

Russell Banks and Denis Villeneuve part ways

Author of Africa novel *The Darling* looking for another director

By Jeff Heinrich

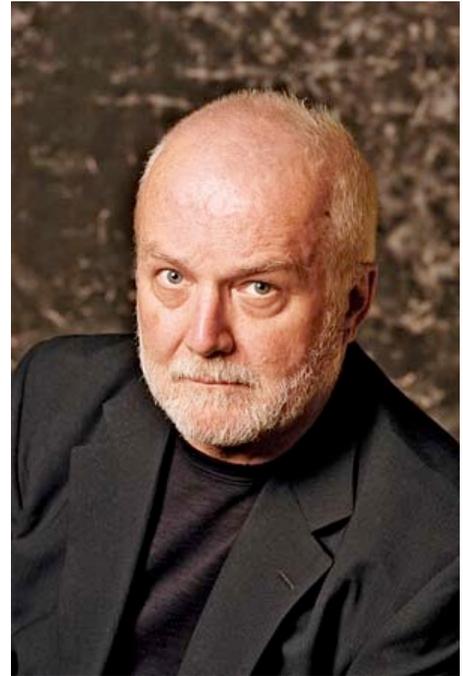
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Sometimes the talented people you've lined up to do your movie just get too busy with other things and it never gets done.

Just ask Russell Banks.

The acclaimed American novelist says he's looking for a new director to film his 2004 book *The Darling*, after Denis Villeneuve bailed on the project.

Villeneuve, a Quebec filmmaker, catapulted from indie status into the Hollywood big time with movies like *Prisoners*, *Enemy* and the upcoming *Sicario*.



Russell Banks

But with his latest film set to premiere at Cannes in mid-May, another shooting in Montreal in June and his biggest yet – the sequel to *Blade Runner* – in the works, he's too hot right now to handle Banks' book.

So the New York novelist is looking elsewhere.

"I want to find someone who's where he was three years ago, before he got big in Hollywood, someone who's still making independent films," Banks confided at a book signing April 25 in Montreal.

In town for the Blue Metropolis literary festival, the 75-year-old writer sat down over a meal with Villeneuve and they discussed what's to become of *The Darling*, a novel set in West Africa.

The two started working together on an adaptation three years ago, with Banks writing the screenplay and Villeneuve recruiting big-name actors and producers for the project.



Denis Villeneuve

At one point, Jessica Chastain was to play the book's heroine, Hannah, a former Weather Underground radical who flees to Ghana and Liberia, marries a local government official and starts a new life.

Famous director Martin Scorsese was at one point going to executive-produce, and A-list Australian actress Cate Blanchett was also reportedly involved.

Villeneuve seemed a perfect fit to direct, coming off the success of his Oscar-nominated *Incendies* in 2010, whose protagonist was a female radical (from Lebanon) who emigrates to a new life (in Canada).

Was it hard to get financing for a thriller whose lead character is a woman? Villeneuve hinted as much in mid-April during a promotional pitch for *Sicario* before heading to compete at Cannes.

The film stars Emily Blunt as an FBI agent who hunts down a drug baron across the border in Mexico. The movie was a tough sell at first, Villeneuve said.

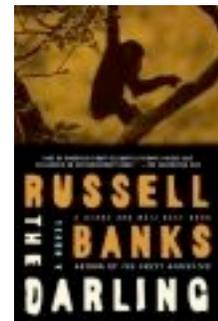
Sicario's financial backers wanted Blunt's role to be re-written into a part for man. Villeneuve and his first-time screenwriter, Taylor Sheridan (Sons of Anarchy) refused.

"It isn't easy to get a film made where the protagonist is a woman – there's less money, people are afraid, and it's really sad that it's still like that today," Villeneuve said. "It's ludicrous."

Two other Banks novels have been made into critically acclaimed feature films. In 1997, Toronto director Atom Egoyan got two Oscar nominations for helming and adapting *The Sweet Hereafter*, starring Ian Holm and Sarah Polley. The following year, Paul Schrader directed *Affliction*, which earned a supporting-actor win for James Coburn and a best-actor nomination for Nick Nolte.

But Villeneuve proved elusive, too hot to commit. After *Incendies* came a couple of back-to-back thrillers in 2013:

Prisoners, with Hugh Jackman, and *Enemy*, with Jake Gyllenhaal. After *Sicario*, in June he'll start shooting the sci-fi thriller *Story of Your Life*, adapted from an award-winning short story by Ted Chiang and starring Amy Adams. After that, he's scheduled to shoot the sequel to Ridley Scott's 1982 sci-fi blockbuster *Blade Runner*.



Would Banks work with another Quebec director who's familiar with the big-time – someone like, say, Kim Nguyen, who was Oscar-nominated in 2012 for the African child-soldier movie *War Witch*?

"No, not Quebec," the author said before heading back down the highway to his home in upstate New York. "Probably the States. We'll see."

