

Film in the Classroom:

The Non-Print Connection

The timing could not be better for teachers to take a serious look at books that have been adapted for film. Today's adolescents continue the American love affair with movies while filmmakers respond with a plethora of teen films designed to tap into this lucrative and eager audience. This column focuses on a film evaluation form developed by a group of middle and secondary teachers enrolled in a graduate course, Teaching Adolescent Literature, summer 2002, at Rhode Island College.

The form was designed to help teachers examine movie adaptations of books that are used in the classroom. Several local teachers and graduate students at Rhode Island College have used the form and their evaluations of films adapted from adolescent novels are included later in this column.

Teachers need to make the distinction between novels that are then made into movies rather than movie scripts that are turned into novelizations and sold as books. Movies makers often authorize novelizations to capitalize on the film's popularity. These books usually follow the plot while adding detail, but as can be expected usually are of limited literary quality.

The role of technology also provides ever-increasing opportunities for teachers to incorporate film, especially adaptations of books in the classroom. Videotapes and DVDs provide teachers with both accessibility and flexibility to use an entire film in the classroom or for teachers to identify and use excerpts from films, to pause and discuss, or to replay important sections. I recently observed a very effective lesson where the teacher used excerpts from the film

Oh, Brother, Where Are Thou? as a bridge to reading *The Odyssey* in a ninth grade classroom. In another class, a teacher used different film excerpts of the gravedigger's scene from *Hamlet* and led her students in a spirited interpretation of the different versions.

A number of years ago, I surveyed high school students about influences on their reading preferences and what influenced their choices. A number of students listed movies as an influence on their reading choices. Their "reading" lists would then include the latest Shakespeare play that had been filmed or a novel made into a television mini-series. The results of the survey revealed that a film or television adaptation of a book heightened students' awareness of books and even encouraged students to read a book once they had seen the film adaptation. It also revealed that some students assumed that seeing the movie "was just as good as reading the book." Of course, some of these students never read the books if there were a movie version, but others were eager to see and compare the two treatments of a story that they liked. One eleventh grader reported: "When I hear about a movie of some book, I get the book and read it and then I go see the movie. When I see the movie first, I have all the images from that in my mind and I don't make my own and that takes the fun out of reading."

More recently, a part of an on-going Literacy Partnership between the Alliance for the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature at Rhode Island College and H. B. Bain Middle School in Cranston (RI) involved a whole school read of Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty*. (See the evaluations below.) After reading and discussing the novel, the students all had

the opportunity to watch the movie adaptation, *The Mighty*. The following comments were representative of responses that student volunteered: "I liked the movie, but the book was better." "What did they do to our book?!" "I liked the way I thought they looked like better than the movie." "I liked the King Arthur stuff in the movie." Not surprisingly, some students indicated that they would liked to have just seen the film rather than reading the book, but there were only a few who took that position.

The Evaluation Form

The form, developed in 2002, has been modified and revised based on field test by teachers. Parts 1 and 2 of the form are geared specifically to the needs and concerns of teachers; however, teachers *and* their students can use Part 3 to compare the book with its film adaptation.

Evaluation for Film Adaptations of YA Books

Film: _____
 Stars: _____
 Director: _____
 Date: _____
 Book: _____
 Author: _____
 Publisher: _____
 Date: _____

Part 1 Rationale/ Purpose for class use of the film

Your discussion should include the following: a justification of *why* and *how* the film will be used. (e.g. How do you think the film will contribute to the understanding of the book? Or the appreciation of it? Are you using the film in conjunction with the book? In place of it? Or just excerpts to clarify or emphasize? Will students view it before, during, or after reading the book? How will you assess their experience?

Part 2 Special Considerations

Your discussion should include the following: Regardless of the rating system, are there any elements of the film that would cause obvious concern in the community? Do you need to use permission slips? Do you need to do any type of pre-viewing activity to enhance the students' experience?

Part 3 Comparison and Contrast

Rate the film in each of the following areas in comparison with the book. Comment on why you selected the rating. In the rating scale replace numbers with stars 5 is the highest.

| | |
|-----------------------|-----------|
| Characters | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Plot | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Theme | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Setting | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Conflict | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Tone | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Mood | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| Overall effectiveness | 5 4 3 2 1 |
| True to the text | 5 4 3 2 1 |

Application of the Film Evaluation Form:

Four applications of the complete form follow. Two of them evaluate *The Mighty*, from differing perspectives. *Freak the Might* is one of the most frequently taught YA novels in the area and increasingly the film is also being used in conjunction with it. The remaining two are evaluations of *Shiloh* and *Tuck Everlasting*.

