

This is What Dreams Are Made Of: Teen/tween Film Adaptations and Representations of femininity

An Interview with Kirsten Andersen

Conducted by Becky Harris

Kirsten Anderson, B.A., M.L.I.S., M.A., researched tween/teen films as part of her Master of Arts in Children's Literature at the University of British Columbia. In her thesis "This is What Dreams are Made Of: the effects of adaptation of popular tween/teen girl novels, films, and screenplay novelizations on constructions of varying femininities: *The Princess Diaries* and *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*," she explored book-to-film and screenplay-to-book adaptations, as well as the notions of femininity expressed in these works.

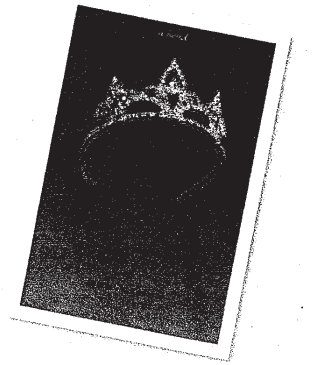
Q. How would you describe your research in layman's terms?

KA: I once did a conference session based on the research and called it "I Liked the Book Better." It seems like book lovers are always eager to see a film adaptation of something they've read, but they ultimately hold the book up as a higher artistic achievement. I was really interested in the adaptation process of making novels into movies, and also the process of adapting screenplays into junior novelizations. Nobody ever talks about those junky little grocery-store kids' books, but millions of children read them! I wanted to know what happens to representations of femininity

when books and movies get adapted into other formats, without worrying about whether or not the two stories were the same in the end. In fact, I wanted to see how the two tellings would differ, and think about what that might tell us.

Q. Why did you decide to do research in this area?

KA: I had an epiphany during the last course of the required coursework for my Master of Arts in Children's Literature at the University of British Columbia. Someone in the class started talking about *Harriet the Spy*, the book and the movie, and I knew for sure this was what I wanted to spend the next year working on: film adaptations of children's books. I also work full-time as a public librarian, so I am in contact with kids and their reading preferences daily. I am interested in the kinds of books they enjoy, and that includes media spin-off books as well as the books librarians often consider to be "quality" literature.



Q. What texts and films did you analyze/compare?

KA: The findings in my thesis relate to four primary texts: Meg Cabot's *The Princess Diaries* (just the first book); the movie *The Princess Diaries* directed by Garry Marshall and starring Julie Andrews and Anne Hathaway; *The Lizzie McGuire Movie* directed by Jim Fall and starring Hilary Duff; and *The Lizzie McGuire Movie: Junior Novelization* as adapted by J.G. and Bobbi Weiss.



To contextualize, I looked closely at texts that were tween/teen girl targeted, produced after 2000, have certain common plot and character motifs and were book-to-film or film-to-book adaptations such as *Ella Enchanted*, *Confessions of a Teenage Drama Queen*, *Queen Bees and Wannabees/Mean Girls*, *Win a Date with Tad Hamilton*, *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* and *13 Going on 30*.

I also looked at other book and film adaptations such as *Little Women*, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, *The Piano*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *Harriet the Spy*, *Riding in Cars with Boys*, *About a Boy*, *The Notebook* and *Freaky Friday*.

At a certain point I realised that I had been reading a lot of teen fiction but hadn't viewed much teen film. So I had the fun job of watching movies like *Friday Night Lights*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She Gets What She Wants*, *She's All That*, *Bring it On*, *Legally Blonde*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *American Pie*, *Never Been Kissed*, and *Not Another Teen Movie*.

I also thought it was important to look at as many media spin-offs as I could find, so I regularly scoured bookstores for "movie scrapbooks", cine-manga, Lizzie McGuire merchandise of any description and so on. As well, I went through stacks of teen magazines, rented *The OC* on DVD - you get the idea! (not to mention the academic, critical theory sources for my literature review!).

Q. What do you consider to be the most important findings of your research?

KA: One of the biggest areas of my findings has to do with intertextuality. I argue that you cannot consider any text in isolation, and that different texts have different meanings depending on the viewer or reader's experience. I got really interested in casting as an element of intertextuality. If you put Julie Andrews in the role of nasty Grandmère in a movie, viewers see Mary Poppins or Maria and the character is already imbued

with cultural significance in a way that is different than when they read a character in a book.

It's also notable that in today's Cinderella stories, Cinderella doesn't achieve her class ascension through marriage as in the original story. In today's stories, the princess usually has an achievement beyond marriage itself, but she always ends up in a heterosexual coupling anyhow. The ascent is by the girls' own doing, and she chooses a male friend as a mate. Lizzie McGuire

becomes a rock star with her natural talent; *The Princess Diaries'* Mia Thermopolis is a princess by birthright and must decide to accept the responsibility of a regent.

Nonetheless, it is significant that class ascension still reigns as the ultimate wish-fulfillment story, and also notable how prominently makeovers and tutelage figure in to this idea, even when the access to power is gained without a prince.

