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13 May 2011

Young Adult Novels and Their Film Adaptations

When novels first originated in the mid eighteenth century, they were seen as lowbrow and unworthy of serious study. Now, the study of novels is a staple to academia, but certain types of novels are still considered with critical disdain, and young adult literature is among them. This disdain is perhaps due to the fact that as a genre, young adult fiction is fairly new: although authors like Judy Blume and S.E. Hinton were writing literature aimed at high school students in the 1970s, it was not until recently that the genre has been officially recognized as distinct from children's literature. In the past fifteen years, both bookstores and public libraries have created young adult sections. It also seems that with every passing year, these sections get larger and larger. In fact, young adult literature is one of the few areas of print books in which sales are rising.

However, the genre of young adult literature is still seen as "an entrée into more sophisticated reading for its intended audience," and not "a viable area of academic study in and of itself" (Coats 317). The themes and content of young adult novels are just as worthy of consideration as those in children's novels, which are often studied critically. Furthermore, young adult novels should be studied for the sheer effect that they have on teens and adults alike. During the teenage years, one is still trying to figure out one's views and beliefs, and young adult books may shape whom these teens turn out to be. Furthermore, the genre has had a strong presence for about ten years now, so as fans grow older, the audience for young adult literature expands. New teen girls are introduced to young adult literature, but girls now in their twenties

who loved young adult books when they were younger continue to read books intended for high school students.

Although the market for young adult books is expanding to include a wider age group, unless a young adult book is extremely popular like *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, older adults (30+) do not tend to read the genre. The market is further limited by books mostly intended to appeal to girls. There are some books aimed at both sexes, but when one walks into the young adult section at a bookstore or library, the color pink is overwhelming. There are also simply some people who do not read as much, and they will only read books that reach extreme levels of popularity.

However, even though young adult books have a limited audience, more and more young adult books are being adapted into movies. The genre is rising in popularity, and so filmmakers can expect a core audience of fans that will see the movie because they have read the book. However, filmmakers also want to widen the potential audience of the film. One way in which they try to attract an older audience for films adapted from young adult books is by changing the story of the book to better conform to the chick flick genre. Chick flicks, like most young adult books, primarily appeal to women. The genre of chick flicks started to gain prominence in the early 1990s and has been on the rise ever since, and similarly to the young adult genre, it is viewed as “low brow” (Hinder). The themes in young adult books can often be seen in chick flicks, so it makes sense for filmmakers to try to fit young adult books into this genre; by changing a few aspects of the plot, they can appeal to a much wider audience. The movies *How to Deal*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and *The Princess Diaries* are all examples of young adult books that have been adapted into movies that use the chick flick genre, with varying levels of success. *How to Deal*, adapted from the books *Someone Like You* and *That*

Summer by Sarah Dessen, completely abandons the teen movie genre and bills itself as a chick flick; this approach made the movie appeal to hardly anyone, since the movie was unpopular both at the box office and among critics. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, adapted from the book by Ann Brashares, employs the chick flick genre more successfully, building on the aspects of chick flick already present in the book to make the movie appeal to slightly older women as well as teenagers. *The Princess Diaries*, adapted from the book by Meg Cabot, is a more complicated example: the movie takes one aspect of the book and tries to make it conform to the standards of a chick flick, but in other respects it downplays the qualities of a chick flick that are present in the book to make the movie more family friendly.

Adaptation Theory

Popular books can be problematic to adapt, because the audience who loves the book may be very harsh on the adaptation. Fans think that the book is perfect just the way it is, so if anything is changed from the text of the book, they may automatically dismiss the movie as bad because it was not faithful. However, as Linda Hutcheon argues in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*, “an adaptation’s double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment of the focus of analysis” (6). A movie can be vastly different from the book from which it was adapted and still be a worthy film in its own right, even a worthy adaptation. Even books that are bestsellers, like *The Princess Diaries* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and books that are prizewinners, like all of the cases that I am examining, might need to be changed in order to be successful as a movie. Hutcheon points out one of the main problems for filmmakers is that “usually adaptations, especially from long novels, mean that the adaptor’s job is one of subtraction or contractions; this is called “a surgical art” (Abott 2002:108) for good reason” (19). There are not many books that adapted exactly as

they are, would be an appropriate movie length. Most of the time, filmmakers have to cut source material, eliminating secondary characters, plot points, and scenes, although in some cases they may have to add drastically, creating new characters and plots. Even films that are made to be mini-series and can therefore be six hours long often contain changes of some sort. As Hutcheon says, “adaptation is repetition but repetition without replication...The act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (7-8). If a movie version of a book followed the book exactly, scene for scene, it would still be impossible to translate the book exactly. The narration of the book would become visually inserted into the scenes, and by doing so, the voice of the narrator could be lost or changed. This aspect of adaptation is especially important in books that are narrated in the first person, like *Someone Like You* and *That Summer*, and books that are written in diary form, like *The Princess Diaries*, since the voice of the main character plays an important role in characterization. Filmmakers must decide how to translate the narration; *How to Deal* employs voiceover and *The Princess Diaries* changes Mia’s thoughts into dialogue.

