

From Lost to Found to Lost on the Silver Screen

In today's fast paced society, screen time overrules page time and audiences often opt to watch rather than to read stories. When a story is condensed to footage and audio, many details are sacrificed or exaggerated in variations that alter the effects of the original written works. While many films portray true to life stories, one might argue that it is not possible for a film to measure up to a full-length book. This is the case for Cheryl Strayed's *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*.

Recently, readers have taken a special interest in memoir. Committing to writing memoir restricts the author to certain guidelines. Theorists like Lejeune have written definitions to solidify the guidelines of writing autobiography. For example Lejeune's, "The Autobiographical Pact" facilitates the reader's deepest understanding of the elements of autobiography and memoir through a very straightforward list of qualifications. Regardless of which memoir theorists you research, many of the definitions out there are unanimous about specific details. For example, claiming a story as memoir implies that the account is accurate. There are many similarities between creative fiction and memoir such as figurative language, dialogue, and flashbacks, but the genres are distinctly different.

Memoir is rooted in the idea that the story is crafted based on the facts. Memoir is written in first person and the narrator is the author. Borrowing techniques from other life writing forms such as journalism, memoirs often include interviews, lists, and research. Strayed says in an interview featured on her personal website that memoir requires incorporating memories as a source of inspiration into a clear dramatic

structure (cherylstrayed.com). Writing a memoir facilitates the author's ability to reflect on and better understand the past.

A successful memoir does not simply tell what happened but instead pushes the story one step further by exposing what effect those events led the narrator to understand. A memoir, though often reads like a diary or journal, is written for an audience. Considering these qualifications, it is obvious that Strayed's book *Wild* is a memoir. However, since the book has been reimagined to fit the silver screen, I contemplate whether to attribute the film with a similar genre description. The film is better defined as a biopic. I am interested in understanding what is lost in the translation from memoir to feature film.

In March of 2012 Alfred A. Knopf published Strayed's memoir *Wild*. The story has since been translated into more than thirty languages. The book was a success, reaching No. 1 on the *New York Times* Best Seller list in hardcover non-fiction for seven consecutive weeks beginning in July of 2012. In June 2012, Oprah Winfrey began a new book club called Oprah's Book Club 2.0. Oprah announced *Wild* as her first selection for the new club. The announcement sparked huge interest in the book and *Wild* sold over 11,000 copies, a 220% jump in sales during the week of Oprah's announcement. Now at least 1.3 million copies of Strayed's memoir have been sold. According to Paul Bogaards, "e-book sales of *Wild* were triple the total print number," (Publishers Weekly). After 12 trips to press, *Wild* has 225,000 copies in print, including 100,000 embellished with the Oprah seal. With such successful sales it is obvious why the book has been transformed into a biopic.

Prior to publication Reese Witherspoon read *Wild* and optioned it for film with producer Bruna Papandrea for their production company, Pacific Standard. Soon after the book's success it was adapted for the screen by Nick Hornby and transformed into a feature film. In an interview Strayed says, "I really can't think of a writer I respect more than Nick," (Extras: Making Wild). The screenplay drastically alters the real account written by Strayed to better suit a movie audience. In October 2013, the film went into production with Witherspoon in the lead. The film adaptation of *Wild* was released on December 3, 2014.

In interviews it is clear that Witherspoon believes that the film adaptation captures the essence of Strayed's writing. However, I urge viewers not to confuse the film with memoir. Instead I consider the film a biopic, "Many feature films today are either documentaries or biopics- which is to say, they are forms of life writing. The distinction between documentary and biopic is parallel to that between memoir and biography: documentary and memoir both require direct access to the subject, but biography and biopic do not," (Couser 29). I would argue that the film adaptation of *Wild* presents itself as memoir or documentary although it is in truth a biopic. A lot of the story line has been condensed, rearranged and altered to appeal to movie audiences. The DVD sleeve describes the film as an, "inspirational true story," (20th Century Fox). Although the screenplay was written based on Strayed's memoir, to attach the idealistic terms "true story" to the adaptation threatens viewers' perception of Strayed's personal identity. Due to the discrepancies between each presentation of

her story the character Cheryl Strayed is understood much differently having read the memoir versus watching the film adaptation.

