

DON'T JUDGE A FILM BY ITS COVER

BY DEBORAH MARKUS

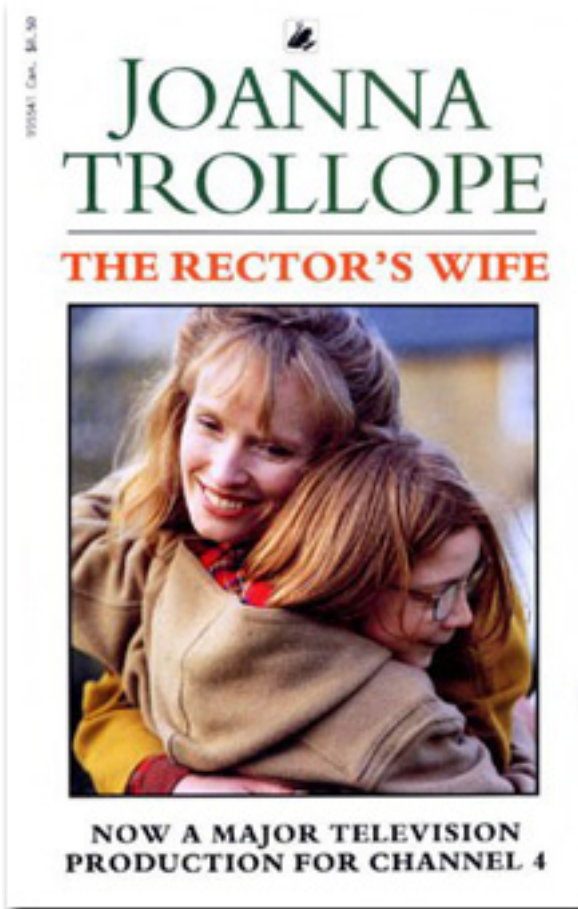
There's a tee shirt I've got on my Christmas wish list that I saw in one of those witty, literary catalogs that always seem to find their way to my house, perhaps because they know how to find people who desperately want to be literary and witty. The shirt reads, "Never judge a book by its movie." This is so blindingly true that not only am I begging for the shirt, I'm seriously considering getting the tattoo.

Now, I am not one of those purists who think a book should never be sullied by having some interpretation of itself flung across the big screen. There are, as I intend to ramble on about at probably far greater length than the subject actually requires, some books that have been made into wonderful movies. There are books that actually *benefit* by being made into movies — and I don't just mean the boost in sales accruing from those new covers with the photos of the actors that the publisher always plasters on the second edition. (Yes, I don't care for those. What do you mean, you guessed?) There are movies that are actually better than the books they were based on, and movies that are easily as good as their pulpy parents.

But — and this is the important part and yes there *will* be a quiz — no matter how good a movie is, and no matter how insistently the director or producer blazons the original work's author's name in front of the movie's title, *the movie is not the book. The book is not a movie.* The book is a book. The movie is a movie. The book cannot be anything but the words the author originally committed to the page, and the movie, no matter how much of the dialogue it may have cribbed from the novel it took its title from, isn't the book, shouldn't be mistaken for the book, and can't be screamed at for not being more

like the book.

I'll qualify that last one slightly. A movie shouldn't be bewailed for not having its father's eyes unless it doesn't have any of its other features, either. Patricia Rozema's recent film *Jane Austen's Mansfield Park* was not Jane Austen's, nor was it *Mansfield Park* by any reasonable definition. I know



some people who insisted that the movie really wasn't so bad if you squinted a bit and pretended the original book never existed, but I am not one who believes that movies and books that bear the same title are so separate that they can be judged, as it were, in a vacuum. But neither am I one of those purists who faints or passes into a red rage at the very idea of profaning a great work with a mere flick. I believe

books and movies can be allies, and have rich, rewarding relationships. But that doesn't make them alike, any more than the community property laws in my state make my husband my clone.

The reader may at this point be wondering what exactly I'm going on about. Surely everything I've said so far is a given. Except it isn't. I know this from firsthand experience. I was making a rare appearance at a book club meeting one night several months ago (I only attend when I've actually read the book in question when I'm done reading everything I need to to get some writing done), and, feeling guilty at not having a more favorable opinion of the book we'd all read which everyone else had admired, I stayed on after to make some bookish conversation.

"I'm reading something really good right now," I ventured. "One of Joanna Trollope's novels. *The Rector's Wife.*"

"Oh, I saw that just a few weeks ago!" the woman next to me exclaimed. "Wasn't it wonderful?" And the group was immediately deep in a conversation about the relative merits of the actors who had played their various parts in the movie version of the book.

Now, I don't mind talking about movies, even movies I haven't seen. I often make some of my best points about those, in fact. And I didn't mind the fact that my neighbor brought up the movie version in a group devoted to talking about books sitting in the middle of a bookstore. She hadn't read the book, and she wanted to say something.

But I object to the lack of a bridge between my mentioning the book and her bringing up the movie. I mind that she didn't at least preface the shift in our conversation by saying something like, "I haven't had a chance to read that yet [it's a

book group; pretend you're planning to glance at the print version, okay?], but they made a wonderful movie out of it." I mind that she didn't acknowledge, or even seem to notice, that there *was* a shift in conversation. Because there was. I brought up a book; she started talking about a movie. Not the same thing.

