

Writer cracks

HOLLYWOOD



VIOLENTLY HAPPY – Roger Smith

South African writer, Roger Smith, says he was extremely lucky to get his break in films with his book, *Mixed Blood*, which was taken up quickly and enthusiastically by Hollywood. Los Angeles-based A Bigger Boat and GreeneStreet Films and Sidney Kimmel Entertainment will co-finance and produce *Mixed Blood* which is scheduled to go into production in Cape Town in 2010.

Samuel L Jackson will act as one of

the producers on the project through his production company, Uppity Films. FilmNation will handle worldwide sales through its partnership with A Bigger Boat and GreenStreet Films.

The film will be directed by Phillip Noyce (*Salt, Rabbit Proof Fence, Patriot Games, Clear and Present Danger, Catch a Fire* and the *Quiet American*) and will co-star Samuel L Jackson.

Smith, who lives in Cape Town, says that his background is as a screenwriter for TV and feature films. "I decided to take four months off work in 2007 and wrote *Mixed Blood*. I then got 200 e-mail addresses of agents in the States. Surprisingly I got a very good response and chose leading New York agent, Alice Martell to represent me. The nice thing is that when I wrote the book I really had no expectations."

This encounter was the beginning of the journey. "My agent then took the book to all the leading American publishing houses and within three weeks we had signed a deal with Henry Holt & Company. My agent also works with Jody Hotchkiss (*Kite Runner, American Gangster*) who is instrumental

in getting books to Hollywood studios and into the industry. Let's say he is very well connected. The book landed up on Samuel L Jackson's desk and he fell in love with the story and that really was the hook. Jackson wants to act as one of the producers and is also going to play one of the leads as Disaster Zondi."

Smith elaborates that the film is very violent. "It deals with the Cape Flats and the gangs but also the up-market side of Cape Town. The story is an ensemble piece with many lives interacting with one another. Regarding my influences as a writer, I love the

American crime writers, Jim Thompson, Richard Stark, etc."

The story is about an American hiding out in Cape Town after being blackmailed into a bank heist back home. He tries to build a new life for his family when an incident of random violence sets him on a collision course with street gangs and a rogue cop who loves killing almost as much as he loves Jesus Christ.

Smith adds that he believes the interest in the novel also resides in the fact that it is cinematic in its narrative and structure. "The pace is fast, there

are lots of different scenes, interesting characters and the settings change from well-to-do Atlantic style sea-board living to the Cape Flats. Many people have said it is too violent but I think part of the attraction for an American audience and the guys who have picked it up, is that it shows a different side to South African life, something that is brutal. I think people are fascinated by this world."

The novel is being adapted into a screenplay by Kelly Masterson (*Better The Devil Knows You're Dead*). "I am confident that he will do a great job. I also am well aware that a novel is a different beast to a screenplay, so in that way I really respect the art of the different disciplines and have no urge to get involved with the film. However if I were asked to help with research, I would have no problem in offering assistance. I look forward to watching the film with a box of popcorn in my hands."

Smith elaborates that he finds it quite funny that even though he has been a screenwriter in South Africa it will be his novels that really contribute to the industry and his professional career. "I am writing a second novel called *Wake Up Dead* and already Hotchkiss has said this will make a great film. It is even more violent than *Mixed Blood* but has lots of other elements which make life what it is: humour, beauty, darkness and light." 🍿

