James **Dashner** , Marie **Lu**, and Patricia **McCormick**

From Novel to Film:

A Collaborative Conversation

From the Editors: In this article, we are honored to feature a written conversation between James Dashner, Marie Lu, and Patricia McCormick, award-winning authors whose writings for young adults have been (or are being) translated from the page to the big screen. James Dashner's first novel-turned-film, *The Maze Runner,* was released on September 19, 2014, and became a commercial success, grossing over $345 million worldwide. *Maze Runner: The Scorch Trials* was released on September 18, 2015, and *Maze Runner: The Death Cure* is set for release on February 17, 2017. Movie versions of two of Marie Lu's novels, *Legend* and *The Young Elites*, are both currently in development—and anxiously anticipated by fans. And Patricia McCormick's novel *Sold* was released in movie form in the US in April 2016. The film has already earned several accolades, having received the World Cinema Audience Award at the 2015 Sonoma International Film Festival and the Pure Heaven Audience Award at the 2014 London Indian Film Festival.

To create this article, we generated and sent a series of questions to each author independently. We compiled these initial responses into a single document and then sent the full version back and forth to solicit questions, elaborations, and revisions until all were satisfied with the end result. We appreciate the generous response of these authors (and their publishers) and hope our readers enjoy learning more about the book-to-film experience.

What was your reaction when you were first approached about your book(s) being adapted to film? Did you have any reservations, and if so, what were they? Did the process itself change your initial perceptions?

James: Having been a movie buff my entire life, this whole movie experience has definitely been the highlight of my career. I knew enough to have many reservations—wondering if it would actually happen, worry over the final product, stress over its potential for success—but mostly I just felt excitement. A *movie*? Based on something *I* wrote? It seemed too good to be true. I've been very fortunate to have such a positive experience and to be so pleased with the movies themselves. If anything, the process has taught me that you have to start with the right people—people who love storytelling and understand the differences between book and film.

Marie: For *Legend,* it was my first experience having any sort of contact at all with the film industry, so I remember being nothing but a ball of excitement and bewilderment. I didn't know enough to have any kind of reservations. I was just shocked that selling film rights was a thing that could happen to me.

For *The Young Elites,* I knew I wanted to work with someone who understood the story's cornerstones—that it was about a girl's journey to darkness, that it was a villain's story, that it was *dark*. This concerned me, because I thought it might be too dark for anyone to want, especially

since it's for a teen audience. I'm lucky to be working with genuinely good industry people (Wyck Godfrey and Isaac Klausner are my producers, and Kassie Evashevski is my agent) who said point blank how important it was that the studio and screenwriter *get* Adelina as a main character. Our screenwriter Jessica Sharzer knows dark stories well—she worked on *American Horror Story.* So I think we're in the best possible hands.

Patricia: I was thrilled, in part because it was a high school reader who brought the book home to her father, a screenwriter, and said, "Dad, you have to make this into a movie!" Soon after that, I had a long conference call with the screenwriter and the producer and instantly knew we had the same artistic vision for the film. My only worry was how they would come up with the money to fund a movie that would be such a tough sell at the box office.

They came up with a radically creative idea: they went to philanthropists who were involved in anti-trafficking efforts and asked each of them to contribute money to fund a film that would raise awareness and stimulate change instead of, say, building a new shelter. Many of those funders—mostly women from Seattle—went to India to see the brothels after they made the financial pledge. *That* is commitment.

How involved have you been in the process of making your novel(s) into film? Is this level of involvement desirable, or would you alter your participation in any way?

Marie: I know almost nothing about what it takes to write a screenplay (or make a film), so my involvement on both films' earliest stages has been strictly on a consultant level. So far, I'm pretty happy with that arrangement. Jessica (our screenwriter) texts me on and off as she's working on the screenplay, asking me questions about world-building, character details, or feedback on new scenes meant for the movie that are not in the book. It's really fascinating and fun to see something that used to exist only in my head now being interpreted by another creative person.

Patricia: The filmmakers were extremely generous in the ways they involved me; they showed me every draft of the script. I gave some character-based feedback, but I mostly just marveled at what they'd done. I have the humility to know that just because I'm a movie-goer doesn't mean I'm a movie-maker. I may not agree with some of the changes they've made, but I understand that they were necessary to transform a novel, written in a first-person interior monologue, to a more visual, more action-driven medium.