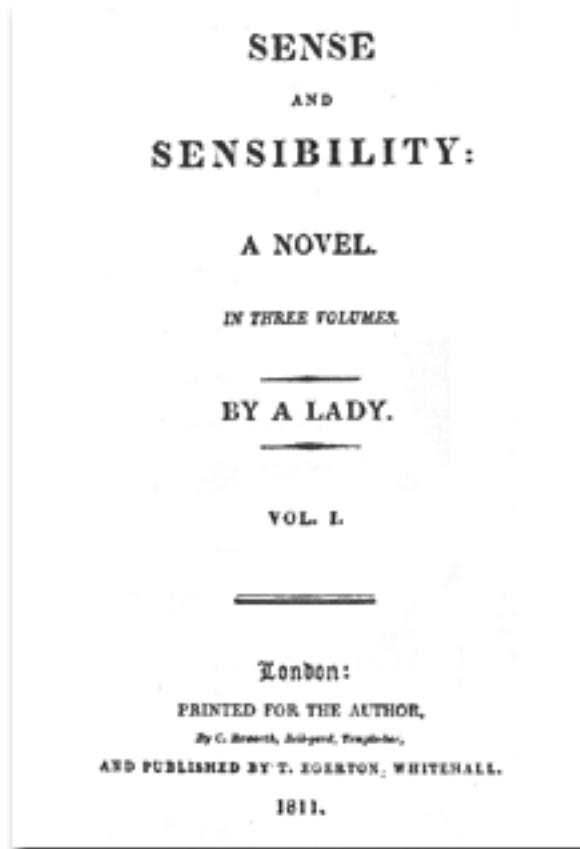
Why should it be? Why put that pressure on a movie — or a book, for that matter?

A book is a private experience. It can be *owned* by its peruser in ways that a movie can't. A book can be picked up and put down, carried about, read at one's own pace and at one's leisure. The faces of the characters, no matter how minutely described by the author, must ultimately be left to the imaginings of the reader. Who may well base them on the visages of movie stars — but *which* stars is entirely up to him. Because all but the shortest books take more time to finish than all but the longest movies, books demand a focus and concentration the meeker movie wouldn't dream of asking. There are generally breaks between sittings, during which the story dwells, tantalizing, in that cozy, haunted region known as the back of the mind. Or, if it's a work one can finish with the devoted attention of a single day, a book is a companion. No one would speak of spending the day with a movie. And when, as every reader has at some time or another, we ponder the question of which precious works we would hope to be left with if a shipwreck cast us away from our libraries, we know that we are following a fine tradition — that print lovers have undoubtedly been asking themselves the same question, or one very like it, for as long as there have been stories committed to paper.

A movie is public. Even if we rent the work to watch in the privacy of our own homes, the movie is meant to be watched in company and talked about after. Who walks out of a theatre in silence? A movie is taken in in one sitting. Even a long one is comparatively compact. If a book is a marriage, a movie is a fling. If a book is a portrait, a movie is a snapshot. But affairs are passionate by virtue of their own brevity. And photos, bright and quick, find their way to our wallets and albums and desks because we want to catch and keep the single moment they record. Movies are

pictures, light in darkness. They can illuminate and entertain, or obscure and disappoint. But they are only what they are. They shouldn't be expected to do more than they're able to. Such as be the books they may be based on.

Sometimes they can be something better. The movie *The Godfather* is a work of art; the book by the same title is a joke that doesn't seem to understand it's its own punchline. Less drastically, *The Third Man* onscreen invites viewing after viewing. The novel, written by the same person, is over once it's over. *The Princess Bride* is a romp as a movie and a rather bitter, belabored



work on the page. *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* is such a strange, awful book that if it hadn't been written by someone who fortunately also wrote some pretty good stuff, it probably would have been forgotten long ago. I am not one who makes a habit of applauding Disney remakes, but I'll clap for this one.

But the category of movies that manage to surpass the novels they're based on is admittedly a small one, of interest because it exists at all but of no statistical significance. Greater in number are movies that, while perhaps inferior to the works that inspired them, nevertheless perform some

service for their books.

Emma Thompson's *Sense and Sensibility* is a good example of this. *Sense and Sensibility* is perhaps Austen's most difficult novel, other than the abovementioned *Mansfield Park*. It is an early work, and it reads like one. The two main character sisters seem almost like caricatures of themselves: Elinor a symbol of duty, strength, and diligence; Marianne the teenage rebel whose misguided passions and selfishness grieve her family and put her own health and life at risk. The third sister is so insignificant that readers can be forgiven for not noticing her presence.

The men in the book are a strange lot. Edward Ferrars is described as having "no peculiar graces of person or address. He was not handsome, and his manners required intimacy to make them pleasing." Hardly a fascinating portrait. Colonel Brandon, I was surprised to see on rereading, is only thirty-five; but that was middle-aged or older at the time the book was written (though it doesn't stop Mr. Knightly in *Emma* from being sexy as all get out, but never mind), and Brandon certainly embraces all the most unattractive qualities of middle age — ostentatiously watching out for his health, and mooning over girls half his age. Willoughby is, like Satan in *Paradise Lost*, the most attractive character around — arguably the *only* attractive one around — and though he adds some spice and excitement, like Satan he is ultimately cruel and unredeemable. Add to this mix other male semi-main characters such as the girls' half brother John Dashwood, who is "not an ill-disposed young man, unless to be rather cold hearted, and rather selfish, is to be ill-disposed," and Mr. Palmer, so cool and sarcastic that he is unmoved even to his newborn son — he cannot "even be brought to acknowledge the simple proposition of its being the finest child in the world" — and an argument can be made that *Sense and Sensibility*, like *Vanity Fair*, ought to be subtitled "A Novel Without a Hero."

