6

From Book to Film: *The Adaptation Treatment*

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When the film adaptation of Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* was ready for release, the producers sent a telegram to the author, who was on Bimini:

"FILM IS FINISHED. YOU WILL LOVE IT.
ALL WE NEED IS A SHORT, SNAPPY, SEXY TITLE."

Hemingway wired back:

"HOW ABOUT FUCK?"

Transforming a novel, short story, stage play, or existing screenplay into a new film is called *adaptation*—a practice of flattery by imitation that's been thriving since the Roman playwrights Terence and Plautus freely adapted the Greek comedies of Menander and Aristophanes; and since Shakespeare adapted *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra* from Sir Thomas North's exuberant translations of Plutarch's *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*. Eugene O'Neill's masterpiece *Mourning Becomes Electra* is a retelling of Aeschylus's trilogy *The Oresteia*, the scene shifted from post–Trojan War Mycenae to the United States during the Civil War.

From Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* to *To Kill a Mockingbird*, based on the novel by Harper Lee, adaptation has been a mainstay of the movies. Some of the most brilliant films

in history, such as *The Godfather* and *Doctor Zhivago*, are adaptations. The success of such recent films as Ang Lee's *Sense and Sensibility*, Oliver Parker's *The Importance of Being Ernest* (with Reese Witherspoon), and Wes Craven's *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* indicates that the adaptation of classics is alive and well, and will continue to be a source of film material for as long as writers can find stories to adapt.

Moreover, the person writing an adaptation has the added advantage of inheriting an already developed plot instead of having to put one together from scratch. For a new writer who's strong in dialogue and character development and weak in structuring action line, adaptation is an excellent training ground.

While novels and short stories are obvious materials to adapt, note the following additional sources for popular movies:

- *Spider-man, X-Men,* and *Scooby-Doo* are just three of many examples of adaptations from comic books and a cartoon.
- *Peter Pan* and *The Red Shoes* (Hans Christian Andersen's story about a young ballerina torn between love and success) are adaptations of fairy tales.
- *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* is based on the popular video game series, *Tomb Raider,* which features the adventures of a female Indiana Jones, an antiquities hunter-for-hire whose expeditions are always chock-full of action, danger, and intrigue.
- *Tron Killer App,* a sequel to the computer game classic and one of the first computer-generated movies, is about a hacker who transports himself into cyberspace to pull off the ultimate hack.
- *The Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Haunted Mansion* are derived from the Disneyland Park theme rides.
- *Clue* and *Super Mario Bros.* were adapted from games—one a board game in which the players must unravel a murder mystery, and the other the Nintendo video game featuring two Italian plumber brothers.
- *The Fast and the Furious,* a fierce and frenzied look at rival

Los Angeles street teams who use street racing as a means of establishing power, was adapted from a magazine article by Ken Li.

- *The Billionaire Fugitive,* the true story of Robert Durst, accused of several murders including the one of his ex-wife, was adapted from a *Vanity Fair* article for Bruce Willis and Arnold Rifkin's Cheyenne Enterprises.
- *Christiane F.,* the gripping story of a bored German girl's decline into drug use and prostitution, was adapted from a West German magazine article.
- *The Last American Hero* was based on articles by Tom Wolfe about a former moonshine runner, Junior Johnson, who became one of the fastest race car drivers in the history of the sport.
- *Henry and June* was adapted from the diaries of writer Anaïs Nin, and *I Remember Mama* was based on Kathryn Forbes's memoirs, *Mama's Bank Account.*
- *My Friend Irma* was based on the radio adventures of a not-too-bright blonde and her sensible pal; the 1953 film *The War of the Worlds,* and its Paramount–Cruise/Wagner remake, about the invasion of Earth by Martians, was based on Orson Welles's radio broadcast; which was in turn based on H. G. Wells's classic novel.

So you see there is no limit to what you can adapt into a film. All you need is imagination and ingenuity.

Adaptation and Storytelling

The same story can be told in more than one way because the words and structure used in storytelling are, in a sense, arbitrary and dependent upon the storyteller. Witness the transformation of a good joke as it passes from one teller to the next, each elaborating on it in his own unique style. It's no surprise then that a primary vein for the storyteller's mining of material consists of

previously told stories. Many films, for both features and television, are retellings of already published or produced stories. Producers scour *Publishers Weekly,* the trade magazine of the publishing industry that announces forthcoming books and trends, and *Kirkus Reviews,* which gives brief reviews of forthcoming books, and cultivate relationships with New York agents and publishers, hoping to be first in line to acquire a promising new novel or true crime story. AEI's NBC films *Amityville: The Evil Escapes* and *Shadow of Obsession* were based on novels, the first by John Jones, the second by K. K. Beck. AEI's 1996 deals with New Line, Propaganda Films, and Walt Disney Pictures were based on novels that had not yet even been sold to publishers. If you've written a novel that could make a good film, whether it's published or not, write a five-page treatment of it and send it to a film or television producer whose listing indicates they are open to developing novels for film.

If the story you want to adapt is in the public domain, either by a failure to register copyright or because it was published before 1911, you're free to adapt it without securing rights. As a member of the public, you have the right already. Just use common sense. Adapting *The Scarlet Letter* again after the 1995 adaptation's failure at the box office, though legally you're free to do it, is probably not a good use of your time.

