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Is It Better to Read the Book Before Seeing the Movie?

Chris Columbus had a difficult task when he won the job to direct the movie based on the international best seller, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. J. K. Rowling, the author of the phenomenon, single-handedly made reading amongst kids "cool" again. Instead of being wrapped up in television or video games, Rowling made a pastime popular in the present time. Over two-thirds of children in the United States and the United Kingdom have read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, if not the entire Harry Potter series to date, making Columbus's job much more challenging than his past movies: he had to compete with children's imaginations.

Some of Hollywood's best films are based on novels: *Gone With the Wind*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Godfather*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Silence of the Lambs*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Traffic*. Of course there are also plenty of movie screenplays which were written with the silver screen as the medium through which a particular story is told. Visually stimulating movies such as *Gladiator* and most of the action genre work best told as movies instead of as books, and were thus written that way.

The matter at hand is what to do when a book is made into a movie: Is it better to read the book first, and develop your own ideas of what the characters and settings should look like, and be surprised by the twists and turns at your own leisure? Or should you see the movie first so that neither the book nor the film will disappoint you? For the most part, this is a matter of taste. Having done it both ways, each way has its own merits.

Using *Harry Potter* as an example, I along with millions of others was excited to see the movie after having read the books. I was well aware that Chris Columbus could not tell the entire story of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* in two and a half hours. After cutting out everything he felt was not absolutely necessary to the plot, Columbus still had a four and a half hour movie. Obviously, certain scenes had to go if Columbus was to make a reasonably long movie. Most children's movies are around ninety minutes in length, and making a children's movie an extra hour longer is somewhat of a risk Columbus was willing to take. After seeing the movie, I'll admit I was somewhat

disappointed with a few minor details, but was overall very pleased with how the movie turned out. The reason I liked this adaptation better than other films based on novels I had read, was Columbus's tireless effort to make the movie as loyal as possible, finding the perfect actor to play each character, piecing together the Hogwarts castle with various British castles and cathedrals, and using some "movie magic" to make the Quidditch match as exciting as it is in the book, therefore succeeding in his attempt to compete with children's imaginations.

Staying loyal to the book is not necessarily on the agenda for other directors and screenwriters. John Grisham's *The Firm* and the movie adaptation are almost identical for the first half, and then split into two entirely different stories. Winston Groom's *Forrest Gump* tells the story of a temperamental idiot savant who becomes college football star, a war hero, an astronaut, a professional wrestler named "The Dunce," a harmonica-playing member of a band, and a millionaire (among many other things). Eric Roth and Robert Zemeckis's adaptation tells the story of how a kind, but not too bright man stumbles into notoriety as a college football star, war hero, ping pong champion, and owner of a shrimp company. This was an example of a movie that I liked and it therefore inspired me to read the book. Needless to say, the book was not what I expected. Because I had no expectations going into the movie, I enjoyed it on its own merits. Reading the book afterwards was also easy because it was so different from the movie, I enjoyed it but for very different reasons. Had I read the book first, I'm fairly confident I would not have enjoyed the movie as much as I did and still do.

Some books are written and adapted for film, and should have been movies to begin with. Sebastian Junger's *The Perfect Storm* was a very good story but written poorly, telling the entire story of the fateful swordfish boat, the *Andrea Gail* in the first 150 pages, and then going back and telling the story of what was happening elsewhere during the storm. William Wittliff and Wolfgang Petersen corrected this problem, and told the entire story chronologically, cutting between the *Andrea Gail*, other ships, rescue missions, and what was happening on shore. A reader practically had to have a thorough background in meteorology to understand how the storm worked and why it was so devastating. The movie, on the other hand, took advantage of amazing special effects to give the audience an idea of just how awesome this storm was. After forcing myself to

finish this book (it is difficult to finish a book if the ending is halfway through it), I saw the movie and was relieved it was much easier to follow than the book had been. This is the exception to the rule, but I was pleasantly surprised to like a movie more than the book.

The best example of a recent book that has been adapted for the big screen is Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*. The book is written like a diary, in which Bridget lists her weight, the number of calories she has consumed, cigarettes she has smoked, lottery tickets she has bought, and *69s she has called, as well as recollects the various adventures in a given day. It is what she recollects that makes up the bulk of the story, and is what makes for such an interesting read. After reading the book, I saw the movie, and liked it very much. A few minor details were changed, a few hilarious scenes were cut from the movie, and a few new scenes were created to give the men who were dragged to this movie by their girlfriends/wives something to enjoy. Overall it was a very strong movie though, flowing nicely, and keeping with the pace of the book. The most likely reason this made a strong movie was because Helen Fielding wrote the screenplay, and she, better than anyone else, would know what was important and what was not to the integrity of the story.

As I said before, reading the book before seeing the movie is a matter of choice, but it is important for each potential viewer to determine what is important to him. If he wants to create his own ideas of what a character or building looks like, and be surprised at his own pace, then reading the book first might be the best option. For those books which he dearly loves, he might not want to see the movie at all because it will only disappoint his high expectations. If imagining isn't important, and you want to know the beginning, middle and end of a story in less than three hours, then by all means, see the movie. Bothering to read the book afterwards might provide added explanations to matters the movie rushed through or skipped all together, and provide a better understanding for the story as a whole. The third and not recommended option is to keep movies and books separate from each other.