Not an easy cast to work with. Not a winning crew of men for Austen's non-academic admirers, most of whom are women. Small wonder that *Sense and Sensibility* is little read. (It was only this year that the Norton Critical Editions finally published an annotated version of the work. Only *Northanger Abbey* has been similarly

neglected, probably because, as it's a work of pure pleasure and easy reading, it requires little in the way of footnotes and hasn't generated many of the scholarly articles Norton always includes in such editions.)

The movie is faithful to the book except in those places where it really ought to differ. Yes, ought to. I would hesitate to say that Austen's writing can easily be improved upon; but in this book, at least, the reader has to take too much on faith. Marianne's being lovable when she seems only spoiled, for instance. Edward Ferrars being a man capable of inspiring deep and abiding affection. Marianne falling genuinely in love with Colonel Brandon, as Austen insists that she does in a passage at once shrill and vague. This, especially, many Austen fans have complained about in the past. As they have about little sister Margaret's simply vanishing as the plot heats up like mist in the midday sun.

One hopes this isn't the same group of people who went on to gripe about the fact that *Sense and Sensibility* dared to differ from the book at all. That's a good thing, guys. Colonel Brandon desperately needed an Alan Rickman to rescue him from humorless melodrama, and to show us just why even a Marianne might fall in love with him. Marianne needed not to scream so much. Margaret needed some characteristics of her own, and Elinor needed a chance to go ahead and break down for once just to prove she's human rather than a walking paragon. The movie did take liberties with the plot, but only in showing us what the story *might* have been. In *showing* us: operative word. We see Hugh Grant, who is almost as quiet and apologetic as his character (Edward Ferrars) is in the book, and understand at last who Ferrars *might* have been that Elinor would fall so completely in love with him. We see Rickman and Kate Winslett together at the end of the movie and finally feel that Austen wasn't

betraying her spirited character by marrying her off to such a man. The movie acts as an illuminator and a guide to the story.

The movie of *The Accidental Tourist* did that for me. I had read the book twice and felt unconvinced by the ending. The first time I couldn't believe Macon Leary was really leaving his wife; the second time around I knew it was coming, but doubted the wisdom of the act, and certainly the "happiness" of the ending.

Then I saw the movie, with its powerhouse trio of actors in the main roles: William Hurt as Leary, Kathleen Turner as his wife, Geena Davis as Muriel Pritchett. Maybe Davis can't help being winning, or maybe Turner can't help admitting an dark

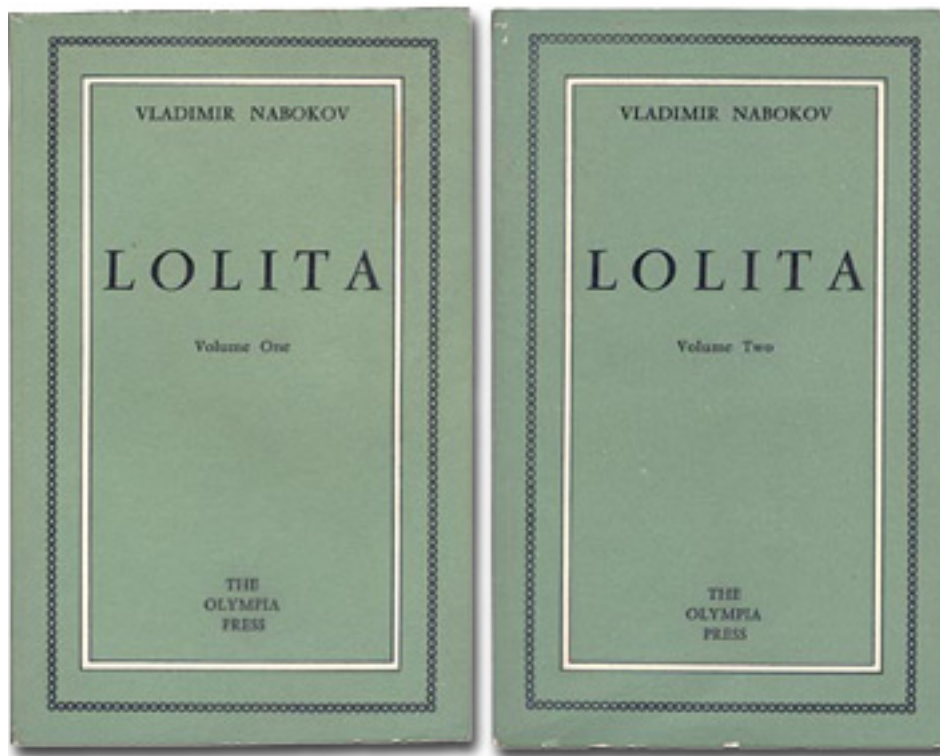
impressively), it took whole chunks of dialogue from the original text and, thanks to some phenomenal acting on the part of Jeremy Irons (Humbert Humbert), Frank Langella (Clare Quilty), and especially Dominique Swain in the title role (why the hell didn't she get an Oscar for that part? because it was a naughty movie, of course), made it seem like real words that real, albeit exceptional, people might have spoken. Swain channeled the contradictions of Lolita's sexual prowess and her extreme, gawky youth and innocence with breathtaking power. The movie was not the book, but it caught some of that parent's magic and added some of its own.

