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A. Scott Berg Interview

**WIFV Q&A With A. Scott Berg,
Award-Winning Author of
*Max Perkins and the Art of Genius.***

The new film, GENIUS, directed by Michael Grandage, is based on Max Perkins and the Art of Genius, A. Scott Berg's biography of Maxwell Perkins, the renowned Scribner's book editor, who toiled for years to turn the writing of Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe into iconic American novels. Flo Dwek conducted this one-on-one interview with Berg on June 8 at the Four Seasons Hotel in Washington, DC. (For a mini review of GENIUS in the WIFV Blog, see Understanding GENIUS, Reel Corner, Flo Dwek, June 10, 2016.)

WIFV: Looking back at all of your award-winning biographies, and especially, *Max Perkins and the Art of Genius*, is there anything you would have done differently today in telling the Max Perkins story?

BERG: I don't think so. And it is very peculiar because I began this book as a senior thesis. In fact, even before it was a senior thesis, I had an idea when I was starting my sophomore year at Princeton that there was possibly a book in this man, Max Perkins. I had come across his name and his letters in the Princeton library while I was doing research on F. Scott Fitzgerald. And everywhere I turned, I kept bumping into Max Perkins. And then I realized, as I was going through Ernest Hemingway's writings and papers, there's Max Perkins; and then with Thomas Wolfe - there's Max Perkins. And one day I went to Hemingway's biographer, a man named Carlos Baker, who was teaching at Princeton, and I said, "This Max Perkins, he is everywhere. Shouldn't there be a book on him?" He said, "Scott, he is the great enigma of American literature; why don't you solve the puzzle." And that's what I did. So I began my senior thesis sophomore year. When I graduated, they told me that the thesis should be a book. And somehow, instinctively, I just had a sense of how the book should be and how Perkins' life should be the through line and all of the authors should sort of be ornaments on the Christmas tree. And somehow I just hit the structure right, I think.

WIFV: That's a great metaphor.

BERG: Yeah, it really is. I mean, it worked. It allowed me to do a kind of group portrait, but there was never any doubt who the center of the story was - it's Perkins. Because everybody had written about all of those writers, but nobody had ever written about Max Perkins. So he really was the great enigma. I never fully re-read the book in the 38 years since it has been published, but I have read chunks of it at a time. And I have never felt something like, "Oh God, if only I had done it this way." I somehow hit it, I think, at least for me.

WIFV-DC
A. Scott Berg Interview

WIFV: Let's talk now about translating your book into film. What were some of the challenges that you, as an executive producer and writer, experienced in teaming up with screenwriter John Logan and director Michael Grandage to make the film, GENIUS?

BERG: Well, most of my work on the film was with John Logan for the first ten years that he worked on it. John Logan and I had become friends in the late '90s and then into 2000, 2001, around then. And John had been a successful playwright who had just made his first film, ANY GIVEN SUNDAY, with Oliver Stone. And John and I had dinner one night, as we often did, and he said, "I would like to make a film of your book." And he knew others had tried in the past. He said, "But what I want to do is something different. I don't want to option your book." And I said, "Oh, great, so you just want the rights to my book without paying anything." He said, "No, no no, the opposite. I want to buy the rights to your book." Very unusual.

WIFV: Right.

BERG: And what I only just learned is he took all of his money that he had made on ANY GIVEN SUNDAY. He said, "I am plunking that down on this book, and would you sell me the rights?" And I said, "Well, why do you want to buy it instead of optioning?" He said, "Because if I option it, I am going to want to unload it at a studio somewhere and then we're going to have to take notes from a studio executive, probably some executive who has never read a book. And I would rather keep this just between you and me until we have a good enough script that we can go out and get a director and a cast." And that's what happened. So, for ten years, every time he finished a draft, he would send it to me and I would make notes, and we would meet again. And then, because John had such a huge career going - you know, he has written several Bond movies and got three Academy Award nominations. He'd go off and do other movies and plays - he won the Tony Award for his play *Red*. So he was always at work on things, but he kept coming back to this and moving it along, one square at a time.

WIFV: Over a decade.

BERG: Over a decade - fifteen years in the end.

WIFV: Remarkable.

BERG: And at a certain point we had a producer who helped us talk about casting and whatnot. And then we got Colin Firth, and then Colin Firth said he'd hang around, but who is the director? And then we got to Michael Grandage because Michael had directed John's play *Red* on Broadway and in London. And they were doing a couple more plays together.

WIFV: Did you have a hand in the casting?

WIFV-DC

A. Scott Berg Interview

BERG: In the casting I did, in that Colin Firth had long been my idea for Max Perkins. And this was even before [Firth's role in] *THE KING'S SPEECH*. I had been following Colin Firth for years. I just thought he was a fascinating actor. He had a great look and he's one of the very few actors who walks on the screen and you feel his intelligence. Very few actors have it. He doesn't have to say a word and you know an intelligent man is in front of you.

WIFV: Almost like Richard Burton?

BERG: Almost like Richard Burton. I will tell you, that notion I just gave you was not an original thought of mine. The first time I read that notion was when Pauline Kael said that Claude Rains had that.

WIFV: Yes, he did!

BERG: It didn't matter what part Claude Rains was playing; as soon as he walked on, you knew he was the smartest man on the screen. So I had been urging Colin Firth for a long time, and we got him. We got him. It took a while. And he said, "I'll do it, but you are going to have to wait awhile because I have got other commitments, so you if are willing to wait...", which we were. And by that time we had Michael Grandage, and Colin had wanted to work with Michael, who is one of the great directors in London today. Michael definitely wanted to work with Colin. So we had those two. And then all of the other cards began to fall into place.

