GREAT ADAPTATIONS

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Extract from www. http://www.literature-study-online.com/essays/sillitoe

Alan Sillitoe (1928 - 2010)

British novelists of the 1960s - By Ian Mackean and Stephen Colbourn

There's bound to be trouble in store for me every day of my life, because trouble it's always been and always will be.

[Saturday Night and Sunday Morning]

Alan Sillitoe was one of the most prominent British novelists of the 1960s, and is remembered as one of the group known as the Angry Young Men, although his best-known novel Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1958) was published a little too late for him to have been at the forefront of the movement - Hurry On Down by John Wain having been published in 1953, Lucky Jim by Kingsley Amis in 1954, and Look Back in Anger by John Osborne having been performed in 1956.

In Britain of the 1950s and '60s harsh realism such as Sillitoe's was the predominant style in literature, being used by prominent writers of the era such as Arnold Wesker, John Braine, Keith Waterhouse, Stan Barstow, Shelagh Delaney and Nell Dunn. These writers may not have reached a working-class readership - people like Arthur Seaton of Saturday Night and Sunday Morning would not have spent their Saturday nights or Sunday mornings reading novels - but many of their works were filmed, and thus reached a wide audience.

The son of an illiterate factory worker who became unemployed in the Depression of the 1930s, Sillitoe spent his early life in poverty, and was largely self-educated, after leaving school at the age of fourteen. After working in factories for six years he joined the RAF and served in Malaya, but was invalided out at the age of 21 with tuberculosis, and began to write during his subsequent months in hospital. He also read widely, being particularly impressed by such classics as Plutarch's Lives, Gibbon's History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, and Carlyle's French Revolution. [1]

He then spent seven years abroad, in France and Spain, living with Ruth Fainlight an American poet, scraping a living and recovering his health in warmer climates. He read American writers, such as Norman Mailer, William Styron, Carson McCullers, and J. D. Salinger, as well as the first novels of John Braine, Kingsley Amis, and John Wain [2]. He visited Robert Graves on the island of Mallorca in 1956, and Graves encouraged him to write realistically about his experience of life in Nottingham, a suggestion which bore fruit in the highly successful Saturday Night and Sunday Morning. He married Ruth Fainlight in 1959 when she obtained a divorce from her first husband, and he had the prospect of some money coming in from books and film rights.

Like D. H. Lawrence before him, and the later Liverpool Poets, Sillitoe wrote from a provincial standpoint which was distant from, and a challenge to, London, the middle-classes, and the literary

establishment. His early novels were more firmly rooted in the working-class milieu than were most of the other works of Angry Young Men, and had an underlying political intent, highlighting the situation of the working-classes in a modern industrial society.

In Saturday Night and Sunday Morning Sillitoe presents Arthur Seaton as a victim of a society which promotes escapism and consumerism through the propaganda of advertising, while at the same time demanding conformity to the class roles of workers and administrators. An anti-hero, Seaton is dissatisfied with his lot as a factory worker, and like Jimmy Porter of Look Back in Anger, is brimming with resentment and defiance, feeling himself to be subject to the established order in which power is wielded by the upper and middle classes. On Saturday nights he indulges in excessive drinking and riotous behaviour, then experiences a period of calm and reflection on Sunday mornings, before returning to the factory and a working week of mindless boredom. Seaton expresses his rebellious spirit by antagonising the established order in any way he can, and the story ends at a point where he has some prospect of improving his life, through promotion and marriage. The novel earned respect on its publication, admired for its dialogue and social realism, and became a best-seller when the film, which Sillitoe adapted for the screen himself, was released in 1960.

Sillitoe's other well-known work is The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner, a short story published in a volume of the same name in 1959, and filmed in 1962. The anti=heroic protagonist, Smith, is a thief detained in borstal. The governor of the institution hopes that Smith will win a cross-country race and that the achievement will motivate his rehabilitation into society. Smith enjoys long-distance running because while running he is alone, with no one to tell him what to do, free to think for himself and reflect upon his life. His thoughts are dominated by his view of society as divided into the 'In-laws', those who own property and wield power, such as the borstal governor, and those, such as himself, who do not, the 'Out-laws'.

