**Drama: Intellectual property**

“We’re not trying to take away [producers’ and writers’] creativity,” Levitz insists. “What we’re saying is let’s listen to what audiences actually want and figure out the right way to make that a great TV show.”

Cole-Bulgin, whose Komixx is producing a version of Wattpad hit The Kissing Booth for Netflix, and developing an adaptation of the site’s young-adult thriller Under, says such research data “is a guide, but a guide that’s incredibly useful. Ignore it at your peril.”

Besides looking online and overseas, TV producers are also looking deeper than they used to into the pool of available IP.

Novel and comic book series have become especially hot properties, with recent deals including Netflix’s acquisition of multi-title fantasy saga The Witcher and graphic novel series The Umbrella Academy. Komixx has bought Robert Muchamore’s 18-novel young-adult thriller series Cherub and MGM Television purchased rights to Daniel Silva’s collection of spy novels (17 published to date) about Mossad agent and art restorer Gabriel Allon.

The Allon series, says Steve Stark, president of television production and development at MGM – also the studio behind The Handmaid’s Tale – “has been hotly pursued since it began 18 years ago.” For a production company, Stark says, the series offers “mass commercial appeal, mass critical appeal and a world that has so many layers to it.”

Podcasts have been attracting interest too, ever since the TV rights to buzzed-about audio narrative Serial were optioned two years. Though that project has yet to make it into production, other podcast-based series in the works include comedy Alex Inc, produced by Sony for ABC’s new primetime schedule, and conspiracy drama Homecoming, which Mr Robot creator Sam Esmail is executive producing for Amazon.

“Most of the time we’ll take a podcast as a jumping-off point, unless there’s an ongoing narrative that can give you a serialised drama or a ‘case of the week’ style series,” explains Lauren Stein, exec VP and head of drama development at Sony Pictures Television.

Classic and literary novels have made something of a comeback thanks to the size and diversity of the drama series marketplace. With so many networks operating in their own niches, today’s drama series “don’t have to be quite as broadly appealing, which allows buyers to open up to some of the great literature of the past,” argues Pancho Mansfield, president of global scripted programming at Entertainment One Television.

The new attitude has opened doors for upcoming dramas such as Howards End, a mini-series version of the EM Forster classic; The Spy Who Came In From the Cold, another Le Carré adaptation from The Night Manager producer The Ink Factory; and Melrose, a limited series starring Benedict Cumberbatch, based on Edward St Aubyn’s contemporary Patrick Melrose novels.

Michael Jackson, the former Channel 4 chief who is now CEO of Melrose production company Two Cities Television, says adaptations like this are “great things to do because they’re a big canvas and you can get great actors.”

And in the current climate, Jackson adds: “There’s competition for [projects based on] literary novels, true-life stories, all sorts of things. It’s amazing how genuinely diverse the appetite is for all sorts of drama, and all sorts of drama based on IP.”

**Increased demand usually of course, means higher prices, and producers and development executives report that over the past few years the cost of TV rights to some forms of IP has escalated.**

A one-year option on a book’s TV rights might once have cost US$5,000 to US$10,000, but now goes for anything between US$10,000 and US$50,000, producers suggest. And a purchase price that might once have been in the neighbourhood of US$50,000 is now more likely to be in the US$100,000 to US$250,000 range.

Deal terms have also been changing.

While the price of feature film rights to a book is usually set as a percentage of the project’s budget, a TV rights sale can involve a complex formula of hourly fees, episodic royalties, producing fees, performance-related bonuses and back-end points. Also up for negotiation are reversion clauses, which allow authors to reclaim rights to their work after a period of time so they can be re-sold to another buyer.

With demand for IP running as high as it is, agents say they have recently been able to negotiate more favourable deals that give authors more profit participation and more status as executive producers. Producers acknowledge the trend, but, not surprisingly, insist that they still have bargaining power of their own.

“If we think we can make the material into something great we will step up for it,” says MGM’s Stark of his studio’s attitude to big-ticket IP deals. “But we won’t make a stupid deal. We’re negotiating right now on a very old book from a very big author and it might just be too expensive; we might walk away from it. At the end of the day, if you don’t have the right take and the right writer to adapt the material, it’s not worth having it.”

**ZDF partners on serial killer drama**

Germany’s ZDF Enterprises has joined Berlin-based CCC Filmkunst and Munich’s MZ Film in co-developing a crime thriller based on the book series by Veit Ezzold.

Final Cut follows a police detective and psychology expert in Berlin as she tracks a seemingly invisible murderer who is spreading terror throughout the city. She eventually realises that the killer is playing her cruel game with her while constantly sending the police down the wrong track. CCC Filmkunst’s MD Alice Brauner said her prodoc and MZ Film had been working with ZDF Enterprises for years on an adaptation of Ezzold’s “brilliantly conceived, multifaceted thriller series” about emotionally broken pathopsychologist Clara Vidals.

“It presents the deepest depths of humanity in a compelling and realistic way that no-one can resist. Not something for the faint-hearted,” she said.

The agreement initially includes a pilot and outlines for five further episodes. Brauner will produce along with MZ Film’s Michael Zechbauer. Uwe Janson will serve as lead writer on the show. Carolina Vera plays the lead role, alongside Ken Dukun, Pasquale Aleardi and Dietrich Hollinderbauer.

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