Another Jane Austen remake, the recent *Persuasion* starring Amanda Root, casts some needed light on the novel. Many members of the Jane Austen listserv I subscribe to have mentioned that until they saw this movie, they never understood why Anne Elliot remained in love with Captain Wentworth, or even why she'd fallen for him in the first place — he seemed so harsh, even cruel, in print. For myself, I confess that I was glad to understand at last what Anne might have looked like. Her description in the book is depressing, as it's meant to be, but also gives us little reason to hope that her true love might love her back on seeing her once again:

A few years before, Anne Elliot had been a very pretty girl, but her bloom had vanished early; and as even in its height, her father had found little to admire in her, (so totally different were her delicate features and mild dark eyes from his own); there could be nothing in them now that she was faded and thin, to excite his esteem.

Amanda Root is perfect as the faded flower that blossoms once again.

Which brings me to what may seem like



edge into any performance; at any rate, the ending, which was beautifully true to the book, finally clicked for me. If it took a movie for me to reach closure on a brilliant novel, then I'm just glad that the movie was out there.

The recent remake of *Lolita*, directed by Cyril Coke, was another example of a book finally clicking for me, at least in part. The book is so firmly and unapologetically booky — so completely an excuse for Nabokov to do beautiful and bizarre things with a language it's hard to believe wasn't his first — that I don't know that any movie could ever do it justice, and never mind that Nabokov himself wrote the screenplay to the first *Lolita* movie. But this edition was brilliant; more importantly (and

a silly, trivial reason to admire a well-made movie of a novel: we get to see what the people look like. Which, by the way, is why there are certain movies I will never see, because I already have the characters' appearances fixed in my head to my own satisfaction and don't want the latest pretty boy or starlet to ruin it for me. *Lord of the Rings* is a huge case in point here. But in general I'm not a visual thinker, and welcome help in that arena.

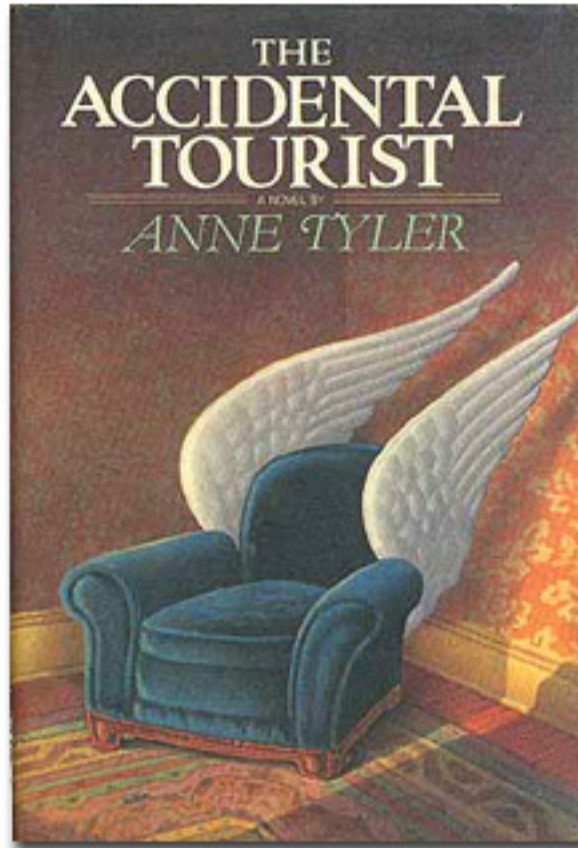
That's why movies that are married to their books are not the waste of time a friend of mine once argued they were. *Rosemary's Baby* the movie is so close to *Rosemary's Baby* the book that the director went so far as to ask Ira Levin what shirt exactly Guy Woodhouse is referring to when he mentions buying the one he saw an ad for in *The New Yorker*. (Levin was a little embarrassed to admit that he'd simply made that part up.) "So why see it?" my friend asked heatedly. "I've already read it." True, and in probably about the same time that viewing the movie would take, since *Rosemary's Baby* is short and made shorter by the reader's tension and eagerness to see just how in God's name this book will end.

But in not seeing it, I would say to my friend if I knew his current address or phone number, you miss Ruth Gordon as Minnie Castevet — and that's missing a lot. You miss wide-eyed Mia Farrow. Levin is an interesting writer: the more important a character is, the less he tells you about what they look like. We know that Rosemary Woodhouse is young and attractive and lacking in self-assertion; we know that at one point in the book she gets a regrettable haircut. That's it. The rest of the time we're too busy with what's going on inside her (I mean her mind, not just her womb) to care about much else. It's nice to catch a glimpse of her from the outside in as well as the inside out.