While running the race he reflects on the fact that if he wins it will not only give the governor a chance to claim credit for having 'rehabilitated' him, but also entrap him (Smith) in the system of competition and reward imposed by the establishment. In an act of anarchic defiance, he stops running, sacrificing his chance to win, affirming that he will not join or support the class that represents authority and ownership. In society's terms he has spoiled his chance for 'success', but in his own terms he has triumphed by being true to his beliefs and acting upon his own values. Smith's attitude foreshadows the 'drop-out' trend of the later '60s.

Faces of Frankenstein | The Innovation and Influence of James Whale's 'Frankenstein'

extract www.manorvellum.medium.com

By Brian Keiper

In terms of influence and cultural impact, James Whale's Frankenstein is a strong contender for the greatest horror movie ever made. In fact, its effusion into the culture is so complete that it is largely taken for granted. Variations of the square-headed, bolt-necked make-up appear in cartoons, comic strips, children's activity books, on cereal boxes and board games, and graces the covers of hundreds of editions of Shelley's novel, even though the creature's description in it is very different from Jack Pierce and James Whale's legendary design. The look of the creature, however, is far from the only iconic and enduring element of this film. The 1931 version of Frankenstein is a point of convergence in the history of horror, marrying elements of disparate films that came before into one providential moment. And, as with so many films, it almost never happened.

Even after the success of Dracula in early 1931 (the introduction of serious supernatural horror in the sound era), Carl Laemmle, Sr., head of Universal Studios, felt it was a fluke:

"I said to Junior [Carl Laemmle, Jr. who had been made head of production], 'I don't believe in horror pictures. It's morbid. None of our officers are for it. People don't want that sort of thing.' Only Junior wanted it. Only Junior stood out for it, and he said to me, 'Yes they do, Pop. They do want that sort of thing. Just give me a chance and I'll show you.' Well, he showed me. He showed us all."

Not only did the younger Laemmle "show them all," Universal's horror films were practically the only thing that kept the company afloat during the deepest years of the Great Depression.

There were also false starts to the film. Robert Florey, who had lobbied to make the film, was originally assigned to co-write (along with Garrett Fort) and direct Frankenstein, with Bela Lugosi set to star. Working under the assumption that Lugosi was to play the doctor, Florey and Fort began shaping the script. Laemmle soon made it clear that Lugosi, who they hoped to shape into the new Lon Chaney, was to play the monster, which the writers had reduced to a grunting, lurching, non-character. As the studio brass began to lose confidence in Florey, he took it upon himself to shoot about twenty minutes of now-lost test footage. There are many conflicting accounts from Lugosi, Edward Van Sloan (who would play Dr. Waldman in the test footage and final film), and Florey himself, but the result is indisputable. Florey was removed from the project and Lugosi departed as well, either of his own free will (according to Lugosi) or by studio mandate. Both were moved to Murders in the Rue Morgue which was a reasonably successful film released in 1932.

Enter James Whale. Whale had caught the eye of Universal with his World War I film Journey's End (1930) and was making Waterloo Bridge (1931) for the studio when he was approached for Frankenstein. According to Whale, he was "forced more or less against my will" to take the job. But there were several reasons why Whale eventually warmed to the project. First of all, it was something other than a war picture. He articulated other reasons in interviews, saying "Frankenstein, after all, is a great classic of literature, and I soon became absorbed in its possibilities. I decided I'd try to do something with it to sort of top all thrillers." He soon began working with writers to shape the existing Florey/Fort script, which had in turn been a revision of the play written by Peggy Webling and reworked for American audiences by John L. Balderston. The eventual film crafted from this script introduced several ingredients to the Frankenstein mythos that would become completely synonymous with it, practically eclipsing Shelley's novel in the process

www.theguardian.com/books

The 100 best novels: No 62 – The Big Sleep by Raymond Chandler (1939)

Raymond Chandler's hardboiled debut brings to life the seedy LA underworld – and Philip Marlowe, the archetypal fictional detective

Robert McCrum

Enter Philip Marlowe, one of the great characters in the Anglo-American novel, a protagonist to rival and possibly surpass Sherlock Holmes. Marlowe holds the key to the enduring appeal of this novel and the six that followed. In 1951, Chandler told his publisher, "It begins to look as though I were tied to this fellow for life."