As Thomas Leitch argues in his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, “to evaluate adaptations fairly, we need to evaluate their source texts as well – an activity traditional adaptation study, which takes the literary text as an unquestioned touchstone of value for any adaptation, has traditionally avoided. To revitalize adaptation study, we need... a new assumption: source texts must be rewritten; we cannot help rewriting them” (Leitch 16). Source texts may not be perfect. Older texts may portray characters using negative stereotypes or convey prejudices in the narration that in today’s day and age would not be acceptable. Filmmakers can “correct” the source texts by changing the movie so that it does not convey racist, sexist, or other prejudiced sentiments. Also, a filmmaker could make a change from the book because the

filmmaker might want to convey a different message or theme in the movie than in the book. Films adapted from movies should be judged as movies in their own right, but the source material should still be examined to see the changes that filmmakers made. Changes are not necessarily bad. They can serve a very specific purpose, from adding another layer of meaning to ensuring the film is not too long. I will examine the films *How to Deal*, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and *The Princess Diaries*, and the books from which they are adapted. The changes filmmakers made adapting are very telling as to their purpose and intent, and by examining the original source material and the final product, I will better know the filmmakers intent and how successful they were in achieving their goal.

That Summer, Someone Like You, and How to Deal

Sarah Dessen's first novel *That Summer* was published in 1996. It is narrated in the first person, like all of Dessen's novels, by the main character, a teenage girl named Haven. Her second novel, *Someone Like You* (1998), centers around a teenager named Halley. The movie *How to Deal* (2004) was adapted from both *That Summer* and *Someone Like You*. This adaptation is unique because the two books are not part of a series and feature completely different characters and plots. The movie gives the main character, Halley, the same friends and love interest as in *Someone Like You*, but focuses on the family from *That Summer*. *Someone Like You*, published by Viking in 1998, started off with a print run of just ten thousand (Corbett). *How to Deal* came out in 2003, and although Dessen was growing in popularity, she did not have the large fan base that she does currently. When *How to Deal* was released, Sarah Dessen had published five books, none of them bestsellers. Her next novel published after the movie's release, *The Truth About Forever* (2004) was a *New York Times* bestseller, and all of her subsequent novels have been bestsellers as well. She has now published a total of ten books, all

of which are narrated in the first person by a teen girl. A recent trend in young adult literature is to write about the supernatural or the filthy rich, but Sarah Dessen writes about normal girls who are faced with issues prevalent among teenagers today; some examples include an abusive boyfriend, a sister with anorexia, and being labeled a slut. As Wendy J. Glenn says, Sarah Dessen is a unique young adult writer because she explores “the complexity of human relationships between and among characters, undermines expected gender expectations, develops the theme of self-perception and identity, creates eccentric and memorable secondary characters, and uses humor to help readers bear the angst of teenage life” (x). Her books probably appeal to filmmakers for the same reasons that they appeal to teenagers; her characters are funny, unique, and easy to root for, and they are faced with issues not often featured in teen books, although they are common in real life.

Since Sarah Dessen was not that well known when *How to Deal* went into production, the filmmakers were able to be freer with their adaptation and combine two of her books. They did not have to worry about a large or cultish fan base that would be upset if a favorite scene were omitted or if the ending changed. However, the filmmakers still could have followed the events of the books closely; after all, both books were selected by the American Library Association as one of the “Best Books for Young Adults” in the year that they were published. Combining the two books was a deliberate choice of the filmmakers, and when doing so, they choose what to keep with the idea of conforming to the chick flick genre, at the expense of omitting or trivializing the issues that are the most important to teenagers.

Halley’s characterization in *How to Deal* is vastly different from the Halley in *Someone Like You*. In the novel, Halley has a crush on Macon almost immediately, and she lives for the days in gym class when he talks to her. However, in the film, Halley is portrayed as not believing

in love. The exchanges between Macon and Halley contain similar dialogue to the exchanges in the novel, but the tone is different: in the novel, dialogue tags show that Halley is excited that someone like Macon would flirt with her, and she is nervous about every response she makes, hoping that he finds it funny; in the movie, Halley says the same words, but through her tone, the reader can tell that she is confident and experienced in flirting, and not intimidated by Macon at all. In the movie, when Macon finally asks Halley out, she declines, proclaiming that she does not want to fall in love. It seems that more teen girls would identify with the inexperienced version of Halley portrayed in the novel, as they have not had time to become jaded in the ways of love quite yet. However, the filmmakers are not necessarily trying to appeal to teens. They are trying to appeal to fans of the chick flick genre.

