



It Matters to the Viewer: Social Reviews of Books Adapted for Film

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On the social reviewing platform Goodreads, reviewers simultaneously assess both book and film when reviewing books with a film adaptation. Using computational methods, we analyze 151,100 Goodreads book reviews about adapted titles and find that the presence of an adaptation alters how amateur reviewers evaluate a book. Through topic modelling, we find three main types of adaptation reviews: the subjective, the critical, and the nostalgic. On close reading, we find that fidelity criticism, a type of criticism that evaluates the success of an adaptation by comparing differences with its source, is common throughout reviews. The fidelity criticism that we find, however, probes into distinct classes of similarities: similarity in plot, characters, bias, and spirit. These reviews are guided by socially constructed "rules" regarding adaptation, including to "read the book first" and that "the book will be better." Our findings demonstrate how amateur adaptation reviewers navigate social norms about adaptation, but in practice are guided by their personal experiences and preferences, even if that means breaking adaptation norms.

Sur la plateforme d'évaluation sociale Goodreads, les critiques évaluent simultanément le livre et le film lorsqu'ils évaluent des livres ayant fait l'objet d'une adaptation cinématographique. En utilisant des méthodes informatiques, nous analysons 151 100 critiques de livres sur Goodreads concernant des titres adaptés et nous constatons que la présence d'une adaptation modifie la façon dont les critiques amateurs évaluent un livre. Grâce à la modélisation des sujets, nous trouvons trois types principaux de critiques d'adaptation : les subjectives, les critiques et les nostalgiques. En lisant attentivement, nous constatons que la critique de fidélité, un type de critique qui évalue le succès d'une adaptation en comparant les différences avec la source, est commune à toutes les critiques. La critique de fidélité que nous trouvons, cependant, explore des classes distinctes de similitudes : similitude de l'intrigue, des personnages, du parti pris et de l'esprit. Ces critiques sont guidées par des "règles" socialement construites concernant l'adaptation, notamment le fait de "lire le livre d'abord" et que "le livre sera meilleur". Nos résultats démontrent que les critiques d'adaptation amateurs naviguent entre les normes sociales en matière d'adaptation, mais qu'en pratique, ils sont guidés par leurs expériences et préférences personnelles, même si cela signifie qu'ils ne respectent pas les normes en matière d'adaptation.



1 Introduction

Millions of amateur reviewers find and interpret creative media such as books or movies via social reviewing platforms. These online spaces give the everyday person a platform to share their responses to aesthetic media, track their reading and viewing history, and perform critique with friends and unknown fellow readers. In the specific case of books that have (or will soon become) a film adaptation, amateur reviews demonstrate whether (and why) people like an adaptation and its source. Amateur adaptation reviews share more than just aesthetic judgments about a work and perpetuate normative recommendations about adaptation reception. These norms exist in the form of rules, including to “read the book first” and that “the book will be better.” While reviews about adaptation almost universally acknowledge these rules, they equally universally break them.

The existence of an adapted film is a major driver for the books that have continued popularity over time (Bourrier and Thelwell 2020; Walsh and Antoniak 2021a). On Goodreads, a social network devoted to book reviewing, users create space for adaptation reviews, where they perform aesthetic evaluation of books and films and share these reviews without knowing who they are addressing or what influence they might have. A single book review might motivate a fellow reader to add a book to their bookshelf and guide how they evaluate that book once they read it. If a book review mentions a film adaptation, it could also motivate a fellow reviewer to watch the adaptation, change how they evaluate the movie, or even whether they wait to watch the movie until reading the book. In aggregate, these reviews are data solidifying an adaptation and its source as successful or unsuccessful across concrete metrics like quantity of reviews, numeric ratings, and the textual justification for a rating.

Although their cultural and commercial significance is clear, amateur adaptation reviews have been overlooked by academics. Academic studies of adaptation have viewed and dismissed popular reviews as merely fidelity criticism, a type of reviewing that evaluates a work based on its similarity to its source. Fidelity criticism has often been derided by adaptation studies as simplistic, moralistic, or overly evaluative, yet fidelity criticism is absent in academic criticism and widespread in amateur adaptation reviews (Murray 2008).

While the academic field of adaptation studies has produced insightful knowledge about adaptation, it has had limited impact on understanding how people actually interpret adaptations, given its focus on rejecting the criterion of fidelity. We argue that a serious engagement with popular reception reveals how everyday readers engage with both individual works and the relationship between source and adaptation.

To learn about how amateur reviewers interpret and evaluate adaptation, we collect 151,100 Goodreads book reviews associated with 1,636 adapted books. We use topic modelling to identify trends across adaptation reviews. While it may seem surprising or questionable to study film adaptation through book reviews, the presence of adaptation reviewing in such reviews highlights adaptation's permeating presence. Even on a book-centric platform, many readers choose to discuss, and even review, book and film simultaneously.

In these reviews, we find three overarching and overlapping types of adaptation reviews: 1) those that focus on subjective preferences and opinions, 2) others that draw from knowledge about book and film history and criticism, and 3) reviews that are contextualized with nostalgic memories about the adapted works. Using these themes as a guide, we analyze two fine-grained reviewing patterns: rules of adaptation reception and fidelity criticism, which are detailed below.

