



# The Art of Adaptation

Article Author:

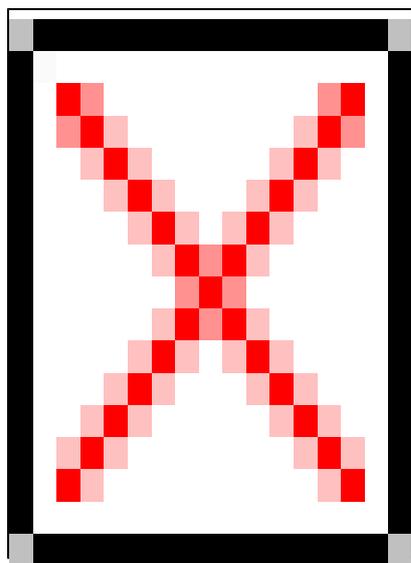
[Laura Fraine](#) [1]

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Byline:

**Laura Fraine** visits **Seven Stories?** new exhibition

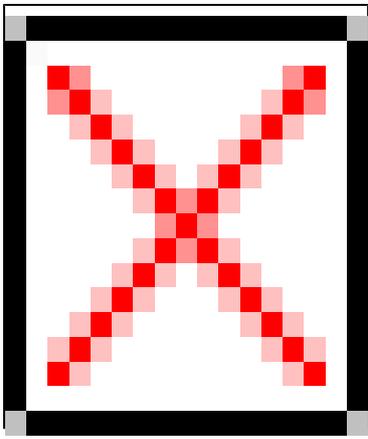
Laura Fraine takes in the new **Moving Pictures** exhibition at **Seven Stories**.



For readers and champions of children's literature, the news of a forthcoming film adaptation is often received with mixed emotions. Films and TV series may be great for bringing books to a wider audience, 'But you must read the book first!', we exhort our children. Images seen on screen seem to be so vivid that other interpretations pale in comparison, even as instinctively we feel the opposite - that a character met on the page and brought to life in our own imagination is the stronger, truer character.

A new exhibition seeks to eradicate these fears, and celebrate the art of adapting books for the screen. **Moving Pictures** is jointly curated by [Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books](#) [3], and **The National Media Museum**, and is currently showing at **Seven Stories** in Newcastle.

Books, films and television programmes are examined in this exhibition, from fairy tale classics to modern dramas. Taking in the original illustrations, film extracts, letters, scripts, and various ephemera of the publishing and filming processes, **Moving Pictures** does a brilliant job in conveying the sense that a story is something alive and mutable; that a published book is just one version of that story and all the best tales are apt to change over time.



Take Cinderella, a fairy tale which dates back more than one thousand years and for which there are thought to be a thousand recorded versions. Fairy tales of course have a long and unrecorded oral history, but the oldest known telling of Cinderella originates from 9th century China, in which Yeh-hsien is the heroine whose wishes are granted by a golden fish. Cinderella has many names around the world: Cendrillon, Ceneretola, Ashenputtel, Ash Girl, Katie Woodencloak being just a few, and the version best known to us is based on the French story written by Charles Perrault in 1667.

The story is on display in book form with versions illustrated by Jan Pienkowski, Jane Ray and Shirley Hughes (Hughes would later write her own adaptation of the fairy tale with **Ella's Big Chance**, set in the Jazz Age, published by Simon and Schuster in 2004). But Cinderella has also been a stalwart of the stage, regularly reprised as pantomime, drama and ballet. The 1950 feature length cartoon of Cinderella would revive the flailing fortunes of Walt Disney Pictures in 1950, and remains a huge success today, with the Disney Princess franchise dominating the market for little girls' toys.

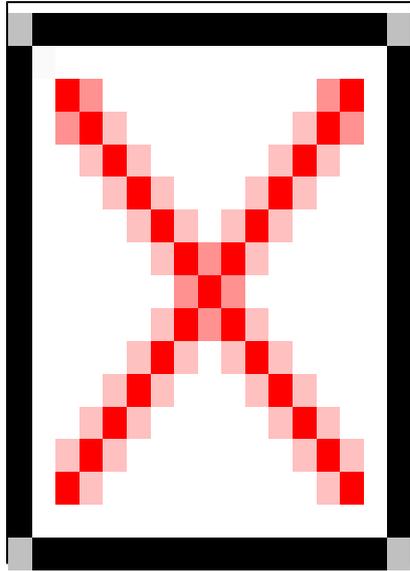
It isn't the original film, though. Georges Méliès directed and produced the first silent film of Cinderella in 1899. In 1922, Lotte Reiniger, a German film director and pioneer of silhouette animation, made **Aschenputtel**, a mesmerising and beautiful short made entirely in silhouette. Reiniger was strongly influenced by George Méliès, but she also anticipated Walt Disney. Incidentally, Disney made his own seven minute cartoon of Cinderella in the same year as **Aschenputtel** was released, while Reiniger's own remake of Cinderella came four years after the Disney blockbuster.

