

FEATURE | *Read Between the Lines*



FINDING *FAVOR*

KAREN KINGSBURY'S JOURNEY FROM AUTHOR TO FILMMAKER

BY DOMINIQUE PAUL | PHOTOGRAPHY BY HOPE HICKMAN
& KAREN KINGSBURY PRODUCTIONS



It began innocently enough, during the late summer of 2010. Best-selling author Karen Kingsbury was in Nashville for a stop on her book tour when her agent told her about a unique bookstore located in the sleepy town of Franklin, Tennessee. “You must let me take you!” the agent implored. Upon entering Landmark Booksellers, located in the historic building on East Main Street where Andrew Jackson is rumored to haunt, Karen instantly fell in love. “I fell in love with the owners, Joel and Carol Tomlin, and with the bookstore itself... It’s filled with so many rare and precious books!”

It was just months after the historic floods of 2010 and Karen’s writer wheels immediately started turning. “What if the floods had reached this bookstore? What if this town came together to help them survive?” she wondered. An inspired Karen returned to her home in Vancouver and wrote her New York Times bestselling novel, *The Bridge*, which was later turned into a Hallmark movie in 2016.

A little-known fact about Karen is that she is also a songwriter, although she is too humble to call herself that. “I’m more of a poet,” she says. “Then someone far more talented than I am turns it into three and a half minutes of genius.” Kingsbury has co-written songs for Marie Osmond, Lonestar and others, and it was during one of these songwriting trips to Nashville that she realized she wanted to relocate to Franklin full-time. “It didn’t make any sense,” she told me. “We’d just built our home in Vancouver. But everything was pointing us to Franklin, and so we moved here in August 2011.”

In 2020, Karen learned that the bookstore that originally drew her to Franklin was in trouble. The Tomlin’s have enjoyed some notoriety since the release of *The Bridge*, with fans coming into the store to take photos with the couple who provided Kingsbury’s inspiration. But with the world shut down due to COVID-19, Karen reached out to her friends to see how they were faring. “Joel told me they might have to close down for good, as they depend on downtown foot traffic to survive,” she said. So, Kingsbury got to work on what she calls “life imitating art, a community coming together to save the bookstore.” Karen arranged for her upcoming novel, *Someone Like You*, to be available for pre-order on Landmark’s website. Then she asked her social media followers to pre-order the book from Landmark Booksellers directly -and she would personally sign each book and include a keepsake bookmark. The strategy worked.

Karen posted her plea at 3pm and by 10pm, Landmark Booksellers

had made over \$50,000 in online sales. Joel Tomlin calls Karen his “guardian angel,” but the ever-humble Karen sees the relationship as mutually beneficial, saying, “A community should hold hands to get through something like the pandemic.”

As if writing almost 100 novels and short stories and selling over 25-million books isn’t enough, in 2022, Karen launched Karen Kingsbury Productions. In 2023, the company made its first feature film with *Someone Like You*, based on Karen’s book of the same title. The story follows young architect Dawson Gage who, after the tragic death of his best friend, London Quinn, launches an impossible search for her secret twin sister, twins separated as embryos. The film explores the very timely topic of embryo adoption, which is a subject close to Karen’s heart as her One Chance Foundation has given several grants to embryo adoptions.

Anyone who knows will tell you that making an independent film is impossibly hard, with tight budgets and even tighter schedules. In fact, Karen calls the endeavor “the biggest challenge of her life.” For starters, Karen and her husband Don paid for the film’s entire \$2M budget themselves. “With movies, everything wants to go wrong... We prayed every day for wisdom and favor,” she says. “Well, we pray for favor but we keep our feet moving.” As if to illustrate this point, Karen and her son, Tyler Russell, completed the screenplay in three weeks’ time. Next, she approached Tyler about directing the film. “Tyler attended film school at Lipscomb and I really felt that he was ready. He almost said no! But we convinced him to do it.”

The filmmakers knew they wanted to film the movie locally and they partnered with local veteran producer, Natalie Ruffino Wilson, who helped them pull together other local crew members. “People are fleeing California as quick as they can, and they’re bringing their creativity with them,” said Karen. As such, there was a large talent pool to choose from, and most of the key crew were locals. The film stars Sarah Fisher, Jake Allyn, Robyn Lively, Scott Reeves and Lynn Collins who were chosen from thousands of actors that auditioned for the roles. Residents of Williamson County will recognize downtown Franklin and surrounding neighborhoods in the film, as well as Camp Widjiwagan on Old Hickory Lake. The film shot in five weeks and came in on budget -no easy feat. Director Tyler Russell also served as music supervisor for the film, using excellent instincts with the placement of local songwriter Hannah Holbrook’s hauntingly beautiful song, “You Should Let Me Love You” during the film’s key dramatic scene.

As Executive Producer and Co-Writer, Kingsbury had a hand in all the creative decisions for the film, making mood boards for everything from wardrobe to locations to set decorations, and

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Karen Kingsbury
at the premiere of
Someone Like You.

she says she is thrilled with how the film turned out. "Everyone did an amazing job! I couldn't be more pleased. I just think it's so beautiful!"

Just days before *Someone Like You* was scheduled to premiere at the Franklin Theatre, Karen's friend, actor-producer Roma Downey, called her with some news. *The Baxter's*, the TV series based on Karen's beloved book series, was finally going to make it to the screen after languishing on the shelf, finished, for six years. "We'd prayed about *The Baxter's* for five or six years... MGM had put up the money for Roma to launch her own streaming service -but that didn't happen. So, the show didn't have a home. Then, Amazon's \$9B purchase of MGM meant the show would be made available to view on Prime Video. At first, I worried the series and the movie would compete with one another, but instead they lifted each other up!"

After the star-studded red-carpet premiere of *Someone Like You* in downtown Franklin, the film hit theatres to rave reviews. It currently has an astounding 96% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes and the film's nationwide theatrical release was just extended for several more weeks.



Sarah Fisher, who plays
London Quinn, at the
premiere of *Someone Like You*.

Karen says she is currently exploring which of her many titles to bring to the big screen next, and loves the idea of making a period piece.

When I asked Karen what she loved most about living in Williamson County, she told me that she loves how it feels like "one big church picnic. We look out for each other here." She also added, "There's a church on nearly every corner, so if you're struggling, go there. There will be someone who will help you."

It seems fitting that when I asked her about herself, she immediately made it about someone else.

To learn more, visit karenkingsbury.com and someonelikeyou.movie