It may seem supremely ironic to mention *The Invisible Man* in this context, since Claude Rains' most important work in the movie was obviously with his voice. But Wells really did write a very visual novel. The scene in the inn when the stranger steps in, covered from head to foot, head swathed in bandages — that's completely true to the book, and it was practically begging for a movie to bring it to fruition. As was the

scene of the invisible man defiantly unwrapping his face in front of the villagers, showing himself to be pure darkness. And seeing what Griffin looks like, at the very end, is significant. The fiend we've feared for so long is revealed at last as a rather boyish, innocent-looking young man. An evil-looking actor just wouldn't have had the same impact.

Gone With the Wind is another good example of a movie acting as little more



than illustration to the book. Actually, Scarlett O'Hara in the book isn't beautiful at all, barely pretty really, as the first line of the first chapter points out, and so perhaps Vivien Leigh is miscast; but Clark Gable is so close to Mitchell's description of Rhett Butler that it would be scary if it weren't so entertaining. We knew what he looked like, or at least we were told in so many words; now we *really* know what he looked like, and can carry the image with us all the way through the book, should we wish to skip through a thousand pages or so some sunny summer afternoon.

Why shouldn't a movie be applauded for showing us what the characters look like? A movie is visual, not cerebral. Choosing the actors with care is part of taking advantage of that medium. And so although no one ought to deprive himself of the pleasure of reading *Rebecca*, missing Joan Fontaine

as the nameless main character and Judith Anderson as Mrs. Danvers seems a shame — especially in the spellbinding scene when Mrs. Danvers is ever so softly and persuasively urging the new Mrs. de Winter to jump. This movie also takes advantage of its medium by lingering over lines that are almost hurried past in the book, such as when Fontaine declares ringingly to her scary housekeeper, "I am Mrs. de Winter now." Just that one line, all by itself. It

wouldn't be possible to isolate it like that in the book; it would look silly, and in fact du Maurier sandwiches it between other sentences. But on the screen, it's allowed to stand alone and make us all stop and listen for a moment. We can't hurry on to the next sentence, the next paragraph, the next scene. We must dwell in a reaction shot until we are told we can leave.

Similarly, the movie chose to emphasize a line that du Maurier didn't seem to realize was a real gut-slammer if you played it right. When the new young Mrs. de Winter is meeting her new in-laws, she's asked if she knows how to sail, and replies in the negative. "Thank God for that," Nigel Bruce as her brother-in-law says, then widens his eyes comically and puts his hand to his mouth in a broad manner only Bruce could get away with. Rebecca, of course, died while sailing, and in the moment of silence that follows Bruce's blunder the audience is reminded at once of the tragic fact (for so we still think of it at that point) and of young Mrs. de

Winter's horribly awkward social position. The novel plays the same line completely differently — effectively enough, perhaps, for the unnervingly cool, level tone the book maintains from strange beginning to bitter end; but the screenwriter's choice to build the scene around that sentence is an admirable one.

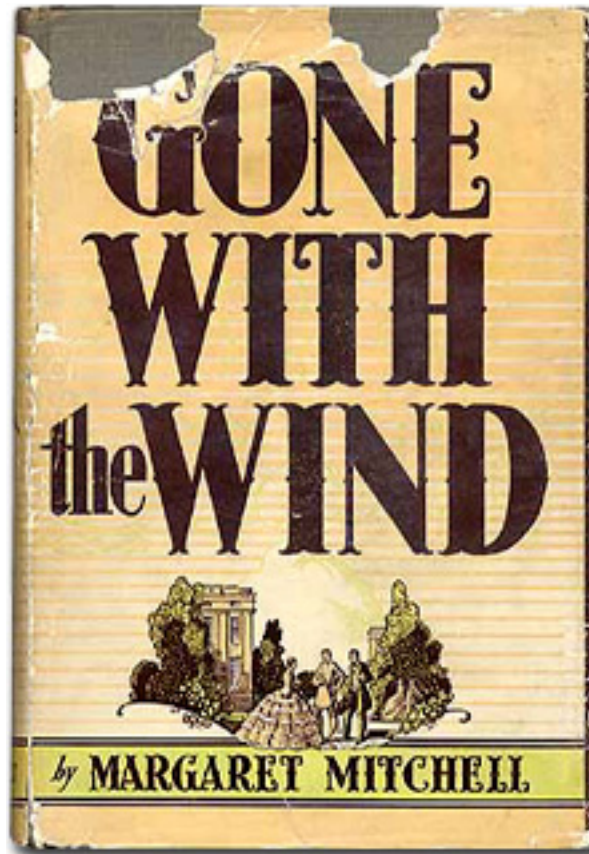
Speaking of Nigel Bruce, we come to the disadvantage of movies telling us what the characters look like. Basil Rathbone was born to play Sherlock Holmes: not only was he killingly elegant, but his very features resemble those of Holmes', as represented in Sidney Paget's original illustrations for the *Strand*. Nigel Bruce, on the other hand, is so utterly unlike the "real" Dr. Watson that it's difficult to understand how on earth he ever got the part in the first place. Watson in print is no older than Holmes; he's not as clever as his

famous companion, but then no one is. He is perhaps a slightly dull character, little more than a loyal Boswell. It's understandable that a director might see the need to flesh him out a bit, make him more of a person in his own right and less of a shadow. But turning him into a comic old uncle is hardly the only solution. Edward Hardwicke, who plays Watson alongside Jeremy Brett as Holmes in a more recent series of Sherlock's adventures, manages to give a faithful portrayal of the original character without coming across as dull. His very ordinariness and calm is a necessary foil to Holmes' antisocial, bizarre genius (which Brett plays splendidly, in marked contrast to Rathbone's smiling, affable detective).