WIFV: And how did you get Jude Law to play Tom Wolfe?

BERG: Well, Jude Law - that was largely through Michael Grandage, who had done several plays with him. I think they had done *Hamlet* together by then. But they had done, I think, three plays together. So again, Michael definitely wanted to work with Jude. Jude loved working with Michael, so that happened. And then somehow, we got Nicole Kidman, I think through her agent, who is also Colin's agent. I think he might have slipped her the script.

WIFV: What a coup!

BERG: What a coup. And she got in touch with Michael Grandage and said, "I have to talk to you." And I think he wasn't even sure what they were meeting about. But she said, "I want to play this part in *Genius*." So now we have people just piling on. And Guy Pierce, who I think is so touching as Scott Fitzgerald - it's a great, great performance. And Dominic West, with just one scene as Hemingway - my God! And those boys, they have got the hardest roles because they have so little screen time in which to convey an entire character. But they both pull it off. And then, of course, there is Laura Linney, who plays Mrs. Perkins. And again, the

WIFV-DC
A. Scott Berg Interview

original draft of the script had so many more scenes for her, but every moment she is on screen she is just so powerful.

WIFV: Yes, she's effervescent. In a very dark film, she is very luminous, don't you think?

BERG: She is, she always is luminous in this film. Yes, that is correct. And she really runs the gamut of emotions, too. So we have - for what is basically a small movie about a friendship between a book editor and an author - we have five or six movie stars in this big picture.

WIFV: So I gather that they all came very close to your interpretation of the characters.

BERG: Oh, absolutely.

WIFV: And close to your early depiction of them in the book?

BERG: I have been dreaming about these characters - well, for more than 40 years. And now here they all are, on the screen, and they are just as I envisioned them. They really are.

WIFV: How was it, seeing it up there on the screen?

BERG: Oh, it is a thrill every time I see it. Although I should say it is surreal for me. Because it's not as if I lived in the 1930s and knew these people, but I have dreamed about them and spent so many years writing about them and researching them. Suddenly, to see them brought to life is - it is dreamlike for me.

WIFV: It's so great that you had a vision that was actually matched by what you saw on the screen.

BERG: It definitely was. And nothing disappoints me in this movie. They really made it happen.

WIFV: Let's talk a little bit about Colin Firth. He seems to portray Perkins with a very deep sadness. In what looked like a happily married Perkins - what really contributed to his melancholy and his stiff, stoic mannerisms? How did that all come about?

BERG: Max Perkins was an 8th generation, white Anglo Saxon Protestant from New England. These are people who stifle emotions, very largely. There had been some sadness in his early life. His father died fairly young. Max had to grow up fairly early and sort of be the man of the house. So there was that element. He himself told a story of how, when he was a teenager, he was supposed to be looking after one of his neighbors up in Vermont, a

WIFV-DC

A. Scott Berg Interview

younger boy. And there was a swimming accident, in which the boy started to drown. And Max Perkins swam to shore or swam towards the shore, and suddenly turned back to rescue the boy. And in that moment, he realized he had been a coward for one moment. And he later admitted to somebody - he said, "I made a vow in that moment, which was never to refuse a responsibility." So he carried this kind of weight with him all his life. And I think that's the key to his character, working with all of these impossible authors - alcoholic, needing money, bad marriages. Whatever is going on, Max Perkins remains dutiful and responsible to all of them at all times. So I think with that comes some weight, some melancholy.

WIFV: And what about his marriage?

BERG: Well, he had five wonderful daughters - there was so much that was wonderful about the marriage, but they were a mismatch. And in fact, Louise Perkins and Max Perkins fought a lot. They were essentially not meant for each other. He was introverted, deep, literary. She was a total extrovert, a bit of a narcissist, wanted to be an actress, so she was very showy. So they inherently are not going to agree on things. And I think that contributed to the melancholy also. And so he found this safe haven working with these impossible men. He also did desperately want a son. And it comes out in the movie - that is accurate.

WIFV: Interesting - so all that work was an escape.

BERG: Absolutely. And here he adopts these young men. He adopts Thomas Wolfe, Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway.

WIFV: Perkins had such a deeply rooted emotional investment in his authors, as you have just pointed out. Would you say that is rather antiquated and long gone from the publishing world?

BERG: Yes and no. And I would say that Perkins was really the first editor to bring that to the job.

WIFV: Really?

BERG: Yes. You know, with book editors before Max Perkins - it was largely a mechanical job of preparing manuscripts for the typesetter. Max Perkins was the first one to realize the time authors really needed their editors was before the manuscript was finished. When they are losing faith in themselves, when they need money, when their marriages are falling apart. And that is where he stepped in. Now today, the book business is very different. It's much more bottom line, dollars and cents, quarterly reports. So all of that being said, you know, the requirements on a book editor are quite different. But I know many a book editor who still gets

WIFV-DC

A. Scott Berg Interview

invested in his and her author's lives, maybe not with the intensity of Max Perkins, but that is just because Max Perkins was who he was.

WIFV: He was truly one of a kind.

BERG: He was. And you know, my own book editor on the Max Perkins book used to say to me, "You know, if Max Perkins had become a plumber, he would have become the most famous, the greatest, most wonderful plumber who ever lived. Because of who he was, not because of the way he would have fitted the pipes." And I think that is accurate.

WIFV: That's a great insight.

BERG: It's true.

WIFV: Thank you so much.

BERG: You are welcome.