

Teaching interpretation between literature and film

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I. Book and film pairing - independent artists, both

The book and film I chose to read and watch was *Tiger Eyes* by Judy Blume. The book was published in 1981 and then the film was produced by Lawrence Bloom, Judy's son, in 2012.

First of all, the book was excellent. It was a book that I remember reading through the night as a sixth grader myself, but having not read it since, I figured it was fair play for this assignment. In the story, the father of the main character, Davey, was murdered in a robbery. Davey spends the rest of the story trying to piece back together her life while also being a daughter to a grieving mom, a sister to a grieving brother, and a young woman who is dealing with her own feelings about losing her father. The story is both heartbreaking and heartwarming. It is classic Judy Blume.

The filmmaker did an outstanding job of capturing the same elements of story that the book writer did. The emotional journey Davey was on was captured in both text and film. It was evident that she was really struggling and was trying to both cope with her own loss as well as help those she loved to navigate their own journey.

Since the book was told with Davey narrating it in the first person we could hear Davey's thoughts, so there were some adaptations that had to be made so that the audience could know, in the film, what Davey was experiencing. Also, like many other texts we've studied, there was a condensing of story that took place.

One of the places this came out most prominently was in Davey's relationship with Wolf. In the book, Davey and Wolf did have a bond. They hiked, they talked, and Davey thought about Wolf a lot. In the film, they also had those bonds, but they seemed connected even more. Perhaps because we could not see Davey's thoughts in the film, the filmmaker chose to show a more significant relationship that even got physical for a brief moment as a way to demonstrate what could not be clearly carried from the book to the film.

One of the ways their relationship was amplified was when Wolf brought Davey to the ceremony in which his community embraced him and publicly claimed care for him because of his sick father, another was at Christmastime when Davey kissed Wolf and when he asked her what she was doing, she replied, "Exactly what I want to be doing." This showed that the filmmaker was using Wolf to show Davey's confusion with her own

situation and grief. Another way their relationship was amplified was in the fact that Wolf was around more. In the book, the two of them usually were just together in the hills. In the film though, their lives were much more interwoven. Wolf came to Davey's performance, went to find her afterwards when she ran away, then went with her at the end to "bury" her clothes from the night her father was killed. All of these things demonstrate an amplification of the relationship between Davey and Wolf. The relationship was important to Davey's healing in the book as well, and here in the film it is shown to be even more of her healing process.

Another way that the filmmaker served as an independent artist was in the modernization of the story. In the 1981 text, Davey didn't have a cell phone, her dad's candy jar was raising money for 'retarded' kids, and the specific costs of things felt very dated to the 1980's. In the 2012 adaptation, changes were made to either make those things benign by not mentioning them or by giving Davey those things that she needed. There was no reference to 'retarded kids', just the camera close up shot of the candy jar raising the money. There was no scene where Davey went to the store to buy her hiking boots for \$30, or any amount for that matter. Instead, she just had the boots after a span of time. While this modernization may have not been a significant point, I do wonder if some of the small details like that in a book do tend to date it and make more modern readers less likely to read it. In that way, the modernization that the filmmaker used was significant because it allows for a more modern audience to not be affected either way with the fact that hiking boots cost way more than \$30 today.

II. A changed perspective

At the beginning of the course, I was a person who often didn't even see a film if I liked a book because watching the movie would 'wreck' the story for me. While I am still the same person who likes books better, I can now appreciate films for what they are - an adaptation of the story. At the beginning of the course, I would have watched the film *Tiger Eyes* with a chip on my shoulder because even from the opening sequence, there were differences between it and the book. I would have entered into watching it just waiting to pick apart the things that the filmmaker changed. I would never have appreciated the character Wolf was or liked the actress they chose to play Davey because she doesn't look like the character I had pictured. I would have been so hung up on little details like that that I would have missed the larger picture. The larger picture is that filmmakers take the essence of a book,

the feeling the story gives them, and then create scenes and images and camera sequences that represent the emotion of the story in that way.

I think this became most clear to me when studying the different versions of *Charlotte's Web* and then studying the different versions of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Having the opportunity to see the same story adapted in different ways, with different focuses each time, really helped me to see that the adaptation of a book to a film is really much more complex than trying to duplicate every scene possible from a book to a two hour time block of a movie. When a person reads a book, they have such a long time to work with the story and characters in their own mind that there is really no possible way that a filmmaker could capture every feeling and emotional journey that a story takes a person on. In order to encapsulate and tell *something*, it's really a matter of choosing *what* the filmmaker wants to capture, then trying best to capture that thing - sometimes at the expense of other elements of the story.

In this film, the emotional journey really focused mostly on Davey and her relationship with Wolf as part of her healing process. A pivotal part of their relationship was Wolf's sharing of his Native American heritage as a way of opening up to Davey, and that is something that wasn't in the book at all. Perhaps the filmmakers used that as a way to give Wolf more of a roundness to his character, where in the book that roundness was difficult to see.

