

San Francisco Chronicle 'Narnia' tries to cash in on dual audience

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Until Mel Gibson delivered "The Passion of the Christ" to the world, Hollywood had no use for religion in movies. "The Ten Commandments" was ancient history, "Ben Hur" a dusty page in movie history. Spirituality was anathema to box office profits.

But when Gibson's "Passion" earned \$370 million domestic and \$611 million worldwide -- flabbergasting Hollywood, the secular world and the country's growing Christian demographic -- opinion changed. Today, studios are striving to capitalize on the market that "Passion" established -- and a 55-year-old tale from an Oxford theologian is the movie industry's biggest hope.

"This is the big one" for the Christian community, said Terry Mattingly, a nationally syndicated religion columnist and author of the new book, "Pop Goes Religion: Faith in Pop Culture." Whereas "The Passion" replaced traditional press-marketing efforts with Gibson's direct appeals to religious groups, Mattingly said "Narnia" works both angles simultaneously.

"That's what makes this such an unusual media story, in the sense that you have a combination here of something that is both super-popular and yet highly identified as Christian."

Blending children's fantasy, Christian parable and "Star Wars"-level technology, "The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe," could become one of the biggest moneymaking films of all time. Co-produced by Disney and Walden Media -- a company bankrolled by Denver billionaire and San Francisco Examiner owner Philip Anschutz -- the PG-rated, \$180 million spectacular is likely to draw the same fan base that sustained "The Lord of the Rings," "Harry Potter" and "Star Wars" franchises.

More significantly, "Narnia" could shatter box office records because C.S. Lewis, an Oxford theologian and author of the seven-part "Chronicles of Narnia" series, is revered among American Christians, who see in his story a reinterpretation of the Christ allegory. Lewis died in 1963, but his books are so popular that Time magazine named him "the hottest theologian of 2005."

A boxed set of the "Narnia" series is currently the top seller on Amazon.com. At HarperCollins San Francisco, publicist Krista Holmstrom said 1 million copies of Lewis' argument for faith, "Mere Christianity," had sold since June 2001, and the publisher's edition of the "Narnia" series has sold nine times as many copies this year as it did in the same period last year. In the 55 years since the first "Narnia" installment was published, the books have sold more than 95 million copies in 41 languages.

If the Christian community shows up in the numbers they did for "The Passion of the Christ" -- many were mobilized by church endorsements -- "Narnia" will reconfirm the growing market for Christian-themed movies. Walden Media, which supplied half the film's budget, is committed to producing wholesome family entertainment devoid of sex and violence. They produced "Holes," "Ghosts of the Abyss" and "Because of Winn-Dixie," and the company's president, Michael Flaherty, is an evangelical Christian.

"This is a historic moment when one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century meets one of the greatest entertainers of the 20th century -- Disney," said the Rev. David Randolph last week to a gathering of Bay Area clergy at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley.

Randolph heads the Media Project for the Center for the Arts, Religion and Education (CARE), which trains clergy and church personnel to integrate cutting-edge media into worship services and teaching programs. Randolph had just received a shipment of "Narnia" Leader Resource DVDs, a beautifully produced marketing tool with a "Narnia" trailer; behind-the-scenes extras; teaching aids for parents, educators and youth leaders; outreach ideas; an introduction from Douglas Gresham, Lewis' stepson and one of the film's co-producers; and group ticket information. Many of the same materials are available online at [narniaresources.com](#).

"These materials are free -- that's a big deal for a church," said Stewart Heller, who works with Randolph at CARE and heads the Christian Institute for the Study of Media in Berkeley. "If I wanted to hire some media folks to put together a teaching package to accompany something like 'Narnia,' it would cost tens of thousands of dollars to make something look good. This is some slick stuff: first-rate, top-drawer, the-best-that-money-can-buy production values."

Heller sees "The Chronicles of Narnia," which is based on the second installment of Lewis' seven-part series, as a perfect vehicle for conveying a message of Christian faith. The story follows the four Pevensie siblings who enter the magical kingdom of Narnia through a wardrobe. An evil witch, played by Tilda Swinton, tempts one of the children, who is sentenced to die until the great lion Aslan (voice of Liam Neeson) sacrifices his life for the child. Aslan is the Christ figure, and the story includes metaphors for the crucifixion and resurrection.

Without the media tools provided by Disney, Heller said, the “Narnia” message falls flat. “If you’re in a classroom and you say, ‘Well, there’s this great movie out,’ that’s nothing -- no impression. But if you can show them a clip from the movie and hand them a kit with lesson plans and everything else, now we’re talking.”

CARE is one of thousands of religious groups contacted through a major marketing campaign directed at the Christian community. Church leaders were given sneak peaks at the film - in Colorado Springs alone, 700 pastors converged to see the film last month -- and merchandising tie-ins include posters, door hangers, a line of jewelry, toys and video games, and a Christian rock CD with music “inspired by” the film.

Disney Studios Chairman Dick Cook told the Los Angeles Times that less than 5 percent of the film’s marketing budget was designated for the Christian market. But with an estimated total marketing budget of \$75 million to \$120 million -- Disney won’t say how much -- 5 percent is a significant investment.

Mattingly said it’s possible that non-Christians could be turned off by the religious themes embedded in “Narnia.” “But they’re going to be turned off by that more from the press coverage than they are from the movie. But that’s the risk: at what point do you blow up the Christian religious connections and turn off a potential audience? That’s the teeter-totter they’re on.”

“It’s a very delicate balance, especially for the secular audience,” said Peter Sealey, adjunct professor in marketing for the Haas School of Business at UC Berkeley. “If this audience thinks Disney has slipped a religious film under their radar, they could react very negatively.”

David Bruce, founder and host of HollywoodJesus.com, a Web site that explores pop culture from a spiritual point of view, disagreed: “I’ve never met a secular person who would boycott, let’s say, ‘Ben-Hur’ just because it contained a Christian message.”

Daniel Handler, author of the “Lemony Snicket” children’s book series, was raised Jewish and read the books in second grade, “and reread them obsessively for three years. My memories of the ‘Narnia’ books is that they have everything: monsters, witches, talking animals, battles, journeys overseas, secret passageways. They’re sort of all-of-the-above adventure stories.

“I was scarcely aware of Jesus, let alone any kind of allegorical aspect to the ‘Chronicles of Narnia.’ “

According to Sealey, “All of Hollywood will be watching” to see if the two-pronged marketing approach works on such a large scale. “It is very important to Disney to keep these two media efforts balkanized and separate.”

If it works, and “Narnia” manages to successfully draw the family crowd, the sci-fi/fantasy crowd and the legions of non-moviegoers who came out for Gibson’s grisly, R-rated “Passion of the Christ,” more dual-market movies are likely. As of Thursday, “Narnia” was the overwhelming top seller on Fandango, the nation’s largest remote movie-ticketing service. Eighty-two percent of this week’s sales went to “Narnia,” with a tiny 3 percent for Peter Jackson’s “King Kong.”

Ironically, if “The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe” meets its expectations and spawns a seven-part movie franchise, it won’t be the result of any long-ago wish by C.S. Lewis. He was dubious about the virtues of transferring literature to film and worried that the freezing and literalizing of images on the big screen would stunt the imagination of his youthful readers.