

Film on post-Dec. 7 friendship is casting in isles

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Moviemakers are looking for young actors to play roles in "Under the Blood Red Sun"

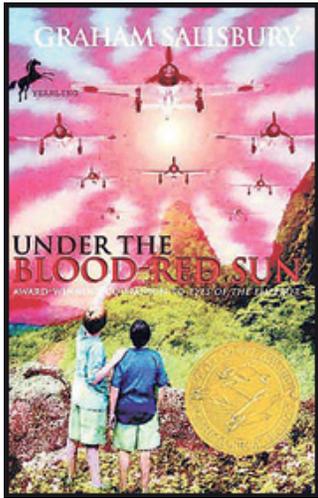
By Mike Gordon

As Hawaii actors ponder rumors about bit parts in a remake of "Godzilla" and grouse over a failed effort to revive the "Jurassic Park" franchise, the lead roles in a beloved local story will be up for grabs.

"Under the Blood Red Sun," Graham "Sandy" Salisbury's novel of childhood friendship after the attack on Pearl Harbor, will be shot in Hawaii as an independent feature film in October. Casting is set to begin this weekend and the producers hope to find the story's main characters, Tomi and Billy, among Hawaii's sea of middle school boys.

Salisbury's novel, published in 1995, has been popular among tweens, the 11- and 12-year-olds who are about the same age as the novel's main characters. "Under the Blood Red Sun" is required reading in middle school classrooms nationwide and has been read by 3 million students, according to Random House, which owns the publishing rights to the story.

They are drawn to Tomikazu "Tomi" Nakaji, an American-born 13-year-old boy whose idyllic life is turned upside down by World War II and the internment of his father, grandfather and many other leaders in the Japanese community. Tomi, who worries that Billy, a mainland boy whose family moved to Hawaii, will no longer be his best friend, has to reconcile his heritage and his American identity in a time of fear and suspicion.



"The story is about the effects of the attack on their friendship, their family and the community," said film producer Dana Hankins, who optioned the rights to the story not long after the book came out. "The underlying themes are prejudice and discrimination and how the young lead, Tomi, has to work through how his world has changed."

In truth, she could probably find Billy anywhere, but her best shot at finding a believable Tomi is to look here, she said.

"He has to understand the time period," she said. "It is unlikely that I will find someone who has grown up on Nintendo. It needs to be an old soul. Growing up in Hawaii and unique culture it holds, it is more likely we will find the person here."

The film's production team compares "Under the Blood Red Sun" to the coming-of-age tales "Stand By Me" and "Holes" but with a local flavor that Salisbury often tapped in his many novels.

The 69-year-old author spent the first 12 years of his life in Kaneohe and Kailua before his mother moved with his stepfather to Kailua-Kona, where he lived until he was 19. As an author of juvenile fiction, he has sometimes touched on that time period, and his Calvin Coconut series for young children is set at Kailua Elementary, where Salisbury went to school.

Even though he has lived in Portland, Ore., since 1985, he still considers himself a Hawaii author.

Salisbury has visited classrooms all over the country to discuss "Under the Blood Red Sun," which he is amazed to still see on summer reading lists.

"Schools find it a great tool to lead into history and also a great tool to talk about certain values, things I am interested in — loyalty and friendship and character," Salisbury said in a phone interview.

THE POWER of the story, which he hopes will translate to the screen, is the tense relationship between Tomi and a

bully named Keet. Tomi would like nothing better than to take a swing at Keet but that would shame his family. It's a plot that appeals to young readers — and hopefully to young moviegoers, Salisbury said.

"Tomi has to hold himself back and at the end of the story he has to stand up and do something — and he does — and I think the kids like that," the author said.

Salisbury wrote the screenplay, the only one he has ever written.

"I had to adjust the story to make it more cinematic," he said. "In a book you have lots of room to wander. In a film, it needs more of a film structure and I had to write a new ending to give it more closure."

Salisbury and Hankins tried twice before to turn the story into a film.

Hankins boasts Hollywood film credits that stretch back to 1981 and include "The Tempest," "Picture Bride," "Bird on a Wire" and "Blue Thunder," as well as the indie film by Brett Wagner, "Chief." Although the 53-year-old producer and her husband moved to Portland two years ago, she had worked in Hawaii for 20 years and felt that would help her case.

When she first pitched the idea about 15 years ago, the studios told her it was a great story but they didn't like that it was historical fiction and would rely on young, unknown leads. They also didn't think it was edgy, Hankins said.

"There was no sex, drugs or violence or Harry Potter broomsticks," she said. "It is just a story about two boys, about friendship."

Hankins tried again five years ago, scaling back the estimated cost from \$5 million to \$2 million as she sought funding from Hawaii-based investors who could take advantage of tax credits. She failed again.

This time, however, they've raised money through a nonprofit partner, Hawaii Community Television, Hankins said. Their budget is also smaller: less than \$1 million.

Casting in Hawaii is being handled by Katie Doyle and will take place this summer. There will be other casting calls on the mainland.

Doyle put the word out several weeks ago for the first two sessions — Saturday and Sunday — and those are all being done by appointment. She is trying to cast 22 parts across all age groups, she said.

"We are going to be doing a huge search," she said. "We really want to cast most of the movie here. It takes place here and it makes sense."

Doyle fell in love with "Under the Blood Red Sun" when her 12-year-old son read it earlier this year in school. It prompted moving dinner-table conversations that made them forget it was a story about middle-school students.

She could see the universal appeal of "Under the Blood Red Sun" as her son talked about his friends. She could see a powerful role for some young boy.

"I think for my son it really became about loyalty and friendship and what it means and what length you would go to be a friend," she said. "And how quickly things you think of as normal can turn topsy-turvy."

To request an appointment with casting director Katie Doyle, send a photo, contact information, height, weight, clothing sizes and experience to bloodredcasting@gmail.com.

For more information about "Under the Red Sun" production: www.facebook.com/redsunmovie