Maybe he should not have been surprised. Chandler fully understood the archetypal fictional detective, and had been polishing the character for years. In The Simple Art of Murder (1950) he describes such a man in a famous passage:

"He must be a complete man and a common man and yet an unusual man… He is a lonely man and his pride is that you will treat him as a proud man or be very sorry you ever saw him. He talks as the man of his age talks, that is, with rude wit, a lively sense of the grotesque, a disgust for sham, and a contempt for pettiness."

Chandler might have been describing Philip Marlowe, who made his debut in this first novel, after several appearances in Chandler's pulp fiction stories. He once observed of his celebrated style: "I'm an intellectual snob who happens to have a fondness for the American vernacular, largely because I grew up on Latin and Greek."

Chandler, like PG Wodehouse, who will feature later in this series, had been educated at Dulwich College, a school founded by Edward Alleyn, the great actor-manager whose company, the Admiral's Men, included the poet and playwright Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's great rival. In Chandler's stories, his protagonist also appears as "Mallory". He is a 20th-century knight who treads the mean streets of Hollywood and Santa Monica, and who also visits the houses of the stinking rich, with their English butlers, corrosive secrets and sinister vices. Chandler plays with this medieval conceit in surreal metaphors. For instance: "It was a blonde to make a bishop kick a hole in a stained-glass window."

In The Big Sleep – the title refers to the gangster euphemism for death – Marlowe is summoned to the home of old General Sternwood whose wild daughter, Carmen, is being blackmailed by a seedy bookseller. But The Big Sleep transcends its genre, moving WH Auden to write that Chandler's thrillers "should be read and judged, not as escape literature, but as works of art".

The plot, notorious for its complexity, soon spirals into a world of pornography, gambling and Hollywood lowlife. It's not flawless, and there are some loose ends. When Howard Hawks filmed the novel he asked, "Who killed the chauffeur?" and Chandler replied that he had no idea. To him, plot was always subordinate to character, mood and atmosphere.

A note on the text

Chandler published his first detective story, in the pulp fiction magazine Black Mask, at the end of 1933. He explained this departure to his British publisher: "Wandering up and down the Pacific coast in an automobile I began to read pulp magazines, because they were cheap enough to throw away and because I never had at any time any taste for the kind of thing which is known as women's magazines. This was in the great days of the Black Mask… and it struck me that some of the writing was pretty forceful and honest." Between these beginnings and 1938, when he began to write The Big Sleep, he wrote 21 Black Mask stories, developing and honing the qualities of his mature work. A late starter, he came to this world as an outsider, a middle-aged English public schoolboy adrift in California. However, he caught on quick. The early stories have several Marlowe prototypes, LA settings, good and bad cops mixed into the regular crime cocktail of violence, drugs, sex and booze.

When he came to write The Big Sleep, Chandler "cannibalised" (his own description) his stories. The central plot of the novel comes from two stories, Killer in the Rain (published in 1935) and The Curtain (published in 1936). Both stories were standalone tales, sharing no common characters, but they had similarities. In each, there's a strong father distressed by his wild daughter. Chandler melded the two fathers to make a new character and also did the same for the stories' two daughters.

There are other sources, too. Like Carmen Sternwood, his own much-loved wife Cissy had posed nude as a young woman and, like Carmen, taken opium. Marlowe's alcohol problems reflect Chandler's own latent alcoholism. In virtually every scene of a Chandler novel, someone is lighting a cigarette, or having a drink.

The Big Sleep was published in the spring of 1939. Despite collecting an impressive retinue of literary admirers, including Somerset Maugham and, later, Edmund Wilson, the Knopf (US) edition sold barely 13,000 copies, though it did better in France and England. It did not begin to attract serious international attention until after the appearance of Howard Hawks's film starring Humphrey Bogart.

In 1959, the year of Chandler's death, his great English admirer Ian Fleming permitted himself a discreet nod of homage. Towards the end of James Bond's confrontation with Goldfinger, he passes through an airport and buys a book about golf – and the latest Chandler.

www.theguardian.com/books **extract**

Rereading: The Spy Who Came in from the Cold by John le Carré

William Boyd explains why he keeps returning to Le Carré's great espionage novel 50 years after its first publication