It is important to consider the context of Strayed's story in relation to her identity prior to publishing *Wild*. We should consider Couser's explanation, "What determines the classification of a given memoir is simply whether its author is known before its publication or becomes known only through its publication," (Couser 144). Considering Strayed's own popularity before publishing *Wild* it is evident that the memoir has gained her the spotlight. "Unlike the somebody memoir, a nobody memoir has to earn its readers the old-fashioned way: on its own merits. The nobody memoir must either offer an extraordinary story or be an engaging read, a "page-turner." Word of mouth recommendations may be as important as reviews in promoting these narratives," (Couser 145). Strayed's memoir is both a "page-turner" and an extraordinary story. The recommendation by Oprah also helped to boost sales for Strayed. All of these factors are important in contextualizing the story. Without Oprah's recommendation it is possible that Strayed's memoir would have been swept aside until the release of the feature film. It is possible that without book sales Witherspoon would have lost interest in the idea of creating a full length film based on the memoir altogether. Oprah's recommendation certainly supported Strayed's success.

Reading the book it seems like Strayed was writing chapters throughout her journey along the trail. However, researching her process it becomes apparent that the book was written long after she finished traveling the Pacific Crest Trail. Strayed responds to the question of why she waited to write *Wild*, "I didn't wait. I wrote *Wild* as

soon as it occurred to me to do so. *Wild* is not in the 'I did an interesting thing so I wrote a book about it' genre. It's a literary memoir. I didn't write *Wild* because I took a hike; I wrote *Wild* because I'm a writer. By which I mean until I had something to say about the experience, I didn't have any reason to write about it. After I completed my hike on the PCT the story I most urgently had to tell was the one I told in my first book, *Torch*," (CherylStrayed.com). *Torch* is a novel about a family's response to the tragic loss of their mother. Although there is an overlapping event in *Wild* and *Torch* in terms of losing a mother to cancer, the stories are different genres and *Wild* remains the more successful book. Understanding the time frame and angle from which Strayed approached *Wild* better informs the reader about the context of her story.

In interviews Strayed describes the work of a memoir. Many times her analysis sounds similar Eakin's *Living Autobiographically* such as when he says, "Talking about ourselves involves a lot more than self-indulgence; when we do it, we perform a work of self-construction," (Eakin 2). Strayed mentions that it was years after her journey down the PCT that she finally felt compelled to write about the experience. Through the process of writing down her experience she unearthed portions of her identity that she would not have recognized otherwise. Eakin explains the process of writing memoir as, "an extremely close and dynamic relation between narrative and identity, for narrative is not only a literary form but part of the fabric of our lived experience. When it comes to our identities, narrative is not merely *about* self, but is rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* self," (Eakin 2). Recognizing the implications of writing a memoir it is

necessary to evaluate the effect that transforming the book into a film might have on the identity of the author.

The film adaptation does not accurately summarize the lived experiences of Strayed and it is crucial to consider this while interpreting the film. Due to the accessibility of watching film it is likely there are more people who have watched Strayed's journey as depicted in the movie than those who have read her story first hand. This being so, it is imperative to consider the misconceptions that the more general audience has gained regarding Strayed's experience. The final interpretation of *Wild* differs whether one is reading or watching the story. For me the book held far more of a positive impact on my own life. The deep insight and vivid storytelling by Strayed is diminished when transformed into a film. The memoir is told through Strayed's voice and allows the reader access into her deepest thoughts. Strayed shares her most shameful moments and does not hold back from cursing God or ranting about her family. In the film there is very little voice over. Basically the only time we get to hear Strayed's thoughts in the film is in the end as she approaches the Bridge of the Gods. This affects the closeness that the audience feels with Strayed. While reading the book it is like Strayed is sitting with you having a cup of coffee and sharing a life story whereas watching the movie makes you feel more disconnected from her character. The intimate relationship between Strayed and the reader allows a bond to grow that doesn't exist between Strayed and the film viewer who becomes an outsider looking in.

