

Hollywood, Etc.: Screenwriters walk a fine line translating literature into film

by David L. Coddon

Who put a lit professor in charge of this holiday season's movies? Consider these august titles:

"Beowulf." "Love in the Time of Cholera." "The Kite Runner." "No Country for Old Men." "Atonement."

BLADE RUNNER - A restored and remastered 'Blade Runner' is back in theaters, and with it has returned the controversy of whether the script would have been better if it had stayed closer to the Philip K. Dick's novella. CNS Photo. Also coming to a theater near you, films adapted from books that enjoy fiercely loyal followings, like "I Am Legend," "The Water Horse," and the "final cut" of the original "Blade Runner," which grew out of Philip K. Dick's novella "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?"

Transforming literature or beloved books (or both) into successful films is not an exact science. For every consensus success ("To Kill a Mockingbird," "The Godfather," et al.) there are glaring failures (remember "Vanity Fair," or "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues"?).

They don't give out an Academy Award for best adaptation for nothing. You've got to please the studio. You've got to please moviegoers. You've got to please devotees of the book.

So how do these screenwriters do it?

"A lot of it for me is very instinctual," said Mark Protosevich, who's adapted Richard Matheson's novel, "I Am Legend," into a screenplay for the Will Smith movie that opens Dec. 14. "It's an emotional reaction. I hadn't read it ('I Am Legend') in a number of years. ... What happens is that I start seeing a movie in my head. Images start coming up, scenes start coming up. I scribble notes.

"I'm not thinking too much about whether this is going to please the fans or admirers of the book. What I'm doing is going through my own process; I've always likened it to musicians covering songs. You're either going to do a very faithful cover of that original composition, or you're going to try to approach it in your own way."

"I Am Legend" (written in 1954) has been filmed twice before: once as "The Last Man on Earth," with Vincent Price in 1964, and again as "The Omega Man" with Charleton Heston in 1971. Protosevich, who wrote 2000's "The Cell" and the screenplay for last year's "The Poseidon," is an ardent Richard Matheson fan, but ...

"There are certain people," he said, "who are fundamentalists when it comes to a book. They view their books the same way fundamentalists view their religions: There must only be a literal adaptation. I'm always interested in interpretation of other people's works.

"People who love the book will always love the book. What's appealing to me is to look at the book, look at the two films that have already been made from that book and say, 'What can a new version be?'"

The screenwriter adapting a book has a foot in both worlds: those of literature and film.

"You have to be able to appreciate both," said Stuart Voytilla, who teaches screenwriting and film aesthetics at San Diego State University and is the author of "Writing the Comedy Film" and "Myth and the Movies." "The novel uses words to create the images in the reader's mind, and the film has to rely on images to show the story's world to the audience. We're trying to reveal character through action in the film, whereas in the novel, you can spend a lot of time inside the character's mind."

Voytilla appreciates the reality that fans of a book will be particularly wary of a film adaptation.

"You want to be true to the spirit of that (author's) work," he said. "They've created a relationship with the reader, and you've got a whole fan base that's already invested in those characters."

How that's done varies, according to the book and the filmmaker's vision.

"It could be embracing the world, as in 'Harry Potter,' but it could be just (using) a single character - James Bond comes to mind, or even the Jason Bourne series," said Voytilla. "We may not be fully true to the plot of the story, but we are to the character."

The restored and remastered version of the 1982 film may again spark debate among those partial to Dick's very different novella. But the late author's daughter, Isa Hackett Dick, has no quibbles with the movie.

"I think it's the wrong road to go down, looking for faithful adaptations, if what you're trying to do is a different medium, you want to have it faithful in spirit, but you're making a film, so it has to be filmic," she said. " 'Blade Runner' departs quite a bit from the novel, but the basic questions are all there, which are what it means to be human and how society might change with technology."

Several others of Philip K. Dick's works, notably "Minority Report" and "A Scanner Darkly," have also been adapted into films, and his daughter, who considers herself "one of the shepherds" of her father's work, is generally pleased with the results.

Bottom line: "If it (the film) gets people back to the written word," she said, "that in itself is a success."

As to whose mark ultimately is imprinted upon the final product - the author's or the screenwriter's - well, we know where Protosevich stands on "I Am Legend."

"I certainly take pride in what I brought to the story," said Protosevich, whose next project is a screenplay for a film about Stan Lee's Thor comic-book character. "I do feel a personal connection to it. But the essence of it, the core of it, will always be traced back to Richard Matheson.

"Do I see some of myself in there? Yes, but not to the exclusion of source material."

For his part, SDSU's Voytilla is adapting Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," taking "five pages of a short story and turning it into a two-hour film. We're actually setting it in the American Civil War."

"It's hard to say how Poe (who died in 1849) would interpret the idea of movies," Voytilla said.

But he thinks the master would approve.

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