

H'wood Studio Book Buying In Downward 'Spiral'; Dealmaking Room For Producers

By MIKE FLEMING Monday April 19, 2010 @ 6:32pm PDT

EXCLUSIVE: Chockstone Pictures partners Steve and Paula Mae Schwartz have teamed with Nick Wechsler to acquire screen rights to *Spiral*. They and other monied producers are snapping up books studios used to buy. ICM agent Ron Bernstein, who brokered the *Spiral* deal, said the book is the kind of big-idea suspense novel by a first-time author that once would be sold for a lot of money on a weekend to a major studio. But those studio-fueled auctions have become rare. So, according to Bernstein, agents are unapologetically steering good books to monied producers unafraid to write checks when studios seem terrified.



Studios will buy book packages. Just today, Fox acquired the Jane Heller novel *An Ex To Grind*, with Cameron Diaz and Benicio Del

Toro attached. But the majors don't seem as excited by a good yarn anymore. Many have shuttered New York scouting offices and few spend grandly on books, which take longer to percolate than specs and pitches. But from *Twilight* to *Shutter Island* and *The Blind Side*, there are enough fresh successes to break a co-agent's heart when so many good ones go unsold or squeak out five-figure option deals. Turning to wealthy producers and directors is the alternative, like when Oliver Stone acquired the upcoming Don Winslow novel *Savages* as his possible next film. Studios are content to let those producers invest the development sweat and then pay a premium for fully-formed packages ready to go into production.

That has opened the door for new players like Steve and Paula Mae Schwartz with *Spiral*, a nanotechnology thriller novel written by Cornell professor Paul McEuen that will be published March 2011 by Random House imprint Dial Press. Schwartz and Wechsler teamed on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and will soon start casting *The Host*, an adaptation of the novel by *Twilight* author Stephenie Meyer that will be directed by Andrew Niccol.

The pair made their fortune creating the world's largest PR agency for emerging technologies. "I'm a serial entrepreneur who can smell an opportunity," said Steve Schwartz, who runs his company with wife Paula Mae and son Roger, and who often makes films with Wechsler, a seasoned producer. "Studios are buying and developing less and that has created so much opportunity. After *The Road*, Nick, Paula and I wanted to do a science fiction project. Ron sent this one over on a Friday, and by the end of the weekend, we went for it."

Bernstein sold McCarthy's *The Road* to the producers, and was impressed by how quickly they mounted a quality adaptation of the difficult Pulitzer Prize-winning subject matter. Why beg a studio when he had a motivated buyer who'd already come through?

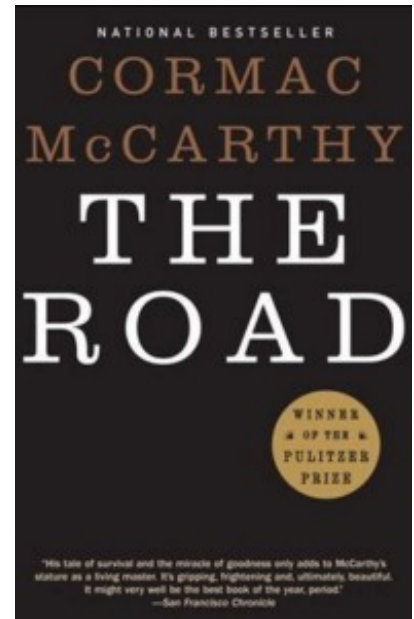
"Studios move much too slowly now, and this was richer in many ways than a studio-sized deal," Bernstein said. "Mark my words, *Spiral* is going to be a bestseller and this guy's going to be the next Crichton. But studios will say, there's no evidence to prove that, therefore everybody sits and does nothing."

Studio scouts counter that they evaluated *Spiral* as a partial manuscript and again when it was completed and lit agent Jane Gelfman set the publishing deal. The themes and suspense were offset by the fear that the nanotechnology storyline was too comparable for comfort to *Prey*, a Crichton novel Fox bought years ago for \$5 million. The studio never licked script problems, but what if that changed?

"If you want to reach for a reason, you can always find one to not do something,"

Bernstein said. "Five years ago, there would have been a high-six figure option, with two under-bidders for *Spiral*. There would have been excitement over finding somebody *new*, but they seem to think that doesn't matter anymore. I have to remind you that Paramount put *Twilight* in turnaround and Fox did the same with *The Blind Side*. What does that tell you? Their instincts have gotten all gummy.

"Studios are only comfortable when decisions are validated by something like a comic book. But *Kick-Ass* didn't exactly kick ass last weekend, did it? We're in this cycle where they think the only thing that work are superhero and comic book movies. At some point, the public will get burned out. Books will be here when that happens."



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