Evaluation of the Film Adaptation of *The Mighty*

Film: *The Mighty*

Stars: Sharon Stone, Gena Rowlands, Harry Dean Stanton, Gillian Anderson, James Gandolfini, Kieran Culkin, Elden Henson

Director: Peter Chelsom

Date: 1998

Book: *Freak the Mighty*

Author: Rodman Philbric

Publisher: Scholastic

Date: 1993

Part 1 Rationale/Purpose for class use of the film

While the plot of the movie pretty much mirrored the book, there were some interesting differences. *Freak the Mighty* is written as a first person narrative. In the book Max is the focus; the reader is inside Max's head. The perspective in the movie shifts. At first Max narrates. The film follows all of the characters for a bit and then returns to Max's voice-over narration. The story is no longer Max's story. Kevin catches the attention of the camera while Max supports him, both literally and figuratively.

While excessive voice-over can kill a movie, changing perspectives also presents a problem: the director needs to explain what's going on with the other characters. Towards the end of *The Mighty*, Max is being held prisoner by his father, murderer Killer Kane. In the book crippled friend Kevin shows up to save the day. Since we're inside Max's head this is all we need to know. In the film the director felt compelled to show Kevin's journey on crutches propelling his weakened body through snow, riding a runaway bumper down an icy mountain. I might use this particular chunk of the film to study how point of view impacts the decisions the story teller makes.

Another interesting difference was the film's many visual references to King Arthur and the Knights. The Arthurian legend thematically holds the movie together. While the legend is important in the book, it is the power of words from beginning to end that draws the story together. The story ends with the writing of the story, even followed by a dictionary of favorite words. I might show the entire movie with a focus on the Arthur references, asking students to compare thematic emphasis.

The movie is divided into chapters, some named exactly as the chapters in the book, others not. It would be very easy to use segments of the movie to compare to specific chapters. The first segment of the movie would be a very good one to show since we hear Max's voice and thinking as the main characters are introduced. Using just this first chunk would provide background knowledge and might also engage less motivated readers.

The endings would also be interesting to compare. Scenes in the movie are quite drawn out compared to the relatively brief wrap-up in the book.

Part 2 Special Considerations

Since the movie and book both deal with special needs students, I would want to discuss that nature of their disabilities. I have had students in the past with disabilities similar to Kevin's. I'm not sure how I would feel about using this movie with a physically handicapped student in the class. Using the word "freak" might be upsetting to students (and parents) so I would want to discuss this word and its use in the context of the film before seeing the movie. It's interesting that the movie version dropped "freak" from the title.

Although I don't think the movie is particularly violent or graphic, I would notify parents that students were going to be watching a PG movie. I would also briefly explain the connection of the movie to the curriculum. When videos are used, parents should understand that there is an educational purpose.

Part 3 Comparison and Contrast

Characters 3 While Kevin was feistier in the movie, Max was more of an unknown. The father (played by James Gandolfini) was downright creepy, especially with southern accent. The grim grandfather was just as I imagined.

Plot 3 Two misfits join forces and become a force to be reckoned with and learn life lessons along the way.

Theme 3 The movie emphasized the code of chivalry. A knight's duty is to do the right thing-and a man is known by his deeds rather than his parentage.

Setting 4 The movie is set in Cincinnati. There are excellent shots of the city, the power generators and plumes of smoke.

Conflict 3 The points of conflict are the same as the book. The boys are in conflict with the local gang, Max's father, and at times, each other. Iggy plays a smaller role. The grandmother and grandfather seem fearful of Max in the book. This tension is minimized in the movie.

Tone 3 During the narration/voice-overs, the tone matches the book: informal, reflective, "kidspeak".

Mood 3 The mood is a bit lighter than the book. Some sequences are downright manic and overblown. The scenes where Max is threatened by his father flip between scary and silly. This is also true of the book, but the translation to film is almost cartoon-like.

Overall effectiveness 3 While the movie was entertaining enough, it didn't hold together. Parts of the film felt silly or overdone, taking away from the relationship that developed between the two boys.

True to the text 3 Most of the plot points remained true to the text. By shifting the point of view away from Max, the story became less about his growth as a character.