We identify pervasive, socially constructed, and widely shared rules of adaptation reception:

1. Read the book before watching the movie.
2. The book will be better than the movie.

Reviewers commonly acknowledge both rules in reviews, but they often claim that their personal experience has broken the rule. When they find that their experience breaks the rule, they express surprise but do not question the rule's validity.

These reviews often compare differences between a film and its source book, which upholds prior scholarly perspectives that say that fidelity criticism is common in amateur reviews. But more importantly, we find fidelity criticism to be a varied, complex, and productive framework. After reading adaptation reviews identified through topic modelling, we identify four types of fidelity criticism: fidelity to characters, plot, political correctness and bias, and the affective experience (i.e., the pervading "spirit" of a work).

Amateur reviewers *do* use fidelity criticism as a "critical measuring stick" (Murray 2012, 8), but they use it as a framework for concretely interpreting and evaluating an adaptation and its source. Fidelity criticism and the social rules of adaptation are constrained—but important—entryways into critical, evidence-based, and reflective adaptation reviewing.

2 Adaptation studies' oscillating stance on fidelity criticism

Fidelity criticism, the evaluative comparison between an adaptation and its source, is arguably the most significant and long-lasting conflict in the adaptation studies

community. The eras of adaptation studies scholarship are marked by the field's oscillating stance toward fidelity (Johnson 2017; Connor 2007; Hermansson 2015). Early adaptation studies scholarship approached the study of adaptation by comparing and critiquing a film based on its relationship and faithfulness to a book. In other words, the field participated actively in fidelity criticism. In 1957, George Bluestone's *Novels into Films* ushered in a new era for adaptation studies. This groundbreaking and influential book argues that as soon as medium is changed, differences between source and adaptation are inevitable; fidelity criticism is a fruitless mode of study given the certainty that an adaptation can never be faithful to its source (Bluestone 1957). Bluestone's stance marks a shift in the academic study of adaptation, as scholars subsequently critiqued fidelity criticism for being, at best, moralist, evaluative, and boring, or, at worst, for misunderstanding the goals of adaptation entirely (Ray 2000; Andrew 1984). This critique became ubiquitous throughout adaptation scholarship, as the "ritual slaying of fidelity criticism at the outset of a work has ossified into a habitual gesture" (Murray 2008, 6).

Ring in the next era of adaptation scholarship by calling for new methods and different data, Simone Murray pointed to the scarcity of scholarly work that participates in fidelity criticism, asking "if no one in academe is actually advocating the antiquated notion of fidelity, what is there to overturn?" (Murray 2008, 6). While Murray tied dismissal of fidelity criticism to the methodological oversaturation of close reading, other work noted that fidelity criticism does occur, but does so most often in non-academic spaces (Connor 2007; Hermansson 2015). The ritual academic disdain for fidelity criticism occurred with implicit and explicit derision for non-academic criticism. Ray, for example, wrote that "[w]ithout the benefit of a presiding poetics, film and literature scholars could only persist ... in asking about individual movies the same unproductive layman's question (How does the film compare with the book?) getting the same unproductive answer (The book is better)" (Ray 2000, 44). Even when put less explicitly, dismissals of fidelity criticism position amateur criticism as lowbrow, unsophisticated, and unintellectual.

In recent years, fidelity criticism has been revived and repositioned as an important mode for learning about adaptation, intertextuality, and critical practice. Cutchins, Raw, and Welsh argue for the pedagogical benefits of fidelity criticism and note that fidelity criticism might be an aid for teaching novices to engage in media criticism (Cutchins, Raw, and Welsh 2010). Hermansson sees the recuperation of fidelity as "one essential tool in the intertextual toolbox" of adaptation studies (Hermansson 2015, 147). Christine Geraghty's *Now a Major Motion Picture* demonstrates how reception of adaptation may be a process of nostalgic recall, communicated through fidelity

criticism, in which the viewer of an adapted film—in Geraghty’s example, the *Pride and Prejudice* 2005 version—recalls not only the original (Jane Austen) text, but also layers of continued adaptation (the BBC television movie of 1995). While Geraghty does not explicitly advocate for fidelity criticism, she does argue that “[f]aithfulness matters if it matters to the viewer” (Geraghty 2008, 3).

Despite the recent revival of engagement with fidelity, there is still a lack of knowledge about amateur reviewing, including the function of fidelity criticism in these spaces. There is a loss that comes from disregarding the amateur critic’s view, especially given the power of the adaptation industry as a driver of both film and publishing industries (Murray 2012). We must care about what the amateur reviewer thinks, partially because these reviews will become accessible as market data, influencing what is read, how it is evaluated, and even what art is made.

