

How Screenwriters Can Waste Their Time and Squander Their Talent

What to do when writing a screenplay based upon published material

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Photo by [Suzy Hazelwood](#)

My own screenwriting teacher, USC's late and legendary Irwin R. Blacker, used to ask his classes the following: "When adapting a novel for the screen, what does the writer owe the original material?"

He required a one-word answer, which we had to recite in unison.

“Nothing!”

What writers owe, whether scripting an original screenplay or one based upon material from another medium, is the best movie they can write.

To whom is that debt owed?

The audience.

For writers contemplating adapting a novel to the screen, my most fundamental recommendation is: Don't do it.

Instead, write an original screenplay.

In recent decades the most depressing aspect of Hollywood has got to be its reluctance to produce anything original. Every movie seems to be a remake, a sequel, a prequel, or an adaptation of a novel, a video game, a comic book, a newspaper article, even a board game or toy.

What can so narrow, so straitjacketed a bias reap for artists and audiences other than suffocation of the imagination?

Instead of adapting material from other media written by other writers, wouldn't screenwriters prefer to invent their own stories and characters?

Inevitably, writers who tell me they are keen to adapt a

particular novel assert that the book profoundly touched and moved them.

Reading it, they aver, changed their lives.

If a novel has so weighty an effect upon readers, however, its ideal form is likely just that. If a book is really, truly great, then that's what it surely wants to be. Change the form, write it as a movie, and it is virtually guaranteed to disappoint.

Many of the finest adaptations of novels come not from great books but mediocre ones. *The Graduate*, for instance, is a universally loved multi-Oscar winning film including Best Picture. Among the general public, and especially within the filmmaking community, you're not likely to meet too many people who haven't seen or heard of it.

How many of them, however, have read the Charles Webb novel? Among the handful who have read it and also seen the movie, how many consider the book to be as worthy, as memorable as the film?

Ditto *Kramer Versus Kramer*, another Best Picture. It's a brilliant film from a book that is just okay. Please don't misunderstand me. To write a book that is even just okay is no small achievement. That said, how many people have read the Avery Corman novel? Corman is a capable writer, to be sure. After all is said and done, though, with *Kramer...* it is not the book but the movie that people recall and revere.

Great books, when screen adaptors invest them with misguided faith, make movies that are at best so-so. Joseph Heller's *Catch 22* and Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* are examples of works that are timeless as literature, but when converted into movies are breathtakingly forgettable.

Beyond these creative considerations, there are also legal reasons to discourage screenwriters from adapting material from other media. Why invest the time and energy that it takes to write a screenplay if you do not own the underlying rights and cannot, therefore, market the script?

Nobody has to defeat you if you defeat yourself.

Confronting this issue, some writers option the books they're adapting, in effect renting the rights.

That costs money.

Worse, options expire.

A well-heeled studio, network, or other production entity, impressed with a particular adaptation (if they're willing even merely to consider it) can simply wait out the option. When the term ends they can move in and take it over, hiring Hollywood's flavor of the month, the hot writer de jour, eliminating without credit or recompense the spec adaptor who 'discovered' the project in the first place.

Writers can do what nobody else can do: write.

From nothing, we can create something we own, something

that belongs to us entirely: a screenplay, a so-called 'property.' Actors can't do it. Directors can't do it. Producers can't do it.

Writers alone can do it.

It's all we should do.

Notwithstanding any of the above, if you find yourself writing an adaptation, I hope on assignment for a producer or studio or network that has acquired the rights and is paying you a proper fee, the key to success remains the same as Blacker prescribed all those years ago. Your debt is not to the original material but to the audience watching (and paying for) the movie.

Readers of a novel who have viewed its film adaptation often complain that the filmmakers ruined the novel.

In fact, however, you can't ruin a novel.

If you adapt a worthy novel into a trashy, useless script, and it becomes a dreadful movie, the book remains unchanged. The letters do not rearrange themselves on the page. The novel remains available in its original form unto eternity.

Adaptors should feel free to play fast and loose with original material. They can delete dialogue and toss out whole chapters; they can create new circumstance and happenstance. They can eliminate particular characters and also create new ones if doing so advances the story.

Screenwriters adapting novels should not be tyrannized by the facts and data of the original.

Truth in movies resides not facts and data but feelings and emotion.

In the exceptional case that both a movie and the novel from which it is adapted are worthy, it is likely due to the fact that the screenwriter ignored the original material.

There is no finer American novel than Robert Penn Warren's *All The King's Men*. The first movie adaptation (1949), written and directed by Robert Rossen, won a passel of Oscars: acting, writing, directing, and also Best Picture. You will rarely see a movie as memorable across the board as *All The King's Men*.

How did Rossen achieve this?

By ignoring the original material.

Penn Warren's novel confronts a challenge that is uniquely well suited to literature, perhaps especially American Southern Literature. In the tradition of masters like Faulkner it explores the deep and mysterious relationships, the convoluted, interlocking neuroses of a Southern family.

The movie, on the other hand, does what movies do best. It traces the rise to power of an honorable, well-intentioned small town public servant, and his subsequent fall. It underscores the eternal principle that power corrupts, and

that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Film adaptations of material from other media often fail because they provide audiences with what they expect.

When I go to the movies I do not want to get what I expect.

I want my expectations to be exceeded.

I seek not balance but imbalance, not satisfaction but provocation. I want to be turned upside down and inside out. I want to be crushed to my core. I want to be wrecked, rattled, and shaken to my bones.

I want to be amazed, astonished, awestruck, and astounded.

I want my life forever to be changed.

Have a question about screenwriting? Hit reply and Richard will do his best to answer in future articles and episodes.

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