



# The Tie-In Business

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TV producers and Publishers explain.

**Who decides what books get on television?**

**How is it all arranged?**

**How important are tie-ins to publishers?**

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**We've been talking to people in TV and publishing, finding out what makes up the many-sided relationship between television and books.**

Southern TV is one of the few ITV companies (Yorkshire with Joy Whitby, and Granada are two others) which has given serious consideration to children's programmes and made book adaptations a major part of its output. Lewis Rudd (Assistant Controller) is the person behind the dramatisations of **Midnight is a Place** (Joan Aiken), **Worzel Gummidge** (the Waterhouse and Hall version), **Noah's Castle** (John Rowe Townsend), **Scarf Jack** (P.J. Kavanagh), and **Brendon Chase (B.B.)** - the last two are due for showing this year.

I'm a great believer in adaptations of children's books for television. The once-removed collaboration between the TV writer and the writer of the original book tends to get you a different dimension of imagination. That's not to disparage TV writers; but I don't think you get something like, say **Midnight is a Place** written just for TV'.

Clearly books offer a rich source of material. But who decides which ones?

**How does a Book get Televised?**

Sometimes an author's agent suggests it - **Scarf Jack** was one of those. More rarely writers approach a company: Willis Hall, Keith Waterhouse and Jon Pertwee went to Southern with their idea for **Worzel Gummidge**. Most often, it seems, it's pure chance. A script editor at Southern happened across **Noah's Castle**; a producer admired Joan Aiken's stories and wanted to do one. There is some contact between the book world and television but it depends largely on chance meetings and informal contacts. Publishers do suggest books.

Rosemary Sandberg (editor of Fontana Lions) explained. 'We regularly send off books; but it's totally chance if one gets picked up. It's a question of the right book in the right place at the right time. We don't know what they are looking for. We assume that they are keeping up with all the books, but...'

Usually it seems 'they' want something they've heard of, or something out of copyright, which makes it cheaper. Occasionally motives are questionable. Not all ITV companies place a high priority on children's programmes, although by their contracts they have to produce a certain number.

Barry Cunningham (Children's Marketing at Penguin) told us, 'Some TV companies ring me and say, "Have you got an S.F. story that's quick, that I can film in the studio?" All the criteria they give me are technical - nothing to do with the story - so they can put it through in six weeks. They're just filling in their quota.'

Lewis Rudd isn't one of those. 'It's got to be a book I feel enthused about, something a bit different, a bit special. I'd rather do contemporary fiction than the classics - that ground's regularly trod by the BBC. **Noah's Castle** and **Scarf Jack** are good strong adventures, but they are exploring political ideas as well; there's something a bit extra. We've got a thirteen part adaptation of one of John Christopher's **Tripods** trilogy, but we haven't decided if we can afford to go ahead and make it yet.'

### Can we afford it?

So it's not just a question of a book the executive producer likes. It comes down to money in the end. Location filming is expensive, so is building special sets and casting large crowds. Lewis Rudd again: '**Midnight is a Place** was not my favourite Joan Aiken - it was a Joan Aiken we could do. I turned down **Black Hearts in Battersea** because I couldn't see us doing it successfully. We would have had to build a completely different London, and an enormous palace. There's no point in doing a lame version of something.'

Budgets for children's programmes are very small compared with those for adult television. Doing dramatisations of books is an exercise in the art of the possible on a shoestring.

### Wide Appeal

Just occasionally though a company goes overboard. All of Southern's **Worzel Gummidge** series have been entirely made on film. This makes them very expensive - 'even more than we originally thought,' Lewis Rudd confesses. But the series is hugely successful. Is this a direct result of the money spent on it? Barry Cunningham thinks in part it is. 'Children just love the simple idea of the funny man, the scarecrow. But because it's very well filmed and the casting's excellent - lots of familiar adult actors - Jon Pertwee, Barbara Windsor, Una Stubbs - it appeals to adults as well.'

The desire for wide appeal lies behind the choice of many books, Barry thinks. 'Period pieces like **The Secret Garden**, **The Peppermint Pig** are safer for a family audience. You're not risking as much as with something realistic like **Break in the Sun**. With a subject like that it's harder to identify your audience and know who you are aiming at. It hasn't got in-built wide appeal. Something like **Bagthorpes** is easier.'

### TV into Books

The tie-in traffic isn't all one way. Richard Carpenter's **Catweazle** is an early example of a successful transformation of a TV series into a book. The wide range of the TV audience creates problems for a publisher taking on a 'novelisation'. Sally Floyer (editor at Beaver) is bringing out **Echoes of Louisa** from a series by Gail Renard, on ATV later this year. It's about a girl and a ghost (both aged fifteen). The likely television audience will be from eight years old up. 'For a book we have to narrow down the age-range. The question is where do you pitch it?' Gail Renard is an experienced television writer - she worked on **Flambards** for Yorkshire - but she's never written a book. The tie-in was arranged on the basis of the scripts for the screenplay. Sally sees it as 'a limited risk. It may not be a good novel, but we hope that while the series is on we'll sell enough to make it worthwhile doing. And if it's a good book and she's a good writer, we've given someone the chance to write a first novel, and maybe we can follow her up.'

When Rosemary Sandberg asked Robert Leeson to try his hand at a **Grange Hill** story, she wasn't taking such a risk. But she was trying something different, motivated by an editor's natural desire to sell a lot of books and also by her belief in the importance of books and reading. 'I wanted us to get to kids who would normally never pick up a book; but

because of the power of **Grange Hill** they actually would. But we didn't want just a write up of the scripts; we wanted to take the characters and situations and build from there. In **Grange Hill Goes Wild** (the second book) the kids go to summer camp. For financial reasons the BBC couldn't do that. The book widens the imaginative vision of the series.'