"What do you think spies are: priests, saints, martyrs? They're a squalid procession of vain fools, traitors, too, yes; pansies, sadists and drunkards, people who play cowboys and Indians to brighten their rotten lives." The person responsible for this bitter rant is Alec Leamas, the deadpan fiftysomething protagonist of John le Carré's 1963 novel The Spy Who Came In From the Cold. We will refer to it as The Spy from now on, for brevity's sake, but it's worth starting any current assessment of the novel with something of a thought-experiment. The Spy is set in the early 1960s before the assassination of John F Kennedy, before the real advent of hippies, the pill, the Vietnam war, the "swinging sixties" and all the familiar counter-cultural baggage that goes with it. Its tone, if anything, is dourly 1950s, its colours grey, its weather depressing. It's worth remembering that rationing in Britain finally ended in 1954; that the second world war was a fresh memory (Leamas is a veteran); indeed, that anyone in their 70s would be a survivor of the 1914–18 war, the first world war. The action of the novel takes place half a century ago. It belongs to an entirely different world from the one we know today.

And yet, and perhaps this is the first remarkable comment to make about The Spy, its cynicism is resolutely de nos jours. One forgets just how unsparing the book is, how the picture it paints of human motivations, human duplicities, human frailty seems presciently aware of all that we have learned and unlearned in the intervening decades. The world was, on the surface, a more innocent, more straightforward place in the early 1960s: there were good guys and bad guys and they were easy to spot. One of the shock effects of reading The Spy when it was published must have been the near-nihilism of its message. It is unremittingly dark – or almost so – and this fact, I believe, lies at the root of its greatness.

The Spy is the story, to put it very simply, of a complicated act of deadly triple-bluff perpetrated by the British Secret Service against its enemies in the German Democratic Republic, as communist East Germany was then known. At its centre is Alec Leamas, sent, he believes, on a clever under-cover mission of revenge but in fact the unwitting tool of even cleverer British brains with other motives. So much so relatively straightforward, but one of the sheer pleasures of the grade one espionage novel is in unravelling its multifarious complexities and Le Carré handles the unspooling web of narrative and motive with exemplary poise.

The second remarkable aspect of The Spy is the skill with which it is constructed and written. It was Le Carré's third novel (after the highly creditable Call for the Dead and A Murder of Quality) but there is a clear sense in The Spy of a writer hitting his stride with resolute confidence. Unusually for a spy novel, Le Carré's narrative point of view is omniscient – a dangerous choice, because with authorial omniscience you cannot have your cake and eat it. If you are saying to the reader that you can enter the thoughts of any character and can comment on the action or events in your own voice, then any deliberate withholding of information counts as a black mark. The narrative house-of-cards begins to collapse; the reader's trust in the author's control dissipates immediately. Technically, on a purely writerly analysis, Le Carré seems to me to be operating at the highest levels.

www.bbc.co.uk

Berlin through the eyes of Christopher Isherwood

19 March 2011 The musical Cabaret helped evoke a crucial period in European history

By Vincent Dowd

A new BBC film dramatises the adventures in 1930s Berlin of the English novelist Christopher Isherwood. Earlier adaptations of his Berlin stories, including the musical Cabaret, helped shape the popular idea of what Berlin was like as the Nazi-era loomed. But how true to life have these versions been?

Christopher Isherwood arrived in Berlin in 1929. He had recently abandoned his medical training in London and had published a not very successful novel. At 24, he knew he needed a new direction - and by the time he left Germany in 1933, he had found the material to make his name as a writer.

His semi-autobiographical stories of pre-Hitler Berlin have been influential, firstly on the page and then reworked by others as a play, a stage musical and on screen.

Isherwood went to Germany to be with his friend, the poet WH Auden. The two young men, both gay, were seeking intellectual stimulus but they also hoped for more physical diversion. As Isherwood recalled much later: "To Christopher, Berlin meant boys."

"Auden's father had offered to pay for his son to have what we would now call a gap year. He chose Berlin, I think, because of the sexual atmosphere," says Professor Norman Page, who has written a book about the two writers' time in Berlin.

"No doubt he wrote excited and exciting letters to Isherwood urging him to join him. Auden went home but Isherwood stayed almost four years and never really lived in Britain again."

Christopher Isherwood was planning a long novel about Berlin life to be called The Lost. "But as a writer he was a sprinter, not a long distance runner," says Professor Page.

So Isherwood published two short works based on his Berlin adventures and acquaintances.

In 1935 came Mr Norris Changes Trains and then Goodbye to Berlin in 1939. The same year he moved permanently to America, where he died in 1986.

