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Movies Are Literature Too

[BY CHRISTINA OPPOLD](http://bookriot.com/author/coppold/)

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As book lovers, we are used to hearing our bibliophile friend’s claims that the book was better than the movie. Much of the time, we are that person.

Movies are given short shrift among bookish types; we claim they are never as good, never as profound or imaginative as a book. But don’t we want to see our favorite books come to life? Particularly, we like it when a book that supposedly cannot be made into a movie ends up surpassing our expectations. Blasphemous as it may be, I would even argue that in some cases a director like Peter Jackson improves upon the written work. His version of the battle at Helms Deep makes more sense than J.R.R. Tolkien’s in *Lord of the Rings*.

As well done as some movies may be – no matter the emotions they stir or the experiences they connect with – we talk of their stories as being something “other” that is different from books or plays. Let’s face it, a play is just a hop and a skip to movie; they both consist of dialogue, setting, and directions. Somehow a script is considered more important – weightier – than a screenplay. We read scripts as students. Shakespeare is thrust upon us, and occasionally we find ourselves with Ibsen or Wilde in hand. Oddly enough, unless we are film students, we do not read screenplays. Yet in many an interview, an actor will wax poetic about their experience reading a screenplay.

I cannot speak for everyone who loves the theatre, but in addition to reading scripts as literature, the stage has done a lot to expose me to new reading material. The first Broadway show I saw was Cats. I became obsessed with memorizing T.S. Eliot’s *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats* (my copy of which was, ironically, eaten by my dog). while years of holiday trips to see *The Nutcracker* lead me to dig up a copy of E.T.A. Hoffman’s book. After a friend joined the Junior Members of the Metropolitan Opera, I found myself looking into Pushkin after a tearful performance of *Eugene Onegin*.

There are plenty of stage adaptations of books, but sometimes you are unaware unless you read the notes within Playbill. Movies on the other hand are less subtle – the advertising wants you to know that it is based on the novel, as if that somehow makes it more important. Conversely, some movies, like *King Kong*, are adapted into book format, while others like Kubrick and Arthur C. Clark’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* are written in tandem. Like books, movies based on books can be good and they can be bad. We cringe at *Twilight* in both media while lauding *Life of Pi*.

Sometimes a story comes full circle from page to stage to film. Foremost in our minds lately has been *Les Misérables* – no matter the format, it will make you cry. No matter how it’s presented, it speaks a truth of the human condition – the tribulations and bittersweet triumphs of life. More importantly, if you fall in love with one telling, you are bound to seek out the others.

That’s one of the things any book lover can adore about movies – they expose a new audience to the books. How many people are carrying around a copy of *Anna Karenina*these days or have finally picked-up a copy of *Cloud Atlas*because they have been captured on film? And that’s just the books that are in your face screaming to be read.

Actors do not just show up on set, script in hand. They research to understand a role, especially if it carries any sort of historical, mythological, or emotional weight – research can be found in books. I recently watched War Horse and afterwards found myself looking up interviews. In one, actor Tom Hiddleston mentioned the coincidence of himself, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Patrick Kennedy all reading *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man* by Siegfried Sassoon in preparation. Discussing the book with Steven Spielberg, they ended up adding some dialogue from the book into their scenes. Obviously I put the book on hold at the library. Because, like other readers, I can’t get enough and need to know more, to learn more, to understand what it means to be human and the world I live in.

Sometimes we take our lives as readers too seriously. Even if we flit between the highbrow and fluffy beach read, it is easy to think of books as somehow being superior to movies. But storytelling is all connected. From the camp fire to the Blue Ray DVD, from stone tablets to digital ink; what thrills the balletomane bores the cinephile. Each new medium follows on the heels of what came before; it breathes new life in to sharing our stories and each is belittled by the supporters of what came before.

We read not for the sake of the book as a physical object but for the stories within that move us. Embrace the story no matter how it was conveyed to you.

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