

I Believe...  
Book, Stage, and Screen Adaptations Are All Different. Why?

By Rhett DeVelay

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I Believe... *Gone With the Wind*, *The Witches of Eastwick*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Harry Potter* are all interesting films in their own right, but how faithful are they to their original source? Why does the film industry tap into books as sources for movies then change them sometimes to the point where they're unrecognizable?

Having been privileged to be around writers most of my life I found out a long time ago that it's inevitable for a book to change when being adapted to stage or screen because each medium has different requirements. Books are based on imagination, stage is based on words and limited visuals, and screen is based on potentially extensive, complicated and intense visuals with words. The character of Norma Desmond, in the film *Sunset Boulevard* says, "We had faces then. We didn't need words." And she was right. Even today, unless it's a script by Woody Allen, David Mamet, or Charlie Kaufman, most films won't have a huge script because they rely on visuals. Yet, if those films were turned into books obviously it would all have to be explained with... words.

One of my favorite books is also a favorite film: *Gone With the Wind*. Surprise! I've read the book several times and have seen the film over a dozen times and am always amazed at how the script writers were able to keep the essence of the book yet make changes in the story without harming Margaret Mitchell's intent. In the book Scarlett has three children, one each from her three husbands. In the film, the first two children were written out and only Bonnie Blue, Rhett's daughter, remains. Also, Scarlett is much more complex and her self-centered actions more understandable in the book, whereas in the film she comes across pretty much as a hedonistic shrew. However, thanks to the superb performance and charm of Vivien Leigh (Scarlett) we don't hate her although I've heard many people say that she was the one that deserved to die and not the sweet Melanie.

Then, there's *The Witches of Eastwick*: To my mind, this is a perfect example of Hollywood taking an interesting story and making it into something that had little relation to the book. The first half of the novel is followed, somewhat, but then veers off into a direction the screenwriter either wanted to or, more likely, was told to by the studio head. As anyone who has had to deal with studios knows, most studio heads never read the source material and have assistants who encapsulate the story into a one page (or sometimes one paragraph) treatment. Apparently, this is to cut down on the time the studio head actually has to do some work, or maybe it's because most of them can't read?

And then, there are the shining examples of *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* (aka *LOTR*) and the *Harry Potter* films. In the case of *LOTR*, the films director and producer, Peter Jackson, revered the books and he and his co-writer and wife, Fran Walsh, knew that to seriously tamper with them would bring the wrath of the fans down on their disheveled Aussie heads. And, what a superb job he and his entire staff and crew did. The same also applies to the *Harry Potter* series, however, the producers and director took flak from many critics for being too literal (?), which baffles me. It seems the critics actually believe that what they think matters. Aren't they funny?

Dealing with stage works being translated to film has another whole set of problems. I've seen stage productions that were almost magical in being able to transport me to another time and place. Then again, I've also seen productions that I couldn't get away from fast enough because they were so amateurish and badly produced. Of course, the same can be said of film. But stage works adapted from books are harder to

accomplish properly, consequently most stage plays are written for the stage. The main problems are trying to “open up” the descriptions in a book onto the stage and, unless it’s all interior scenes to begin with, bringing the action “outside” and making it believable is tricky and can often fail. The transfer from stage to screen has the same problem especially if the work is set indoors most of the time. It’s easy for those who love books to criticize those that try to transfer them to stage or film, but try doing it.

I just recently completed a musical called *Sister Aimee* based on the life of Aimee Semple McPherson, who was the most famous evangelist in Los Angeles during the 20’s until the 40’s when she was found dead in a San Francisco hotel room from an accidental overdose of barbiturates. Having read two biographies about her and seeing a video of her sermons I fashioned a script (in its 6<sup>th</sup> draft, so far) that focused on the year 1926 when she was “kidnapped” for six weeks and suddenly resurfaced in the Mexican desert unharmed and unscathed. The problem of how to make this period of her life interesting without being preachy, or solely focused on her, was very hard because what was fascinating in the book became almost hokey in the script. Peripheral characters in her real life had to have more prominent roles in the stage version and dialogue had to be invented since there wasn’t much recorded dialogue that could be used.

I think the best way to approach any adaptation is to read the original book (if one exists) but don’t compare it to the stage or film version. Appreciate those adaptations for what they are whether good or bad and realize that each medium requires different sensibilities.

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