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Where Won't 'The Hunger Games' Count?

Todd Alcott · Thursday, March 29th, 2012

A few years ago, I was involved in developing a movie based on a popular series of YA novels, a science-fiction thriller series set in a dystopian future and featuring a female protagonist trying to make her way in an oppressive, brutal society.

Because it was not just one novel but three, it was incumbent upon me to lay out not just one movie but a whole trilogy, describing the arc of the protagonist and her journey from helpless waif to leader of the revolution.

It was a lot of work, but the producer was very pleased with my take and we took it to the studio. The studio executive we went to see was a very nice, very kind, very intelligent young woman. I pitched to her not one movie but three, I pitched to her for over an hour, laying out a tapestry, a world of intrigue, action, spectacle and personal development.

The studio exec was fascinated and very impressed, and then, at the end of the pitch, said “That’s really great, Todd, you really nailed it, it’s perfect. I’m just wondering — is there some way to make the protagonist a boy?”

I was dumbstruck. No, there was no way to make the protagonist a boy. The books were *very much* about a female perspective on this strange futuristic world — the two were inseparable. You literally could not tell the same story with a male protagonist.

But the studio exec explained, “We can’t make a movie with a female protagonist. Boys won’t go to see it.” She also explained that girls won’t go to see science fiction movies, or action movies. I explained to her that one recent movie franchise — *Pirates* – very much had a female protagonist and had done very well indeed, that another franchise — *The Terminator* – also had a female protagonist and had done very well indeed, that another franchise — *Alien* – was also a futuristic sci-fi series with a female protagonist, and had done very well indeed.

The studio exec’s hands were tied. Word had come down from above, “No big-budget movies with female protagonists.” The only movies that could be made with a female protagonist were intimate personal dramas and romances — that is, cheap movies.

My guess is that today, this very day, in offices all over Hollywood, studio executives are still telling writers “We don’t make science-fiction movies with a female protagonist.” And when the writer says “But what about *Hunger Games*?” they will make an excuse — “Well, but that’s *The Hunger Games*, it’s a phenomenon, it’s its own thing, you can’t hope to repeat that.”

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