Chick flicks are films primarily aimed at young women that are often viewed as “low brow.” There are two main types of chick flicks: ones that prominently feature the bonds between female friends and ones that are romantic comedies (Hinder). Friendship chick flicks are intended to be empowering for women, spreading the message of “girl power.” Some examples include *Thelma & Louise*, *Romy and Michele’s High School Reunion*, *Mona Lisa Smile*, and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, all “popular chick flicks that place friendship above romance” (Hinder). On the other hand, romantic comedy chick flicks focus on a woman and her quest for love, and seem to tout the message that a woman cannot be truly happy without a man. Romantic comedy chick flicks appear at the box office much more frequently than friendship chick flicks; at any given time, if one were to go to a movie theater, it is highly likely that at least one of the choices could be classified as a romantic comedy chick flick. Romantic comedy chick flicks tend to be very formulaic, which is why the critics are so harsh on them. In most chick flicks that are romantic comedies, the heroine is unlucky in love until she meets X. They proceed to fall in love.

Then, toward the end of the movie, something happens— usually, one discovers a secret about the other— and the pair breaks up. However, they soon realize they are miserable without one another, and the film ends with them together, ready to live happily ever after. One common plot device in romantic comedy chick flicks is that the two dislike each other at first, but when they are forced to spend time together, they gradually realize that they are in love. This trope began as far back as *Pride and Prejudice* and is now a standard: *Leap Year*, *How Do You Know*, *Life as We Know It*, and *Bounty Hunter* are just a few examples from the last year that used this conceit. Another common set-up is that the woman has a serious boyfriend or fiancé who is nice enough, but their relationship lacks the chemistry that the woman has with X; examples of this plot device can be found in *The Notebook*, *Sweet Home Alabama*, and *Leap Year*. Although chick flicks are viewed as mindless fluff, they are popular at the box office, as women want to live vicariously through the women in the films who are either standing up for themselves and changing their lives in the process, or falling in love with the perfect guy.

The plot of *How to Deal* is changed from *Someone Like You* so that Halley dislikes Macon at first (or at least, she declines when he asks her out for a date) in order to make the movie conform to the chick flick genre by using a trope seen often in romantic comedy chick flicks. However, soon after Halley dismisses Macon, the camera cuts to a montage of them getting to know each other while “Why Can’t I” by Liz Phair plays in the background. The song choice for the montage is especially noteworthy, as it was featured in several romantic comedy chick flicks in the early 2000s, often during a montage of two characters falling in love; some examples include *13 Going on 30* and *Win a Date With Tad Hamilton!*. This song is an example of how the film uses intertextuality to place itself in the chick flick genre; as Linda Hutcheon argues, we experience film “through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition

with variation” (8). If the audience has seen another romantic comedy chick flick that uses “Why Can’t I” in a montage, then the *How to Deal* montage will bring back memories of the other movie in the viewer’s mind. In this way, they will associate *How to Deal* with other romantic comedy chick flicks and categorize it as such.

Another way that filmmakers try to conform to the chick flick genre is shifting the focus of *How to Deal* from the relationship between Halley and her best friend Scarlett to her relationship with Macon. *Someone Like You* is a love story, but it is a love story about best friends; if it were classified the way that movies are, it would be a friendship chick flick. Halley and Scarlett have a strong female bond, and their empowerment comes as they prepare for Scarlett’s pregnancy together; Halley reads pregnancy and baby books to Scarlett, Halley is Scarlett’s Lamaze partner, and Halley defends Scarlett when kids at their high school whisper and snicker about Scarlett behind her back. The book ends with Scarlett going through labor, with Halley there for her through the entire thing. The focus of the book is on Scarlett and Halley; two thirds of the way through the book, Macon and Halley break up, and the reader recognizes that it is for the best. The movie conforms to the chick flick genre by making Halley and Macon’s relationship the focus of the movie and transforming their story to one typical of a romantic comedy chick flick. In the book, Macon pressures Halley to have sex, even though it is obvious she is not ready. In the movie, cynical Halley is open to a more physical relationship without being in love. The decision of whether or not to have sex for the first time seems like a thoroughly teenage issue; by making Halley more open to sex, the movie appeals to an older audience. In the book, Halley dumps Macon after he is in a car crash with her and he does not visit her in the hospital, even though she is severely injured. This scene is in the movie, but the filmmakers use Halley’s injury as the trigger for Macon to finally say, “I love you.” In the

movie, it is understood that he does not visit her because he is afraid of what he said. In *Someone Like You*, the reader knows that Macon and Halley are broken up for good, and it is shown to be empowering: Halley can do better than a boy who treats her the way that Macon does. In *How to Deal*, the car crash is just the point during every romantic comedy where the couple is broken up. It adds suspense -will they end up together or won't they? – although it is obvious to everyone that they will. Indeed, *How to Deal* ends with Macon driving the girls to the hospital for the birth of Scarlett's baby, but instead of showing Scarlett and Halley together in the delivery room, it shows Macon and Halley in the hallway, sharing a passionate kiss as the music swells.