3 Corpus and methods

3.1 Goodreads: A book reviewing social network

To study amateur adaptation reviews, we identify a set of book reviews for adapted titles on Goodreads, an online social book reviewing platform. While Goodreads is the most popular book reviewing platform, originating in 2006 and accumulating nearly 90 million members, there are several limitations to using Goodreads as a source for amateur adaptation criticism (Goodreads 2023). The deprecation of Goodreads’s application programming interface (API) in December 2020 makes collecting data from Goodreads much more difficult. Even though a Goodreads scraper is available (Walsh and Antoniak 2021b), at the writing of this essay, Goodreads only allowed access to 300 of the newest, oldest, and default reviews (maximum 900 reviews total). (Beginning in Spring 2023, Goodreads began beta testing a web interface in which all Goodreads reviews are available through an endless scroll. This change to the interface means that future researchers will likely be able to access the full reviewing history of every book.) These 900 reviews are unrepresentative, given that they provide disproportionately the work of the first and last people to review the book. The other 300 reviews delivered by the site—the default view—are algorithmically curated; these reviews are displayed without an explanation for their selection. For a small subset of very popular books, the available data is a figurative speck in comparison to the swaths of data stored by Goodreads. The book with the most ratings, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, has nearly 9 million ratings and almost 140,000 reviews. The 900 available reviews account for only 0.64% of the total number of reviews in that case. But most books are not so popular. For the majority of the books in our corpus, 900 reviews account for most if not all of the reviews ever posted to Goodreads.

The rhetorical norms of the Goodreads review reflect the platform's infrastructure. Goodreads accounts are often connected to Facebook profiles, meaning that a "friend's" post will be boosted above other reviews. Goodreads is therefore virtually public and tied to a reviewer's identity; a Goodreads user has their own profile with all their reviews collected and displayed. Given user-centric profiles and the reviewer's ability to document prior and future reading, Goodreads is both an egocentric network of public reading performance and "reading as a spectacle of collecting" (Nakamura 2013, 240). Given Goodreads's infrastructure and norms, Goodreads adaptation reviews can be understood as a semi-public performance within platform constraints.

It would be wrong not to acknowledge the formidable presence of Amazon, of which Goodreads is a subsidiary, in the publishing industry. As a book distribution company, alongside numerous other ventures, Amazon owns Goodreads, giving Amazon access to restricted book ratings and reviews, as well as behavioural data about Goodreads users. Speculatively, but with knowledge about the interconnections between the film and book industries in the adaptation industry (Murray 2012), it is important to recognize that Amazon also owns Amazon Studios, a television and film producer and distributor. Amazon, already an extremely powerful company, could use Goodreads reviews as a guide for what books to adapt.

3.2 Computational analysis of reviewing communities

Other computational studies of Goodreads have recognized how adaptation permeates Goodreads reviews. Walsh and Antoniak find that adaptation defines how classics are reviewed; classic literature that remains popular is likely to have been adapted (Walsh and Antoniak 2021a). Their topic model of Goodreads "classics" reviews results in one topic devoted to adaptation (and to audiobooks). Similarly, Bourrier and Thelwell show that many Victorian books enjoy continued popularity on Goodreads because of cinematic adaptations, like *Black Beauty*, *Jane Eyre*, and *A Christmas Carol* (Bourrier and Thelwell 2020).

3.3 Collecting reviews and book metadata

To develop a set of books that have been adapted as films, we adopt Wikipedia's list of adapted books (Wikipedia 2023). For our purposes, a book may be connected to multiple film adaptations, but a film connects to a single source book. Wikipedia's list is not exhaustive and is likely Anglocentric, but the span of included years and the number of non-English-language works suggest that it is a strong starting point for creating an adaptation dataset (Figure 1).