Another example of an actor's portrayal of a character becoming emblematic is Bogart's Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon*. Yes, he's brilliant. The problem is, he's nothing like the original character, whom Dashiell Hammett describes as looking "rather pleasantly like a blond satan." There's nothing wrong with hiring a non-blonde for the part, but the fact is there's nothing remotely satanic about Bogart. He's sympathetic, haunted, and rather crude. As opposed to Hammett's Spade, who is cynical, remote, and elegant. The movie is very like the book, and at the same time almost nothing like it thanks to the choice of main-character actor. Bogart changes the tone of the whole story just by being himself. Which is fine, except that this movie was a pivotal work in creating the hard-boiled detective genre, the popular conception of which came to bear almost no resemblance to Hammett's odd, difficult but rewarding and germinal works. *The Maltese Falcon* is a brilliant movie, but I can never watch it without a vague feeling of regret.

But perhaps the most drastic example of a movie completely defining what a novel's character looks like for generations to come is James Whale's conception of Frankenstein's monster, who is (also thanks to this movie) thought by many to bear the name of Frankenstein himself. How many readers (for surely there isn't a reader in existence who hasn't seen the movie, or at least visual stills from it, before arriving at the book) have been shocked by the fact that the character is, on the page, simply a big guy with rather rheumy yellow eyes and dark hair,

who can speak quite eloquently when required to? Karloff's mute green bolt-head dominates the landscape, especially since many readers don't make it through Shelley's original novel, though it's quite short. Which flagging interest may also be thanks in part to the movie. The book is more a philosophical treatise than an action-packed thriller. There is no equivalent of the "It's alive!" scene; Frankenstein, on seeing his creature's eyes slip open (sans lightning) bolts from the room and doesn't see his monster again for many pages. There is also no equivalent of the villager carrying his dead daughter through the



festive crowd. The book is important, and even quite entertaining and interesting when taken on its own terms, but it can't hold a candle to the movie's splendor. Whale created a monster that couldn't be stopped.

That a movie of a book may draw readers to actually crack a spine now and then, by the by, is not something to be taken lightly. I will admit my bias now and state baldly that I detested the little of Andrew Davies' *Pride and Prejudice* I was able to get through. If nothing else, it broke the sound rule of thumb for such productions that they shouldn't violate the spirit of the author's original intentions — specifically with that idiotic speech Davies forces into

Elizabeth Bennet's mouth about how she could never marry a man for money. But more than one subscriber on my Jane Austen listserve has confessed that she hadn't read a word of Austen until she saw Davies' production, and as one reader claims that she's gone on to read *Pride and Prejudice* upwards of thirty times since seeing the movie, even I am forced to admit that it has done its part in contributing to the greater good in the world. I myself was inspired some twenty years ago by the Cyril Coke production, which now seems faintly goofy but still fun, to turn to the original text. Anything, as one of my favorite librarians likes to say, that gets people reading is a good thing. Very true.

But let's not forget the books, shall we? Even if the movies sometimes seem to have.

As I mentioned before, that's not always a bad thing. When a bad book has a germ of a good idea, all praise to the director who decides to take the money and run, as it were. Even when a *good* book has a cool idea, I can understand grabbing it and having fun rather than following obediently in the author's footsteps. I happen to think that the original Daphne du Maurier story "The Birds" would make a brilliant movie as it is, but I'm sympathetic to the impulse of gleaning the one concept (birds ganging up on people) and transplanting it into a completely new setting. Or look at *The War of the Worlds*, which kept pretty much nothing of the original text except the idea of hostile Martians invading and of course what happened to them. Which is a lot, actually, but what I mean is, the tone is nothing like that of the book. Or take *Sleepy Hollow*, which

takes a pastoral, non-scary local color period piece and, keeping nothing of Washington Irving's story but (you guessed it) the headless horseman, magically transforms the work into a vision of darkness, witchcraft, and ferociously evil beings such as the ever jumpable Christopher Walken as horseman before the whole head incident. (The only mistake this movie made, by the way, was in not giving Walken's dazzling voice any lines to work with other than "HAAAH!" There really ought to be a law.)

I lied before, by the way, about not violating the author's original intentions. As long as you make a really good movie *and* you don't plaster the author's name all over the thing as a selling point if the movie

has nothing to do with what he or she wrote (not that I'm thinking of anyone in particular here), you can do whatever you want. It's just usually not possible to obey both these rules and still make a movie worth seeing, or any money.

But please, please don't change a book without a good reason. Screwing over a brilliant novel to make a cold war propaganda point, for example, like the 1960 George Pal version of *The Time Machine*, is strictly a no-no. Plastering a happy ending onto an otherwise good and faithful movie, possibly also to make a cold war propaganda point, as happened in the 1954 version of *Animal Farm*, is in doubtful taste and doesn't convince anyone anyway. And totally throwing over the wonderfully apocalyptic worldview of an author like William F. Nolan, who by the way is still waiting for someone to make a decent film out of his book, in order to create a piece of silliness like *Logan's Run* the movie is just, well, silly. And sad.