Another example of distorting the plot of the book to fit into the chick flick genre is with Halley's grandmother. In *Someone Like You*, Halley and her mother reminisce about when Halley was six years old and she watched the sky for Halley's comet with her grandmother. Halley's mother implies that Halley's grandmother is a little crazy for believing that she could see the comet through the cloudy night. The only other time the grandmother is in the book is when Halley and her family go visit her in the hospital and she is loopy from pain medication. The filmmakers distort this small character by making her extremely eccentric. Halley's grandmother smokes a joint of marijuana before going with the family for dinner at Ashley's fiancé's parents' house. They live in a huge mansion and have maids, a chef, and a butler, and of course, are very conservative, so they are shocked by the things that Halley's kooky (and high) grandmother says. Many chick flicks feature an eccentric, liberal, funny grandmother; for example, Betty White in *The Proposal* and *You Again*. The adaptors used the grandmother to conform to an aspect of the chick flick genre, while at the same time livening up a boring dinner scene through the grandmother's funny antics.

The filmmakers use the genre of chick flick to appeal to a wider audience. As Rick Altman argues in his book *Film/Genre*, “the very notion of genre depends on the existence of audience activity...Furthermore, like all critical constructs, genres are created and unsustained by repeated use of generic terminology – not only as part of recognizable generic criticism, but also in ads, posters, labels, iconography, quotations, and other intertextual references” (84). The genre of chick flick only exists because the audience recognizes it as a genre. A romantic comedy chick flick, with most of the focus on the love interest and funny misunderstandings, is aimed toward women, because those are the types of movies that many women want to see. The genre of “chick flick” was around before the term, but as the genre has grown more and more popular, critics have put a name on these kinds of movies. Often, critics say they dislike them, but they still do well at the box office; chick flicks are not usually going to win any Oscars. They provide escape into a perfect fantasy world where women get to experience falling in love along with the heroine. The trailers for chick flicks usually focus heavily on the romance, so that the viewers know what to expect. More than that, they feel entitled to the romance. If they went into a movie classified as a chick flick romantic comedy, but no romance was featured, audience members would feel deceived.

The filmmakers of *How to Deal* are not trying to deceive; they portray it as both a teen movie and a chick flick, and they change the story so that it actually does fit into both of those genres. As Steve Neale discusses in his book on genre theory, *genre and Hollywood*, genres consist “of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis which spectators bring with them to the cinema and which interact with films themselves during the course of the viewing process” (31). By billing *How to Deal* as a chick flick, Hollywood induces in audience members certain expectations. They expect a happy ending, and for most viewers, that means a happy ending

between the lovers. The filmmakers must change the plot of the book in order to focus on the romance between Macon and Halley, and give them a happy ending in order to satisfy viewers who expect it. Many would be upset if Macon and Halley did not end up together, since the couple almost always end up together in chick flicks. However, one could say the same thing for the type of young adult books that Sarah Dessen writes. All of her books feature female heroines who must deal with high school, their families, and romance. Teen girls (because these books are not aimed at boys) also have certain expectations when they go to the bookstore or library and pick out a book with a pink cover with hearts drawn on it. They expect one of the main plot threads to feature romance between the main character and some boy, and they also expect a happy ending.

That Summer (1996) is the only one of Sarah Dessen's books to not feature a love interest in any way; this is probably because Dessen intended it to be an adult novel with a teenage narrator: in an interview, she says:

I sent [my agent] *That Summer* and she was the one who said it was YA. Initially, I didn't know if I wanted to be a YA writer. I came at this completely backwards. If you read the how-to books, they tell you, "If you want to write for teens, you have to research the market and hang around with teenagers." I didn't do any of that, and it's turned out to be the best possible place for me. The readers are so enthusiastic. (Corbett, "Children's Bookshelf")

The young adult genre is similar to the chick flick genre in that it is viewed as "low brow," and the books often follow some formula. Sarah Dessen's first novel was not very successful, probably because it did not feature a romance, which most teen girls expect in some way from young adult novels. *That Summer* is especially disappointing because Haven idealizes Sumner

and starts spending a lot of time with him, so it seems as if she might have a crush on him; however, she only wants him for her sister, not herself. Readers expect the romance and feel unsatisfied when it is not there. Although the rest of Dessen's books do feature some romance, the earlier books are not focused on portraying a perfect romance. *Dreamland* (2000) and *Someone Like You* (1998) portray boys that the main characters are better off without, causing the happy ending to come from their strength in giving up the boy that they love. Although *Keeping the Moon* (1999) ends with the main character getting asked out on a date, the romance aspect makes up a very small part of the book. Both *Keeping the Moon* and *Someone Like You* are more focused on portraying strong female friendships than romantic relationships, demonstrating to young girls that a woman does not need a man to be happy, as long as she has great friends. Dessen's later novels, of which there are five, all prominently feature the main character and her love interest for a good portion of the book. They are all much more formulaic; in fact, all of her last five novels feature a romance that follows the standard chick flick trope of the main characters getting in a big fight right before the end of the book and breaking up, and then getting back together at the end to complete the happy ending. It was with these books that Sarah Dessen started gaining popularity, and once she recognized a formula for success, she decided to stick to it. Her novels all feature characters that are more well-developed than those in most young adult novels and her main characters are still strong, independent women, but her books are now predictable. She features love stories and happy endings because that is what the audience has come to expect from a Sarah Dessen book, and she wants to remain a commercial success. Perhaps the *How to Deal* filmmakers recognized before Sarah Dessen that what the teen girl audience likes more than anything is romance and a happy ending. They were trying to "correct" the mistake of the book by having Halley end up with Macon.