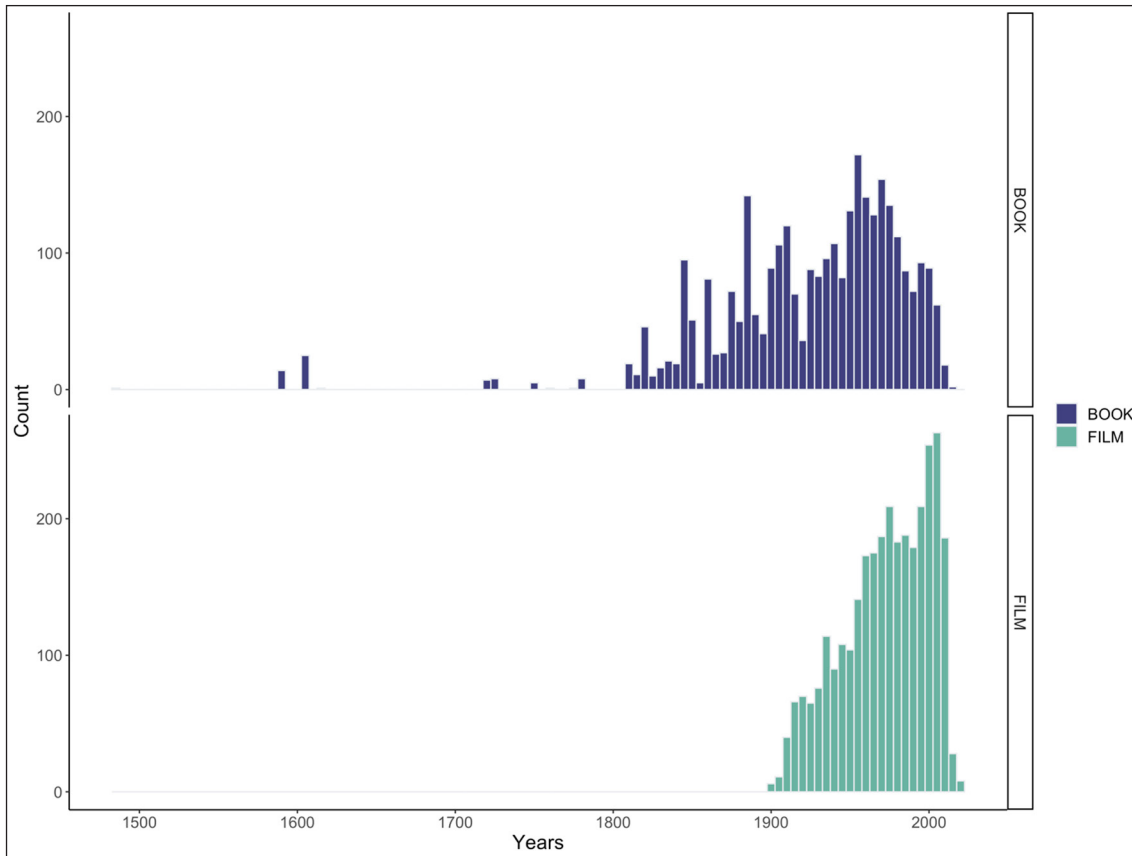


Figure 1: Distribution of books and films between 1500–2022 by date of original publication (books) or theatrical release (films).

We then collect Goodreads reviews for all books in our list of adaptations. To collect Goodreads reviews, we first manually identify the Goodreads page and URI (a type of ID) associated with each book. Of the adaptations that have a Goodreads page, there are 1,636 books, with 3,264 associated films. We use a Goodreads scraper to automate the scraping of book metadata and book reviews (Walsh and Antoniak 2021b). Book metadata includes aggregate information about a book: year published, author name, user-attributed genres, lists and shelves to which the book has been assigned, distributions of ratings, and number of reviews. Scraping book reviews retrieves the individual reviews, including review text, rating, and the reviewer’s user ID. Because some Goodreads reviews are unavailable via the web interface, we collect at most 900 reviews for each book. For most of our corpus, we can collect all reviews for a book, because the total number of reviews is less than 900. For about a third of our corpus, there are more than 900 reviews (**Table 1**).

Total number of reviews	151,100
Number of books	1,636
Number of films	3,264
Median number of reviews per book	263
Number of books with more than 900 reviews	519

Table 1: Statistics about our Goodreads adaptation reviews corpus.

3.4 Balancing reviewer privacy with reviewer credit

We use computational methods to identify themes in adaptation reviews, but we ground these themes through direct quotes. However, quoting a user risks invading their privacy, even if Goodreads is technically public. For some communities, where users are more likely to share personal or sensitive information, direct quoting a user alongside their name or pseudonym could put that user at risk. For example, members of fandoms craft and share stories, but these stories may contain sensitive information, these communities have a high proportion of marginalized members, and there is stigma related to fandom (Dym and Fiesler 2020). Across fandom communities, Goodreads and other social media users likely do not anticipate that their posts could be published in academic articles. Like fandom communities, where writing is both social and a craft, Goodreads reviewers put time, knowledge, and energy into crafting book reviews. Unlike fandom, Goodreads reviewers tend to publish these reviews with their own name on an account that is linked to their friends and family members, and the reviews themselves typically contain minimal sensitive information.

Our goal is to balance protecting reviewer privacy with giving credit to reviewers for their work. To meet this goal, when choosing reviews to quote, we omit any that contain sensitive personal information. We then reach out to all quoted reviewers for permission and citation preferences. Unfortunately, many reviewers do not allow messaging; for this set of reviewers we quote their review and cite them by their username. For reviewers who we successfully contact, we have included their quote alongside their requested citation.

3.5 Topic modelling adaptation reviews

To find patterns in amateur adaptation criticism, we use Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) topic modelling, a probabilistic method that represents topics, also understood as themes, across a corpus (Antoniak 2021). This unsupervised method allows us to find

common trends in book reviews, without predetermined categories into which reviews can fall (e.g., “adaptation” or “horror”). This approach allows a range of subject matter and reviewing styles to be represented by the model. (We recommend Blei 2012 for an introduction to topic modelling.)

Before topic modelling, we preprocess reviews by removing named entities (such as people or book names), reviews shorter than 100 words, and a set of 30 stopwords, as well as replacing all numbers with a “NUM” token. We test the topic model at 50, 100, 150, and 200 topics. We use the 200-topic model due to its wide range of genres, numerous stylistic topics, and, most importantly, its inclusion of three clearly distinct adaptation topics. (All code for this project can be found at github.com/rosthalken/book-film-adaptation.) The model is validated by comparing each topic’s 20 most probable words with a close reading of the reviews in which that topic is most salient.

While the high number of topics means that the model separates adaptation reviews into three types, it also produces topics that are excessively specific to a small number of books. To remove these overly specific topics, we find and remove topics that have 20 or fewer unique books represented among the top 100 reviews. For example, topic 5, with highest probability words *characters, house, little, bleak, nell, novel, victor, pickwick, poor, prison, many, shop, victorian*, is dominated by reviews of books by Charles Dickens. Of the 200 total topics, 97 are dominated by 20 or fewer books. We remove these topics from analysis, since our object of study is adaptation and reviewing style rather than the subject matter of individual books. After reviewing the top 200 reviews for each of the remaining 103 topics, we provide summarized names for each topic to make them intuitive to a human reader. Of these topics, there are three adaptation topics: Adaptation Preferences and Opinions, Adaptation History and Criticism, and Adaptation Memories and Narratives (Table 2).