If the story was published after 1911, the year that modern copyright laws went into effect through the Geneva Convention, someone most likely owns the copyright, and the author or his estate's permission must be obtained before you attempt to sell your adaptation treatment. We're approached regularly by writers who've spent considerable time adapting a work without securing its rights and who are then bitterly disappointed to learn the original story is protected by the very law that serves them as well. But obtaining the rights to an obscure novel you found in a secondhand bookstore or library may not be so difficult. We suggest you do so in one of two ways.

First, check the publisher's imprint, located on the copyright

page at the opening of the book, and call or write the publisher's subsidiary rights department to ask who controls the dramatic rights to this novel. If the publisher controls them, tell the rights manager you're interested in optioning the novel to write a treatment of it. If the publisher no longer exists, you need to find out who took over its rights. The *Literary Market Place*, the all-inclusive "yellow pages" of the publishing industry, available at the reference desk of your local public library, may be helpful. If you can't find out any other way, do a search at the Library of Congress's Copyright Office. The Copyright Office will either direct you to the current rights holder, or will tell you that the rights are now in the public domain.

Another avenue is to call an independent producer such as AEI and tell us what you've found and what you want to do. We'll ask you to write a brief treatment, register it, and send it to us. If we're intrigued by the story, we'll handle the optioning of the rights for you after making a deal to clarify and protect your role in the project.

Adaptation, with all its obvious advantages, can sometimes be even more difficult than creating an original story. Your challenge is not only to create a drama that's compelling but also to remain true to the original. A well-done adaptation, like those of Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides*, Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, or Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, must please the novel's original audience while at the same time capturing film audiences who may never have read, or even heard of, the book. *The Prince of Tides* succeeds in successfully reducing Pat Conroy's sprawling saga to film size by focusing on the psychiatrist's viewpoint, and by eliminating a number of the characters and subplots. Yet it provides the same emotional impact as did the novel. We suggest that when you're faced with a decision, you choose what's good for the drama over what's required to remain strictly faithful to the original. Even William Faulkner, adapting his own novel *The Sound and the Fury* for film, had to make radical changes in his approach to telling the

story of the Compson family. Instead of the multiple viewpoints of the novel, he focused his treatment on the point of view of one character, Jason. Yet the film transports us powerfully to the world of Yoknapatawpha County. In other cases, such as William Wharton's novel *Birdy*, the screenwriter was able to follow the novel's structure in crafting an artistically successful film. *The Bridges of Madison County* actually seems a better story in its film version than it was in the original novel.

Guidelines for Adaptation Treatments

Here are some guidelines to remember when undertaking an adaptation treatment:

- Reread the original, looking for scenes instead of chapters.
- Remember that books are literary, films are visual. What you're looking for is visuality, the elements of a book that paint a picture of the characters, the setting, the action.
- Mark the *obligatory scenes* in the story.
- Avoid interior narrative, choosing action over thought; and don't resort to *voice-over* unless you can think of no other way of externalizing and dramatizing a scene.
- Minimize description, even if the source is rich with it.
- Find a way to streamline the plot, reducing the action line to the protagonist's viewpoint with one or two subordinate action lines to complicate the story.
- When in doubt, eliminate an element. Imagine trying to include everything from *War and Peace*.
- Eliminate transitional scenes, and don't worry about making jumps as long as the situation in the new scene is clearly marked.
- Leave metaphor and symbolism, as much as possible, to the director.
- Keep your audience in mind throughout, making sure you

tell a story that can be enjoyed by anyone whether they've read the book or not.

• Apply the principles we've outlined here to the development of your major and supporting characters, action line, viewpoint, and setting. Be as ruthless as necessary to make your drama work, following the imaginatively expansive examples of *A Twist of Fate* (based on *Silas Marner*), *Robin Hood*, or *The Three Musketeers*.

TREATMENTS *v.* TERM PAPER OUTLINES

Don't think of treatments the way you used to think of your term paper outlines: all misery and no reward. Instead, think of them as road maps, but better—not only do they tell you how to get where you want to go, they help you figure out where you're going in the first place.

Some people object that treatments stifle creativity, that part of the process is the gradual unfolding of the author's vision. This may be somewhat true of novels, but not for screenplays. Scripts are a refined form of cabinetry, in which it's crucial to be able to discern the structure before carving the trim.

Treatments also help you to answer the age-old question any writer must ask when beginning a project: Do I want to spend time with these characters? Because if you don't, how do you expect an audience to spend ten bucks and two hours?

—Michael Walsh, cowriter of *Cadet Kelly*, the Disney Channel's highest-rated movie ever; author of *As Time Goes By* and *And All the Saints* (Warner Books)

Though plays can be as good a source for adaptations as novels, they present a special challenge—that of overcoming the relatively claustrophobic nature of the stage in serving the openness of the film. A film relies on visuals, not on dialogue,

and long monologues, generally speaking, must go—we hold our breath to watch Mel Gibson make it through "To be or not to be." Successful movie adaptations of plays include *West Side Story*, adapted from the Broadway musical, itself based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*; Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*; and *Steel Magnolias*, which managed to "open up" the play by involving not just the beauty parlor but the entire small town.

The following adaptation is one we wrote for network television based on Emily Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. We chose this example because it easily shows you that you can be inventive in adapting a well-known classic novel into something contemporary while still maintaining the original essence of the story.

KENNETH ATCHITY · CHI-LI WONG

WRITING TREATMENTS THAT SELL

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Contents

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