

THE GOD FACTOR (Should be) coming to a theater near you

by [Cathleen Falsani](#)

April 26, 2011

(RNS) This fall a film based on Donald Miller's bestselling spiritual memoir, "Blue Like Jazz," is expected to hit theaters nationwide. In many ways, Miller's book is an unlikely subject for a feature film.

"Blue Like Jazz" book is a collection of semi-autobiographical short essays based in part on Miller's experience auditing classes at Reed College in Oregon that explore the author's wrestling with questions of faith.

But the film project is part of a growing trend of adapting well-known "Christian" or Christian-themed books (both fiction and nonfiction) as feature films. Recent movies based on C.S. Lewis' "Chronicles of Narnia" series have grossed more than \$1.5 billion worldwide. Two more film adaptations of Lewis' works -- "The Screwtape Letters" and "The Great Divorce" -- are in development.

Ralph Winter, producer of the X-Men films, is set to produce the film version of "The Screwtape Letters" in a partnership with Fox and Walden Media, the studio that produced the Narnia films, as well as "Bridge to Terabithia" and "Charlotte's Web."

Fox has owned the film rights to "The Screwtape Letters" since the 1950s, and adapting Lewis' 1942 satirical novel for the big screen has been an endeavor of epic proportions. The book is composed of a series of letters from the veteran demon Screwtape to his junior "tempter" nephew, Wormwood, on the best ways to bring about the spiritual downfall of his target, a British man known simply as "the Patient."

Winter told The Christian Post last year that producers hoped to attach director Scott Dickerson ("The Exorcism of Emily Rose") to the film, which likely be rated PG-13, because it is "edgy, serious material."

While the film is on a "fast track" and a 2012 release is likely, Winter is in no hurry to get it into theaters. "I don't want to be known as the guy who ruined it," he said. "So I'm gonna go slow ... We'll get there in God's timing and when it's right."

"Screwtape" has sparked speculation about who should play the demon protagonists. Winter talked about "archetypal" actors, such as a "John Goodman-type" for the role of Screwtape, and perhaps someone wholly unexpected for Wormwood -- perhaps even an actress, such as Oscar-winner Reese Witherspoon. The film likely would not be a period piece set in 1940s Britain, Winter said, but instead feature a more contemporary setting.

While the prolific Lewis has enough material in his oeuvre to keep filmmakers busy for decades to come, his are not the only enduringly popular Christian books that could translate into powerful cinema. Here are a few humble suggestions:

"Godric" by Frederick Buechner

"Godric" is a fictional retelling of the life and travels of the medieval English saint, Godric of Finchale. Phillip Seymour Hoffman would be stunning as Godric, with Tony Hale ("Arrested Development") as his secretary/biographer and the inimitable Wallace Shawn ("Princess Bride") as Elric the wizened old hermit. (Imagine Shawn's quirky lisp delivering lines like, "My skull's a chapel. So is yours. The thoughts go in and out like godly folk to Mass. But what of hands that itch for gold?") Peter Jackson directs.

(Actor Ned Beatty holds the film rights to Buechner's epic "Book of Bebb" series about the Rev. Leo Bebb, the archetypal smarmy, corrupt preacher. Get this project to Joel and Ethan Coen, pronto, with Beatty as Bebb.)

"Operating Instructions" by Anne Lamott

Lamott's hilarious and deeply spiritual memoir about her unexpected single motherhood and the first year of her son's life would take "Christian" fodder to a new place: romantic comedy. Sandra Bullock, Catherine Keener ("The 40-year-old Virgin") or Laura Linney ("The Big C") have the strength, humor and neurotic energy to portray Lamott. Fill out the cast with the quirky soulfulness of folks like Frances McDormand, Holly Hunter, Dianne Wiest, Mark Ruffalo, Jim Broadbent and Zooey Deschanel. Nora Ephron or Nancy Meyers directs, and Sam Phillips does the musical score.

"Gilead" by Marilynne Robinson

This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel -- a fictional autobiography of the Rev. John Ames, a dying, elderly congregational minister in rural Gilead, Iowa writing to his young son -- is ripe for a cinematic retelling. I'd go with Robert Duvall or Brad Pitt as Ames, with Ryan Gosling and Cate Blanchett in supporting roles. T-Bone Burnett does the soundtrack with help from Alison Krauss and Union Station. Clint Eastwood directs.

"The Shack" by William Paul Young

In the novel, God appears to the protagonist, Mack, as three persons: "Papa," an African-American woman (who also goes by "Elouisa"); a Middle Eastern carpenter; and an Asian woman named "Sarayu."

Young has said he is working on a screenplay for "The Shack," and at least one fan website is lobbying for Queen Latifah to play "Papa/Elouisa." (If not the Queen, how about Wanda Sykes or -- do we dare -- Oprah?)

Tony Shalhoub ("Monk") would bring a great ironic soulfulness to the carpenter, and Margaret Cho an unexpected fierceness and humor to "Sarayu." Steve Carell, Greg Kinnear or Luke Wilson as Mack. Director Tom Shadyac ("Evan Almighty") would hit it out of the park.