But changes can and often should be made. Sometimes they are for the better. Sometimes they are simply necessary.

My favorite example of this is the Disney remake of *Peter Pan*. I watched this movie with a heart full of hostility and was forced to admit, ever so reluctantly, that it was better than I remembered and even rather good. More significantly, I was bugged off my high horse regarding the changes they had made to Pan's character.

I still think his voice characterization was a mistake. It may have seemed symbolically appropriate to give him the voice of a boy just on the edge of adolescence, perhaps to bring home the point that he would never quite reach that transition into manhood. But the voice is too old, too male, too rough. Peter Pan is, as Jackie Wullschlager points out in *Inventing Wonderland*, "an asexual child, not a young man." He should sound like Haley Joel Osment, not Huck Finn.

The compromises that had to be made in his appearance are interesting. Pan the original is not just the boy who will never grow up; he is one who isn't old enough to keep a firm grasp on who has moved through, or into, his life. He is innocently selfish, so completely egocentric that he doesn't even realize how thoroughly he dominates his own universe because it never occurs to him that he could be any other way. For all the work he puts into saving Tinker Bell's life (the book, not the movie), he later forgets her so thoroughly

that he can only hazard the guess, on being asked about her, that she has died. "There are such a lot of them," he said. "I expect she is no more." Such it would be, Barrie hints, for us if we should move in and out of the orbit of a child young enough to still consider himself the sun in any system. It is difficult to understand from the text which Barrie considers to be the great, or greater, tragedy: that children must grow up into adults, or that adults are cursed with the one-sided memories of the infancy and young childhood of others.

That last is always a shock. We expect babies to forget us; indeed, it would be almost horrifying to be remembered by someone we once met when he was only six months old. But to have had real conversations with one just old enough to converse, real confidences, inside jokes and secrets, and then to see all that forgotten completely enough to have left no trace of itself, is startling. I once met a four-year-old whom I had enjoyed considerable time and fun with only two years before. Only two years; but that was half her life now, and apparently the wrong half. When I greeted her with surprised pleasure, she shrank from me not only without recognition but with timidity bordering on fear. I was sixteen and I suddenly felt very old.

Barrie is obsessed with the motif of the young child as "innocent and heartless." In Pan's initial incarnation in *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens*, he is an adorable, naked, roly-poly baby who flew out of his nursery window quite by mistake when he was only a week old, because he forgot he wasn't a bird any more (as all children are before they're born, in Barrie's bizarre cosmology). He is an innocent little Pan: playing his pipes for the fairies, treasuring a stray kite because a real human boy once played with it, falling in childish love with a little girl who hides in the gardens all night; yet already there is a hint of the menace to come in the later book bearing his name. On the very last page, we are told that all is not sweetness and light on his jolly little island in the midst of the Gardens in which he plays once all the visitors have left for the night:

But you must not think that...it is a safe thing to remain in the Gardens after Lock-out time. If the bad ones among the fairies happen to be out that night they will certainly mischief you, and even though they are not, you may perish of cold and dark

before Peter Pan comes round. He has been too late several times, and when he sees he is too late he runs back to the Thrush's Nest for his paddle...and he digs a grave for the child and erects a little tombstone, and carves the poor thing's initials on it.

...But how strange for parents, when they hurry into the Gardens at the opening of the gates looking for their lost one, to find the sweetest little tombstone instead. I do hope that Peter is not too ready with his spade.

I quote this work at such length to give some idea of the Pan readers knew (and *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* was a runaway best-seller) before movies came along. Peter Pan, by the time of the book bearing his name, was a small child, no longer a baby; but he still, as the book

points out several times, had all his first teeth. And his first laugh as well. He is innocence itself, but innocence is not always sweet. On our first introduction to the lost boys, we are told that "when they seem to be growing up, which is against the rules, Peter thins them out." If he was not too ready with his spade before, he is surely swift with his sword now.

Swift and savage, as we learn when John asks Pan about Hook:

"What is he like? Is he big?"

"He is not so big as he was."

"How do you mean?"

"I cut off a bit of him."

His hand, of course. His *right* hand. The movie makes a point of telling it as his left. Perhaps it was simply too horrible to say that a man's dominant hand was now a hook.

And certainly the Neverland of the book is nothing like the cutesy realm of the movie:

In the old days at home the Neverland had always begun to look a little dark and threatening by bedtime. Then unexplored patches arose in it and spread; black shadows moved about in them; the roar of the beasts of prey was quite different now, and above all, you lost the certainty that you would win. You were quite glad that the night-lights were in. You even liked Nana to say that this was just the mantelpiece over here, and that the Neverland was all make-believe.

Shortly after, the pirates fire upon Pan and the Darling children, and "thus sharply did the terrified three learn the difference

between an island of make-believe and the same island come true.”

I thought and still think that there is a curious enchantment in the original story of Pan in all his innocent cruelty. But I understand that it might not translate very well into a big-screen box office success. Pan as himself may be winning, but he is not kind, he is not good. He is a not-so-noble savage, and Hollywood was right in assuming that parents and children wouldn't be comfortable with him in his original form.

