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Sanitizing the Bones

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READ THIS SKIP THAT

In order to “make a film that teenagers could watch,” Peter Jackson’s *The Lovely Bones* excises the blockbuster book’s lynchpin rape and doesn’t show the murder. Was he right to do so?

Long before the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy vaulted Peter Jackson into the record books, he seemed eager to challenge his audiences, depicting puppet sex and gore in *Meet the Feebles* and flesh-eating aliens in *Bad Taste*. He even introduced Kate Winslet to the world as a deranged teenager who bludgeons a woman to death with a hammer in *Heavenly Creatures*.

But at a press conference last weekend, Jackson invoked his sense of morality when questioned about his decision to excise a crucial—albeit, wrenching—plot point from his adaptation of *The Lovely Bones*, Alice Sebold’s blockbuster 2002 novel about a 14 year old who is raped, murdered, and dismembered by her next-door neighbor. In Jackson’s film, Susie Salmon doesn’t get raped. The murder happens off-screen. And though her family falls apart in its grief, Jackson chose to cut scenes of her mother’s adulterous affair with the crime’s investigator.



Courtesy of Paramount Pictures

“To make *Lovely Bones* without the rape,” said UCLA’s Richard Walter, a fan of the novel, “is like making *Titanic* and leaving out the iceberg.”

Speaking to a crowd of journalists, Jackson explained in a measured, matter-of-fact tone that some things—like the depraved acts conjured by Sebold—just don’t belong on a 60-foot screen. He wanted a PG-13 rating. He wanted his own 13-year-old daughter to see the film. He didn’t aim to make a film for the fans of the novel.

“I’ve shot some pretty extreme things in my time,” said Jackson, referencing his “slashstick” films of the 1980s and early 1990s. “And there’s a certain style and sense of humor you can do to get away with that. But to do anything that depicted violence, especially to a young person in a way that was serious, to me, I would have no interest in filming. It would be repulsive.”

So Jackson depicted the scene leading up to the murder, an unbearable few minutes with an almost unrecognizable Stanley Tucci rendered reptilian in blue contacts hovering over a trembling Saoirse Ronan, savoring her terror and the horror to come. “There were pieces in the script originally that were a little more graphic,” said Tucci. “In our conversations, we all agreed we don’t need to see this.” It ends with Ronan’s young Susie escaping her captor as an ephemeral spirit, breathlessly fleeing into the afterlife.

Sebold, on the other hand, looks the horror right in the face. (The author was herself brutally raped as a college freshman, an experience she chronicled in her first book, *Lucky*.) By page 15 of *The Lovely Bones*, the reader has witnessed the rape in a hole dug deep beneath a cornfield less than a mile from Susie’s suburban home, listened to the heartbreaking dialogue between attacker and victim, and watched as Harvey raises his knife. By page 22, a neighbor’s dog has unearthed Susie’s elbow. These images were too much for Jackson.

Some argue that the horrific acts depicted in this story are what make the narrator's journey, and that of her family, so extraordinary. The novel becomes a poem of mourning and loss. And by the book's end, Susie has relinquished the revenge fantasy that drives the plot and succumbed to the "wide, wide heaven." Justice is almost an afterthought.

To suggest there is a moral reason for excising the onscreen murder of a child, says screenwriting professor Richard Walter of the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television, is to diminish the importance of drama as an art form. The depravity and barbarism of child murder has, after all, driven plots since the dawn of theater from *Medea* to *Macbeth*, he points out.

"To make *Lovely Bones* without the rape," said Walter, a fan of the novel, "is like making *Titanic* and leaving out the iceberg."

Walter's view was echoed in *The Guardian* by Xan Brooks, who called Jackson's film "so infuriatingly coy, and so desperate to preserve the modesty of its soulful victim that it amounts to an ongoing cleanup operation." *Entertainment Weekly's* Lisa Schwarzbaum wrote that Jackson's "bleached *Bones* bears little resemblance to the book in either tone or complexity." This frustration completely confounded Jackson.

"We wanted to make a film that teenagers could watch," he said. "I never regarded the movie as being a film about a murder. ... It was almost like a crime mystery of what happens when you're in this world of the subconscious, the world of the afterlife. And Susie has to deal with the mystery of what happened to her. There's a positive aspect to it in the sense that she's immortal, that there's no such thing as death."

The movie, he said, is at best a "souvenir" or "an impression" of the book. And he's right that a fan of a beloved book is rarely satisfied by a movie version of the same story. The two mediums are too different.

"A book is a very personal experience, an interior experience," said film critic Leonard Maltin in an interview. "There are things that readers will accept on the printed page that play very differently on a 60-foot screen."

That's why New Line's version of *The Golden Compass* felt empty and bombastic to some fans of the brilliant Philip Pullman trilogy. It's why Maltin himself is still miffed by the fact that the *Harry Potter* film franchise has never captured the biting British wit of the books and felt *Watchmen* was only "superficially faithful" to the graphic novel.

And yet, there are films adapted from challenging novels that succeed, and even surpass the books on which they're based. Jackson himself took on one of the 20th century's most epic stories, J.R.R. Tolkien's unwieldy *Lord of the Rings*, and his interpretation earned him 17 Oscars.

Atom Egoyan's adaptation of Russell Banks' *The Sweet Hereafter*, about the aftermath of a school bus accident that kills most of the children in one town, was declared better than the book by the novelist himself. And then there's screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, who turned his own struggles to adapt Susan Orlean's *The Orchid Thief* into a brilliant take on the essence of inspiration.

Considering the reviews, *The Lovely Bones* probably won't make it on too many "best of" lists. But you won't hear any apologies from Jackson.

"We responded to the emotional themes and the comforting value of the book and things it had to say about the afterlife which is very personal," he said. "Our adaptation is very much just elements of the book. No adaptation would be perfect."

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