

Films that are Better than the Book

The 39 Steps

Book: John Buchan, 1915

Film: Alfred Hitchcock, 1935

Perhaps Hitchcock's greatest film, and the model for all man-on-the-run thrillers, it made many improvements to Buchan's improbable plot, racking up the tension (who can forget that escape on the Forth Bridge?) and introducing strong female characters, to one of whom the hero remains handcuffed for an enjoyably risqué scene.

Biggest change: Hitchcock's thrilling climax is the dramatic revelation by 'Mr Memory' that the mysterious 39 steps are an organisation of German spies trying to steal vital British military secrets. In the book the enemy are part of an international Jewish conspiracy and the 39 steps were, quite literally, steps.

Write to reply: By the time the film came out, Buchan was His Excellency the Rt. Hon. Lord Tweedsmuir, Governor-General of Canada, and seems to have thought it beneath his dignity to comment on it in public. But the 39 real steps that originally inspired him, after he heard his infant daughter counting them, were removed from the building they were part of and sent to him as a gift.

A Clockwork Orange

Book: Anthony Burgess, 1962

Film: Stanley Kubrick, 1971

Inspired by an assault on his wife, Burgess wrote his dystopian satire on post-war Britain and Behaviourism in three weeks. Filming over many months, Kubrick turned it into a disturbing, hallucinatory vision of rape, ultraviolence, and Beethoven. Extremely controversial and inspiring copy-cat crimes, Kubrick himself withdrew it from British distribution.

Biggest change: In the redemptive last chapter Burgess came down on the side of free will, whatever the cost. Kubrick cut this ending completely, which left his masterpiece both darker and more ambiguous than the book.

Write to reply: Though he also repudiated his book, Burgess disliked the way the film seemed to glamorise the violence he had sought to target. Arguably it was this very tension which made the film both greater and more disturbing.

Lawrence of Arabia

Book: 'The 7 Pillars of Wisdom' - T. E. Lawrence, 1926

Film: David Lean, 1962

Although a foot taller than Lawrence, O'Toole captured his heroism and his arrogant oddness. The epic film took liberties with accuracy - but so had the book. Lawrence was as careless with manuscripts as with his memories: he had to entirely re-write after losing his only copy at Reading station.

Biggest change: The scene in which Omar Sharif rides out of the distant haze and shoots Lawrence's guide is one of the most famous in cinematic history. It completely altered the incident in the book, but in doing so captured the beauty and savagery of the desert.

Write to reply: Lawrence was dead when the film came out, but might have got a masochistic thrill from its portrayal of his description of being raped by Turkish soldiers, which he apparently inserted mischievously into his memoir despite the fact that it probably never happened.

Blade Runner

Book: 'Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?' - Philip K Dick, 1968

Film: Ridley Scott, 1982

By removing much of Dick's post-apocalyptic clutter, Scott focused the story on Harrison Ford's character and the question of his personal identity and what constitutes humanity. Oxford philosopher Dr Stephen Mulhall describes this as a betrayal of the book's 'Heideggerian' message. He couldn't be more wrong.

Biggest change: The studio wanted a happy-ish ending, like the book. But Scott turned a thriller into a masterpiece inserting a scene suggesting that Harrison Ford is a 'replicant' like his enemies. He also chose a much better title.

Write to reply: Dick saw the film's script and some clips before he died and said that Scott had 'perfectly caught' the World he had imagined in the book.

Don't Look Now

Book: Daphne du Maurier, 1971

Film: Nicholas Roeg, 1973

Roeg's fractured approach to conventional narrative ideally suited this story about clairvoyance. His impressionistic crescendo of imagery changed its nasty twist into something that seemed at once horrific, inevitable and somehow cathartic.

Biggest change: By making the protagonist part-responsible for his daughter's death, Roeg turned a slight novella into a searing exploration of love, guilt, and loss.

Write to reply: Unlike most adaptations of her work, Du Maurier liked the film, though the sex scene between Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland was so intense that to this day it is rumoured to have been un-simulated.

Lord of the Rings Volume One: the Fellowship of the Ring

Book: J. R. R. Tolkien, 1954

Film: Peter Jackson, 2001

Tolkien's epic couldn't be bettered, but starts slowly. Jackson lovingly re-structured to increase the drama and character development so part one stands on its own. Good riddance Bombadil, and endless arguing at Elrond's Council (despite which no-one thinks of just getting the eagles to give Frodo an airlift to Mordor).

Biggest change: By having Arwen not Glorfindel rescue Frodo from the black riders, Jackson makes her a bigger – and rather less drippy – character.

Write to Reply: Tolkien died in 1973, and was sceptical of dramatisation, though he did sell his film rights. His son and literary executor, Christopher Tolkien, complained that the films eviscerated and commercialised the book. He should have been relieved: one studio's original plan was for a two hour film of the whole trilogy, and at one stage Aragorn was to be played by Nicholas Cage...