The romance in the movie seems entirely too dependent on the chick flick genre. When Halley and Macon break up, it is obvious that they both want to be with each other, but are just scared of the word “love.” The break-up seems forced. A good chick flick can still contain this break-up, but the rationale makes sense. Then one of the characters needs to have an epiphany so they end up together. The adaptors of *How to Deal* make the common mistake of including this break-up, simply because they think it is something that the audience expects. The main characters break up over something trivial, and they end up back together without any change in their thinking; it’s just because the movie is ending that they are together. *How to Deal* was a flop at the box office. It omitted aspects from the novels which would appeal to teens, while relying on tropes from chick flicks that made the romance unoriginal and dull. It was unsuccessful because both fans of the teen movie and fans of the chick flick were disappointed by *How to Deal*.

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants

The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants was author Ann Brashares first novel. It was one of only five novels by a debut author published in 2001 to sell more than 100,000 copies in its first year of publication; it was a *New York Times* bestseller and an almost immediate success (Maryles). The book follows four fifteen-year-old girls who have been best friends since infancy and covers their first summer spent apart. They find a pair of pants that magically fit all of them, and decide to share the pants over the summer as a way of keeping in touch with one another. The book already contains strong elements of a friendship chick flick, so the filmmakers do not have to completely change the plot of the book in order to make it conform to the chick flick genre. The filmmakers change a few small things in order to better portray the girls’ strong friendship in the allotted time, and they change Lena’s story to conform to the ideals of a romantic comedy chick flick, but they barely have to omit anything. The format of the book

lends itself well to film adaptation; there is a prologue narrated by Carmen introducing the girls and the situation (which becomes an almost verbatim voice over in the film), but the rest of the chapters use the third person, jumping from girl to girl and splicing their experiences together. The chapters are already cinematic, mostly describing the scene and portraying dialogue. The book is written in the third person and does not portray the characters' thoughts very often, so the filmmakers do not have to worry about how to translate voice and thoughts to the screen.

The manner in which the novel was written also lends itself well to film adaptation. Books do not often have a producer; usually, someone comes up with an idea for a novel, writes it, and then shops it around themselves to literary agents or publishing houses. The novel *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* was produced by 17th Street Productions, a division of Alloy, the group responsible for *Gossip Girl*, *Pretty Little Liars*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, all young adult book series that became television shows. This company has experience with adaptation and connections with Hollywood, and their books make good film adaptations because they are mostly plot and dialogue. Furthermore, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* was produced more in the manner of a movie than of a book:

The *Traveling Pants* idea originated with a woman named Jodi Anderson, who was then an editor at Alloy. Ms. Anderson proposed the concept (a group of girlfriends who share a pair of jeans), which was based on some of her own college experiences. She wrote a proposal sketching out the idea that was sold to a publisher, and was under the impression that she might then get to write the book(s). The concept was also sent to non-Alloy Y.A. writers...who were invited to write samples for the book. In the meantime, Ann Brashares, who was then co-president of Alloy with Les Morgenstein, decided to write the book. (Kolhatkar)

Films adapted from novels are often vastly different from their source material, and authors may feel possessive of their work. However, the story of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* was a collaborative group effort that does not seem to belong to anyone. Oftentimes, an author is wary of their book being adapted for the screen, because they are worried that the director will translate their characters and ideas in a way that they did not intend. With *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, the author and the person who came up with the idea are different people, so it does not seem like a big deal for another person, the director, to have yet another vision of the story. The filmmakers did not have to worry about the author, but they did have to worry about the fans, since the book was popular right away.

A major change in *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* from the book to the movie is with Lena's story. In the book, Lena's grandmother pushes her to date Kostos, a smart, handsome Greek boy whom all of the adults on the island adore. One day, Lena goes skinny dipping and she sees Kostos; it is a situation full of misunderstandings, as Lena thinks he was intentionally spying on her, which leads her grandparents to believe that he tried to sexually assault her. Lena's and Kostos' grandfathers get in a fist fight, and the family friends no longer speak to one another. Toward the end of the book, Lena realizes that she is in love with Kostos, because of the way he handled the entire situation: he does not embarrass her by accusing her of lying. In the movie, Kostos and Lena are transformed into Romeo and Juliet. Their families have been feuding for years, and Lena is forbidden from seeing Kostos. She likes him as soon as she meets him, however, and begins sneaking out with him.

There are two reasons why filmmakers might have changed Lena's unique story line to one as tired as that of *Romeo and Juliet*. The first is to conform to the romantic comedy aspect of the chick flick genre. Both the book and movie versions of *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*

conform to the friendship chick flick; by changing Lena's story, filmmakers can also make the movie have aspects of the romantic comedy chick flick, which is seen more often because it is more successful. After Lena meets Kostos in the film, her grandmother tells her to stay away from him. Although she does not dislike him per se, she declines when he repeatedly asks her out because she does not want to anger her grandmother. Lena's initial coldness toward Kostos is similar to the common trope in chick flicks of the two love interests disliking one another in the beginning. Another aspect of her story that conforms to the romantic comedy chick flick genre is that Kostos says that he loves her, and immediately after that her family discovers them and physically rips the couple apart. Lena's grandmother makes her feel guilty about going behind the family's back, so Lena decides to stay away from Kostos. This separation follows the convention in chick flicks that before the ending, the couple must break up for a period, so that there is a grand climactic ending when they reunite again. Indeed, Lena's story in Greece reaches its climax when she runs to meet Kostos' boat as he leaves for college, says "I love you too," and they share a passionate kiss.

