

# READ ALL ABOUT IT

Lauren John digs into the world of the film tie-in book...

In the DVD extras for the movie *The Greatest Showman*, director Michael Gracey is quoted as saying “I’m a big believer in people watching the film more than once, so there are a lot of things in the film where on the fourth, fifth or sixth time through you go ‘oh that’s what’s going in the background’ or ‘oh I didn’t see that snake before’.”

An official companion book should follow the same path. You should be discovering new things about the plot, gaining some insight into how the film was made, and celebrating all the moments that made you pick up the book in the first place. But are film companion books really like this, or are they page filler heavy and designed just to make extra revenue? As someone who has never read or bought a film companion book before I decided to find out.

As such, I got hold of a range of books, spread over the last three decades or so of cinema. Thus, I procured the making of books for *Batman* (published 1989), *Gladiator* (2000), *The Golden Compass* (2007), *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them* (2016), and *The Greatest Showman* (2018). Five different books, and while the movies

can all lay claim to having some impact, their companion books didn’t all live up to that reputation.

## Sandals

*Gladiator: The Making Of The Ridley Scott Epic* started well with a meaningful foreword by Ridley Scott, but then swiftly descended into what I can only describe as a cross between an encyclopaedia of Roman history and a school lesson I couldn’t wait to get out of. There were some high points, but the overly formal language and almost too much historical detail to take in (which didn’t link to what was seen on screen enough) made this all quite unsatisfying.

Ridley Scott is quoted in this book as saying “with history, your challenge is to see how accurate you can be” but it isn’t until page 42 that the reader is reminded that *Gladiator* is a fictional story and very few of the main characters lived.

The general feeling I got throughout this book is of a tome up against an impending deadline.

It’s a book alive with frustrations. From the scattergun approach to photo placement, where the mix of production sketches and film stills don’t quite fit together, and film industry speak that wasn’t



explained, to hints of on-set stories that were never elaborated upon. Bottom line, I just wanted more.

But even here, there were nuggets. In the middle of the book came insight into the visual and special effects, and this was the material I really enjoyed. My attention was captured by the props and animatronics photos, I read every word about the smoke and explosions, prosthetic and stunt teams, and the realities of using real animals. Unfortunately, the book ended by wasting pages on excerpts of the script and full end credits. But that's an old trick: pad it out a bit. The full script would be great. The odd snippet for page-filling purposes? Less impressive. I thus opted to move onto *Batman*.

In the making of for the 1989 movie, instantly you're given lots of material on how far the character goes back, and the marked differences between the comics and TV series. There was also some background into Tim Burton (including his time with Disney) and the long-winded reality of bringing some films to the big screen.

The 'Batman In Action' section of the book was a nice touch. It's easy to follow for anyone wanting to revisit the plot, and the nostalgia trip through scenes of Gotham City will interest fans of the film, TV show or comics alike. Design elements are also a key feature of this book, with gadget enthusiasts well served with close-ups of weapons and detail on design influences for the buildings seen on screen.

Where it fell flat was in the observational details; it was like reading a conversation that went off on a tangent rather than insider chat. As such, for a making of book, it was a bit odd to follow, but the author nonetheless has a real talent for bringing larger than life characters like the Joker alive.

### His Best Materials

Where the *Batman* book brought some elements of the film alive in grand style, *The Golden Compass* book delivered them all. The film may be, politely, a muddle, but the making of is a high bar. In fact, Brian Sibley's narrative was the only one of the five books I felt stood tall as a standalone read.

I didn't expect to give credit to a contents page, but the titles and details made me want to read more before I'd even started, and that feeling continued. The text was presented alongside stunning photos and illustrations, and the reference to Disney and



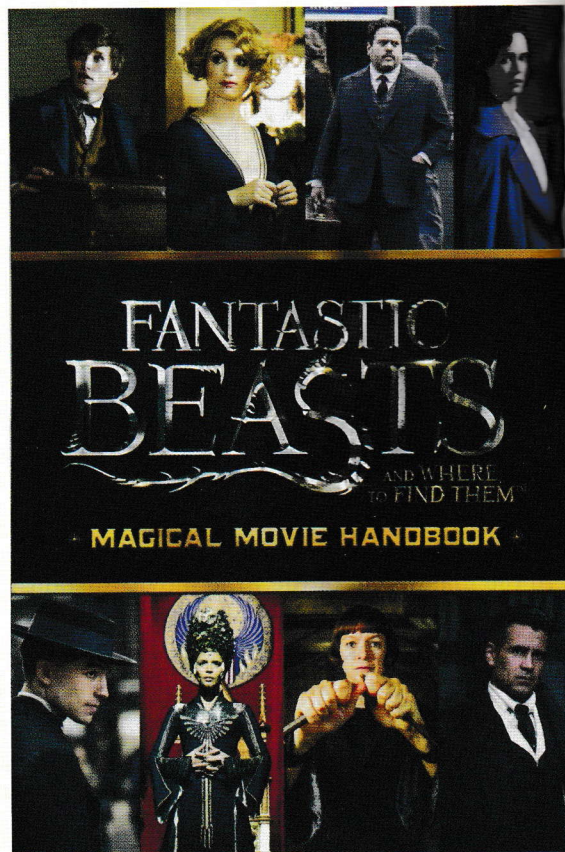
how it first introduced storyboarding were welcome bonuses.