Not that the movie doesn't try, at least at first. When we first see Pan (in that ubiquitous Robin-Hoody green outfit that replaces his original gown of “skeleton leaves and the juices that ooze out of trees”), he lands on the roof of the Darling household. Backlit into blackness, we can make nothing out until Tinker Bell (who is a nasty and often murderous little piece of work in the book) glows into being just under his face. And what do we see? Those teeth, the ones Barrie made such a point of mentioning, bared in a truly ghastly grin. A very nice nod to the original text, for those who know to watch for it.

But the movie simply can't sustain the book's menace. Hook fares well enough, though of course he can't measure up to the black, bleak, driven character of the novel; but while the end of the book is a rather depressing tribute to the fact that we will all grow old and die and that children, though dependent on us for their bodily needs, will never love us quite as we love them, the movie ends with the joyful picture of Pan sailing off into the sky in the ship he won from the evil grownups.

Well, of course. Even *I* know that you can't stay true to the text at the price of driving your young audience into therapy at the tender age of six.

But my bias is apparent when I state that I wish that choice didn't have to be made. I *do* tend toward the puritanical in that respect. I like the unadulterated text. I favor books over movies in general, and I can't rid myself of the suspicion, when I hear of a movie being made from a book, that the writer or director or producer wasn't moved so much by love of the original text (you do see that sometimes, like Emma Thompson's adoration of *Sense and Sensibility*) as by love of a sure thing. And so when I do watch a movie based on a novel, it's generally either because someone I know and trust highly recommends it, or because I didn't know there was a book in the first place.

This was the case with *Fight Club*, a movie often misunderstood both by those who haven't seen it and those who have. Women generally have to be dragged bodily to what the previews presented as just another guy movie (with Helena Bonham Carter dumped into the ever-popular role of Token Female Love Interest), while most reviewers perceived it as a paean to fascism. When in fact it's neither. It could only be a love song to totalitarianism under a charismatic leader if it seemed to be cheering that on, rather than simply shrewdly observing it. As for the guy-flick idea — true, there are two powerful male main characters engaged in some very macho behavior indeed. But the film doesn't feel exclusionary, or intended only for a male (or macho) audience. I sat there with my feminist ire on red alert and didn't feel the slightest warning prickle. Carter's character, Marla Singer, *is* technically a love interest; but she's also a pivotal character and a very unique, bizarre individual, without whose forceful personality the movie simply could not progress as it did.

By the by, there is apparently one individual in America really named Marla Singer. The guys who made the movie wanted to keep everything kosher, and so they contacted her to make sure it was okay to use her name. She said it was fine. Provided they paid her. So I'd just like to take this opportunity to say: Marla Singer, if you're out there, please know that you're a low, repulsive, cheap, narrow-minded bitch in a manger who epitomizes all the worst qualities of greed and unenlightened self-interest that have made people all over the world think harshly of Americans. Cashing in on your name was clearly the only accomplishment you'll ever be remembered for, and if you're ever in town please don't hesitate to drop by my place so I can spit on you. And I won't charge you a cent.

Anyway. Getting back to the film. It's another case of the movie being insanely wonderful and the book being merely very good, even though much of the dialogue and narration comes directly from the novel. The original text does indeed feel like a boy book, and I am not dissing its author Chuck Palahniuk, who has written several novels with brilliant premises and also seems to be smoothing out that “it's a guy thing” tone that can be so off-putting to sensitive females such as myself and the real Marla Singer's evil twin. The movie took brilliant advantage of its own medium;

I don't think I've ever seen a movie that so exulted in its own state of being. Listen to the commentary available on the DVD and you will hear people, actors and writer and technicians, who are absolutely delighted in this their project, absolutely sure of its rightness, absolutely convinced that they were working on something solid and lasting. Rock on, kids.

I spoke of seeing this movie not knowing its parentage. There are a few movies-from-books that don't ever directly acknowledge their line of descent. They leave it to the viewer to infer. If you figure it out, fine; you'll probably enjoy the movie a little more, feeling in on a private joke. If you don't, no big loss. Not knowing that Jonathan Lynn's *Greedy* is based on Dickens' not-so-ever-popular *Martin Chuzzlewit* isn't going to rub any butter off your popcorn. Knowing that *Clueless* is based on *Emma* can only add so much to an already flawless movie, although it does crack me up that the members of my Jane Austen listserve routinely refer to it with a straight face as one of the movie versions of *Emma*, and most of them rank it the highest of the three. But you don't have to know anything about Austen to laugh your gluteus maximus off. You can view it simply as a wonderfully written, well-acted romantic comedy; or you can read the book, see what the screenwriter kept and how she adapted the material, and laugh out loud at Elton being based on smarmy old Mr. Elton and the secret engagement of the original text translating into a boy Cher has the hots for turning out to be gay. Sounds wrong. Works right. See it and read it and see it again. You won't be sorry.

All of which draws me back irresistibly to my original point. Book is book. Movie is movie. Movie is not book, cannot replace book, should not be discussed as if it were book, and if you're one of those people who starts talking about a book as if seeing the movie means you have a clue to the finer (or even the broader) brushstrokes of the author's original intent, I'm going to have to get medieval on you.

Look, *go* the movies. Rent movies. Enjoy movies. Just don't mistake them for anything but what they are.

And if you've learned anything from this humble essay and want to express your gratitude, just remember something I read long, long ago: diamond earrings are never the wrong size. ~