James: For me, it's been just the right amount of involvement. I consulted on the script, visited the set a few times, stayed in constant contact with the director and producers over questions that arose. But I made it clear from the outset that I completely understand who the experts are when it comes to filmmaking—them, not me. Fox and everyone involved made me feel a part of the family, while at the same time allowing me just enough say to keep me happy without getting too stressful. It was the perfect balance, and I couldn't be happier.

What is the most challenging part of seeing your work translated into film? The most rewarding?

James: Although the response to the films has been overwhelmingly positive from my readers, there are a few die-hards out there that hated the changes. That's what I see as my biggest challenge—helping them understand that some things that work in a book don't work in a movie and vice versa. Most rewarding for me has been the success of the films and all the new readers they have brought to the series, especially internationally. That has been a lot of fun to watch.

Patricia: The most challenging part is accepting the loss of control; the most rewarding is seeing how your work inspired the creativity of others—from the screenwriters to the actors.

Marie: I'm so early in the process that it's hard for me to say—but I really love seeing the screenplay, because it's like an alternative universe version of my story. It's so cool seeing another writer translate

that. The most challenging part, honestly, is the waiting! As a writer, I'm already used to waiting . . . but making a movie requires so many things to align perfectly and so many moving parts that every movie ever made is like a modern miracle. All you can do is cross your fingers and hope that luck eventually shines on you.

Are fiction and film able to convey character, theme, setting, etc. in the same ways? What would you argue are the benefits and limitations of each format?

Marie: I think that many times, they can't. And maybe they shouldn't. They are wildly different creative cousins—in a novel, you can describe a character's emotions with pages and pages of detail that take place inside the character's head; in a film, the actor has to wrap all of that detail into an expression or a gesture. Film is so immediate and visceral, while a novel can really dig deeper into the corners of a story. That's why most movies can't translate everything that happens in a novel. There's just too much.

James: I think fiction and film accomplish these elements in different ways, but the key is that both formats must *make* that accomplishment. That's what makes any type of storytelling valuable—the ability to create characters that you care about, a compelling story, settings that draw you in, etc. I feel that Wes Ball and his team did an absolutely fantastic job of taking those things from the books and figuring out the best way to translate them cinematically. Thus the changes here and there. With a book, you have all the time in the world, but you can only use words. With a movie, you only have two hours, but you can take advantage of visuals and sound. It's a challenging but fun transition.

Patricia: This film, *Sold*, set largely in the brothels of India, makes full use of the grit and the colors and chaos of that setting. As a writer, I could only describe it; by choosing to film in the red light district, the filmmakers allow us to experience it.

Has participation in this process influenced your writing process or approach to other novels? Do you imagine the scenes you create as potentially playing out on the big screen?

Patricia: I wouldn't say that I now write with a film adaptation in mind. (It's hard enough to write with a novel as my goal!) But I am aware of how scenes are shaped in film and how important dialogue is. The language in my book, *Sold* (2006), is lyrical—and that was totally appropriate for a book. But that kind of language does not make for realistic dialogue. So I do think more now about how my words sound spoken aloud.

Marie: I've always been a visual writer, partly because I used to work in the video game industry as an artist, so I have always imagined my scenes playing out as a movie. I don't think my glimpse into the film industry has changed much of my writing.

James: Participation has only solidified what has always been my process, and that is to think cinematically when I write my books. I know it seems blasphemous, but if anything, I love movies even more than books (although it's certainly a close race). And the movie format is how my mind works when it's busy generating stories. I picture scenes and characters in a cinematic way, and then I do my best to transform that onto the written page. It's worked for me, and I can only assume that's why my books have transitioned well to the big screen.

Other than your own, what would you say is your favorite film adaptation of a novel? What makes this adaptation successful for you?

James: I would say, without any hesitation, that it's the Lord of the Rings trilogy (Tolkien et al., 2001–2003), directed by Peter Jackson. I see those three movies as one film (a really, really long one!), and I think it's the perfect example of how to adapt a book into a movie. Peter Jackson says in the commentary that he knew he couldn't attempt a direct translation, literally playing things out in the film as they do in the books. He wanted to take the experience of reading the books, beloved by so

many, and transform that into a similar cinematic experience. He wanted to make you feel, as you watch his movies, the same way you felt when you read the original source. I love that attitude.

In my opinion, when someone attempts to directly adapt a book as literally as possible, it becomes a boring checklist of expectations. Oh yeah, that happens, then this is going to happen. Then that, then that, then that. There's no magic, no sense of experiencing the story for the very first time. That's what a good adaptation should do. Take a story that you love and help you relive it in a brand new way, while staying true to the spirit and tone and overall story, and especially the characters. Lord of the Rings did all of that perfectly.