My examination of the effects of adaptation

showed me that a book version and a movie version can tell two different stories. For example, the novel version of *The Princess Diaries* does provide some resistance to, and critique of, popularized notions of adolescent femininities. Mia resists wearing stockings and only agrees to her etiquette training in order to serve her own purposes: to raise money for Greenpeace. Mia's ado-

lescence is expressed through her anxiety about puberty, her inexperience with sex and romance, and reluctance to assume her adult identity as a regent. These expressions are, however, written more to provide possible identification for the reader than they are written as problematic. The end of the novel concludes without resolving any of these issues, leaving Mia in her state of transition. This is not to suggest that the book is subversive or that it reads against the mainstream,

but rather to highlight the ele-

ments that are altered in its adaptation to film. The film version of the same story presents different femininities than the book. In the movie, an increased emphasis is given to beauty and decorum, and the movie itself foregrounds an objectifying gaze. The protagonist's development is shown as a necessary transcendence of adolescence for the ultimate goal of entering adulthood. I would argue that the femininities of the movie are more restrictive and unfortunately predictable than those in the book.

Overall, I think considerations of book-to-film and film-to-book adaptation is an important area of research, since so much of popular entertainment revolves around adaptation products. The movie industry will only continue to grow in dominance, purchase rights to books (or already own the publishing company) and produce movie

"A purist wish to keep screen and page separate is not only unrealistic, but also excludes the possibility of well-imagined and creatively adapted works that reference each other and experiment with narrative interplay"

tie-in books. A purist wish to keep screen and page separate is not only unrealistic, but also excludes the possibility of well-imagined and creatively adapted works that reference each other and experiment with narrative interplay. If we are to become truly reader-centred, elitist views on “quality” literature should be reconsidered. That said, it is also important that young readers learn to recognize covert marketing and be provided with alternatives and tools for resistance to dominant ideologies that are oppressive to them.

Q. Your abstract states that all the texts “reinscribe certain notions of femininity.” What notions are these? Can you provide examples?

KA: I read a lot of feminist theorists’ work on girlhood and they often agreed that appropriate femininity is often tied up with beauty and attractiveness to men, niceness and passivity. Girls tend to be constructed in relation to consumerism. There is also a secondary, deviant femininity: the mean girl. What teen-centred text doesn’t have a bitchy cheerleader?

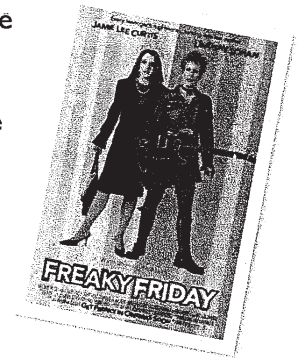
Examples abound. Consider any makeover sequence in any movie, brilliantly parodied in *Not Another Teen Movie*, where the ugly girl shakes out her ponytail and removes her glasses, revealing the stunner she is. Consider movie montages of women and girls shopping, appearing in different outfits, such as the opening sequence of *Clueless*,

the runway sequence of *The Lizzie McGuire Movie*, and the famous Rodeo Drive shopping binge in *Pretty Woman*.

Lizzie McGuire is consistently pleasant to those around her, maintaining the value of being “nice”. Her alter-ego, an animated image of the character who pops up in the movie and television show, and who is drawn on the page of the books, expresses Lizzie’s true feelings that she keeps to herself. Similarly, in book version of *The Princess Diaries*, Mia

cannot express herself because she wants to be seen as agreeable and nice. Instead she suppresses her opinions and needs and writes them only in her secret diary. Interestingly, the movie version of *The Princess Diaries* changes Mia’s lack of assertiveness to invisibility. In the movie, nobody notices her because she is ugly, but once she becomes beautiful, she gains considerable recognition.

Many stories follow the motifs of wicked stepmothers and stepsisters, three witches, other mean girls. In the book of *The Princess Diaries*, Lana Weinberger is the ringleader of the popular clique, and in the movie version, she is flanked by two nasty sidekicks, Anna and Fontana. Lizzie McGuire is tormented by Kate Sanders. *Ella Enchanted* includes the most obvious reference to this convention of the Cinderella story, with Ella’s



evil stepmother Dame Olga and her stepsisters Olive and Hattie. In *Mean Girls*, Regina George is the queen bee of her threesome with Gretchen and Karen. Some stories have several mean girls; *Dirty Dancing*'s Eve is the leader of Lois, Sheila, Wendy and Polly, while *13 Going on 30*'s queen bee Tom-Tom heads up the clique Six Chicks.

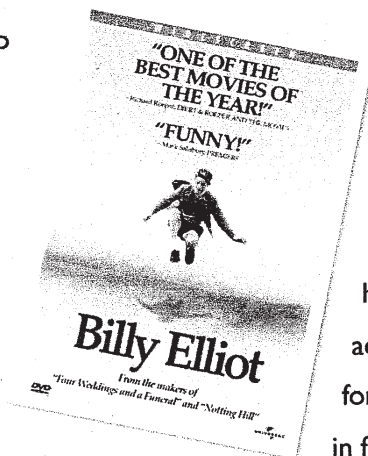
Q. What effect do you think this has on teen girls?