Topic #	Topic Name	Probability	Top Words	Top Books
Topic 35	Preferences and Opinions	0.12392	movie book read better seen much different movies story version watched made based like saw watch first good see film	<i>Forrest Gump</i> <i>Nothing Lasts Forever</i> <i>Shoeless Joe</i> <i>Sideways</i> <i>Who Censored Roger Rabbit?</i> <i>The Dark Fields</i> <i>The Princess Bride</i> <i>Jurassic Park</i> <i>Jaws</i> <i>Dances with Wolves</i>

(Contd.)

Topic #	Topic Name	Probability	Top Words	Top Books
Topic 43	History and Criticism	0.08194	film novel movie book adaptation version seen NUM films original made based see better screen starring well different much story	<i>Psycho</i> <i>Nothing Lasts Forever</i> <i>These Foolish Things</i> <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> <i>The Hellbound Heart</i> <i>Sideways</i> <i>Get Shorty</i> <i>Who Censored Roger Rabbit?</i> <i>Jaws</i>
Topic 80	Memories and Narratives	0.05405	movie read book movies series watch show watch- ing watched seen years never reading saw remember NUM see first since based	<i>MASH: A Novel About Three Army Doctors</i> <i>Pronto</i> <i>The Ghost and Mrs. Muir</i> <i>Red Dragon</i> <i>The Princess Diaries</i> <i>Being There</i> <i>Who Censored Roger Rabbit?</i> <i>The Bourne Identity</i> <i>Brokeback Mountain</i> <i>Cirque Du Freak</i>

Table 2: Adaptation topics and their probabilities, top words, and top books. Top books are identified by taking the average of all review's topic probabilities, by book.

4 Types of adaptation criticism

These three adaptation categories have distinct qualities, though they can and do co-occur in the same review. Topic 35, Preferences and Opinions, demonstrates a reader's subjective preferences, likes, and dislikes about an adaptation. Reviews with a high probability of topic 35 often discuss social rules of adaptation, describing whether the reviewer believes a book should be read first or whether books are reliably better than an adaptation. At the same time, these reviews reinforce the intertextual experience of adaptation (Raengo and Stam 2005; Cardwell 2018; Leitch 2017; Cutchins 2017). For example, one Goodreads user, *Mary*, reviews the adaptation *Being There* by recalling, "I found myself remembering the movie visuals while reading the conversations throughout the book."

Topic 43, History and Criticism, is written more formally than topic 35, and is replete with references to publishing and film history. Reviews with a high probability of this topic often include names of authors, directors, actors, and characters. Topic 43 differs from topic 35 in part by deemphasizing personal taste; a review with a high probability of topic 43 is generally more intent on making an evaluative claim about the underlying quality of a book or film. One reviewer, *Andrew Foxley*, provides an illustrative example in their review of *Diamonds Are Forever*:

It's a pity the filmmakers dispensed with so much of the book, as it's full of interesting elements—including the Spang brothers, the wild west ghost town Spectreville, and some of the ingenious methods used by the Spangled Mob to pay off their employees—which would have improved it considerably. As it is, it's classic Fleming in so many respects—glamorous locations, great set pieces and an array of interesting characters, all wrapped up in a highly gripping and enjoyable thriller.

This reviewer demonstrates their knowledge about what is “classic [Ian] Fleming” and assesses decisions made by filmmakers. They describe their disappointment in the film version of *Diamonds Are Forever*, but do so by evaluating specific filmmaking choices.

The third adaptation topic (#80), Memories and Narratives, contains nostalgic reviews that present long-term and layered narratives about how the reviewer has interacted with a work from source to adaptation. Many of these reviews present stories about repeatedly reading the book or watching the film, or the impact that the source or adaptation had on the reviewer's childhood. *Dr. Andy's (@foreverinastory)* review of *The Princess Bride* exemplifies topic 80:

Ugh the nostalgia. If you don't know what this book is about, shame on you go read it and then watch the movie 10,000 times! I love this story so, so much. I don't know when I first saw this movie, but it was a tangible part of my childhood just like Star Wars, or Dragon Tales. ... I loved the narrator of the audiobook, he reminded me so much of the actor who played the grandpa in the movie, who coincidentally narrates the story in the movie. It was perfect for this.

For this reviewer, the visuals of the film version of *The Princess Bride* have become inextricable from the audiobook; the reviewer visualizes actors from the film when listening to the book. The adaptation “evokes and is amplified by” the reviewer's experience of the original text (Brokenshire 2015). Topic 80's nostalgia recalls Linda Hutcheon's framing of a successful adaptation as a balance between “the comfort of ritual and recognition” and “the delight of surprise and novelty” as a reviewer re-experiences a familiar story in a new medium (Hutcheon 2006, 173).

4.1 Rules of adaptation reception

On close reading, we find two socially imposed rules for adaptation reception: 1) read the book before the movie, and 2) the book will be better than the movie. These rules are commonly held and socially perpetuated assumptions about adaptation that alter how people frame their adaptation reviews, especially in anticipation of an audience of fellow reviewers. Both rules suggest the continued belief that books (as the source of an adaptation) are essentially a higher and purer aesthetic form than film.

