

Film producer, author brings love for book's characters to junior high

October 5, 2006

By Michael Drakulich The Star

Students at Orland Junior High School will get a rare treat when film producer Frank Beddor visits their school Friday.

No doubt Beddor could regale students with how he got to rub elbows with actors Ben Stiller and Cameron Diaz when he produced the film "There's Something About Mary."

But he won't be talking about that.

Beddor would rather talk about Alyss Heart, Hatter Madigan and The Blue Caterpillar.

Those are characters he created for his first book "The Looking Glass Wars," a darker take on Lewis Carroll's "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

It's not easy to say where Beddor's book fits in with Carroll's books. It's not a sequel in the strictest sense, nor is it a prequel. Readers might describe it as a parallel tale that broadens and expands what Carroll first wrote about.

After releasing the novel in England two years ago, it's now available in the United States, and Beddor is eager to share it with American readers.

Beddor first released his novel in England in 2004, and the interest generated there prompted the Penguin Young Readers Group to publish it here in the United States.

But on first publication, Beddor admits he had to edit out some violence. Any violence in the book now is more implicit rather than explicit and graphic.

But said he could not edit out the deaths of some characters. The story would not be the same without the theme of losing loved ones, Beddor said.

"When I first sold it in the U.K. to Egmont Publishing, they came back to me and said they had issues with some of the violence. So I made some changes. But with the Internet and movies and video games, that's all part of popular culture. And (the phrase), 'Off with your head!' has been around for so long because of Carroll's book."

To be doubly sure it wouldn't be too much for younger readers, Beddor's American publisher sent out advanced copies to libraries and schools to get an initial reaction. So far, there has been no indication it's too violent for its target teenage audience.

But it might be too much for any child younger than age 10, he said. Having become a father recently, the 47-year-old Beddor said there are parts of the book he could read to his son when he's 6 or 7 years old. But some of the scenes containing violence he probably would hold off exposing his son until his child was at least 10.

Ironically, 10 years old was the very age Beddor became exposed to "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland."

Beddor grew up in Minneapolis. One day his mother diverted him from swimming to read the classic novel.

His initial exposure would not clearly indicate how fascinated with it he would become later in life.

As a swaggering 10 year old with tons of attitude, Beddor said he was "bored silly" with the book.

It would be quite a few years before Beddor would learn to appreciate what he initially dismissed.

"When I came to Los Angeles as an aspiring actor, I read a lot of literature and plays. I picked up Carroll's works and discovered the wit and the play on words that were so prevalent. And I came to appreciate just how sinister the sequel ("Through the Looking Glass") was," he said.

But his newfound appreciation for it would not blossom into inspiration just yet.

Beddor would find that years later during the London premiere of "There's Something About Mary."

At that time, he visited The British Museum, a unique display captivated him. It contained decks of picture cards. An incomplete deck that reminded him of Wonderland particularly caught his eye.

He would later find an antiquities dealer who had a few of the missing deck's cards.

The dealer told him the story behind the cards and that became the foundation of his novel.

Beddor has not stopped at just writing his book. He's created his own multimedia experience, including his own picture cards portraying characters, a soundtrack and a movie-like trailer.

Beddor also has created the comic book series, "Hatter M" based on character Hatter Madigan.

Madigan is the bodyguard to Alyss Heart. He tells of his journey to find her and bring her back to Wonderland to help defend it against her evil Aunt Redd.

With his experience in movies, Beddor has been asked whether he would want to adapt the book for the screen. He says it's a distinct possibility and he's already commissioned artists to do some of the conceptual work.

But this is where the students at Orland Junior High will play another part.

During his presentation Friday, Beddor will talk about the story behind the story and show the completed movie-like trailer.

But he plans to hold mock auditions, having students acting out parts for their classmates.

It brings his love and respect for the disciplines of writing and filmmaking into one activity. And it's something he thinks the kids will become excited about.

"It breaks the wall between child and adult," he said. "And it gives kids a chance to cheer for and react to their friends acting for them."

After completing his book tour, Beddor soon will head back home to Los Angeles.

There likely is to be little idle time for him, though. "The Looking Glass Wars" is the first of a planned trilogy. He has completed a draft of the second book, "Seeing Redd," and sent to the publisher. Beddor will continue to craft it into a finished product while working on the yet-to-be-named finale.

More information on the book, trailer, soundtrack and more is online at www.lookingglasswars.com .

Michael Drakulich may be reached at mdrakulich@starnewspapers.com or (708) 802-8841.