

Netflix's 'woeful tales' of misery'

The reinvention of Lemony Snicket's *Series of Unfortunate Events* as a Netflix Original TV series has renewed the fortunes of a publishing phenomenon

BY RON FOGELMAN

No doubt Mr Snicket himself would frown on *The Bookseller's* efforts to draw attention to the plight of the Baudelaire orphans and urge its readers to look away from the disturbing article that follows.

Yet the story behind Netflix's new series is a compelling one. It's the tale of publishing success, the failure of a hoped-for movie franchise and the revival of fortunes through the rise of the subscription video on demand (SVOD) giant. It makes for the perfect case study to chronicle the changing landscape of film and television.

Back in 2004, when Paramount released the Jim Carrey movie, the publishing industry still treated the world of film as a cash machine. Publishers, writers and literary agents could expect windfalls in cash from options, more if something actually got made and even more in the unlikely event it was a hit. The main risk? Making the wrong deal.

Those were indeed the good old days. With Home Entertainment vibrant and strong pay and free TV deals, the studios could model investments with almost scientific accuracy. Then came the age of "disruption" calling on the naughty inner child of many a tech entrepreneur. The internet "Take 2.0" skewered the economics of the movie business as the DVD market all but disappeared from our high streets. Was the original Snicket film a failure? Actually, no! It grossed more than US\$200m at the global box office. Not bad, huh? Even with a hefty US\$140m pricetag, if you roll in every cent from every revenue stream, it's a respectable financial performance.

As regimes changed at Paramount, the prospects of a sequel slipped away. Hopes faded as the worst plight of all befell the original child actors playing the Baudelaires (at least in Hollywood terms)—they aged!

So 13 years later, what encouraged Netflix to revisit the saga? In that time, the way TV audiences relate to content has changed dramatically. The origins of "binge" viewing, often attributed to Netflix, lie more with the mid-noughties push of DVD box sets. It's from that trend that the "again, again, again" thirst for immediate series consumption really began.

The economic uplift from those DVD sales helped fuel the ambitions of the premium cable channels in the US. Inspired by HBO, AMC, Showtime, Starz et al ramped up investment in scripted one-hour dramas. In a handful of years, the quality and lavishness of TV projects challenged mid-range budget feature films already fading from studio slates. This triggered a migration of frustrated feature film talent to TV.

If there's a key year in this saga, it has to be 2007—the year of the great evolutionary leap taken by Netflix away from its DVD rental by mail business towards SVOD. Initially reliant on studios and indies for content, Netflix launched the first of its own flagship TV series "House of Cards" in 2013. Since



The screening of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* (above) led to a Netflix deal to stream all 13 books in the series since the original season of eight episodes featured in January (below left). The original film (right) starring Jim Carrey grossed more than US \$200m at the box office.

then, commitment to its own original content has powered subscriber growth to the 100 million milestone, which it hit worldwide last month.

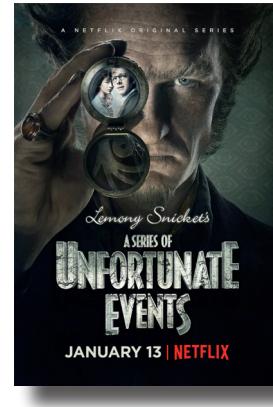
Streaming pushed binge-viewing further. As TV drama series increasingly shifted to season arc storytelling, the viewer was able to take control of what to watch and when in the same way they might enjoy reading a novel. The term episode could even be redefined as "chapter".

As for value to the consumer, consider this: in the UK, Netflix costs only £7.50 per month (about the cost of a new paperback release). That buys you so much in contrast with the retail price of just one new DVD release at £19.99 at the turn of the century.

Through its proprietary software, Netflix also has an instant connection to its audience and can aggregate niche interests in an intelligent way. Before the Baudelaires fell into its sights, it had successfully revived highly visible series that had ended their natural network life. It gave the kiss of life to "Arrested Development" in 2013 and in the past year has brought back "Full House" and the "Gilmore Girls".