4.1.1 Rule 1: Read the book first

The first rule, that books should be read before watching their adapted counterpart(s), recommends how to curate the adaptation experience. By reading the book (the source) before watching the film (the adaptation), the reviewer follows the temporal creation of the works. The reader is thus able to experience the original story as intended by the author, and without the influence of the adaptation. Often, when reviewers mention this rule, they do so because they are uncertain about their audience's (fellow Goodreads users) opinion, suspecting that the audience might take issue with the timing of the reviewer's reading and viewing. One reviewer, *Alaina*, writes that they saw the adaptation of *Eragon* without realizing that it was also a book:

Lets just say I was completely devastated. WHERE DID MY CHILDHOOD GO WRONG?!?
 ... I'd much rather read the book before I see the movie (I don't know why but for some reason I'd rather compare the book to the movie than the movie to the book—if that makes sense?). HANDS DOWN the book is way better than the movie—which is a no brainer.

Another reviewer, *JoDean*, writes that they read *Johnny Tremain* to their children because they want to see the film adaptation and “[they] have a rule that if a movie is based on a book, [they] read the book before watching the movie.” Yet another reviewer, *Stephanie*, self-describes as “a reader before movie-goer.” These reviews demonstrate an awareness and perpetuation of cultural beliefs about adaptation precedence, curating the reading of a book prior to the watching of a film.

4.1.2 Rule 2: The book is better

The second normative rule of adaptation reception is that the book will always be better than the movie. This rule is loaded with assumptions about the aesthetic hierarchy between books and films. Reviewer *Stephanie* prefers a film adaptation of *Wonder Boys*, writing, “what I'm about to write seems sacrilegious, but ... I actually liked the movie version of this better than the book—because the organization was tighter and the

characters more vivid.” When the reviewer prefers the film to book, they describe it as surprising, and a “rare occasion” or one of “very few instances.” One reviewer, *Franz*, entirely opposes an intertextual adaptation experience: “I don’t regret having read the book, and in some ways liked it better than the movie, but I think I will stick to my self-imposed rule of not reading and watching the same story.” These reviews sometimes play with these set rules, as reviewer *Anthony* states, “Okay—it hurts me to say this, because really, it’s not how I usually approach these things, but I think the film was better than the book. *glances behind to check if karma is about to crap on me from a great height*.” Rules about adaptation shape how adaptation is experienced and how reviewers frame their opinions in book reviews. Reviewing adaptations comes with baggage about curating the correct adaptation experience and expecting books to be the superior aesthetic object.

4.2 Fidelity criticism in adaptation reviews

While these rules may guide how a reviewer frames an adaptation review, reviewers use fidelity criticism to justify their evaluations of source book and adapted film. Fidelity criticism has historically been derided by adaptation studies, at least partly due to its proximity to amateur reviewing. Fidelity criticism is extremely common in Goodreads adaptation reviews (Table 3), but it is used in ways that are complex, playful, opinionated, and often driven by textual evidence. Reading adaptation reviews, we find four primary types of fidelity criticism in amateur reviews: 1) fidelity to characters, 2) plot structure, 3) political correctness and amended bias, and, perhaps most elusively, 4) fidelity to the spirit of a work. To disambiguate the four types of fidelity criticism, we find reviews with a high probability of both an adaptation topic and another topic for each of the classes of fidelity criticism. We rank the reviews based on the minimum topic probability out of any adaptation topic and a fidelity topic ($\text{minimum}(\text{adaptation topic}, \text{fidelity topic})$). Of the reviews with the highest probability of both adaptation and fidelity topics, we perform close reading to determine how reviewers engage in specific forms of fidelity criticism.

4.2.1 Characters

Fidelity criticism about characters analyzes differences between character descriptions, including growth, personality, and physical characteristics. While the topic model results in an assortment of character topics—about heroes and heroines, character development, or moral critiques of characters—the topic that most consistently performs a fidelity critique of characters is topic 124: Character Descriptions, about physical characteristics like hair colour, complexion, eye colour, height, etc. (Table 4).

Fidelity critique	Percentage of reviews with critique (hand labelled out of 200 reviews)
Overall	80%
Characters	35%
Plot structure	37%
Political correctness and bias (gender)	3%
Spirit (horror)	18%

Table 3: Percentage of adaptation reviews that include fidelity criticism overall and by category. Number of reviews identified by hand-labelling the reviews with the highest probability of any adaptation topic.

Topic	Topic Probability	Top Words	Top Books
124: Character Descriptions	0.068	like hair little eyes old black red white one face look name head blue eye hands good fat every small	<i>Mary Poppins</i> <i>The 101 Dalmatians</i> <i>The Devil Wears Prada</i> <i>Forrest Gump</i> <i>Charlie and the Chocolate Factory</i> <i>The Wonderful Wizard of Oz</i> <i>The Maltese Falcon</i> <i>The Ghost and Mrs. Muir</i> <i>Psycho</i> <i>The Princess Bride</i>

Table 4: Character description topic's top words and books. Top books are identified by taking the average of all reviews' topic probabilities, by book.

