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INDUSTRY INSIDERS INTERVIEW WITH ITALIA GANDOLFO ON VESUVIAN

MEDIA GROUP

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Samantha Friedlander

The book publishing and visual entertainment worlds have always been connected to one another, whether it be through transforming books to movies or the other way around. These business negotiations typically require multiple different agencies going over both creative and logistical aspects of translating a written work into the visual art of film or television.

However, since 2015, Vesuvian Media Group (VMG) has incorporated both of these worlds into one business model. One half of VMG, Vesuvian Books, finds and acquires promising book manuscripts, while the other half, Vesuvian Entertainment, handles the promotion of those books to the film and television industry, as well as the rights to any merchandising and licensing. VMG is comprised of industry veterans who have decades of experience in entertainment, publishing, representation, and merchandise/licensing. VMG has a first look agreement with Boilermaker Entertainment, which allows for authors that have signed with Vesuvian Books to have producers option their work, in addition to a publishing deal. VMG has also proven itself to be a standout in the publishing industry: in 2018, Vesuvian Books was one of the finalists for Children’s Publisher of the Year Award at the



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Digital Book Awards.

In order to learn more about this unique media company, I went to the CEO, Italia Gandolfo. Ms. Gandolfo is also the founder and CEO of Gandolfo, Helin, & Fountain Literary Management. She has worked in both the book publishing and entertainment industries, and has over 20 years' media experience. Ms. Gandolfo began her career at the Creative Artists Agency as a librarian and assistant research director, then became an acquisitions manager before founding Gandolfo, Helin, & Fountain Literary Management. In addition to being Vesuvian Media Groups' CEO, she is also one of its founders.

SF: Vesuvian Media Group occupies a unique niche role in the entertainment industry; how did the idea for VMG initially come about?

IG: I began my career at Creative Artists Agency (CAA) and later worked with producers and publishers before founding GH Literary, soon to be joined by Renee Fountain, a publishing industry veteran. Working in this business, you realize Hollywood execs prefer IP (books). They request IP far more than original scripts. So, I began to focus on properties I felt were commercial and would make a natural leap from book to screen. However, I soon became aware of two obstacles. Either manuscripts I believed in would languish without being picked up by large publishing houses, or, once they were acquired, there wasn't enough nurturing to make the books rise above the fray. I felt there was a need for books to be managed from publisher to screen to have the best chance of success, especially when trying to build a series franchise. After talking to our Chairman Tom Ellsworth, an entrepreneur and former publisher, I spoke to LK Griffie about the idea of creating a corporation to do exactly that. She agreed to come on board and was followed soon after by Gareth Worthington. From there, the company just kept growing.

SF: Do you think that more media companies will move towards a similar model to the one that VMG has?

IG: There are a few media companies that encompass parts of what we do. I'm not aware of anyone with every division that we have. From Gandolfo Helin & Fountain Literary Management to Vesuvian Books, a traditional publishing arm with full-service distribution domestic and international, and an entertainment division with seasoned film/TV veterans who can take a project from development to screen.

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SF: How often do the book publishing and entertainment sides of VMG come together?

IG: Quite often as we work in tandem with producers from the beginning of the publishing process. Producers have been known to offer notes on the manuscripts in progress, to better line up with film/TV purposes.

SF: Earlier, you mentioned that the film producers offer their comments from the very beginning of the publishing process. I was just wondering, what is the step-by-step process of taking on a project for Vesuvian Media Group? Aside from the addition of input from producers and film/television experts, how different is the acquisition process from that of other publishing companies?

IG: Producers offer notes on a case by case basis. It's not every manuscript. In general, this occurs when VMG acquires a book that producers have received pitch information on and were intrigued. They'll request the manuscript to read, understanding the full editing process has not yet taken place. The authors who have been given producer notes enjoy the interaction as they work together in a way that not only enhances the story arc but gives their book an added advantage when viewed through the film/TV lens vs publishing format only. During the acquisitions phase, we always have an eye toward cinematic leaning properties that will translate well to big or small screen. To that end, we start by assessing the story. So, in the initial submission phase, we rely heavily on a synopsis of the entire manuscript to help determine commercial viability for screen, then we review further to assess whether the writing holds up.

SF: Does Gandolfo, Helin, & Fountain Literary Management work together with VMG often?

IG: On a regular basis, yes, when it comes to submitting projects for both acquisition consideration as well as film/TV submissions.

SF: What's been one of your favorite projects at VMG so far?

IG: One of the most fun projects has been *Mr. Sam Shearon's Creepy Christmas Coloring Book*. It has had quite the journey from publishing to being developed into a seasonal, family friendly TV series by Boilermaker Entertainment. Most recently, we acquired Lindy Ryan's Black Spot Books, and our next adventure is with the CFO of Leo Burnett Worldwide, Anna Gomez, who writes under the pen name Christine Brae. Anna is coming in to co-create a new imprint. More on that to come!