larraín and to watch filming take place.

Thewlis saw none of the creative ego one might expect from a household name. "I know he puts his pants on one leg at a time, but he's such an icon," she adds. "We saw the guy who somehow made his way to set—and we were never quite sure how—and hung out for five to seven hours, then drifted off."

The author's personal favorite of his many novels, *Lisey's Story* follows a woman (played by Julianne Moore in the series) confronting memories of her late husband, a famous novelist (Clive Owen), two years after his passing. King was inspired to pen the book after returning home from a long hospital stay to discover his wife had reorganized his study, giving him a glimpse into what the space might look like after his death.

Bad Robot Productions, co-led by JJ Abrams and Katie McGrath, had previously teamed with King on Hulu miniseries *11.22.63* and horror anthology *Castle Rock*, both adapted from his novels. King executive-produced those projects, but before either had even premiered, was expressing interest in seeing *Lisey's Story* adapted as prestige television. Moore was a galvanizing force in moving it forward at Bad Robot, and eventually at Apple, which acquired the rights to King's novel and handed down a straight-to-series order.

The actress was also the first to approach Larraín, a Chilean auteur who'd just directed experimental biopics *Jackie* and *Neruda*, about helming all eight episodes. It was a daunting proposition, but he couldn't refuse.

"The scope of the novel could never be put into a movie without minimizing what it is, and the impact it might have," says



Larraín. "But the story is not really episodic. It's a long movie, split into eighths."

Larraín was particularly devoted to understanding the uncanny ambience of *Lisey's Story*. "I needed to believe in it, to actually understand that there could be this other place that combines horror, pain and sorrow with the possibility of healing," he explains. To better understand the material, Larraín flew to King's home in Maine, staying there as a guest until they'd extensively discussed all eight episodes. He was struck by the deeply personal nature of the story for King, sensing a vulnerability that the author offset with humor and an earnest desire to embrace Larraín's vision. "More than anything, it was the connection we had through the process that was very powerful," says Larraín. "It really changed me."

One of Larraín's most striking additions to *Lisey's Story* was the visual language he fashioned around water, which emerges as a motif through the show. Moore's Lisey is often seen floating or submerged in a series of striking compositions that complement the story's liminal, between-worlds nature. Early on, Thewlis had locked down a residence where the production could capture all-important scenes of Lisey's house, but Larraín eventually came to her expressing his desire for that location to include a swimming pool. It didn't. She improvised. "We made a decision to build the swimming pool," recalls Thewlis, laughing. "I'm not a creative producer, but so much of what I had to manage were creative solutions."

Larraín and King remained close throughout production. "On this project, we were dealing with two auteurs," summarizes Caroline Baron, who took



over from Thewlis after she left midway through the series.

Familiarizing herself with both the material and the team bringing it to life, Baron was struck by the respect and mutual admiration King and Larraín displayed amid reconciling their creative visions. "When Pablo deviated from the scripts, he did so with Stephen's blessing and understanding," says Baron. "They made sure the essence of their storytelling was in sync; my role was to make sure everybody was talking, and that the process stayed collaborative."

But the friendship that had developed between King and Larraín made that part of Baron's job easier. Though Larraín's body of work—including *Spencer*, an upcoming Princess Diana biopic starring Kristen Stewart—marks him as a uniquely creative force, he says he felt his primary mission throughout *Lisey's Story* was to get inside King's head.

"It was me following the master, trying to understand how to put what he desires on the screen, but in doing so making those desires become mine," explains Larraín. "It started as a personal story for him, and it became personal for me as well." ■