Reviews with a high probability of both adaptation and character description compare the physical descriptions of the characters to the actor chosen to play them, often with direct quotes from the book. Robert Bloch's *Psycho* is the target of many of these reviews, as readers contrast Norman Bates in the book with Norman Bates played by Anthony Perkins. Many, but not all, reviewers critique the adaptation for miscasting, but some reviewers simply point out differences, like reviewer *Shan*, who notes that "in the book Norman was ... completely opposite from Norman the Movie." Other reviewers even appreciate the differences in casting: *Muhammed* writes that "Norman Bates in the novel is described as being in his 40s, plump, with glasses and thinning hair. It was a stroke of genius, therefore, to cast the debonaire and shy looking

Anthony Perkins—the cute, innocent boy next door.” While this reviewer might use fidelity criticism as a reviewing mode, they have taken a distinct critical stance.

4.2.2 Plot and structure

A second type of fidelity criticism occurs when a reviewer discusses changes made to structural elements of the plot: whether the sequence of events in the book occurred in the same order and at the same degree of specificity between the two works. Topic 70 (Table 5) describes both structure and pacing, often about the beginning and end of a book or film. Reviews with a high probability of topic 70 and the adaptation topics discuss how closely the book and the movie align, pointing to moments when the two diverge. Many of these reviews prefer the book and film to have a one-to-one connection, where each scene in the book matches a scene in the film. This type of reviewer likely sees the role of the adaptation as making the characters and story come alive. One reviewer, *Kevin*, even puts a percentage on how similar the book and film version of *Enemy Mine* are:

To start with, I’m actually a little surprised at how similar the film and the book are. Up to a certain point (about 75%), the book and the film follow almost exactly. Happily, the book does go deeper into Drac society and culture, though there is a bit less action. It naturally takes a little longer to get to it, but there is some brilliant character building and some incredible character moments. ... I felt that the end dragged on and did too much summarizing, but for all that, in some ways it ended up being stronger and more emotional than the ending presented in the film.

Topic	Topic Probability	Top Words	Top Books
Topic 70: Structure	0.10465	book first story slow end bit half interesting little pages action ending found NUM last quite good however chapters beginning	<i>Nothing Lasts Forever</i> <i>The Dark Fields</i> <i>Jaws</i> <i>The Children of Men</i> <i>Audition</i> <i>Jurassic Park</i> <i>The Bourne Identity</i> <i>The Neverending Story</i> <i>Bid Time Return (aka Somewhere in Time)</i> <i>All You Need is Kill</i>

Table 5: Structure topic’s top words and books. Top books are identified by taking the average of all review’s topic probabilities, by book.

Some reviewers assume that if a book and film share enough similarity, simply reading or watching one is enough. *Lukas's* review of *Election* states that “If you wished to read this book after seeing the movie, I can honestly say that there is no need. The movie captures everything in the book and actually improves on it somewhat, the only difference to them is a slight change to the ending.” This reviewer finds the book and film to be so closely matched that there’s no longer a reason to engage with them as separate objects. Similarly, while reviewing *Fear and Trembling*, reviewer *Jessica* states:

After watching the movie, I googled the film, and found out about this writer and her books. I ordered this one, and it’s good. What was most remarkable, however, is the fidelity of the film adaptation. I almost NEVER say this, but I don’t really think you need to read the book if you see the film. And the film shows the beauty the narrator Amelie tries to present to us much more clearly. So, hey, read the book, watch the film—or the other way around. Worth your while.

This review hints at the significance of a medium’s specific affordances for representation; the film shows the beauty that the book’s narrator can only describe.

4.2.3 Political correctness and amended bias

Recent adaptations of older texts are especially likely to dispose of anachronistic materials, including racist or sexist depictions of characters, to make the story palatable and socially relevant to a contemporary audience (Brokenshire 2015). Fidelity criticism of biased representations inverts how fidelity criticism typically frames change in a negative light. Reviewers laud changes made to an outdated source. To find this type of fidelity criticism, we identify topics that discuss bias or stereotypes. For example, the gender and adaptation topics use fidelity criticism to assess amendments of biased stereotypes of women in books and movies (Table 6). Reviews with the highest amount of gender criticism and adaptation topics use fidelity criticism to point out changes to sexist or one-dimensional representations of women in books. One review of *The Witches of Eastwick*, by *Susan*, acknowledges that they “almost never say this” but they preferred the movie to the book because “revisions made to the characters and the plot ... make the female characters more believable.” Similarly, another reviewer, *J.D. Hanning*, discusses *Somewhere in Time* as one of their favourite films, because “it is a sweet love story with a strong female lead.” They say that they probably wouldn’t have finished the book without already knowing the movie, because “[t]he book version of the female character depicts her as overly meek and naive. The male character comes across as a creepy stalker rather than a smitten admirer.” These reviews demonstrate that reviewers don’t simply assume that change is bad. Instead, it can give an outdated or problematic story relevance to a contemporary audience.

Topic	Topic Probability	Top Words	Top Books
44: Gender	0.056	women men woman female male man sex feminist sexual wives gender NUMs wife husband strong group rape time girls misogyny	<i>The Stepford Wives</i> <i>The Witches of Eastwick</i> <i>The Group</i> <i>Terms of Endearment</i> <i>Disclosure</i> <i>The 101 Dalmatians</i> <i>Sideways</i> <i>The African Queen</i> <i>The Children of Men</i> <i>Laura</i>

Table 6: Gender topic's top words and books. Top books are identified by taking the average of all review's topic probabilities, by book.