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Evaluation of the Film Adaptation of *The Mighty*

Film: *The Mighty*

Stars: Kieran Culkin (Kevin "Freak" Dillon), Eldon Henson (Max Kane), Sharon Stone (Gwen Dillon), Harry Dean Stanton (Grim), Gena Rowlands (Gram), Gillian Anderson (Loretta Lee), Meat Loaf (Iggy), James Gandophini (Kenny "Killer" Kane)

Director: Peter Chelsom

Date: 1998

Book: *Freak the Mighty*

Author: Rodman Philbrick

Publisher: Blue Sky Press

Date: 1993

Part 1: Rationale/Purpose for class use of the film

The film version of Rodman Philbrick's *Freak the Mighty* is a faithful and powerful adaptation of the original text. Using this in the classroom in tandem with the novel would go a long way towards having students understand and appreciate Philbrick's themes and lessons. Being a cinematic person by nature, I strongly believe that the use of properly adapted cinematic versions of novels helps bring readers closer to the text. Bear in mind that film versions should never be used as an alternative to reading the book, and certainly should not be shown before students have read the text. That having been said, it's important to understand and accept that students today are more drawn to film and television—it's a sign of the times—and we, as educators, need to show kids that these things can be educational as well as entertaining.

When my students have finished reading *Freak the Mighty* and have discussed the novel in literature circles and reported on it through various writing prompts, I plan to show the film and ask students what they thought of how well the characters, scenes, and overall themes were portrayed. Students will be given assignments which give them the opportunity to act as film critics, directors, casting agents, and screenwriters and make modifications to the film as they see fit. The experience of seeing this film will be assessed on the basis of these final projects.

Part 2: Special Considerations

There is some violence in this film (in accordance with Philbrick's original text), although it is handled with discretion. Still, I understand that, while many

parents don't mind their children reading about violence, to see it portrayed in a movie shown in the classroom could upset them. I would arrange for a screening of the film for all concerned parents and administrators to ensure that there are no surprises when it is used in class. I am confident that there would be no objections from anyone who has seen the film. In cases where parents outright forbid their child to see it, the student will be excused from the exercise and given an alternative assignment based upon the novel itself.

Part 3: Comparison and Contrast

Characters 5 I have to admit, I was skeptical about the casting of Kieran Culkin as Kevin, considering that in Philbrick's text, Kevin was slightly deformed from his disease. This, in my mind, brought more out in the concept of "Freak the Mighty." Kieran is a normal, fairly good-looking young boy who I was uncertain could capture the essence of the character. I was wrong. Through a combination of special effects and his outstanding performance, I was gladly proven wrong. Other cast favorites include Harry Dean Stanton as Grim. Sharon Stone as Gwen, and Eldon Henson as Max. The performances are powerful, but not over the top, which could have easily happened with a story as heart wrenching as this one.

Plot 5 The film follows the original novel's plot almost exactly. While there are some scenes that have been modified (Kane's attack on Loretta for example) and there are some creative liberties taken here and there (the appearance of knights in many scenes) it all goes to help with the flow of the film and does not compromise the integrity of Philbrick's original intentions.

Theme 4 Philbrick's original themes are evident in the film. The first, and most obvious, being that our differences make us what we are and that everyone has a place in the world. The symbiotic relationship of Max and Kevin reflects this as both have had trouble fitting together individually, but when together as "Freak the Mighty," they become more than either one could be alone. Other themes include the search for the self, the desire for individuality, the struggle for acceptance, the absence of the father (and the presence of an abusive parent), trauma from a past life experience resurfacing, and coping with the loss of a loved one. If there is any fault in this category, it's that the film tries to capture too many of

these themes. As a result, the narrative often comes across as a little heavy handed in it's handling of some of these lessons—almost preachy at times.

Setting 5 I referred back to the book several times during the course of the film and found that the sets and locations match up nicely with Philbrick's original descriptions. The city streets are gritty, Kevin and Max's homes are old but not really run down, and Loretta's building looks exactly like I'd pictured it when reading the book. Choosing to do the entire second unit shooting in Cleveland speaks volumes about director Chelsom's desire for authenticity and his care in translating the book to celluloid.

Conflict 4 There's a lot of this in the film and the novel. Although Chelsom had to modify a lot of it to fit it all into a 90-minute film, his handling of a lot of the violence and heartbreak shows that he is catering to young adults and children in his work. For example, the scene where Kenny Kane attacks Loretta takes place behind a wall. While we don't actually see his hands around her throat, what we do see: her legs shaking, Kane's form over hers, and what we hear: the sounds of strangulation, combine with Max's flashback to the death of his mother to make for an eerily disturbing and powerful sequence (far more effective than if we'd actually seen the act explicitly). Likewise, Max's final scream when he realizes that the "cybernetic research lab" is nothing but an industrial laundromat is silent, but the pain is there in his face and his body language.