The Author's Note in the very beginning of *Wild* explains that Strayed did use her personal journals as well as researched facts when she could during the process of

writing her memoir. She says that she contacted several of the characters that appear in the book to gather more information to include in her story. She says she relies heavily on her memory, recalling the events of that time of her life. In an interview Strayed says, “I’ve always been able to remember tiny facts—the name of someone’s mother mentioned in passing, birthdays, the thing we were eating when we had that conversation. It’s unsettling to some” (*Vanity Fair*). While watching the movie rendition of her story I found that many of these details are lost. Strayed’s attention to vivid descriptions is often replaced with flashing images. Sometimes the film uses flashbacks that are filmed in ways that complicate the story. In the memoir these scenes based on memories help Strayed to better understand the implications of the events and how they factor into her personal story. The film uses these scenes to tell the story through a mysterious angle.

In the opening scene of the film adaptation the first frame opens to a view of the forest, looking down from the peak of a mountain. The first sound is very heavy and sexualized breathing from Witherspoon. After nearly 20 seconds a hand places a boot down on the dirt. Then we see Witherspoon. This scene begins the story with intent to captivate the audience through sexual cues. By the end of the first scene the audience is bombarded with flashing images of two people having sex, a dictionary definition of ‘strayed’, a man’s fist pressing to a little girl’s face, a bloody forehead, a fox, Strayed’s mother’s face, and burning books before the opening credits roll. Reflecting on the opening scene now after having read the book it is obvious that the implications of this structure reduce the impact of reading Strayed’s own account of the trip. The flashing

images do not offer connections between the visuals and their significance to Strayed. In the book, each of these images hold a backstory that helps to weave together Strayed's life before and during her hike on the PCT. I think having read the book this scene is interesting, but without the context for each of the visuals it is just confusing and overwhelming. It creates a sense of terror in the viewer rather than a sense of identity as it does when Strayed describes the significance of these moments throughout her memoir.

In an analysis titled *Film As Social Practice*, a section called The Universality of Story says, "Feature films are narratives— they tell stories. Even films based on true events will fictionalize them in order to produce drama, to telescope time, to avoid being filled up with too many minor characters, or simply to be more entertaining," (Turner 78). It is very interesting to consider this fact when reading the opening words in Strayed's memoir. The prologue goes on to explain that while some characters are renamed in the memoir it is only to protect the anonymity of those she writes about. She explains specifically that there are no composite characters or events in the book but that some people and events have been omitted when the omission has no impact on the truth of the story. When watching the film it is evident that Greg is a composite character constructed out of a few characters Strayed describes in the memoir. The film is also guilty of reassigning lines to characters that did not actually speak the words in the memoir. Specifically, Strayed named her backpack "Monster" but in the film it is Greg who names it.

In a 2012 interview, Strayed explains, “When I read the script, if I see that there are elements that are indeed fictional, how will we address that? I do think that I would only feel comfortable if somehow the audience were made aware of that- that some things were altered for the film because of course I think that a lot of people will be watching it as if it’s the story of this hike that I actually took,” (George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight). Although she made this claim before the film was made, there are no indications in the film that the content veers from the true story of Strayed’s hike.

In the same interview Strayed attempts to answer the question of whether she stayed honest while writing her experience on the PCT. Strayed says, “There is this conundrum where I can tell you very truly that I tried really hard to not only tell the truth in terms of the facts, fact checking what I could, but also really searching my soul. What is the true story of this experience for me? And I took that really seriously. There’s nothing in the book that I decided to make up because it sounded better to do this versus that.” This information gives the reader an indication that the memoir is as truthful as Strayed could write it. “I wrote that with a great amount of compassion for the others I was writing about. You know? Would my brother tell a slightly different story, or my sister, or anyone in the book? Probably,” (George Stroumboulopoulos Tonight). The idea that she is sharing her own truth is crucial in understanding memoir. While she admits that other members of her family may remember differently, it is not her intent to deceive the reader. This interview happened before Strayed ever read the script of the film and I think it reflects the approach many authors take to writing

memoir. It expresses the potential for discrepancies while explaining the intent to remain truthful.