**Grange Hill** has nine million viewers aged six to eighteen. Robert Leeson's brief was to 'make it simple to read, with lots of dialogue. Make it a book eight and nine year olds can manage; but don't make it so young that twelve to fourteen year olds will feel put off.'

Independent film makers, we discovered, are constantly approaching publishers to make books about their film characters. 'They are all after a Mr. Men-type breakthrough,' said Sally Floyer. 'They need to say they have books lined up to help sell the films. Mostly we turn them down. They are not translatable; they rely on a song, or the animation and they don't work as books.' An exception is the work of John Ryan. His **Noah's Ark** series of early readers (Beaver) will soon be seen as twelve ten minute films for Yorkshire TV, broadcast at lunchtime.

### **How does a Tie-in affect sales?**

Television exposure sells books. On that everyone agrees. How much it affects sales and for how long depends on a lot of things. **Bagpuss, Ivor the Engine, Paddington, Pugwash** and the like have consistently good sales, arising partly from regular repeats for younger viewers.

The **Hardy Boys** TV series in 1979 boosted sales. In 1980 they were back to their previous level. **Nancy Drew** (same series) sales shot up and have stayed up. No-one knows why. For **Just William** (also Armada) television brought a brief reprieve of half a million sales before he went back to the verge of extinction.

In Puffin **The TV Adventures of Worzel Gummidge** have sold over 80,000 copies a year each, so far. Barbara Euphan Todd's **Worzel Gummidge** (the first ever Puffin) is still in print along with other original titles. Sales are lower for these than for the Waterhouse and Hall titles; but they are double what they were before Worzel hit TV. Television also lifted K.M. Peyton's **Flambards** from 'very low sales' to a place in the Penguin adult list. It seems that where the quality of book and television is good the effects are longer lasting. If you break through to a mass audience, as with **Gummidge** and **Grange Hill** the effects are spectacular.

Belinda Hick (Fontana Publicity) thinks books featured on television are especially important for children buying books. 'For lots of them it's the first opportunity they have for exercising their own choice of a book. It's usually parents who do the choosing and a child doesn't have the confidence, or the knowledge of what he would rather put in the place of a parent's choice. If they have seen something on television and they know they have enjoyed it, they can say, 'I know this book; that's the one I want.'

### **Recognition**

Lots of people who usually never go near a bookshop could discover books through television. But getting simple information about books which are being dramatised, onto the screen is a sore point. The IBA rules say that only books that *come out* of a series can be promoted- not the one that originated it. Lewis Rudd thinks this is pity. 'I'd like to underline to kids that there is a book and that they can read it.'

The BBC advertises only its own publications. Publishers are naturally irritated to see a plug for the record of the theme music of a series when the book which originated it goes unmentioned. Because the book doesn't appear on the screen, publishers have to work hard to make it recognisable in bookshops. This means special covers, posters, point of sale display - a big undertaking on the limited budgets for promoting children's lists. Rosemary Sandberg: 'There's a big bonus if it comes off; but it's high risk. You can't tiptoe into it. You have to make a heavy commitment and go in with confidence to convince the wholesalers.' That sort of activity impresses booksellers too. They display titles with more confidence. Once a children's book has sold well they tend to reorder it and keep it in view so sales stay up for longer. Puffins keep their TV covers on books long after the series have finished.

There are other spin-off benefits. Robert Leeson's **The Third Class Genie** and **The Demon Bike Rider** are doing well. 'The kids know him from **Grange Hill** and they trust him.'

## Covers and Conflicts

In spite of the closeness implied by tie-in, TV and books inhabit different worlds. Publishers work months ahead; in TV they may well be changing and adapting up to the last minute. For covers and publicity the book people need material of a certain kind well in advance.

Getting tie-in covers on out-of-copyright classics isn't as easy as it used to be. 'Ten years ago the BBC would give you still photographs for nothing. Now they've got wise,' said Rosemary Sandberg. 'They wanted a huge fee for using the Heidi material. When they put it up for auction no-one was interested.' So there was no 'official' Heidi edition. That caused problems for Belinda Hick at a Book Fair. 'A mum said, "I want the **Heidi** books." I said, "Yes, here they are." She said, "No, not those ones, the ones on television".

Even when you get a cover your problems aren't over. When a series actually goes out depends on the schedulers. TV companies are cagey about precise dates because they don't want the competition to know what's coming. A series can be postponed after the books are in the shops. 'Now on TV' flashed across a cover can suddenly have a hollow ring. On ITV no children's programmes are shown after 5.15; 'building an evening audience' has priority. So it's unlikely that a series like **Noah's Castle** found its best audience.

## The final impression

What does all this add up to for teachers, parents, school bookshops?

Television, it is clear, is hugely influential. Few people in it however, seem interested in putting that influence to work for children and books. Those who are, are isolated and hedged about by lack of finance, restrictions of time, rules and regulations which prevent even simple information about books being passed on at a time when it would be most effective. But even in a company like Southern which is sympathetic to books, the choice of material seems frighteningly arbitrary, left to chance or personal enthusiasm. Because of this we are to have **Brendon Chase**, which may be nice nostalgia for adults but probably won't turn a single child who picks up the book into an avid reader. There are lots of books, equally good for television, which would. Should there then be more cooperation between TV and publishers to ensure better use of this powerful medium?

In the end what matters for television may be viewing figures. What matters for publishers may be sales. But need this mean that they cannot co-operate to encourage enthusiasm for books among children, something which is important for individuals and for the whole of society.

Teachers and parents who are trying to do this, searching for the 'right' books and trying to avoid the 'wrong' ones, know that tie-ins can hinder as well as help. They have an important role in all this. One positive step might be for them to pass back to those in publishing and television who created the tie-in in the first place their responses and those of the children who are at the receiving end of both.

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