

# Writer Saul Shooting for long-term pic deal

**B**estselling novelist John Saul has made a long-term alliance with Middle Fork Prods. and the Shooting Gallery that will lead the prolific author to create a TV series called "Black Mariah," turn his current Bantam bestseller "The Right Hand of Evil" into a telepic and draft his thriller "The Presence" for a feature or telepic.

Under the deal, Saul will have considerable input into adaptations and the producers will have their pick of Saul novels, which include 27 bestsellers.



Saul

Deal was constructed by Middle Fork chairman Verna Harrah and Shooting Gallery chairman Larry Meistrich as part of their agreement to partner on various projects such as the Drew Barrymore starrer "So Love Returns." The Saul agreement came out of a chance meeting between the author and MFP senior vicep Andy Fickman. It led to various ventures that will include a Web site to coincide with the TV series allowing viewers to correspond directly with Saul, who'll co-create the drama with partner Michael Sack. Saul is also discussing writing a novel specifically for the Internet, with both Web ventures through Shooting Gallery Interactive.

"Black Mariah," the first venture, is an anthology series based on an original idea by Saul and partner John Sack, in which a showrunner will be hired shortly. Saul has plans to adapt any of his own works. "A mistake most people make is thinking they are screenwriters," he said. "My ideas might work well for books, but not necessarily for TV, NOW or a feature. I look forward to working with you and not against them." Saul said they'll evaluate each idea and find its best medium. Some could go either way, like feature, like "The Homing," a novel that lures a man to Saul while he wrote it. "It's what if a microscopic insect lives in a human host and turns that person into a hive," he said. "It's a horrible idea, and I started writing the third day, and it got worse each day and took me a year after I finished to get over. It's one of my favorites."

Saul's most jazzed by the Web possibilities. "I'm convinced the Internet will revolutionize storytelling. We're trying to figure out the best way to deliver a story that exploits the technology in a way books can't. Maybe it's with music, clips, links to other sites, even pictures." His deal was made by Grade A Entertainment's Andy Cohen, Stephanie Tade at the Jane Rotrosen Agency and AMG-Renaissance's Joel Gotler.

**P**OTTER BAKEOFF: Progress on "Harry Potter" has begun since Steven Spielberg finally passed after months of vacillating over whether to direct the film. Scripter Steve Kloves is working on a second draft; his first draft was read last weekend by about 10 A-list directors. Each will take part in a creative bakeoff the likes of which hasn't been seen since Milos Forman

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made a bunch of actors film their own Andy Kaufman screen tests for "Man on the Moon."

Aspirants include newcomers Peter Weir, Wolfgang Petersen and a few others who join Rob Reiner, Jonathan Demme and Brad Silberling. Each, having read the script, will pitch his vision to WB's Alan Horn and Lorenzo Di Bonaventura, plus the pic's producer, David Heyman. WB is also exploring doing the first two pics back-to-back, the way "The Matrix" sequels are being done, possibly with the same helmer supervising both.

**K**EV CONVERGING?: "Traffic" may be out of a jam if last weekend's meeting between Kevin Costner and director Steven Soderbergh went as well as was rumored in Hollywood on Monday.



Soderbergh

With the likes of Richard Gere and Al Pacino also interested, Dish hears Costner wants to step in and play the drug czar whose plans for all-out assault against drug smugglers is tempered by his daughter's descent into crack addiction.

Harrison Ford was tempted by the role to have his lawyer work out a deal with the studio. WB reports said he dropped out of the film, but he's said he'd never committed, but agreed to make up his mind on whether to write by Steve Gaghan, ultimately deciding to do a most risky role. As with Ford, the main question for Costner will be whether he'll cut his own production fee to keep the budget manageable so Fox's marketing can keep its margins. Stay tuned.

**A**GENCY SIGNINGS: CAA has just inked Jordana Brewster, who'll be among the crop of young things on the upcoming young Hollywood cover of Vanity Fair. After doing "The Faculty" and "The '60s," she's starring with Cameron Diaz in Fine Line's "Invisible Circus." She had been at William Morris... Gersh Agency has signed Annabella Sciorra, the vet actress best known for such pics as "Hand That Rocks the Cradle" and "Copland." She's managed by Barking Dog Ent.'s Sue Leibman.

**F**ROM PJS TO WAYANS: Saladin Patterson is leaving his exec story editor post on "The PJs," to write the Marlon Wayans series vehicle set up with the Littlefield Co. and NBC Studios. That sitcom, which Eric



Costner

Gold exec produces with Littlefield, is the result of a big commitment NBC has made to Wayans. Patterson will be supervising producer if the show goes to series run. Monday, his option expired on the Imagine-produced claymation series. After Fox aired just one of 22-produced eps, it's unclear whether the web will pick it up, but the WB and UPN are interested, Dish hears. ICM's Dianne Fraser and Nancy Etz rep Patterson.

**A**SSANTE STORMING: Armand Assante is joining Benjamin Bratt in "After the Storm," a pic put together by USA Network Original Films for a feature to be first distributed by Trimark. Scripted by A.E. Hotchner, the film is an adaptation of an Ernest Hemingway short story, directed by Guy Ferland. Assante plays a guy who charts boats in the Bahamas, hired by the mob to track a local fisherman (Bratt) who stabbed him. The fisherman hooks him on a search for a sunken boat filled with jewels. Assante's rep'd by CAA and managed by Lou Pitt.

**S**TEREO TREATMENT ON MIRANDA: While MGM and Tribeca paid low six-figures for the Vanity Fair article about a mysterious woman called Miranda who had intimate phone relationships with some of Hollywood's biggest power players, the real phone lady wants the last word. Whitney Walton has made a six-figure deal to tell her story in a book for Diane Reverand, publisher of Cliffstreet Books, a Little, Brown offshoot. Deal was made by Dean Williamson of Vigliano Associates, who became obsessed with the woman after reading the VF story by Bryan Burroughs and tracked her down. After initially hanging up on the journalist, Walton decided to make the deal not so much for money as for the chance to clear up misconceptions and control her own tale. The book will feature many of the 40 celebs, pols and jocks who became her phone confidantes and the agent is looking to set up her story for a feature. Since there were multiple bidders on the VF story, there's a shot. "If you were to make a movie, wouldn't you want the whole story, from the woman's point of view?" Williamson asked.

**N**EW SHADE OF RED: Always looking for new ways to turn classic fairy tales into films, Disney has ponied up low six-figures for the spec script "Red Hood," a twist on Little Red Riding Hood that covers the title character 10 years beyond her encounter with a guy named Wolf who, after doing in Red's granny, is now terrorizing the Land of Grimm. Now 18, she goes on a revenge-motivated Wolf hunt. Pic was scripted by Ezekiel Martinez and Lee Alford and will be produced by Tova Laiter, the former Cinegrid production proxy for whom the duo interned while she produced the hit "Varsity Blues." The pair told Laiter they wanted to pitch a project and she told them to go write a script. If they were serious. Six weeks later, they had a script, a mock trailer and one-sheet and, shortly after, their first screen deal.