Tone 4 The use of Max as the de facto narrator of the film gives it a unique voice. Unfortunately, this narration occurs almost exclusively at the beginning and end of the film. The director also pushes us through the action through chapters, named from chapters in the original novel (see "True to the Text" below for more on this). Overall, the film speaks to both kids and adults, although it would have been interesting to hear more of what Max is thinking now and then.

Mood 3 Here is where the film, in my estimation, flounders a bit. Perhaps this is because the narrative has to move quickly for time restraints. It just seems that more time could have been taken to build more emotion at key points in the story. For example, the friendship between Kevin and Max happens very quickly. Too quickly, I think. The book offered a lot more tension as Max overcame his fear of Kevin (and his fear of himself) in order to be able to trust the

young disabled boy. It just seems that the film moves from one frame of mind to the next too rapidly. One moment, Max is curious, and then scared, and then shy, and then angry . . . as his emotions change, so does the mood of the film. This can be jarring and sometimes confusing as, in some cases, the shift of emotion is not properly explained.

Overall Effectiveness 4 The film is very ambitious, considering the source material. Chelsom handles it with grace and artistic integrity. The themes, though many, are strongly and effectively portrayed and the relationship between Kevin and Max, once they have gotten past the awkward initial stages, is persuasive and touching. The intensity of the third act is frightening but heartening and the final moment between Kevin and Max could have easily been melodramatic but comes across more as inspiring, especially in light of Kevin's final gesture, essentially giving Max a chance to have something of a normal life. We are saddened by Kevin's death, but are hopeful for Max and his future.

True to the Text 4 Philbrick's book had been acclaimed for five years before the film's release and Chelsom obviously had his work cut out for him in taking on this project. Too often, films take the low road and churn out a story that has little or nothing to do with the original text. This is absolutely not the case in *The Mighty*. The film relies heavily on the original text, even going as far as using chapter names from the novel to name segments of the film. Even some of the original dialogue has been lifted (though in some places "pop-culture-ized" a bit). Of course, time restraints made it impossible to recreate every scene and every conversation, but that is to be expected. The only area that the film might have improved is in Max's internal dialogue. There is some narration from the character at the onset of the film and the end, but that's about it. I think that Chelsom could have included more of this throughout the film, as he does briefly at some key points. Overall, the film is faithful to the original novel and, while I am not certain of his actual reaction, I have to believe that Philbrick was pleased with what Chelsom has produced here.

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Evaluation of the Film Adaptation of *Shiloh*

Film: *Shiloh*

Stars: Blake Heron, Michael Moriarty, Rod Steiger

Director: Dale Rosenbloom.

Date: 2001

Book: *Shiloh*

Author: Phyllis Reynolds Naylor

Publisher: Atheneum.

Date: 1991

Part 1 Rationale for class use of the film

My Inclusion class is comprised of eight special education students and five regular education students. There is a wide range of ability within each of the two groups of students. It is very difficult to get all of the students to read the assigned pages of a book as homework. It is for this reason that I decided to have the students read the entire book during class. I chose the book *Shiloh* because I felt it would appeal to all of the students and it was well within their reading abilities. The class read the book before viewing the film. Students were asked to identify the differences between the book and movie. They were then asked to tell why they thought the changes had been made and to evaluate the effectiveness of the changes.

The students had no difficulty identifying the changes, but had difficulty explaining reasons why the changes might have been made. To overcome this difficulty I helped them to brainstorm possible reasons for one of the changes. In the film version Marty was friends with the daughter of the local store owners, something which had not happened in the book. After considering some possibilities, the students concluded that the director wanted to appeal to teens by having a romantic connection.

Part 2 Special Considerations

The film was rated PG for mild violence. I did not need parental permission as the film was in no way controversial. I did warn the students that it would be upsetting to watch *Shiloh* being mistreated, but that more than likely trick photography was used.

Part 3 Comparison and Contrast

Although there were several changes, the film adaptation stayed quite true to the original story. For example, the family was portrayed as less needy than the book would have led us to believe. However, an explanation of a re-mortgaged home was given for the family's inability to afford a dog. The characters were developed through their actions and conversations rather than in the method of narration in the book. One major difference was in the climax of the film. The film version was far more dramatic than in the book. In the book Jud not only released *Shiloh* to Marty, but gave him a dog collar as well. In the film Marty and his dad got into a shoving and shouting match with Jud. This change added much suspense as the viewers were taken through desperation then jubilation as Jud drove away with *Shiloh*, then at the last minute released him.

Shiloh was adorable, and in depicting just how precious he was the book could not compete. Another aspect in which the film excelled was the in depicting the theme. Not only was the theme directly stated in the film, it was ably shown by the actions and words of the actors. To stand behind your words and fight for justice were messages that could not be missed.

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