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Gained in Translation: The Power of Film Adaptation

Amanda Stewart · Wednesday, February 11th, 2015

The translation of nonfiction literature into film is a daunting task. Difficulties range from adapting sensitive subject matter to condensing complex stories into a cinematic framework. Literature allows both writer and reader to experience the subject on a more intimate level and requires a much greater commitment on the reader's part rather than just watching the film adaptation. It relies on the readers' imagination while film utilizes multiple sources and techniques to not only create that same effect, but intensify it to a higher degree. Movies combine imagery, score, dialogue, and performance to evoke emotion and access a wider audience that is not so easily done with literature. Furthermore, books are read over a period of time with multiple interruptions occurring in the readers' lives between chapters, while film has the advantage of capturing their audience's attention for two straight hours, allowing viewers to escape their own reality and into that of the film's protagonist. Two of this year's Oscar contenders illustrate how movies can translate nonfiction literature and contextualize it for a modern audience, thus bringing to life significant and unknown characters to audiences across the world.

British mathematician Alan Turing's legacy was brought to life in Andrew Hodges 1983 biography, *Alan Turing: the Engima*. A mathematician himself, Hodges' critically acclaimed biography explores Turing's life in depth, describing in great detail the brilliant mind that went on to crack the Nazi Enigma code and laid the foundations for modern computing. Hodges also detailed Turing's homosexuality, for which he was legally prosecuted and forced to undergo chemical castration. Hodges' biography was published during the early days of the AIDS epidemic when gay rights in the UK were limited-to-non-existent and Turing wouldn't receive his posthumous royal pardon for another 30 years. The 2014 film adaptation, *The Imitation Game*, was able to show Turing's place in history, while at the same time contextualizing his struggles within the modern climate of gay rights. While Turing's persecution may have been viewed as unfortunate in the 1980s, in today's culture it is considered appalling and unimaginable. The father of modern computer science has now taken on the added dimension of gay icon.

It is through flashbacks of Turing as a young student at boarding school that audiences see how Turing has always been an outcast amongst his peers. Bullied and misunderstood, Turing showed signs similar to that of autism with his OCD tendencies and inability to socially connect with his fellow students. Turing's relationship with his one and only friend, Christopher Morcom, gently alludes to his homosexuality, while displaying his fascination with codes. Flash forward from his school days to WWII, the film captures the significance of his relationship with Christopher when Turing names his code-breaking machine Christopher, and confirming the audience's suspicions of his homosexuality when he relays to a colleague that he doesn't have feelings for fiancé Joan

Clark, but rather prefers men. Despite the film's alterations from actual events, *The Imitation Game* excels at grasping the audience's sympathy and admiration for Turing and showing what crippled Turing socially helped him excel professionally, saving millions of lives during WWII and paving the way for computer science.

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Fellow Oscar contender *Wild* is the film adaptation of Cheryl Strayed's story of loss, infidelity and drug use, *Wild: Lost and Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*. The book creates an intimate relationship with the reader through first-person narrative and the author's exposed, uncensored thoughts. While some of this intimacy is lost in the film, her smallness and isolation are intensified on the big screen through cinematography that shows the ruggedness of the terrain and physical isolation Strayed experienced. The film opens with Strayed (played by Oscar winner and 2015 nominee Reese Witherspoon) resting atop a steep rock, surrounded by silence and solitude, sweaty and exhausted from what appears a long day's hike. Immediately upon discarding her hiking boot, it trickles down and into oblivion, leaving Strayed stranded with one boot in the middle of a 1,100-mile hike. The audience holds their breath as the boot disappears, quickly developing fear and concern for Strayed. Immediately, Strayed throws the other boot off the rock, releasing her building frustration by screaming "fuck" into the open wilderness, while a series of flashbacks strummed together conclude the scene. Both the novel and film's openings are identical, but the film's vivid scenery mixed with Witherspoon's raw performance give the audience an intense visual of Strayed's emotional and physical state that was not as dramatically depicted in the book.

One significant aspect of Strayed's life that is intertwined throughout *Wild* is Strayed's difficulty in dealing with the loss of her mother. In the book, we hear and learn about Strayed's close relationship with her mother through Strayed's own memories, while in the film, the audience sees this relationship play out through highly emotional flashbacks and gain a better understanding of the hardships with which Strayed's mother struggled. From escaping an abusive husband to keeping her family financially afloat as a single mother, the audience develops their own relationship with Strayed's mother, provoking emotions brought on by their own experiences.

There are always sacrifices made in the translation from literature to film since the film adaptation requires a simplification in the narrative and character motivation. However, the power film holds can outweigh its damage in the translation by appealing to a wider audience and bringing to life a story that may otherwise go unnoticed. Despite altering facts and characters for cinematic purposes, these individuals' stories are being presented to the mass audience, gaining wider notoriety, and encouraging audiences to discover the source material. When asked what made her want to take the hike, Strayed replied, "That's a long answer. You'll have to read the book."

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