Patricia: My favorite adaptation of a book to film is *The Hours* (Cunningham & Hare, 2002). The screenplay is faithful to the time-bending, overlapping narratives of the book and recreates its atmosphere of claustrophobia. The acting took what was on the page—the language with which we had become familiar—and made it bloom into something exotic, gave us an experience that enhanced and transcended the confines of the book.

Marie: My favorite film adaptation of a novel is *Contact* (Sagan, Hart, & Goldenberg, 1997). Actually, this is my favorite movie of all time. I don't even know how many times I've watched it. The scene where Ellie first hears the signals from outer space—agh, my heart! I absolutely love the novel by Carl Sagan, but I think the film version did a wonderful job of knowing what to take out and what to add in and how to make the main character as well-rounded as she could possibly be. Jodie Foster also added *so* much to bringing Ellie to life. It's all about the acting.

As an author, what are your thoughts on issues of access across these two formats? Can film viewers who haven't read your novels fully appreciate your story as presented on the screen? Does something get missed or lost in the mediation between text and image and sound? Does something get "found"?

Patricia: The intimacy of the reading experience is lost when we sit down, en masse, to watch a film. The intimacy of reading allows a reader to imagine visuals that are unique to his or her imagination. A film imposes the same set of visuals on the entire audience. And of course, much has to be edited out of a book to allow it to work in film. But . . . being plunged into a film, in the dark, with a group of strangers as a film unspools at the directors' pace (not your private reading pace) is a much more immersive experience. You get "drenched" by a film; you cannot hold it at arms' length the way you can with a book when you've decided to put it down or skip over parts.

James: Funny enough, people tell me all the time: "I'm so sorry, I haven't read your books, but I *loved* the movie!" Their face is always filled with apology. But nothing could make me happier! I created a story filled with characters that I love. It doesn't matter to me how people experience that story. I'm thrilled when people see our movies, whether or not they've read the books. And in most cases, it leads them back to the books anyway. Again, I've been very fortunate to have a fantastic team making my films, so I realize it could've been an entirely different experience. But when it comes to the Maze Runner series, I feel very strongly that there are two equally powerful and entertaining and fulfilling ways to live and relive the story: the books (Dashner, 2009–2011) and the movies (Dashner, Oppenheim, Myers, & Nowlin, 2014; Dashner & Nowlin, 2015). The differences between them just add to the magic.

Marie: I think that, ultimately, a film and a book should be viewed and judged as two separate things. A film will never be able to incorporate *everything* from a novel, and that's okay. If it did, it probably wouldn't be a good film. Something is always lost between the mediums, and something is always found. The key, I think, is to present the differences in such a way that the audience can take away the right things from each one and then go off to discover the other.

James Dashner *is the author of the #1* New York Times *bestselling Maze Runner series:* The Maze Runner, The Scorch Trials, The Death Cure, *and* The Kill Order*, as well as the bestselling Mortality Doctrine series:* The Eye

of Minds, The Rule of Thoughts, *and* The Game of Lives. *Dashner was born and raised in Georgia but now lives and writes in the Rocky Mountains. To learn more about him and his books, visit JamesDashner.com, follow @jamesdashner on Twitter, and find dashnerjames on Instagram.*

Marie Lu *(www.marielu.org) is the author of the* New York Times *bestselling Legend and The Young Elites trilogies. She graduated from the University of Southern California and jumped into the video game industry, working for Disney Interactive Studios as a Flash artist. Now a full-time writer, she spends her spare time reading, drawing, playing Assassin's Creed, and getting stuck in traffic. She lives in Los Angeles, California (see above: traffic), with one husband, one Chihuahua mix, and two Pembroke Welsh corgis.*

To research Sold, ***Patricia McCormick*** *traveled to India and Nepal, where she interviewed the women of Calcutta's red-light district and girls who have been rescued from the sex trade. Patricia is a two-time National Book Award finalist and the author of five critically acclaimed novels, among them* Never Fall Down, *the story of a boy who survived the Killing Fields of Cambodia by playing music for the Khmer Rouge. Her other books include the YA classic* Cut *and the young readers' edition of* I Am Malala, *the story of the Pakistani girl who was targeted by the Taliban for standing up for education. Her newest book,* The Plot to Kill Hitler, *will be published by HarperCollins in 2016. She lives in Manhattan.*

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