If there's a role model for authors everywhere it has to be Daniel Handler in the way he's supported the death defying leap of his own works across media. Handler suppressed his ego right off the bat even denying his own existence for several years as his pseudonym literally took all the credit.

When Netflix approached him about the idea of a TV series, Handler told *The Bookseller*: "They were interested in starting to make original family programming and convinced me that their format would work well for the





series." Netflix shared his vision for the show. As opposed to keeping a polite distance from the author, they embraced him, giving him executive producer status (top of the food chain in US TV). He serves with director Barry Sonnenfeld in the role of showrunner, a word here that means both writer and producer in the landscape of TV.

When asked, what it's like making the move from being an author to executive producer Handler said: "The showrunner duties are basically split between Barry Sonnenfeld and myself. I've been running the writers' room in my dining room, with a wonderful group of people... and that part is splendid. Then our scripts are turned over to the production team, which is more varied and trickier," he says.

The question is whether TV offers a better ride than film today for an author? According to Handler: "I don't think it depends on the medium—I think it depends on the quality of people with whom one is working."

So, is it a hit? Now, there's the rub. How can you tell if a show is a hit on Netflix when it refuses to publish any form of ratings-related data? And if you're a publisher, how can you anticipate demand for the original books and build a successful tie-in business if you don't really know the numbers?

It's a mystery worthy of the Baudelaires themselves and here are the clues: since the original season of eight episodes "dropped" in January, Netflix has committed to two further seasons to bring all 13 books to subscribers. However, Netflix thinks very differently to the traditional way an ad-based broadcaster does. Its eyes are on maintaining the

subscription base, avoiding churn and signing new members—not on ratings or advertising.

TRACKING DEMAND

To address this conundrum, different tech companies are looking at solutions in different ways. In California, Symphony Advanced Media has tested its VideoPulse system which tracks any and all video consumption of its users through a passive listening program that hears what you're watching and tracks it. "Lemony Snicket got off to a very strong start," says president and c.e.o. Charles Buchwalter. On this rating system, for the opening weekend in January, the series achieved a measure of 3.76 million, placing it fourth for all SVOD originals ever tracked by the service (the other three being season one of "Fuller House", season four of "Orange is the New Black" and season eight of "Gilmore Girls" (the first one on Netflix)).

In New Zealand, Parrot Analytics has developed a very different system that aggregates the global desire, engagement and viewership for content into a "demand expression". Parrot's Samuel Stadler says that it pulls in more than one billion data points each day from all countries in the world sweeping in social media, streaming, photo sharing, blogging, fan and critic ratings and file sharing sites. Its focus isn't on the ship, but on the wake it leaves behind. In the weeks leading up to the series being dropped, demand expressions topped eight million in the UK market and more than 40 million in the US a day.



NEW GENERATION

It's also clear that a success on Netflix impacts on publishing sales. "Egmont is disappointed that Netflix should choose to bring these woeful tales of misery and despair to a whole new generation of children," said Cally Poplak, Egmont Publishing's UK m.d. But perhaps it can take comfort that since Neil Patrick Harris donned the garb of Count Olaf, year-on-year sales have since increased in the UK by 450% across the series. *The Bad Beginning* alone has sold more than 25,000 across two editions.

In the US, Harper Collins saw *The Bad Beginning* jump 78% week on week after the Netflix adaptation debuted, selling 4,206 copies that week. The 13 books have racked up total sales of 167,409 copies for the year to date, already 2.5% up on the 52-week total for 2016.



Handler

Daniel Handler knows the challenges of adaptation for both film and television. You are creating something new, not a picture book rendition of the source. Authors (where living—death being a setback to many a writer's career) or their estates need to respect adaptation as an admirable art. Storytelling in any form needs certain freedoms to flourish.

So, forget the cash machine attitude towards movies and TV; that mix of suspicion, hostility, aloofness (and let's face it greed) is antiquated and ultimately fails to serve the material. In the age of the showrunner, Handler has embraced the collaborative world of the "writers' room", has a seat at the head of the table and earned it. The result? Count Olaf lives again.

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