At the beginning of the course I would have been hung up on the fact that Wolf brought Davey to the ceremony of loss with his tribe, and the fact that that scene wasn't in the book. I would have been angry that the filmmakers did that. Now, though, I appreciate it. It makes me think of the flashback scenes in the modern *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. It offered explanation where previously there was none. The ceremony that Wolf brought Davey to allowed us as an audience to see Wolf as part of a community, it allowed us to see that he clearly cared about Davey and he was trying to help her heal and he wanted to share part of his journey with her. It also allowed for some fantastic camera work. The shots of Wolf looking at Davey across the campfire were beautiful images. The scene also allowed for a really powerful parallel image late in the film when Wolf gave Davey a feather too.

III. Teaching this book and film

If I were teaching this book and film together, I would want students to notice the use of secondary characters. The book focuses on Davey, but then has a number of secondary characters all swirling around her. Her

mom is struggling with depression since Davey's dad died, her brother is treating his aunt and uncle as though they are his parents and Davey is bothered by that, Davey has a more volatile and defiant relationship with her uncle and aunt. Additionally Davey at school is a whole other can of worms - she hangs out with a friend who Davey thinks is an alcoholic, has a boy who likes her, doesn't do well in school and has to go to the nurse a number of times, then tries out for a school play. All of these micro-stories involve characters and relationships and complexities that are developed to a certain extent in the book. Really, for such a short book, there are a lot of relationships and secondary characters.

The movie switches focus a bit and that is interesting. Where the book developed a number of different relationships, the movie really developed the relationship between Davey and Wolf most prominently. Davey and Wolf ended up both being round characters - characters who started the story as one type of person and ending the story as another - and their journey feels a lot more parallel than in the book. That is interesting.

In the film, the relationship between Davey and Wolf is more developed in the fact that they are together more and lean on one another more, but also in the journey that Wolf is on with his dying father - and that Davey didn't have that long journey with her own dad's death. Both the connection and the contrast between Davey and Wolf is worth exploring. Because Davey and Wolf are so developed, it makes sense that the other characters and micro-plot lines are less significant and that other characters have less of a role.

This book and movie offers this great opportunity to study the focus that a filmmaker really needs to have to keep a story one that is well-told in a two hour movie. By offering students the chance to study the development of secondary characters in both the written text and then in the film, they will really see this sharp focus that filmmakers must have. Additionally, it would offer the opportunity to look at the additional scenes that were added to show the growing relationship between Davey and Wolf. To take it to another level, the students could explore what each added scene contributed to their relationship and have a discussion around that. And lastly, the students could write about the contrast between Davey's journey with her father and Wolf's journey with his - and how the filmmaker used Wolf to foil Davey.

These are all nuances that are so interesting to explore and it really is something that is probably done best with a book and film of the same story. If, as a teacher, you tried to point out the different levels of character development and the use of foils for a main character, but did so using different texts, it would be difficult to see the

contrast. Here, though, to see the same story with different iterations of the same relationships would really help students to see these changed relationships and really understand the significance of secondary characters. That would then be very beneficial in their own writing and development of characters.

IV. Teachers serve as interpreters of literature and film

Teachers are interpreters of literature and film in the same way filmmakers are. When considering watching a film, we all see things through our lens and our life experience, our schema. Each of us enters the viewing with a lifetime of different memories to draw from, other books and films that we have seen that the story reminds us of, different melodies that are in the film that are also in our memories somewhere. Thus we each see what can be done with teaching that film to our students in our own nuanced way. And literature is the same. We have equally as many connections to literature and could teach it in a myriad of ways as well.

When I think about using *Tiger Eyes*, I consider using it to teach characterization. A different instructor might see *Tiger Eyes* as a perfect opportunity to explore setting and how a filmmaker can really give a sense of place with the camera angles and use of short and long range shots. A third instructor might use *Tiger Eyes* to really demonstrate to his students that key lines from a book are preserved, but it is up to the filmmaker to pick those lines of dialogue and set them in a place where they fit - which may be different than in the book.

Each of the above examples demonstrates that teachers *are* interpreters of literature and film. Because it is up to the teacher to then guide the students' eyes, the teacher needs to have a focus just like the filmmakers. If teachers ask students to try to pay attention to everything - the use of characters, the dynamic camera shots, the key lines of dialogue - students would be overwhelmed with the task. Reading a text and then watching a film would be a chore and would be complicated. Students, in their effort to see everything, would see not as much.

If, though, a teacher can give students a focus, a lens to read with and then to watch a film through, the students can gain a deep understanding of that focus. It is the same way that filmmakers provide a lens with their work - they choose the big thing that they want their viewers to experience and they go for it. Teachers do the same. They can choose the big thing that they want their students to experience and then help those students to see it. In that way, teachers are interpreters of literature and film.