He had mined his own life for inspiration more than most writers dare, as the 2009 film A Single Man, directed by Tom Ford, showed. But the afterlife of his Berlin stories has been extraordinary: it is hard to think of another writer whose take on a specific time and place proved so definitive.

In 1951 John van Druten wrote a play based on the stories called I am a Camera. His challenge was to find the dramatic focus.

In the 1930s, Isherwood couldn't write openly about his own homosexuality. So the original stories are linked by a narrator who is always slightly out of focus, with readers left to draw

their own conclusions. The most famous line is: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."

But 20 years after Isherwood's Berlin adventures, the stage play is less honest about his sexuality than the originals had been. A suddenly heterosexual Isherwood has a relationship with nightclub singer Sally Bowles.

In real life there had, of course, been no such affair but Isherwood explained there had been a real Sally Bowles, a young Englishwoman in Berlin called Jean Ross.

As he wrote her, Sally's main talent is for snaring wealthy older men.

Jean Ross died in 1973 having said little about being used as the model. In reality, Ross was a political radical who went on to have a relationship with the author Claud Cockburn.

His son, Alexander Cockburn, knew her much later. "Jean was a wonderful woman, warm and gentle in demeanour. She couldn't have been more unlike the rather tinny character portrayed in Sally Bowles. She was extremely intelligent, politically alert and vital. She probably found the portrait painted by Isherwood rather irritating."

Ross may have been annoyed at Isherwood's invention but the success of Jan Van Druten's 1951 Broadway play I am a Camera (filmed in 1955) meant the writer was now losing control of his own creations.

Later he said the regular arrival of cheques soothed his wounded self-regard.

In 1966, the play became the hit musical Cabaret. Six years later came Bob Fosse's massively successful movie version, starring Liza Minnelli.

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Patricia Highsmith manipulates our sympathies in The Talented Mr Ripley so expertly that we find ourselves rooting for a brutal killer

Sam Jordison Tue 2 Jun 2015

Do you only read books containing "likable" characters? Are you put off if there's no one to root for in a novel?

This debate has been buzzing in the literary community for quite a few years, but I sometimes wonder if it's been exaggerated. I've rarely heard people complain that they "didn't like any of the characters" in a novel. What I have often heard is people complaining about people who make this complaint. When I googled "likable characters" I came across articles in the New York Times, The New Yorker, and here in the Guardian, all worrying over the issue – but fewer actual people who were upset because they couldn't find someone "nice" to to take sides with in a book.

To limit yourself to books containing characters you can like is to deny yourself a healthy proportion of the finest literature. It is to deny the complexity of humanity. It is also – let's not mess around – pathetic, needy and wimpy. If you can't cope with Hamlet being a bit of a pain, how can you possibly manage when faced with real people?

Fortunately, I know just the medicine. If you ever actually come across someone who demands a book with likable characters, give them The Talented Mr Ripley. It contains everything they must wish for.

It is near impossible, I would say, not to root for Tom Ripley. Not to like him. Not, on some level, to want him to win. Patricia Highsmith does a fine job of ensuring he wheedles his way into our sympathies. It's a classic story of someone who starts off down on his luck and disregarded, but who, through force of personality, hard work and sheer determination, manages to make something of himself. He's had a hard upbringing. He lost his parents and was brought up by an aunt who called him a "sissy". And yet, he came out the other end polite, self-effacing, hard working. He is endearingly shy in company and worried about the impression he makes on others. He is always assessing himself, always trying to improve.

He is also endearingly starry-eyed. At the start of the book we see him thinking that his conversation with the rich and sophisticated Mr Greenleaf is like "something in a movie" and he never loses that charmingly naive appreciation of good fortune and high society.

That's not to say, however, that he is a sucker. Part of his charm lies in the fact that he is so clever and able to outwit all around him. He can do wonderful imitations. He escapes from horrible scrapes with

flair and elan. He has a brave taste for adventure, for putting himself in difficult situations and foreign landscapes. Oh, and he is a very good tipper.

Good old Tom - what's not to like?

Well, I suppose there is the fact that he is a cold-blooded killer. It isn't very nice when he batters Greenleaf Jr to death. Truth be told, it's rather an awkward moment. Highsmith has placed us firmly in the head of Tom throughout the book. She has expertly and methodically ensured that we see the world from his point of view, feel his emotions, understand his problems and know his desires. We identify with him: it feels as though she does too. It's not at all surprising to learn that Highsmith occasionally absent-mindedly signed her letters, "love from Tom".

