

Don't judge a book by its movie:



By Kimberley Debus

"It wasn't as good as the book," is the second most common thing you hear coming out of a cinema, the first being "where are the restrooms?" Avid readers hate film adaptations, but Hollywood loves them, so much so that there is a separate Academy Award for screenplays adapted from other sources.

But are all films based on books disappointing? You'd be surprised at how wonderful some of these adaptations are. In some cases, films are able to portray action scenes more intensely. Consider the battle scenes in *Gettysburg*: In Michael Shaara's book *Killer Angels*, the descriptions were but almost plodding. In the film, the action happens in much quicker, blood-pumping scenes. In other cases, a page of internal dialogue can be portrayed with a look; one longing glance from Colin Firth's Vermeer in *The Girl with the Pearl Earring* says more than a page of description by author Tracy Chevalier.

Does this mean I don't relish Chevalier's or Shaara's writing? Of course not; there is still a delight in not just the writing of a particular author, but in the experience of reading in general. And some books should never be translated to film, because of the delicious pleasures of their written

words. I can't imagine Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* on celluloid; while the story might work, the grace and precision of every phrase would be lost. On the other hand, a writer like Nick Hornby, whose focus is much more on the storytelling than the language, translates beautifully to film — if you doubt, read, then watch, *About a Boy*.

So what makes a good adaptation versus a bad one? In my experience, there are a few key points that ruin an adaptation for me:

Don't cut the subplots that make the main plot work. Film adaptations will often cut subplots, and with good reason: there just isn't enough time. But the lack of some subplots changes the story. A classic example is *Dracula*; I can't think of any film adaptations that deal with Harker's trip to Transylvania, which explains why the count is in London in the first place.

Don't change details that don't matter to the story but put the piece in a time and place. A couple of years ago, I read and watched Nicholas Sparks' *The Notebook*. In the book, the ingénue comes from Raleigh. In the movie, they relocated her to Charleston. Why? We didn't see anything different. There weren't any Charleston-specific scenes. It is a minor quibble, but one that has stuck with me.

“THE GOOD, THE BAD & THE UGLY”

of Film Adaptations

Use the original plot if you're going to adapt a book. I was surprised to discover that *Simon Birch* was based on John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. At least it was intended to be based on the Irving novel. By the time the film went into production, the script was so far from the original, Irving insisted that the credits read only “Inspired by the novel.” The film isn't bad on its own, and the book is a classic. But for the love of art, do not experience them together.

Salient details matter. Perhaps I'm being picky here, and certainly if the film was being made today, you'd have a male actor and the original sad ending, but I still bristle at the thought of Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's* being so significantly changed. Audrey Hepburn is lovely, but Holly Golightly's character is so much — well, more — when you realize Holly is a man and the story is a sad one.

Other ways in which film adaptations fail are largely subjective — appreciating an actor's performance may make or break your experience. I like Alec Baldwin as Jack Ryan in *The Hunt for Red October*; in fact, Tom Clancy cites Baldwin's portrayal as his favorite. However, most people prefer the rugged Harrison Ford. Others may have affection for subplots that had to get dropped in the interest of time. There are many delightful scenes in the Harry Potter books that never make it to the screen; however, I don't think the films lose anything in the translation.

I for one love many films based on books, and I think part of the reason why is that I do separate the two experiences and enjoy both art forms. So put down the book and enjoy some of my favorite adaptations:

The Princess Bride — book by William Goldman, film

directed by Rob Reiner and starring Robin Wright and Cary Elwes. While there is one obvious change — in the book, Goldman is sharing with us his father's “abridgement” of the S. Morgenstern tale, whereas in the film a grandfather tells the story to his ailing grandson — the film by and large is faithful to the original, down to the Impressive Clergyman. Read the book, though, for the most hysterical chapter on Humperdink's attempts to find a bride.

Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil — book by John Berendt, film directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Kevin Spacey and John Cusack. Faithful to the story, but providing so much more, the film seems to bring alive the characters in a way that Berendt would love to have done through his words. In both the book and the film, the city of Savannah is a character itself, and both immerse you in that world. Cusack's light touch serves the role of author/narrator perfectly.

Enchanted April — book by Elizabeth von Arnim, film directed by Mike Newell and starring Miranda Richardson and Josie Lawrence. It is perhaps one of the loveliest films I've ever seen, and one of the loveliest books I have ever read. The book is old-fashioned in a way that makes it largely overlooked; however, the adaptation in this case enhances the text, offering lush landscapes and indeed, more human characters. The book is sweet, but the film is beautiful.

These are three among many. Other adaptations of note include *The Thin Man*, *Quiz Show*, *The Remains of the Day*, *LA Confidential*, and of course the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. If you've seen the films, check out the books. You will be delighted in the experience.