The author here created a page-turner with just the right amount of detail on topics like previous actor credits and research to keep me interested, which other books have overdone. Reflecting the attention to detail in the actual film should be a key feature of any film book too, and this one achieved that. From insight into props that the filmgoer won't see, such as coins and newspapers, to the process of animating ice bears it was absorbing, and in some cases surprising. For instance, six pages were dedicated to hair and make-up, which on the surface did not seem that complicated, but *The Golden Compass* book makes it all really quite fascinating.

More recently, the making of book for *Fantastic Beasts And Where To Find Them* also has a unique style and place, and the book is heavily themed to reflect that. Given the level of decorative design in this hardback, I was expecting it to be style over substance, and although it wasn't quite that it did have a few failings.

Some material seemed to focus quite heavily on extolling the virtues of crew and director, rather than celebrating the film or how they work. In other sections, it felt like reading an overlong synopsis or study notes to accompany an English set text. This vague observational concept made some parts hard to follow without referring back to the film, especially the section dedicated to the 'Fantastic Beasts', which after all are at the heart of the whole film.

Luckily, the photos provided style and substance, helping to bring to

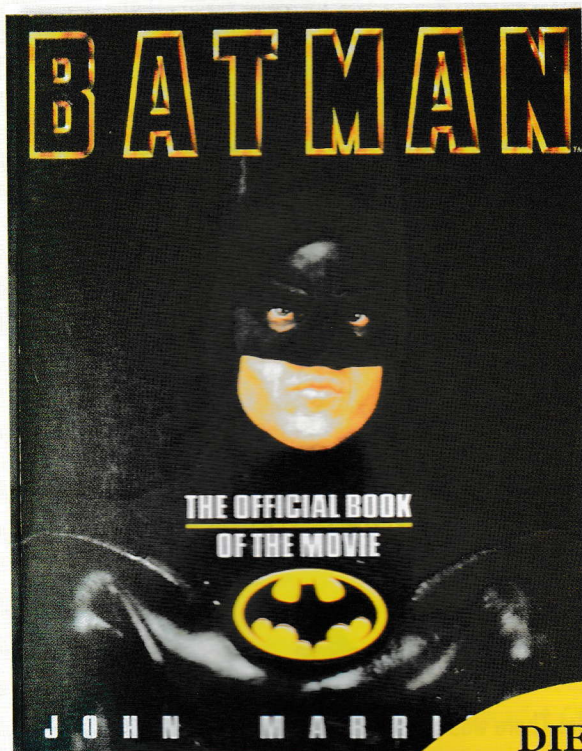


life various details in the sets that you wouldn't notice on screen (and anyone who's gone on the excellent Harry Potter studio tour in Leavesden will know just what details there are to be found). Details in the Goldstein's apartment, creating the 'authentic stream of traffic', and the backlot New York set were all featured. The beasts may be 'fantastic', but it's the work that went into choosing the case that they called home, and imagining the science and tech behind some of the other props and sets, that made this book sparkle.

### This Is Me

Out of the five films, it's the magic, energy, and life in *The Greatest Showman* I'm most familiar with. I've been there, done that, and bought the T-shirt (or the DVD, soundtrack, and this companion book anyway), but it was the book I was most sceptical about. The film had quite a story





**DIE HARD**

Perhaps time needs to pass for a full insight into a movie. Take Titan's stunning *Die Hard* book, which goes in turn through the production of the four films and that strange fan fiction one they released in 2013. Its level of detail and access – pretty much warts and all – is extraordinary. It sets a very high bar, which a tie-in released around the time of a movie's original release is always going to struggle to match...

behind it, but would the making of book tell it?

Well, the engaging introduction gave a sense of how invested everyone was in the film, how unique it was, and what went into getting it green-lit through to pre-production. Input from Hugh Jackman and his fondness for the character P.T Barnum was another reminder of how much of a passion project this was and why it became a box office hit.

*The Greatest Showman* bubble did burst when I started reading the text. I don't know if it was lack of access or a focus elsewhere, but beyond the big bold headings and quotes that announced some chapters, there was a lack of new, original insights. An expensive press kit, basically. The chapter on Charity Hallett, for example, had eight photos (on a double-page spread), but just one small paragraph of text.

This was a book ultimately all about the art, and it delivered that on a beautiful scale. What it lacked in insight, it made up for with pictures. The concept art and close-up photos of character costumes were stunning, with behind-the-scenes shots offering some insight

into sets and special effects, where the text failed. As a fan of the movie soundtrack, I also appreciated the songwriters' notebook and lyrics. It was style over substance in some respects, but the style was still worth investing in, even if I had to revisit the DVD extras for everything else.

Going into this, I wondered if the newer books would be more commercial fluff than content-heavy, and I think in some respects there is truth behind this theory. But it also depends on what you want to get out of the books as a reader. For me, these were a (sometimes frustrating) mix of unanswered questions, vague details, and repurposed promo, sprinkled with some beautiful storytelling, illustration, and details that kept me reading. Would I read them again? Definitely not, but there's much more to film companion books than meets the eye. Weeks later, I'm still fascinated by the long-winded process that went into choosing Newt's case in *Fantastic Beasts*. The devil is in the detail, be it good, bad, or in some cases boring. 📖