

Rising 'Passion' for merchandise

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What a difference a year makes. Last year, Mel Gibson's film "The Passion of the Christ" -- with a budget of \$25 million and a subtitled script in Aramaic and Latin -- was seen as a major gamble.

If the film was risky, it was an even bigger gamble to develop merchandise based on the film. Movie tie-in items are now available, the first ever for a religious film that isn't animated. And perhaps even more surprising, "Passion" merchandise is selling quite well.

Not even a prophet would have predicted that the film's soundtrack would climb to No. 2 on Amazon.com's top sellers list, for instance. And it's consumer interest -- not divine intervention -- propelling a coffee-table book called *The Passion* (Tyndale Press, \$24.99), featuring scenes from the film alongside scripture, to No. 11 on that same list.

The book is selling well in Christian bookstores in the Chicago area. It's a bit of a windfall for Carol Stream-based publisher Tyndale House. Already in its third printing, the book has sold more than 150,000 copies, and the west suburban publisher said it hopes to have another 250,000 in print before the end of March.

Dan Balow, Tyndale House's executive director, said his company initially felt it was taking a huge risk printing 150,000.

"No one anticipated the level of interest. We thought the original print run would be more than enough to meet demand," Balow said.

It's a gamble that is paying off. Staffers at Vine and Branches, a Christian bookstore in Naperville, for instance, ordered 24 copies of *The Passion*, which also features a foreword written by Mel Gibson. The store sold out of all its copies within a week.

"I've heard they're out of them until mid-March," Vine and Branches saleswoman Judy Schroeder said.

Another book that has benefitted from its relationship with Gibson's film is *The Dolorous Passion of our Lord Jesus Christ* by Sister Anne Catherine Emmerich (Tan Books & Publishers, \$18). Originally published 170 years ago, Gibson used the text in part for the basis of his film and it went from 201 to 64 on Amazon.com on the eve of the film's release.

Around the country, the "it" item from the film is a pendant that features a scale reproduction of a nail much like the ones used in the film's crucifixion scene. Made of pewter, it is inscribed with "Isaiah 53:5" in reference to the Biblical passage seen during the opening of the film.

Bob Seimon Designs -- the Christian jewelry company responsible for past crazes like the guardian angel lapel pins and "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets -- is the manufacturer of the

nail pendant and other "Passion" licensed products. The two sizes -- a nail on a 20-inch cord for \$12.99, a larger one on a 24-inch chain for \$16.99 -- have shipped more than 75,000 of the pendants to Christian bookstores nationwide. Dwight Robinson, director of marketing for Siemon designs says staffers have been working late on double shifts to keep up with the demand.

Even so, good luck finding the pendant in Chicago's Christian bookstores, where only a handful are carrying the item.

"We're getting calls for the product," said Jeff Lennard, manager of the Covenant Book Store. "Unfortunately, we don't have any of it in stock."

Neither Tyndale House nor Siemon Designs would disclose just how much they paid for the licensing, but with the positive buzz from the film no doubt translating to great box office, Gibson - who produced the film with his own money -- might just be sitting on a Christian cash cow.

Robinson says it's nice to make money, but that was never Siemon's goal.

"We didn't want to turn this into another example of movie merchandising," Robinson said.

Along those lines, Robinson said Siemon Designs has given back to the Christian community through a program that distributed free of charge 100,000 of the witness cards and 50,000 of the cross lapel pins to churches nationwide.

"Our goal isn't to grow profits, but rather spirituality," Robinson said.

The items above are for sale at www.sharethepassionofthechrist.com.