

MOVIES: MY (SOMETIMES) GATEWAY TO GREAT BOOKS

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Queen Sugar, The Girl on the Train, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, every superhero movie – Screenwriters have been looking to books for inspiration since movies and television were invented. The reaction by book reading moviegoers tends to be mixed. A common refrain among us bookish folks is that the book was better. Either the movie adhered too faithfully to the book or strayed too far. The movie left out an important character or was miscast. The movie got the ending wrong or completely failed to capture the essence of the book. I admit to making such complaints. (Don't get me started on the awful ending to the 1967 film Valley of the Dolls.) Nevertheless, I have a soft spot for movie (and increasingly television) adaptations. Give me the great adaptations, the average ones, and the terrible ones. Many movies, even bad ones, served as my gateway to incredible books.

I am on an eternal quest to discover new things to read. Today there exists a multitude of ways of finding new books, many of them online making the search that much easier. It was not as easy when I was growing up. Cell phones didn't have internet access. Not every home had a home computer. If people wanted to know what was going on in the world they watched network news or read an actual newspaper. So how did a bookish kid find new things to read without easily and immediate internet access, you ask? Well, I can't speak for all bookish kids but the primary way I found new things to read was by walking up and down the aisles rows of the library and bookstores. Teachers, librarians, and other adults provided additional suggestions, as did magazines and newspapers. Movies provided the rest.

TRAVELS TO WORLDS NEAR AND FAR: DISCOVERING THE SPACE OPERA

People really disliked the 1984 movie version of the Frank Herbert's interplanetary epic Dune. Critics panned the movie. (See for example [here](#) and [here](#).) Audiences agreed with critics and stayed away from theaters, making the movie a disappointment at the box office. I first saw Dune several years later on TV and loved it! Sure it was confusing and messy but there was enough of a story to pique my curiosity. I picked up the book to better understand what happened in the movie. Not surprisingly, Dune the book was way better than Dune the movie. But thank goodness for the movie. Not only did it introduce me to what became a favorite book, it was my gateway into science fiction literature of the space opera variety.

Science fiction and space opera movies were not completely new to me – I saw Return of the Jedi. But before Dune their counterparts in written form were uncharted territory. Before Dune I thought space centered science fiction meant aliens and/or humans fighting in space. While that can be entertaining, it isn't necessarily the kind of story I seek out. In Dune there are escalating tensions between multiple factions but the book is about so much more. It explores ecology, politics, religion, and

relationships. *Dune* the movie however bad it may have been opened my eyes to how rich this genre could be. It led me to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, *The Martian Chronicles*, and more recently, *Leviathan Wakes*. Without *Dune* I'm not sure I would ever picked up these titles.

BESTSELLING BOOK? I THINK I SAW THE MOVIE

The Joy Luck Club, *The Hotel New Hampshire*, *The Color Purple*, and *The Handmaid's Tale* – these are the movies that introduced me Amy Tan, John Irving, Alice Walker, and Margaret Atwood. That might seem strange given these were bestselling books. How could I have not known about them or their authors? My lack of awareness was mostly due to timing. Three of the four above books were published before I was in middle school. If a book becomes a best seller before you were born or came to reading, then it is less likely that book will make it onto your radar. That is unless someone puts it on your radar. That is what movies did for me as a kid, and to a lesser extent continue to do for me as an adult. They put books on my radar.

Except for *The Color Purple*, the above books were not on my high school syllabi. An aunt clued me into the fact that *The Joy Luck Club* originated as a book and suggested I read it. Otherwise teachers, librarians, and booksellers did not recommend these books or authors to me. Instead, they steered me to what today would be called young adult titles. But I was the kind of kid who read above her grade level, who stretched toward “adult” books with complex stories. These movies introduced me a world of books I hadn't known existed.

IF NOT FOR THE MOVIE...

The best is when a movie leads to a lesser known book or one that has long fallen off the public's radar. After all given that Margaret Atwood, John Irving, and Amy Tan continue to publish new books, chances are that I would have eventually found my way to their work even without the movies. It is less certain that would have happened in the case of Sloan Wilson's 1955 novel, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* or Scott Heim's 1995 novel, *Mysterious Skin*.

People like to portray the decade of the 1950s decade as an idyllic time in American history. (Think *Leave It to Beaver*.) However, I have always thought that if the 1950s were so great, then the 1960s would have been different. I seek out movies and books that provide a different take on the 1950s. That is how I ended up watching Gregory Peck portray Tom Rath in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, a movie about finding purpose and happiness amidst a materialistic culture and demanding work schedule. The 1956 film seemed so un-1950s. I wanted to know more.

The story of how two boys cope with sexual abuse in *Mysterious Skin* floored me. One boy, adventurous and reckless, becomes a prostitute. The other interprets his experience as an alien abduction. Sometimes I watch a movie and realized I missed something and look to the book for clarity. Other times I see a movie and think I want more of this. With both *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Mysterious Skin* it was the latter. I simply wanted more of the story.

For me the book is not always better, but it is almost always more than its movie counterpart. Movies based on a book usually condense the story. They replace words and maybe even whole characters with visuals. This isn't necessarily a bad thing; it is just a different way to tell a story. I love movies but sometimes I want the uncondensed story. I want the original story created by the author, not the one interpreted by a director and actors. So I turn to the book, always with gratitude for the movie that led me to it.