Yet, every so often, there is an uncomfortable reminder that Tom's view of the world is not entirely healthy - like that murder. It's a crime that feels all the more terrible because Highsmith has done such a careful job of making sure we also feel sympathy for Dickie. Tom is snuffing out a man who is kind, gentle and, in spite of his lack of direction, happy. "I won't ever set the world on fire as a painter," says Dickie, "But I get a great deal of pleasure out of it." Dickie has his faults; and yes, he should probably pay more regard to his poor sick mother. But he has also done the best he can to find himself a little sunshine away from the shadow of his overbearing father and to do something quiet and positive in the world. Even at the very last, when he understands that Tom has betrayed him so brutally, he just says "For God's sake!", registering disappointment rather than loathing.

Fortunately, Highsmith soon has things back on track – and it's here that we really see the extent of her macabre talents. She so effectively zeroes in on Tom's efforts to conceal his crime that she has us rooting for him all over again. It becomes a sophisticated, high-stakes game. The tension becomes nearly unbearable when it feels as though he might get caught. One scene is so fraught that when Tom takes further extreme measures it comes as something of a relief.

Except, of course, that moment also reminds us that Tom is a psychopathic killer. Throughout the book Highsmith keeps niggling at this point with a near-constant stream of unpleasant details. Reading the book becomes exquisitely uncomfortable. It is perfectly engineered to make us give our sympathies to the wrong man. To rejoice, even, when luck is on his side. Tom is so "likable", and we get so deep inside his head, that we start to feel guilty by association.

Occasionally, while immersed in the drama, I found myself half hoping that he would get away with it all – that he would be able to kill with impunity. It is disgusting. It is also quite brilliant.

In making you root for Tom Ripley, Highsmith makes you hate yourself. People who demand likable characters should be careful what they wish for...

Extract www.bfi.org.uk Alice in Wonderland 150th anniversary: 8 very different film versions

150 years after the publication of Lewis Carroll's classic Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, we pick out the best of the many big-screen versions – from the pioneering 1903 version to a porno reboot and beyond.

26 November 2015 By David Parkinson

As one might expect, the story of Alice's Adventures in Wonderland is a little convoluted. Tradition insists that Oxford maths tutor Charles Lutwidge Dodgson first related the tale to the three daughters of Dean Henry Liddell during a rowing trip between Folly Bridge and Godstow on 4 July 1862. 10-year-old Alice wanted a memento of her 'golden afternoon', however, and asked Dodgson to write down the surreal adventures of a young girl who falls down a rabbit hole and lands in a kingdom where animals and playing cards can talk, and food and drink can transform the body in a trice.

Following another boat trip later that summer, the Reverend Dodgson made good on his promise and presented Alice with a handwritten manuscript of Alice's Adventures under Ground, complete with his own drawings, on 26 November 1864. Another year would pass, however, before the text by the pseudonymous Lewis Carroll was finally published, as, on 27 June 1865, illustrator John Tenniel objected to the quality of Macmillan's printing and most of the 2000 copies were withdrawn.

An approved edition did go on sale on 11 November (even though the frontispiece date reads 1866) and the title (which has been translated into 176 languages) has never been out of print since. Queen Victoria was among its many admirers. Indeed, she wrote to tell Dodgson she was very much looking forward to his next publication and must have been surprised when she took receipt of a copy of Syllabus of Plane Algebraical Geometry. A sequel did appear in 1871, however, and filmmakers have often since mixed and matched episodes from both Alice in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass in the many adaptations that have been produced for cinema and television since 1903.

Alice in Wonderland (1903)

Alice in Wonderland (1933)

Alice in Wonderland (1951)

Alice in Wonderland (1966)

Alice in Wonderland: An X-rated Musical Fantasy (1976)

Dreamchild (1985)

Alice (1988)

Alice in Wonderland (2010)

www.theguardian.com/books

Where to start with: Agatha Christie

Kicking off our new monthly guides to an author's work, crime novelist Janice Hallett puts the spotlight on the creator of Miss Marple and Poirot

Janice Hallett Fri 21 Jan 2022

What with the chart-topping success of Richard Osman's novels, and a new series by the Rev Richard Coles due later this year, cosy crime fiction seems to be having its moment. If you've already raced your way through The Thursday Murder Club and The Man Who Died Twice, why not try picking up a novel by the original queen of crime herself? Janice Hallett, whose bestselling crime novels The Appeal and The Twyford Code have seen her dubbed "a modern Agatha Christie" has put together a handy list to help you choose which one to pick.