The second reason the filmmakers changed Lena's story has to do with the time constraints of the movie as compared to a novel. Since the four girls' summers are largely independent of one another, the filmmakers had to figure out a way to tell four stories in two hours without trivializing or rushing any of them. Changing Lena's story to use *Romeo and Juliet* helped the filmmakers save time explaining things. As Steve Neale argues, the expectations of the audience when they see a familiar story line "provide spectators the means of recognition and understanding. They help render individual films, and the elements within them, intelligible, and therefore, explicable. They offer a way of working out the significance of what is happening on the screen" (31). It would take time to explain the dynamic in the book between the two families,

to depict the misunderstanding, and to show Lena's guilt over the whole thing. As soon as Lena's grandmother in the movie tells her that Kostos is forbidden because they have been feuding with his family for as long as anyone can remember, the viewer can immediately identify her story as *Romeo and Juliet*, and they do not need much exposition. They know the basic facts of Shakespeare's story and can apply them to Lena's situation. It makes it easier for the viewer to orient themselves in Lena's story and not be confused. Although the decision to drastically change Lena's story may seem to make the movie more cliché, it opens the movie up to viewers who have not read the books so that they can understand what is going on. Although some fans of the book may be disappointed to see Lena's unique story become something stale, most are probably still fans of the movie because the filmmakers manage to stay true to the characters as they are portrayed in the book; that is, even though Lena is put into an entirely different situation in the film, she still acts in a way that is consistent with her characterization in the book. By staying true to the characters, the filmmakers are able to change the plot while still staying true to the book in a way that will not upset fans.

Another change in Lena's story is that the filmmakers completely eliminate the character of Effie, Lena's younger sister who travels with her to Greece. Effie played a decent sized role in the books with Lena's relationship with Kostos, but since that entire relationship was changed and rewritten, it was easy for the filmmakers to eliminate Effie. On the whole, she is not missed from this movie. However, the danger with making great changes in adaptations of young adult novels is that many of them have sequels. Although Effie is not missed in the first movie, she loses the pants in the fourth book and puts an end to the Sisterhood. The second movie follows the plot of the fourth book, so they added Effie to the second movie. The filmmakers of the second movie should have figured out a different way for the pants to be lost, but it was easiest

to keep it the same as the book and just pretend that Effie had been in the first movie. Although large changes are sometimes easiest, filmmakers adapting books with sequels should think ahead.

The only other change to the plot in the movie is that the pants become the catalyst for some of the main plot events. In the book, the only obvious magical aspect of the pants is that they fit all of the girls perfectly. However, they also empower the girls, and make them feel invincible when they are wearing them, but this is a more subtle change that might not be obvious in a movie. The pants in the movie are even more magical, and actually bring about action. In Greece, Lena is wearing the pants when they get caught on a wire underwater. She is drowning and cannot break free, which causes Kostos to come to her rescue and they are introduced. The pants are accidentally delivered to Bailey's house by mistake, and she brings the package over to Tibby, and it is how they first meet. At the end of the movie, Bridget's dog carries the pants in his mouth until she runs into Eric. This is a very cinematic change that illustrates the magic of the pants very well, but also lets the viewer know when a chance meeting is important, since magical music plays in the background. It helps with the transitions from girl to girl, and it also helps to condense parts of the plot, making the way that characters meet happen much more quickly.

Besides Lena's story, the filmmakers do not make many big changes in adapting the plot, since the book already conforms to the friendship chick flick genre. Also, they barely omit anything, choosing to hint at plot points instead of eliminating them completely. Bridget's mother commits suicide and Bridget loses her virginity during the course of the movie; the filmmakers are able to successfully portray these aspects of the plot in a way that allows older viewers to understand exactly what happened, while younger viewers are left blissfully

oblivious. The movie is rated PG, and is primarily aimed at teenagers and those a little bit younger; although the movie uses the genre of chick flick, it is still a teen movie first and foremost (*Amazon*). However, by looking at just the first page of reviews from ordinary people on *Amazon* and *Rotten Tomatoes*, one can see that *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* is not just enjoyed by teen girls. Mothers appreciate a movie that they can see with their daughters. Other older women appreciate the movie for “transporting” them back to their teenage years (*Amazon, Rotten Tomatoes*). *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* may be what critics call “fluff,” but as Dana Stevens says, “the film makes up in charm what it lacks in sophistication.” The film was successful at the box office, grossing \$42,013,878 worldwide from a budget of \$25 million, because it used the chick flick genre without abandoning the issues important to the teens who made the book so successful (*Box Office Mojo*). By making sure that overall, the movie appealed to teenagers, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* appealed to both younger girls waiting to grow up and older women who long to go back.