Early in the prologue of *Wild*, Strayed writes, “I’d come to know that anything could happen and that everything would. But that doesn’t mean I wasn’t shocked when it did.” In the very first paragraph of the memoir she foreshadows the many struggles to come, a different experience from watching the opening scene of the biopic. Truthfully, I watched the movie before reading the book. I do not sense that this has had any effect on my understanding of the two stories individually because of their vast differences. That being said, I recall when I first watched the opening scene of *Wild* I was less empathetic towards the Reese Witherspoon Strayed than when reading Strayed’s words. Reading a memoir, the words put on the page by the narrator and character herself, offers a significantly deeper account of Strayed’s time on the trail. Particularly the movie lacks insight and reflection. The movie is an outside perspective watching the journey where as reading *Wild* allows for you to experience the trek with Strayed by giving access to her deepest thoughts. I believe that this transition from memoir to film is representative of most books that are reimagined as feature films. It has been my experience that even when I like a movie based on the book, the book always offers deeper insights. Written words allow for more vivid details, intricately interwoven themes, symbols and revelations throughout the piece.

One particular portion of the film that confused the actual events described in Strayed’s memoir is her time in college. In her memoir she explains that her acceptance letter to college announced that parents of students could attend classes for free. Her

mother, Bobbi, did decide to go to school along with Cheryl. In the film adaptation it is confusing because the introduction of Bobbi happens as Cheryl walks past her in the hallway of their shared college and Cheryl calls out, "Bobbi." The context of the book explains how Bobbi told her children it was fine to call her by her first name but without that information the movie makes it difficult to understand the relationship between Bobbi and Cheryl right away. Eventually there is a scene when they are both at home working on homework and discussing books they are reading, but I found this to be a delayed explanation intended to initially confuse the audience for dramatic appeal. This is just one instance where the film complicates things that are presented clearly to you in Strayed's memoir.

In the film Strayed is very angry about her mother's illness. When reading the memoir you get a much more extensive account of the ways Cheryl felt as her mother fell sick. For example, she describes the necessity to feel as though she had been the best daughter, and when her mother doesn't come out and say it she even asks. While her mother confirms this Strayed writes, "But this was not enough. I wanted those words to knit together in my mother's mind and for them to be delivered, fresh, to me. I was ravenous for love," (Strayed 23). The emotions conveyed through written word are far more compelling to the audience than the interpretations we draw from watching a film. In this way many times the film fell short of portraying the full scope of emotions Strayed experienced during various events of her life.

One scene I think the film captures well is the moment in the hotel room where Strayed was unable to lift her backpack. In many interviews Strayed explains how when

she finally put together her backpack she was not able to lift it even an inch. In the book she says, “It was exactly like attempting to lift a Volkswagen Beetle. It looked so cute, so ready to be lifted—and yet it was impossible to do,” (Strayed 42). In the film Witherspoon makes long exaggerated attempts to lift the pack and eventually lies on the floor with it crushing her. She musters the strength to lift up on her hands and knees then finally stands. The scene portrays the shakiness of Strayed’s legs and the immense difficulty of lifting Monster. It was a realistic translation of that section of the memoir to the big screen.

Strayed’s interactions with heroin are displayed much differently in her written memoir than the film. The film creates a very dark and hopeless image of Strayed when she is using. It depicts the drug use as very gloomy and apathetic. The brief scenes of Strayed shooting up in the film are shot in very dim lighting in an unkempt apartment with a bed on the floor. Strayed is lying around in a t-shirt and underwear when the shot zooms in on her leg with a rubber band tied around and a man’s hands injecting her with a needle. In her memoir, Strayed explains the first time she shot heroin. “It was like something inordinately beautiful and out of this world. Like I’d found an actual planet that I didn’t know had been there all along. Planet Heroin. The place where there was no pain” (Strayed 53). This personal reflection offers the audience an in depth understanding of how Strayed experienced heroin rather than the exterior gloom depicted in the film. While the film’s portrayal offers truth, it does not give a full scope of Strayed’s experience with the drug.