The entry point

Famous largely for being Miss Marple's first appearance in a novel, The Murder at the Vicarage sees thoroughly disagreeable chap Colonel Protheroe murdered, Cluedo-style, in his library, with a gun. Surrounded by villagers who all have an axe to grind with Colonel P, Miss M uses her famous nous to eliminate seven suspects. I've seen it dismissed as having dated poorly, but for me this is a funny, witty and sharply observed Christie classic.

The best one

The only thing off about And Then There Were None is its original title. Otherwise, this dark and menacing story of attrition is as brilliant a Christie as you'll ever hope to read. Ten strangers come together on a windswept island, all with apparently nothing in common. One by one, they meet their various gruesome deaths according to chillingly accurate predictions … The final denouement is as satisfying as it is shocking.

The one to drop into dinner party conversation

What better dinner party fare than Sparkling Cyanide? A group of high-society friends gather for a meal at the same table where exactly a year earlier an heiress died dramatically, apparently in a suicide by poisoning. A lesser-known Christie, it's adapted from a Poirot short story called Yellow Iris. As your guests check their glasses, be sure to tell them cyanide is not necessarily detectable by its odour.

The classic

Murder on the Orient Express has been adapted for the screen no fewer than four times and for good reason: it's the classic Christie whodunnit in structure, pace, character and mood. It's also the 10th appearance in a novel for the author's iconic Belgian detective Poirot. His job this time is to winkle out the guilty party from a bunch of eccentric first-class passengers. The ingenious and unparalleled plot is inspired by two real-life events: the stranding of an Orient Express for six days in Turkey in 1929, and the kidnap of the Lindbergh baby in 1932.

The one for armchair travellers

For an author synonymous with cosy English village mysteries, Christie frequently ventured abroad and takes us with her. For instance, we can wander the nooks and passageways of an archaeological excavation in 1930s Iraq, thanks to Murder in Mesopotamia. For atmosphere and authenticity this title is hard to beat – Christie would accompany her husband on his archaeological digs and knew her sherd from her microlith – even if its plot stretches credulity.

The odd one out

Its distinctly un-Christie-like tone was instantly criticised on publication, but when reading The Seven Dials Mystery today, we are bound to remember that Christie was a contemporary and mutual admirer of both Evelyn Waugh and PG Wodehouse. Her suspects in this laugh-out-loud, upper-class jape all hail from a previous novel, The Secret of Chimneys, and caper across a landscape of stately homes, London pads and exclusive shady clubs littered with as many dead bodies as champagne corks.

The dark one

A later novel, published in 1958, Ordeal By Innocence is a nagging, tragic tale of missed opportunity, a miscarriage of justice and family wrongs that can never be righted. It's as much a psychological thriller as a murder mystery, with elements that make for uncomfortable reading. Christie herself cited it as one of her favourite titles.

The shocker

If you're looking for an ending that shook contemporary readers and is still capable of jolting the unsuspecting reader today, then settle down with The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. The eponymous victim is a neighbour of Poirot's and his sudden, violent demise brings the detective out of retirement.

The one that influenced the rest

You'll probably be familiar with the structure of Five Little Pigs even if you've never read the book. It's a Poirot murder-romp in which the story of a woman convicted of murdering her artist husband is told multiple times from multiple characters' points of view. The result is a cracking mystery, perfectly balanced and highly sophisticated. Its influence echoes down through decades of detective fiction on page and screen. The Seven Deaths of Evelyn Hardcastle, Vantage Point, Knives Out … to name just three brilliant 21st century tributes to the legacy and genius of Christie.

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extract - Page to Screen - Clueless Reimagines Jane Austen's Emma as Only Amy Heckerling Could

The Fast Times at Ridgemont High director recognized her beloved Valley girl in the timeless pages of Emma

Matt Melis July 28, 2020

Page to Screen is a recurring column in which Editorial Director Matt Melis explores how either a classic or contemporary work of literature made the sometimes triumphant, often disastrous leap from prose to film. This time, he hits the mall to celebrate 25 years of the '90s classic Clueless.