KA: I can't comment on the effect this might have on teen girls, since I did not look at any studies of media effects or take that approach to my research. I will say, though, that it is worth thinking about this deviant femininity showing teenaged girls as malicious. It is prevalent in many texts and constantly reinscribes the notion that teenaged girls are nasty, without considering why the relational aggression takes place. Why are we not considering the environment that produces these toxic behaviours in girls, instead just accepting that there will always be a mean girl?

Q. I'm also interested in what you have to say about movies implying adulthood as an endpoint of character development, while the book versions offer a "consistently adolescent or pre-adolescent point of view." Can you

provide examples of this or elaborate further?

KA: A really great example of this comes from *The Princess Diaries*. I think the way certain events are used in the book and the movie differ, and



I think this changes the representation of feminine adolescence.

Namely, in the book version of *The Princess Diaries*, Mia's "debut" takes place at the Cultural Diversity Dance, a high school event. Within the realm of adolescent social functions, she steps forward and breaks up with Josh Richter in front of other students. This is her bold act of transformation and the climax of the novel. It is notable that her major debut takes place among teenagers in a very teen-specific setting: the high school dance. Mia's achievement is situated firmly in adolescence as an event witnessed by her peers. On the other hand, the movie pays tribute to the Cultural Diversity Dance when Mia breaks up with Josh at the Baker Beach Bash. However, Mia's debut takes place at the Genovian Independence Ball. Here she accepts her title as Amelia Mignonette Thermopolis Renaldi, Princess of Genovia, and is literally presented to society and the world. She is among diplomats and is entering adulthood alongside them. She is wearing a big white dress, coded as a bride. The romantic conclusion of the movie moves Mia out of transition and uncertainty into couplehood with Michael. By contrast, the book

ends with Mia acknowledging her crush on Michael and the thrilling knowledge that he might reciprocate. This romantic outcome is very inconclusive and transitional, and suitably adolescent. The happy ending of the movie is necessarily a departure from adolescence, while the book presents adolescence itself as a possibly happy state.

Q. Why do you think this is?

KA: I have a hunch it's about audience. Books are written for individual child or teen readers, while movies are consumed by the whole family audience. *The Lizzie McGuire Movie: Junior Novelization* also strips out the adult humour and storylines from the movie version to make it more appropriate for the child reader. An altered discourse results.

Q. Your abstract also states that when a film is adapted into a book, the movie isn't fully adapted into a literary medium. How so?

KA: Some literary elements such as plot events or character outlines can be transferred to films and vice versa. Other literary and filmic elements such as soundtracks, camera shots, epistolary, and font, must be adapted between formats. I noticed that when *The Princess Diaries* was taken from the diary format to become a movie, several elements were adapted to the filmic medium. How-

ever, the *Lizzie McGuire Movie: Junior Novelization* seemed to be merely transcribed from the screenplay and presented as a book. No attempts at all were made to make use of literary conventions that are not available in the filmic realm. You might think this is obvious since novelizations are always produced cheaply by hack writers.

While this is often true, it does not have to be.

The movie *Billy Elliot* was adapted into a novel by award-winning author Melvin

Burgess. Naturally, there are dance sequences, camera views, musical interludes and montages in the movie that cannot be recreated in the book. Burgess introduces the story into a literary medium and employs various clever literary devices. For example, he tells the story from alternating characters' points of view, including the town pawnbroker who is not a character from the movie. Rather than just transferring the screenplay into a book, he actually adapted it, exchanging filmic devices for literary ones.

Q. Based on your research, can you offer any advice for selecting young adult films?

KA: I would like to see us let go of our tightly held notion of what "quality" is. It feels a bit elit-



ist to me, and I think “quality” is a pretty slippery notion anyhow. It’s like we’re saying we know better than teens themselves what they want to watch. Of course we should continue to provide variety – true variety, including adaptations and multi-modal formats we haven’t included before.

Q. Is there anything else you think young adult or youth librarians should know about your research?

KA: I think kids are more accustomed to cross-merchandising than ever. I’ve even heard the term “format agnostic” to describe how fluidly they move between narrative in books, movies, television, board games and online games. I believe that adaptation in all formats can be creative, can provide commentary or analogy,

and is the product of a rich post-modern culture of references and intertextuality. Thoughtful analysis and discussion of adaptation can also give us tools to resist certain ideologies and recognize the results of certain productions and agendas.

However, adaptation itself need not be confused with branding and covert advertising.

I once heard Meg Cabot herself comment on Disney version of her book. She quipped, “Think of it this way: There’s the Disney *Princess Diaries* universe, and that’s great, and there’s the Meg Cabot *Princess Diaries* universe, and that’s right.” She jokingly draws attention to the lack of fidelity between her original books and the Disney movies, while acknowledging that the various tellings can coexist. So much for “I liked the book better.”

