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EXPERT COMMENT: My book *Tell it to the Bees* was made into a film – but they changed the ending for a straight audience

Fiona Shaw, Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at Northumbria University discusses film adaptations of novels and the film ending of her own book, *Tell it to the Bees*.

You'll find the corpses of many novels left to rot in the hinterland of film adaptation – and plenty of novelists weeping over them. Films are

sometimes very much altered from the novels they are based on. And mostly, in the novelists' eyes, for the worse.

So I'm glad to say that after the film adaptation of my novel *Tell it to the Bees* was premiered at the [Toronto International Film Festival](#) in September 2018 I wasn't weeping, but applauding.

The film adaptation (directed by Annabel Jankel, script by Henrietta and Jessica Ashworth) captures much of the spirit of the novel, with expressive performances from Holliday Grainger and Anna Paquin. It is beautifully filmed and sensitively directed, with a powerful, subtle score by Claire M Singer.

I set *Tell it to the Bees* in 1950s Britain. It's a love story between two women: a doctor, Jean (Paquin), and a factory worker, Lydia (Grainger). The novel is about prejudice and ignorance – attitudes that today would be called homophobia – and the violence this can produce. And at the heart of the novel is Charlie, Lydia's ten-year-old son, played by Gregor Selkirk. Charlie sees everything, the love and the hate, and tries to understand. He's an emotional barometer for what's going on between all the adults.

Because of the turn my own life had taken, I was determined that my central female characters should have a happy ending: be able to make a life together as a couple. And from my research, I knew that this would have been far more difficult for them to achieve in Britain back then. They would almost certainly have faced a professional and legal whirlwind, stigmatised for their love, with drastic consequences. Jean would have lost her livelihood as a GP – and Lydia would have lost custody of her son.

So by the time I wrote the ending, I'd decided that the two women, with Charlie, would have to leave Britain to have their happiness. Because in another country they could plausibly “fly beneath the radar” and be seen as eccentric foreigners rather than lesbians. Then Jean could still work as a doctor and Lydia could keep Charlie with her.

Taking liberties

The film has changed much of my original story. Of course it has. The book takes about seven hours to read, while the film is 106 minutes long – so some of the story has to go. Liberties must be taken for a film adaptation to work: novels and film scripts are like comparing apples to oranges.

So characters have been expunged and scenes cut, added or merged. Events have been invented and characters given very different parts to play at key points in the story. The eponymous bees are not simply an observable aspect of the world that Charlie lives in, but have become their own collective character with an important role in the story. And, most significantly, the ending has been changed.

A changed ending is nothing unusual. Ridley Scott gives Philip K. Dick's story *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* a more optimistic ending in its screen adaptation, *Blade Runner*. In Michael Crichton's novel *Jurassic Park*, almost everyone dies, whereas almost everyone survives in Spielberg's film. Stephen King [hated Kubrick's adaptation of *The Shining*](#), singling out the ending in particular: "The book is hot, and the movie is cold; the book ends in fire, and the movie in ice."

And the reversed film ending of Jodie Picoult's bestselling novel, *My Sister's Keeper*, is a spectacular piece of film-making hubris. [Picoult recalls](#) the director Nick Cassavetes telling her: "I'm not going to change [the ending]. If it does change, I'm going to tell you why and tell you myself." Given the reversal that actually happened, maybe Cassavetes got cold feet: Picoult only found out accidentally, once filming had started. She was not pleased. Her view, widely shared, is that:

Authors have no involvement in adaptations. Hollywood thinks we are the least important piece of the puzzle, and by and large authors have zero control over a film. You give a baby up for adoption, you hope it goes to a good family and sometimes you're disappointed.

So given how common this is, why is the changed ending to *Tell it to the Bees* so significant? Type "[lesbian endings](#)" into a search engine and you'll find out. This is a lesbian happy ending altered by a straight director from sweet to "[bittersweet](#)". People, and in particular lesbians, have got angry, and [wondered aloud](#) why the girl can't be allowed to get the girl.

It's not that fictional lesbian love stories should always end happily. But so often on screen the lesbian either has to [commit suicide](#), [die tragically](#) or be a [psychopath](#) – so giving lesbians a happy ending has come to be seen as a political act.

The screenwriters for *Tell it to the Bees* wanted to give the film a "sweeping

romantic ending”, like Brief Encounter or Dr Zhivago. But they wanted them to have a divided happiness – one of them can have the happiness of staying in the town to have a fulfilling career; and the other can have the future happiness of finding love in a more tolerant place. But they can’t have those two things in the same place and with each other.

However, while I applaud the adaptation of my novel, and I was moved by the final kiss (two beautiful women together, proud and public, while people tut and stare), I am not in love with the ending. This bittersweetness is a straight person’s finale. I wanted my couple to have their cake and eat it together, for once: a fully romantic, fully happy, and therefore – in the context of lesbian fiction – a more radical ending.

So should I just settle for someone else’s beautiful [film ending] of my book? One story, two sets of parents, and two babies? Or next time, if there is one, should I raise my baby myself, to use Picoult’s metaphor? Though from what I hear, being the scriptwriter might be an equally difficult parenting experience.

This article was originally published on The Conversation. You can read it [here](#).

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