



By the book

Every April sees a host of American film company executives coming into London for the London Book Fair. They are on the prowl for the latest British books. This follows the BAFTA shortlist for best adapted screenplay: *The Last King of Scotland* (winner), *Casino Royale*, *The Departed*, *The Devil Wears Prada* and *Notes on a Scandal*.

There is something encouraging about the fact that British writers seem to be doing something right, even if some of the time they are novelists, which is why it is not surprising that film and television executives attend the book fair since books are such an important source of material for film and television.

While this magazine focuses broadly on scriptwriting, it is worth looking more closely at adapted scripts, the books that are the basis for the films and the process by which adaptations are made. Even though we have published a few articles over the last five years on adaptation (issues 9, 12 and 23), adaptation is generally not recognised as having the significance it plays in the industry.

Selling an option to a book or script is worthy of raising only a glass of water. The vast majority options never become films. However, books are much sought after.

Many of the problems in adapting books are similar to those in making an original script work as a film but there are some problems specific to adaptations, starting with selecting the right book. A best-seller might give you a great brand-name and marketing advantage but it is sometimes said that truly great books are more difficult to adapt than deeply flawed books, perhaps because there is too much reverence for the original.

What attracts someone to a novel (or a true story) might make it difficult for it to be adapted into a feature film or television drama and, of course, true stories have specific problems in adaptation that fiction doesn't usually have, notably the need to portray a different sort of truth.

Aristotle said, 'A credible impossibility is to be preferred to an incredible possibility.' In other words, good drama is about the believable not about factual truth and successful storytelling is essentially about what the audience believe and, although truth is part of the equation, I believe that it is not usually as important for the writer to reflect what actually happened in drama as it is to engage the emotions and the intellect of the audience.

A dramatic adaptation of a true story - as a feature film rather than a documentary - relies every bit as much on the rules of fiction and since creative minds will always find a way, there have been a number of outstanding 'documentaries' that have actually been more like fictional presentations of true stories; I am thinking of films like *Touching the Void* and even *Etre et Avoir*.

Lew Hunter, a well-known American script guru, put it well when he said that in life one thing happens after another; in drama one thing happens because of another.

So what are the factors that make us emotionally engaged? They include:

- Believability.
- Accessible and likeable characters (even if they are villains) who are usually in relationships and often suffer some undeserved misfortune.
- Something at stake that the audience care about.
- Characters who have been well developed, and finally
- A structure that makes the audience pro-active participants of the narrative rather than passive spectators.

All of this applies as much to an adaptation as to an original script.

I have on the wall in my office a cartoon by Honeysett, published in *The Listener* showing the BBC Script Department meeting room. Several people are sitting around a table and a man is holding a book out of the window saying, 'This is the first thing we do when we adapt a book.'

The main danger in adapting a true story is that the creators of the film often believe that it is the truth of the story that will make the audience believe in the story but the general public will forgive poetic licence and factual inaccuracy if they have a good time and a powerful emotional experience.

Books, comics and plays are a huge resource for film and television producers. According to the pre-Book Fair issue of *Screen International*, the film-industry trade paper, what producers are currently looking for includes:

- Very smart chick lit, especially after *The Devil Wears Prada* did so well.
- The new *Bourne Identity*.
- Franchise books that can lead to a series of films or television dramas.
- Intelligent, accessible political thrillers after *The Constant Gardener*, *Syriana* and *The Last King of Scotland*.
- Intelligent, funny literary novels.
- The next big romantic novel.

So what we learn from *Screen International* - other than a comment that there is probably too much low-budget horror in development - is that producers want more or less the same things that they have always wanted.

Since there are so many more books published than films made, book fairs can be a litmus test for the film and television industry. If you are a scriptwriter, development executive or producer and didn't attend the Book Fair this year, perhaps you should think of doing so next year. Like the Cheltenham Screenwriters' Festival coming up in July (see pg 68), it is filled with people talking about storytelling. What better way to spend some time?

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