

Jacob Tremblay
and Julia Roberts

the world of

HOW **JULIA ROBERTS** AND DIRECTOR **STEPHEN CHBOSKY** TURNED AN AWARD-WINNING YOUNG-ADULT BOOK INTO A GENTLE GEM ABOUT THE POWER OF KINDNESS AND FAMILY. TAKE THAT, HOLLYWOOD. By Kevin P. Sullivan @kpsull

wonder



(Clockwise from far left) Noah Jupe, Tremblay, Kyle Harrison Breitkopf, Ty Consiglio, and James Hughes; Owen Wilson, Roberts, and Tremblay; the 2012 best-seller, Tremblay with author R.J. Palacio

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MOVIES WORK—OR AT LEAST GOOD ONES do—because of two concepts: vision and empathy. We see a person on the screen. The character inhabits a physical space and comes complete with foibles, loves, and quirks. And we care. We know it's a trick. We know this character is not real. Yet for those two hours we see the world through a different set of eyes.

That's what R.J. Palacio hoped to do with her first book, *Wonder*. It's why the publishing professional tapped out her YA novel every night from midnight to 3 a.m., while her children slept. The book follows Auggie Pullman, a fifth grader who's more comfortable living life wearing his toy

astronaut helmet because of his craniofacial difference that draws stares wherever he goes. For years, he's been homeschooled while undergoing dozens of surgeries, but when *Wonder* opens, he's about to enter a neighborhood school for the first time.

Since its publication in 2012, *Wonder* has provided a series of surprises for Palacio. She never expected the book to be published or to become a hit or to have it pop up in school curricula. It certainly was never going to be a movie, and even if it were, it would be some tiny indie without a movie star in sight.

But *Wonder* had a few wonders of its own in store. Palacio's little novel has now become a big film (out Nov. 17), starring Jacob Tremblay (*Room*) as Auggie and Julia Roberts and Owen Wilson as his parents. Even if the arc of *Wonder*'s success wasn't terribly unusual—from best-seller to movie—the journey from page to screen was complicated and fraught with legitimate anxieties. “My big fear was that if not done well, it could be one of those ‘cue the violin’ movies,” the author says. Sentimentality, it turns out, was only the start of her concerns.

Wonder seized Hollywood's attention shortly before the book debuted, and Palacio and her agent spoke with several producers who were interested in optioning it. Each had a different idea of how to portray Auggie, but few wanted to be matter-of-fact about his facial appearance, which includes scarring from corrective surgeries, downward-pulled eyes, and underdeveloped ears. One suggested making an animated movie. Or maybe Auggie's face would only be revealed in the last shot. Another thought it could be told with a first-person perspective, *Hardcore Henry*-style. None of these satisfied Palacio or matched the book's intention. “That [facial] difference sets up the whole premise of the book, so we couldn't shy away from it,” Palacio says. “We couldn't be coy.”

WHEN JULIA ROBERTS RETURNED FROM HER YEARLY FAMILY vacation in 2015, she told her kids they were pressing pause on the book they'd been reading at bedtime. She had read *Wonder* on the plane, and they were going to start reading it aloud that night. “I loved what [Palacio] was sharing and what she was teaching without saying, ‘You should be more compassionate,’” Roberts recalls. “She was just doing it in this really beautiful way, saying, ‘How about this option for your internal compass: Just be kind.’”

Roberts assumed that a film was in the works. It had to be. The book had already been on shelves for three years, and “Choose kind,” a key lesson from the book, was already being embraced by schools. Roberts' agent told her that *Wonder* was indeed in development with producers David Hoberman and Todd Lieberman. As a studio executive, Hoberman had worked on *Pretty Woman*, so the connection was easy enough to make. Over lunch, Roberts expressed her enthusiasm. “I would love to be the mom,” she told the partners. A year later, they were on set.

Before director Stephen Chbosky (*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*) signed on to co-write and helm *Wonder*, he had turned down the offer several times. “Personally, I didn't feel close enough to the story,” he says. It took the birth of his son in 2015 to make him see the film in a new light. “I wanted to write something about my son and how I felt about being a father to a boy.”

By the time Chbosky joined, the producers and Palacio had already decided on how to present Auggie. A combination of prosthetics and minor CG effects would transform Tremblay, hot off his star-making turn in *Room*. The now-11-year-old actor, less concerned about the decisions that went into his portrayal, was eager to get into the makeup chair. The process took as long as two hours and included multiple face pieces, a helmet, a wig, and a system to pull Tremblay's eyelids down

into asymmetry. “It was really cool to put on the makeup because it looked really realistic,” Tremblay says. “I'm not going to lie, sometimes it was itchy. But sometimes you don't mind it and then you forget that it's even on my face. It was really fun to wear. It also helped me be my character.”

With everyone looking the part, mood and emotion became the focus, and the old threat of sentimentality loomed. “Usually, if it's a film about children or families, the tone is more sappy, treacly,” Chbosky says. Their goal, then, became relatability. The Pullmans, including Auggie's sister, Via (Izabela Vidovic), would need to project comfort and love, even in the mundane moments. “Sometimes the danger is being too sentimental in the way you play these scenes,” Wilson says. “I don't think that's how real families are. It's not always these Hallmark moments, so you play against ‘father knows best.’”

Everyone involved knew that if they got it right, *Wonder* could achieve something greater than an average night at the theater. Too much consideration and sensitivity went into the film for this to be just another book adaptation. Movies like *Wonder*—heartfelt, family-centered dramas not drawn by Pixar—simply don't get made anymore. Exactly why that happened is a bit of a mystery. Chbosky suspects that these kinds of stories have all shifted to television. Roberts, though, has another theory. “Maybe it's too heartbreaking to look at the possibility of what we could all be doing for each other compared to what we are doing to each other,” she says. “Every minute of every day we have this option to be the best version of ourselves, to make a choice that's just a little sweeter, just a little kinder. I think you have to be prepared to feel that.” ♦

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