4.2.4 Spirit and essence

Fidelity criticism about the essence or spirit of a work makes the number of specific changes to characters, plot, and historical details virtually irrelevant. Instead, fidelity to the spirit describes an affective state that is shared across the experiences of reading and viewership. For example, one reviewer of *Emma* writes:

It was very fun finding the parallels between the original source material and CLUELESS, and I have to say that of all the adaptations I've seen (that along with the Paltrow version, and the BBC 2009 version), [*Clueless*] captures the essence of the book the best. It is just fun and sweet and very, very cute, while being biting about classism and sexism.

Clueless's encapsulation of *Emma* (and the eponymous heroine) strongly exemplifies how setting, characters, and plot can be vastly different, yet the spirit and emotion of a work might remain the same. While fidelity critique of plot, characters, and bias could be identified with consistent secondary topics, regardless of book subject matter, fidelity criticism of the work's spirit is more specific to a given story and the affective state it creates. As an exemplary case of fidelity to the spirit, we use an acutely atmospheric topic, Suspense and Horror (topic 111) (Table 7). These reviews are particular to the traits of horror and suspense, but they demonstrate one way in which reviewers critique and compare their own affective response to an adaptation and its source. Reviews that discuss suspense and adaptation compare how the film and book instill a suspenseful or fearful feeling in the reviewer. These reviews might

note other changes made in the film’s structure, characters, and plot points, but their focus is a comparison between the atmospheres created in book and film. A review of *The Day of the Triffids* by *Renan* simply describes a film adaptation as “faithful” to the book, but foregrounds emotional states when explaining why:

Sometime in the ‘80s I watched (AE) a BBC movie version extremely faithful to the book. I got a DVD of it at the end of 2007. Again, the sheer power of the imagery, the vividness of the disaster, the terror produced by the stalking triffids was all there.

Topic	Topic Probability	Top Words	Top Books
Topic 111: Suspense and Horror	0.092	dark one yet even tale almost novel sense ever never moments heart feel quite reader still disturbing feeling despite horror	<i>Psycho</i> <i>The Hellbound Heart</i> <i>Audition</i> <i>Nightmare Alley</i> <i>Strangers on a Train</i> <i>Black Narcissus</i> <i>They Shoot Horses, Don't They?</i> <i>Invasion of the Body Snatchers</i> <i>Let the Right One In</i> <i>No Country for Old Men</i>

Table 7: Suspense topic’s top words and books. Top books are identified by taking the average of all reviews’ topic probabilities, by book.

Other reviews discuss an intensification of the emotional experience in the book or film, like a review of *The Adventures of Pinocchio* by *Joshua* that describes how the book version “ratchets up the creepiness and, frankly, the hard-nosed bleakness quite a bit more, by comparison.” Some even qualify their recommendation of the film with the differences in emotion. *James*’s review of *The Road* states: “this is a very good film which is largely faithful to the book, well-acted and directed—however it does lack the same sense of emotional intensity as the novel.” While fidelity to the spirit could encompass a romantic, hopeful, or lighthearted spirit, the efficacy of the suspense topic at drawing out fidelity to the spirit also shows how emotion is vital for suspenseful or terrifying stories. A person’s relationship to suspenseful or thrilling media is inextricably related to the affective experience of anticipation, fear, excitement, and horror.

5 Conclusion

Our computational analysis of 151,100 Goodreads adaptation reviews demonstrates how strongly adaptation affects the amateur book review. The presence of three cohesive adaptation topics—the subjective, the critical, and the nostalgic—shows that adaptation reviewing is common but not monolithic. Goodreads adaptation reviewers are cognizant of cultural rules around the reception of adaptation, often remarking that the book should be read before the film or that books are better than their adaptations. Yet even when reviewers acknowledge the existence of an adaptation rule, they allow their own experiences to break it. These social rules around adaptation may mediate how a reviewer shares their experience to their imagined Goodreads audience, but these rules are not deterministic. Last, we find that fidelity criticism, an oft-dismissed critical mode, helps reviewers make comparisons between a book and film’s concrete elements, like the plot structure and pacing or character personalities, to more abstract meditations about bias and affect. Fidelity criticism is an elemental tool for reviewers to ground assessment in book and film details, to justify their evaluation of a work.

Our work is an initial examination of amateur adaptation reviews, but these culturally significant reviews deserve more attention. We study adaptation reviews on Goodreads, but an analogous project could assess adaptation reviews on a platform for films, like Letterboxd. Adding more examples of amateur adaptation reviews clarifies which findings are distinct to Goodreads and book reviewing, and which extend across adaptation reviewing, regardless of platform or medium. Amateur adaptation reviews have the potential to shape what is read and watched, how it is understood, and how it is recommended to family, friends, and unknown and unlimited audiences. These reviews enter at the nexus of book and film industries and are uniquely rich with information about how people feel, navigate, and share adaptation.

Additional File

The additional file for this article can be found as follows:

- **Appendix.** Topic Model Names, Probabilities, and Top Words. <https://doi.org/10.16995/dscn.9671.s1>

Competing interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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Data Curation: RT
Formal Analysis: RT
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Software: RT
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