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Why Hollywood Types and Authors Like Wally Lamb Love Metabook

By Diane Clehane



DIANE CLEHANE AND BENJAMIN ALFONSI

I was joined today by **Benjamin Alfonsi**, the creator of Metabook, an exciting new multisensory digital publishing platform that he co-founded with publishing industry veteran **Ken Siman**, the company's publisher and editor in chief, **Christian Alfonsi**, president and CEO, and strategic advisor **Mark Andersen**.

I first learned of Metabook last year when I was introduced to Ken by **Judy Twersky** (who knows everyone) when Metabook launched with their version of **John Berendt's** worldwide bestseller, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Last week marked the release of Metabook's first original title, *I'll Take You There*, the new novel by New York Times bestselling author and **Oprah Winfrey** favorite, **Wally Lamb**, so it was time for a catch-up.

"Ken knew Wally, who saw an early version of 'Midnight,' and he wanted to do something different for his next book." Evidently, Wally is a "pop culture savant" with "an encyclopedic knowledge of television, film and music." "His CD collection numbers in the hundreds, maybe thousands," Benjamin told me.

In *I'll Take You There*, Wally taps into his well-known expertise in writing in a female voice (the book is dedicated to "Feminists everywhere of every era.") to tell the story of one man's life and the various women who shaped it against a backdrop of Hollywood. It features appearances by real-life (or in this case the ghosts of) legends, including silent film director Lois Weber and Ingrid Bergman. The protagonist, Felix, is a film scholar who runs a Monday night movie club in an old vaudeville theater. One evening he's visited by the ghost of Weber who

invites him to revisit and relive scenes from his past as they are projected onto the theater's big screen.

As a screenwriter who has done his time in "development purgatory," Benjamin likened the title to a Fellini film. "I relate everything to Italian cinema and it's like the American version of *8 1/2*."

The combination of colorful characters and the opportunity to work in a new medium were intriguing enough to get some big names to sign on to the project. **Kathleen Turner**, as Weber, headlines the cast in the audiobook, which also includes **Laura Benanti** (whose brilliant impersonation of **Melania Trump** on **Stephen Colbert's** late night talk show is sure to keep her busy for the foreseeable future), **Dana Delany** and **Jeremy Sisto**. **Elizabeth Banks** stars in and is the executive producer of *Yours Sincerely*, Lois Weber, one of two short films included in the Metabook. The film's director is Academy Award nominee **Svetlana Cvetko**.

"We were really excited about the talent we were able to attract for this," said Benjamin, as we tucked into our beet salads. "Hollywood seems very game to do more with us."

Before our main courses arrived, Benjamin pulled out his iPad for a tour of the Metabook of *I'll Take You There*. (Hey, it is Michael's after all.) Besides the dramatization of the audiobook and the accompanying digital novel, there are a slew of extras in addition to the two short documentary films, including lots of behind the scenes extras with the actors, a virtual tour of an art galley filled with pop culture- and politics-themed art curated by Wally and Benjamin and modeled on The Whitney, and an eight-song soundtrack featuring **Janis Ian's** acoustic version of her Grammy-winning classic *At Seventeen*. Other songs include *I'll Take You There*, performed by Britain's Croydon SDA Gospel Choir and *Change* by **Hélène Muddiman**.

For the reader who 'casts' their own movie versions of the books they read, Metabook offers an immersive experience not found anywhere else. Benjamin estimates the app for *I'll Take You There* gives the reader-viewer a "binge experience" and weekend's worth of entertainment — "depending on how fast you read."

Even though Metabook offers readers the opportunity to experience a title in so many different ways, Benjamin explained, "It starts with the book which is published digitally first." The app for the title is available exclusively for the iPad and iPhone in Apple's App Store for \$14.99. Metabook licenses the print versions of their books here and in the U.K. *I'll Take You There* was published by HarperCollins in the States and by Penguin/Random House in the U.K.

Benjamin explained that Metabook authors receive advances like they would from "normal publishers" and "participate very generously" in the profits from the licensing agreements with the company's print publishing partners.

"We have created a different genre," said Benjamin, who told me plans for 2017 include publishing **Gregg Olsen's** next true crime title as well as introducing a 'Classics Collection' that will include works like *The Scarlet Letter* that are sure to entice educators, eager to explore how Metabook can be used in the classroom.

"The most exciting thing about being involved with this is that we're doing something completely original," said Benjamin as we finished up our coffee. "We did a full page ad in last week's New York Times' Book Review announcing we're here. It's like sticking our flag on the moon."

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