Georges Méliès crops up again in the exhibition in an appreciation of Brian Selznick's 2007 book **The Invention of Hugo Cabret**, and its 2012 cinematic adaptation, **Hugo**, directed by Martin Scorsese. [Brian Selznick](#) [4]'s book tells the story of Méliès and the birth of cinema, but it does so in a unique way by aiming to act like a film. The result is part novel, part picture book, part flick book. "Because my story is centred around a filmmaker" I wanted to experiment with the visual aspect of my story," explains Selznick. "I decided to tell part of the story in images, like a movie. I returned to my manuscript and removed as much text as I could, replacing words with illustrated sequences so we could watch those parts of the story."

What happens when an homage to film, created in order to emulate the cinematic experience, is subsequently made into a film? In the case of this adaptation, the director is for the most part faithful to the text. Many of the images used in the book are translated wholesale into the film. "When I went on set, everybody had a copy of the book. Scorsese always kept a few on hand, so he could give them to people so they'd understand what he wanted in the shot!" said Brian Selznick. The author was told by the film's production designer, "I just did everything you drew." Yet, there is the sense of Scorsese writing himself into the history of cinema too. As he tells the story of pioneering techniques while using 3-D technology for the first time, it is hard not to notice he is adding himself to the list of pioneers. The film can't hope to match the book for inventiveness, but nonetheless it captures the book's mood and meaning very stylishly. "I just wanted the screenplay to have the same emotional wallop that the book does," explained screenwriter John Logan.

The same was inferred of Wes Anderson's 2009 film **Fantastic Mr Fox** by Felicity Dahl, Roald Dahl's widow. The filmmaker had waited six years for Felicity to give him permission to adapt the book, but when they finally met she approved of him due to his passion for the book. Indeed, **Fantastic Mr Fox** was the first book Wes Anderson had owned as a child. On seeing the film, Felicity said, "I know they've changed the story a bit" but I think Wes has really got that Dahl humour and darkness. I think it's a masterpiece."

One of the differences in the film to Roald Dahl's book is that Mr Fox is given a much fuller home life, including a wife named Felicity, after Dahl's widow. Wes Anderson also went and stayed at Gypsy House, Dahl's home, and photographed all the rooms in the house to reproduce the author's furniture and ornaments in the film. If Anderson aimed to capture the essence of Roald Dahl, he nonetheless did so with American actors (George Clooney plays Mr Fox) in an expertly stylised stop motion film noir. Dahl's modern-day fable creates a world where the animals are more civilised than the humans. This can be seen in the film in the gangster chic of the foxes' smart clothes, although the farmers are also more sophisticated than those scruffy Quentin Blake illustrations that we so associate with Dahl's book.



But if Blake's grotesque depictions of Boggis, Bunce and Bean are the ones we picture as the 'true' image of the farmers, then this view also needs revising. The book was first published in the USA with beautifully detailed drawings by Donald Chaffin, and followed in 1974 by the first UK publication, illustrated with exquisite precision by Jill Bennett.

The 'true' depiction is often, but not always, the one we encounter first. JM Barrie's **Peter Pan** is an example of a story that has lived through many an adaptation. Written as a play, which was hugely successful when it was first performed in 1904, Barrie didn't publish the book **Peter Pan and Wendy** until 1911 and it has been available in various formats ever since. One film adaptation - a 1924 silent movie produced by Paramount - was released in the author's lifetime, but subsequent Peter Pan activity has been authorised by the Great Ormond Street Hospital, to which JM Barrie left the rights.

Disney's 1953 animation of **Peter Pan** is still its main reference point, but other films including **Hook** (1991), **Peter Pan** (Universal Studios, 2003) and **Finding Neverland** (2004) have all proved incredibly popular. A new film, **Pan**, starring Amanda Seyfried and Hugh Jackman is in production for release in 2015. The book has been published in innumerable versions. Yet, to my mind at least, it is the relatively new David Wyatt illustrations of an authorised sequel, **Peter Pan in Scarlet** by Geraldine McCaughrean (2004) which finally, perfectly capture the images of Peter, Wendy and Neverland which make the enterprise worthwhile. Even so, these images lead me back to JM Barrie's own magical, wordy, circuitous text, where my recharged imagination finds satisfaction.

**Moving Pictures** is at **Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children's Books**, in Newcastle upon Tyne until April 2015. [www.sevenstories.org.uk/](http://www.sevenstories.org.uk/) [5]">

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Laura Fraine is a journalist based in the North East.

**Ella's Big Chance**, Shirley Hughes, Red Fox, 978-0099433095, £7.99pbk

[The Invention of Hugo Cabret](#) [7], Brian Selznick, Scholastic, 978-1407103488, £14.99 hbk

**Fantastic Mr Fox**, Roald Dahl, Puffin, (colour edition), 978-0141348827, £7.99 pbk

**Peter Pan in Scarlet**, Geraldine McCaughrean, Oxford, 978-0192726216, £6.99 pbk

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