

Local publishers helped Oscar hopeful take flight



By Brock Weir

Hollywood's best and brightest are preparing to walk the Red Carpet this Sunday for the 88th Annual Academy Awards.

For movie buffs, it is basically the Super Bowl with pools on the winners and losers, viewing parties, and post-show griping on who took home the gold.

Few people in this area will be watching the ceremony closer, however, than James Tonn, who played an instrumental part in an Oscar journey that began right here.

Fade in on the Aurora Public Library.

After several years of success in the government procurement industry, Mr. Tonn, a resident of Newmarket, felt was looking for something more.

Despite promotions and increasing responsibility in his field, there was something nagging at the back of his mind telling him to do his own thing. In fact, when he married his wife, they went into their union with a handshake deal, with full disclosure there might come a point where he would bail on his career to pursue his dream, no matter what that dream was.

They shook on it, walked down the aisle, and 10 years later, the time came for Mr. Tonn to press the button.

Heading over to the Aurora Public Library, he checked out the audiobook *The Four Hour Work Week* and was inspired to be an entrepreneur. Governed by the philosophy of *Purpose, Plan, Prosperity*, he set to work creating a plan.

At a table [at the Library] I drew out the idea for a company, he explains. *For almost two years, I developed this idea, got a friend of mine (Greg Lawrence), who was an audio book producer, and where he knew how to make audio books, I knew how to make a company and how to scale it, so why not work together to create this?*

They spent many long hours at the Library drafting their vision and, two years later, Podium Publishing was born.

With Greg's contacts, they immediately set to work. In relatively short order, they had nine or ten audio books on the shelf, but their world changed when Mr. Lawrence stumbled onto the website of author Andy Weir. It was a barebones website, says Mr. Tonn, and when Mr. Lawrence sent him the link, he raised more than an eyebrow at what was before him.

'Andy Weir was giving away his story for free on his website [and Greg] thought this should be our first fiction audio book,' says Mr. Tonn. 'I looked at it and thought this was the worst website I had ever seen! It was just blue text on a white page that said 'The Martian.' It wasn't even a PDF or an e-book. I thought he was joking!'

Greg was, nevertheless, insistent and James eventually took a look.

Won over, they contacted Weir and secured audio and print rights to the book.

At the time, Weir had the book up on Amazon for the nominal fee of 99 cents simply because there wasn't the means to upload for a free download. It might have been a good move because, with the easy access, they had a product that was already 'hitting home runs with the nerdy super fans.'

'The audio book went up and became a bestseller then, very soon after we got the rights, that's when the print publishers started to get interested,' said Mr. Tonn. 'That's when Ridley Scott and 20th Century Fox started to get interested in the film rights. The print book came out 11 months after the e-book.'

'This is a reverse tale and now we have six other audio books that are now optioned for films, HBO, or BBC type stuff.'

Now, a couple of years later, the resulting film, starring Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain and Kristen Wiig premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival this past September, spent weeks atop the North American Box and has, since its release around the world, earned more than \$620 million.

This weekend, it is up for seven Academy Awards including Best Picture, Best Actor for Matt Damon, Best Adapted Screen Play, and Best Visual Effects.

'Directors listen to audio books to see what performance can bring to a book to figure out what they should be optioning,' says Mr. Tonn, who says Podium's motto is 'The Fairest of them All.'

'We're disrupting the publishing industry with fairness. We're treating these indie authors who are giving their stuff away for free and saying, 'We can make a big partnership, we can do a lot for you, but you need to work with us and we want to do your next book.' We want to be in this for the long haul as a partner. Andy Weir has more books coming out and we're his partners on that.'