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LOS ANGELES (ABP)—It's a perennial question, like the chicken and the egg. Which was better, the book or the movie?

For one film company, Los Angeles-based Walden Media, the issue is not either-or. Walden hopes its latest production, "Because of Winn-Dixie," will demonstrate that good children's literature can spawn quality screen entertainment that in turn inspires kids to read.

Like other Walden movies, including the 2003 "Holes," "Winn-Dixie" is based on an award-winning children's book. Written by Kate DiCamillo, the novel behind the new movie was a Newbery Honor Book for 2001. Awarded each year by a division of the American Library Association, the Newbery prizes recognize excellence in American writing for children.

Faithful to its written original, “Winn Dixie” tells the story of young India Opal Buloni (AnnaSophia Robb), daughter of the pastor of Open Arms Baptist Church in Naomi, Fla. Opal and the “Preacher” (Jeff Daniels), as she calls her dad, have just moved to the small town, where the little congregation meets in an old convenience store only partially converted into a house of worship.

Just as the old store provides an atypical church house, so the Preacher and his daughter challenge the comfortable stereotypes of the pastoral family. The minister and his daughter live by themselves in a trailer park where the manager writes off their rent as a church contribution. And the two are alone because Opal’s mom abandoned them, weary of the judgmental gaze of church members and unable to stop drinking.

It’s summer, and Opal feels all alone. But things change when she happens upon a stray dog wreaking havoc in the local grocery. Fibbing that the dog belongs to her to save him from the pound, Opal has to concoct a name on the spot—“Winn-Dixie,” echoing the real-life grocery chain headquartered in Jacksonville.

Opal and her dog join a long line of cinematic canines and kids going back at least as far as the youthful Elizabeth Taylor in the 1943 “Lassie Come Home,” passing through the decades to “Benji” in 1974 and including the bittersweet “My Dog Skip” from 2000. But the creators of “Winn-Dixie” see their mission as more than making another appealing movie about vulnerable children and lovable dogs.

Walden Media forms part of the financial empire of the highly successful entrepreneur Phil Anschutz. According to Bob Beltz, personal adviser and creative consultant for Anshultz, the business leader got into movies out of “a great deal of concern for the moral climate.” Anschutz “recognized that media, especially film, played a large role in sort of setting the tone” in society, Beltz said.

The businessman's focus is not explicitly religious film. "I think what he's creating is a much more mainstream film company that really doesn't specifically fit under 'religious film company' or 'Christian film company,'" said Beltz, who is a minister.

Observing that movies targeting religious audiences, or those made by companies identifying themselves as Christian, often fail to attract the attention of Hollywood distributors despite their worthiness as films. Beltz pointed out Walden has been able to partner with industry powerhouses like Disney and 20th Century Fox to get its productions into the nation's movie houses.

Walden CEO Micheal Flaherty reiterated his company's unique commitment to both good movies and the books behind them.

"The big difference with our films is that what we're trying to do is ... to bring great literature, or great ideas, alive, and the experience hopefully doesn't end with the film," Flaherty said.

If kids "see a film that really brings a book alive, that will lead them back to the book and lead them back to other books," he explained.

Cary Granat, Walden's president and Flaherty's roommate when the two were students at Tufts University, stressed the company's respect for the original authors of the stories they put on-screen.

"We as a company really make a big push ... to celebrate the author and to try and connect our audience with the author," Granat said. He added that Walden wants audiences to "really get to understand the author's philosophy a lot more than just what was literally put on the specific page."

Experts acknowledge the potentially positive relationship between watching and reading.

Cindy Birden, who worked as children's librarian at the West Florida Regional Library System in Pensacola more than 20 years, said releasing a film based on a novel often sends young readers scurrying to the library.

"I think it definitely does promote more interest in the book when the film is out," Birden said. "Even if a book is popular, when the movie comes out, you see another surge of popularity."

When asked about the pros and cons of putting a good children's book on film, Birdsen said: "I guess the upside is that it exposes the book and the good story ... to more children, to a wider audience. The downside is in how well they adapt it."

Craig Detweiler, screenwriter and chair of film studies at Biola University near Los Angeles, pointed to the risks involved in taking beloved plots and characters off the printed page and onto the screen.

"When you're dealing with beloved classic children's literature, in some cases you're dealing with both rabid fans and a bit of a sacred trust. And so you adapt these beloved stories with great risk and respect at the same time," Detweiler said. "To turn a classic literary work into a classic cinematic work is real movie magic."

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