One relationship that differs from her memoir to the film is that with her ex-husband Paul. In the film Strayed calls Paul in the motel before she starts the hike, she calls him at different stops and he writes her often. In her memoir she does not call Paul before her trek. She doesn't actually use his address when asked to write one down to rent a room. Instead there are many times in the book where Strayed explains how she has realized that it is time to stop bothering Paul. In the book she comments at times about wishing that Paul wrote her more. She was very conflicted and eventually decides to let go because now that they are divorced it isn't right to continue holding on. This was clearly a way to incorporate a romantic angle into the film but I think it often makes the Witherspoon version of Strayed appear to be weak, while the book gives the impression that Strayed is a strong willed and logical independent woman.

On the last day of shooting for the film, Strayed returned for the first time to the place where she began her hike in 1995. She made a cameo as the driver who drops off a younger version of herself, as she sets off for the P.C.T. (*Vanity Fair*). Strayed and her entire family appear in the film. In this way the production of the movie allowed for Cheryl to bring her experience hiking full circle. She began the journey as a solo hiker and eventually wrote the memoir. At the time she probably never imagined it would be adapted as a feature film that she and her whole family would act in. The creation of the film probably allowed Strayed a sense of closure in terms of connecting her early life experience with her recent life as a mother and wife.

Although I see that creating a film based on her memoir has been a very successful venture and beneficial journey for Strayed, as well as her family, I found in my

research that we must be careful with our interpretations of film adaptations. Although the movie is based on the book it is in many ways quite different. The audience must understand this so that they do not misinterpret Strayed for the character Witherspoon depicts. Although there are extreme similarities, the Witherspoon version of Strayed left me feeling much differently than Strayed's detailed memoir. Perhaps this is due to the alternative point of view through which the story is told, first person in the memoir and third person in the film.

In the film *Extras* there are many interviews where Strayed, Witherspoon and director Jean-Marc Vallée reflect on the process of transforming the memoir into a film. Strayed says, "I from the outset trusted them to bring this story to life with integrity," (*Extras: Bringing the Book into the Wild*). She describes how she and Reese spent a lot of time together discussing the role and their own lives. Strayed explains, "I think when you're playing somebody else you have to make it your own," (*Extras: Reese Witherspoon in the Wild*). I believe in this quote Strayed implies that Witherspoon's portrayal was never going to emulate the true experience Strayed underwent. Witherspoon's challenge as an actress in *Wild* was to recreate the journey in a way that would capture the depth of the experiences of Strayed's own hike. Her challenge was to represent the complexity of unearthing answers to life's questions such as, "Why did my mother pass away young?" and "What if heroin taught me something?" during hard times in solitude.

Witherspoon read the book before it was released to the public and found herself compelled to create the film. She says in an interview, "I hope the film

transforms people and heals people in the same way I think the book has,” (Extras: Bringing the Book into the Wild). In the same interview she explains, “Jean-Marc and I wanted to make sure that we capture every element of her journey- just how difficult it was, how inspiring it was, how beautiful it was.” I think that the interviews seem too promotional. The content of the interviews all portray the film as a success and do not make any comparisons between the memoir and the film that suggest discrepancies between the stories. Clearly as a producer and star of the film, Witherspoon has nothing but positive things to say about the final outcome of the adaptation, but I believe that there are portions of the memoir that can only be explained through written word. The two mediums of story telling have separate limitations making it impossible to capture a truly accurate translation from one form to the other and I had hoped that in interviews Witherspoon would validate that by discussing it.

Analyzing the film in comparison to the written memoir did not lead me to believe that books should not be translated to film. I believe it is valuable for artists to reimagine stories through various mediums. Instead, contrasting the effects that these mediums had on Strayed’s story and the portrayal of her character has taught me to understand the medium through which you are learning another’s story. The memoir is an honest, raw and very intimate account directly from Strayed whereas the film is filtered through the director, producers and actors. Although their interpretation of *Wild* is not wrong, there are inaccuracies when telling the story through film. What is important to understand is that film, unless documentary, cannot be viewed as memoir. I recommend both the film and the book *Wild*. I encourage readers and viewers to

recognize the limitations of each medium and to only believe Strayed's own words as the truth about her life.

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