Page to Screen Amy Heckerling's own mouth may very well have cost her an Oscar nomination. In interviews promoting Clueless — an inspired, but risky passion project that was far from a guarantee at the box office (that is, until audiences started seeing it and became absolutely smitten) — the filmmaker mentioned that she had based elements of her story on Jane Austen's classic novel Emma. That admission caused the Academy to contradict the 48th Writers Guild of America Awards, which treated the work as an Original Screenplay, and lump in Heckerling's witty, infinitely quotable Beverly Hills rom-com with other Oscar candidates for the Best Adapted Screenplay nominations. That year happened to also include another Austen adaptation, Emma Thompson's brilliant, traditional take on Sense and Sensibility. Suffice it to say (and studio politics aside), Heckerling's Cher Horowitz had a better chance of passing her driver's test than Clueless had of besting one of the finest modern tellings of Austen on screen. Thompson's adaptation, of course, went on to win the Oscar while Heckerling's script spent the night at home like Cher waiting for Christian to ring her monolithic black phone.

A quarter century later, both films endure as beloved modern classics, but it's still fun to consider what could have (or maybe should have) been come awards season.

"It is an original screenplay, if you consider West Side Story an original screenplay," Heckerling explained of her script years later. "If you're going to say there was Romeo and Juliet — well, [West Side Story] was a whole other world." Indeed, Heckerling deserves major snaps for finding a modern parallel to the social stratum of Georgian-Regency England in the cliques and social circles of a wealthy high school in mid-'90s Los Angeles. Actor-writer Wallace Shawn (the film's grumpy debate teacher turned Romeo, Mr. Hall) agrees with Heckerling. "Everything we write is inspired by great works of the past," he asserts. "Her script was inspired by Jane Austen's book, but it wasn't what people ordinarily mean by

‘adapted from another medium.'” Thompson’s adaptation, of course, is what Shawn means by “ordinarily.” She beautifully captured all the romance, humor, and social critique of Sense and Sensibility while staying in period and largely drawing from Austen’s original language.

Both Heckerling and Shawn make convincing arguments for Clueless being an original, if not entirely original. Certainly, Heckerling’s totally dope update seemed out of place alongside Ang Lee’s touching take on the dating dilemmas of Austen’s Dashwood sisters. But did she get cheated out of an Oscar nomination (or even a win) by being mislabeled? While we can all agree that Heckerling’s Beverly Hills and Cher are as much hers in language, humor, and insight as Highbury and Emma belonged to Austen, the answer might come down to just how much of Emma seeped into Clueless. We might even imagine ourselves back in Mr. Hall’s debate classroom and ask ourselves if Cher, who usually relies on her powers of persuasion (including twirling her gum) over preparation, could pass an oral exam on Emma by watching Clueless.

Similarities in leading ladies immediately emerge in revisiting Emma. Austen introduces Emma Woodhouse (Cher’s classic counterpart) as young, rich, bored, and though meaning well, prone to meddle, especially in matchmaking. This repeatedly backfires and leaves her, in Cher’s parlance, totally buggin’. Austen goes on to describe her Emma as flawed from her “power of having rather too much her own way, and a disposition to think a little too well of herself.” Clearly, we see strong echoes of Emma in Cher’s flattering self-opinion, habit of overestimating her own qualifications (as a driver, a debater, or an amateur love connection), and, most importantly, knack for being completely oblivious, yet coming through mostly unscathed, every purple-clogged step of the way

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The 12 Best 'A Christmas Carol' Adaptations, Ranked

Our favorite Scrooges, Marleys, Bob Cratchits and ghosts

What's Christmas without "A Christmas Carol"? There's a reason why Charles Dickens' classic has been made over and over: It's always timely to remind people of the real spirit of the season. And to not be a selfish jerk. Here are our favorite versions from various Disney takes to the one everyone agrees is the best adaptation ever.

12. Spirited (2022)

11. Mickey's Christmas Carol (1983)

10. A Christmas Carol, Doctor Who (2010)

9. Blackadder's Christmas Carol (1988)

8. A Christmas Carol (1938)

7. Scrooge (1970)

6. A Christmas Carol (2009)

5. Scrooged (1988)

4. A Christmas Carol (1999)

3. A Christmas Carol (1984)

2. The Muppet Christmas Carol (1992)

1. A Christmas Carol (1951)