Movie Studios Smell Out Teen Spirits

By Michelle Hong

Sequels and prequels are Hollywood summer staples, powering some of the biggest hits that are popular with young-adult viewers. But with the final instalments on the way for some big-screen franchises, studios are hunting for new properties.

Warner Bros. "Harry Potter" franchise this summer winds down with its eighth movie, setting off a series that has brought grosses of $7.64 billion world-wide. Next year, the fifth "Twilight" movie will mark the end of Summit Entertainment LLC's lucrative foray into the world of vampires and their teen lovers.

To continue winning over those audiences, studios have been snapping up the rights to science-fiction and fantasy book series that have the potential to spawn sequels—and lucrative ancillary products like clothes and memorabilia. A movie from a trilogy of books by Suzanne Collins is one of the most hotly anticipated movies this year, as are films with personal from the "Twilight" movies.

The crop of new material and the interest for speculative fiction, including books and packaging deals, is "the talk of the town," said Erin Fitzgerald, president of wonderworld production and acquisitions.

"Our biggest challenge now is to find innovative voices without repeating ourselves so fans don't feel like we're giving them something that's a duplicate," said Fitzgerald.

Like many studios, Summit has bought rights to several novels even before they hit bookstores, such as the dystopian thriller "Divergent," due to be published next month. Popular fantasy novels, comic books and hits from other media are desirable because of their established young fan bases. Studio often offer all the titles in a book series at once, so if the film adaptation is a success, the studios quickly can churn out sequels.

The highest-profile of the new candidates is Lions Gate Entertainment Corp.'s adaptation of Collins' popular "Hunger Games" trilogy, which has more than 8.8 million copies in print. The series' first film, about a 16-year-old girl forced to compete for her life on a reality television show, has a production budget of roughly $75 million and is set for release next March.

Walt Disney Co. is planning a "Secret of NIMH" animated film, based on the book by Robert C. O'Brien. Summit has bought the rights to the "Starz" series "Beneath the Surface," which is set in Iceland, for a potential film or TV series.

Ad buyers say increased ad rates could push clients to move more online money. "If pricing gets too high, we will look to other places," says Dani Benbow, head of investment at independent group of Cos. Universal McCann, whose clients include Johnson & Johnson, Marriott Corp., Stay Corp. and Cereal B.A. Ad buyers also say they expect to shift more dollars to co-host networks, such as Comcast's USA, Time Warner's TNT, and CBS's "CBS News 8." Ad buyers are seeing the increased ad rates online because of ad networks, such as Concast's USA, Time Warner's TNT, and CBS's "CBS News 8.

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