The Princess Diaries

Like *How to Deal* and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, the filmmakers of *The Princess Diaries* also hope to expand the audience; they aim to include children, young adults, and their parents. *The Princess Diaries* is a Disney film, and Disney is known for live action movies that the whole family can enjoy together. Although Disney is not a genre, the audience still has certain expectations whenever they go and see a Disney film, which may be why the adaptors chose to eliminate some threads of the novel while adding others.

The Disney studio has always promoted family values. In a study of twenty-six Disney animated films, researchers found that the films predominantly portrayed family relationships as a high priority (Lund 360). Walt Disney was a family man who built the amusement parks so that families would have a clean, fun place to go on vacation and wanted the whole family to be able

to sit down and watch his movies together; he famously once said, “The important thing is the family. If you can keep the family together—and that’s the backbone of our whole business, catering to families—that’s what we hope to do.” The Disney studio is still faithful to Walt’s vision. Their animated movies are funny and charming, so that they are enjoyable for both adults and children. Their live action films are still intended for families to watch together: they may contain romance, but there is never a sex scene, and the jokes and language are appropriate for younger children. The studio also encourages social conservatism through its young starlets. The teenagers who are featured regularly in Disney’s television shows and make music for the company, like the Jonas Brothers, promote values such as abstinence until marriage. The starlets are encouraged to be good role models for younger children and not smoke, drink, or have sex; it causes a mild scandal when they are caught doing one of the above because it is so against the mild, clean, innocent image that Disney tries to promote for all of its stars. Nobody would be surprised if pop star Ke\$ha leaked dirty photos, but the naked pictures of *High School Musical* star Vanessa Hudgens were talked about on the news for days and became the subject of an *Saturday Night Live* skit.

The Princess Diaries, by Meg Cabot, was first published in 2000. Prior to *The Princess Diaries*, Meg Cabot had published a few romance novels under a pseudonym, but *The Princess Diaries* was her first foray into the young adult genre and her first publication using her real name. The novel was optioned by Disney before it was even published, and the movie went into production in the same month that the book was released (Maughan). At the time that the movie went into production, Meg Cabot was an unknown whom the Disney company was going to make famous. Filmmakers could change the intended audience for the book from young adult to whatever they wished, since the novel did not have a large fan base at the time the movie was

made. *The Princess Diaries* became a bestselling novel in the months before the movie came out in theaters because of all of Disney's promotion for the movie. In the eleven years since *The Princess Diaries* was published, Meg Cabot has published over forty books, many of them *New York Times* Bestsellers (Corbett, "Meg Cabot"). She has published romance novels and "chick lit" for adults, but most of her books have been in the young adult genre, including nine other books in *The Princess Diaries* series. As her one time editor Abby McAden said, "[Meg Cabot is] like the Nora Roberts of teen publishing, and those are so few and far between. Most authors, we have to beg and cajole them to crank out one book a year" (Corbett, "Meg Cabot"). Today, Meg Cabot is incredibly successful, and that success is due in part to the movie *The Princess Diaries*.

With this adaptation, the filmmakers are actually taking away some of the aspects of the chick flick genre that are present in the book, in order to make it more family friendly. For example, in the book, Mia's parents are never married. In the movie, they are married for a brief period, but they divorce when Mia is still young for the same reason that split up in the book: Mia's mother wanted to devote her life to her art, and not to being royal. The movie seems to make this change because the Disney studio disapproves of having children out of wedlock, and so it is trying to improve the book in some way to make it set a better example and be more family friendly. The filmmakers must change the book so that Mia's parents are married in order to fit in with the ideology of the socially conservative studio. However, it seems odd that her parents would divorce for the same reasons that they do not get married in the book; it seems as if her mother would have realized that marrying a prince would mean moving to his palace with him when the time came for him to run his country. In the movie, once her parents' divorce, Mia does not see her father or her grandmother. Her father sends her cards for her birthday and

Christmas, but that is the extent of their relationship; both parents think this is the best possible arrangement for Mia. Almost any child psychologist today would agree that it is good for children to have both parents, and to see both parents. It seems like having a child out of wedlock but still knowing both parents would be better for the child than the family arrangement that Disney is promoting in *The Princess Diaries*. What makes this situation even more disturbing is that in the film, Mia's father often visits San Francisco on business; he does not visit his daughter even when they are in the same city. The only reason that Mia's grandmother finally gets in contact with her is because her father dies, which means that Mia is the heir to the throne. Her grandmother tells her that she is going to train her to become a princess, after having no contact with her for fifteen years. This seems like Mia's grandmother is only using her to be the heir, and does not care about her as a person. She had no interest in Mia until she needed her to be royal.

However, the filmmakers drastically change the characterization of Clarisse, Mia's grandmother, making her much nicer in the movie than in the book. In the novel, Clarisse is a caricature of a character: the unloving, unkind, vain grandmother is funny compared to most people's expectations that a grandmother be sweet and accepting. Although Clarisse in the novel is not exactly the same as the "kooky grandmother" character often seen in chick flicks, her role is pretty similar, since she says outlandish things and is used for laughs. The filmmakers could have played up her character in order to make the movie better conform to the chick flick genre. Instead, they try to conform to the standards of a family film. In the movie, it is shown that although Clarisse may have a cold exterior, she truly loves Mia and has her best interests at heart. By showing Clarisse to have a soft spot in the film, filmmakers give the character more depth and make her more appealing. However, most importantly, the filmmakers are making the movie more family friendly. Disney does not want to promote a movie in which the grandmother

obviously cares for nothing but herself, unless something happens at the end to show that the grandmother was acting the wrong way all along. Since that does not happen, they changed the grandmother's character so that she was cold at first, but eventually grew warm and loving (and how could she not, played by Julie Andrews?).

Another way that the filmmakers try to make this movie more family friendly is by mostly eliminating the Mr. Gianini thread. In the novel, Mia's mother starts dating her algebra teacher, Mr. Gianini, and one morning when Mia wakes up, he is sitting at the breakfast table in his boxer shorts. This implies that Mr. Gianini spent the night, and had pre-marital relations with Mia's mother, both of which are ideas that conservative Disney does not want to promote in a film about princesses. In the movie, the fact that her mother is dating Mr. Gianini is mentioned only one time, when she first goes on a date with him. The viewer certainly never sees him in his boxer shorts, or even eating breakfast. This thread probably should have been eliminated completely. By mentioning it once but never again, it just seems like a remnant from the novel's plot. It does not do much damage, since it is not as if any huge questions are introduced by that date, but it seems like an introduction to something that never materializes.

Although the movie tries to conform to the standards of a family film more than that of a chick flick, the adapters of *The Princess Diaries* still follow the standards of a romantic comedy chick flick when it comes to romance. In the book, Mia does not realize that Josh Richter, the boy that she has been pining over, is a huge jerk until the very end of the book; there is not much time left for any other romance, although it is clear to the reader that Mia's friend Michael has a crush on her. Since the book is part of a series, Mia and Michael's romance can be spread across several books, so it is not surprising that nothing happens between them in the first book. In the movie, Mia realizes that Josh Richter is a jerk halfway through, which gives the filmmakers

more time to focus on Mia's other love interest for the second half of the movie. When Michael asks Mia on a date, she accepts, but then some princess duty comes up and she must stand him up. Michael gets angry with her, conforming to the aspect of romantic comedy chick flicks which say that all couples must break up before the movie's end. Then, the movie is able to end on their make-up kiss, which occurs at Mia's coronation ceremony.

Although based on a young adult book, *The Princess Diaries* is not primarily aimed at teens. As *New York Times* critic Kevin Thomas says, "Though preteen girls, especially those who have read the Meg Cabot novel upon which the film is based, clearly form the film's target audience, this stylish Disney production is an ideal family film." The aspects of the book that a teen might enjoy most – Mia's harsh but funny grandmother, for example – are omitted from the film in order to make it appeal to a younger audience. Also, more than any issue portrayed by the novel, teens may most identify with Mia's voice, since the novel is written in a stream of consciousness diary form. However, the movie does not do much to adapt her voice to the screen. Mia's thoughts come out solely through dialogue; there is no voice-over. Teen movies tend to appeal to only teens, and there is very little crossover. However, by toning the movie down in order to gain a G-rating, the filmmakers appeal to preteens who are not old enough to go to the movies by themselves, so the whole family must come along. Teenagers would still probably enjoy *The Princess Diaries*, especially the aspects of chick flick seen in Mia's romance with Michael and her makeover; as Elvis Mitchell says, the movie is "*Pretty Woman* for children." However, teens will not identify with the issues or characters the way that they do in the book, since the movie has become a fairy tale. By making the movie less appealing to teens, the filmmakers are able to greatly widen the audience to include young girls and their families; *The Princess Diaries* was a blockbuster hit, grossing \$165 million dollars worldwide.

Conclusion

How to Deal, *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, and *The Princess Diaries* are all movies based on young adult novels which change parts of the plot in order to appeal to a wider audience. They shape the plot to conform to the chick flick genre in order to appeal to females other than teenagers. They also use genre to help save valuable time. Some of their changes are successful, and some are not. *How to Deal* did not succeed at the box office because it distorted the plots of the books in order to fit into the chick flick genre at the expense of issues important to teens. The movie was intended to widen the audience, but instead, the movie appealed to neither teens nor fans of the chick flick genre. Although *The Princess Diaries* was a blockbuster success, it also widened the audience at the expense of teens, omitting issues important to teens in order to gain a G rating. *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* was a moderate success at the box office, but it used the chick flick genre the most effectively of the three case studies. It managed to keep the issues present in the novel that were important to teens while adding in aspects of the chick flick genre in order to appeal to women in their twenties and thirties. However, of the three, the source material for *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* conformed the most closely to the chick flick genre already, so perhaps that is why the genre worked so well for the adapters.

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