



Hello, and welcome to the first of New Writing North's ADAPT series of webinars, aimed at writers who are taking their first steps towards adapting work for the screen.

I'm Alistair Owen, and I'm the author of the Creative Essentials book *The Art of Screen Adaptation* – in-depth interviews with twelve leading British screenwriters about the challenges and pleasures of reimagining fiction, non-fiction and stage plays for film and TV, in the UK and in Hollywood.

I'm also a screenwriter myself: I've written original and adapted screenplays, I've written on spec and to commission, I've written solo and in collaboration with other screenwriters. One day, I might even get something made – which I'm sure would please my agent enormously.

I'll be drawing on all that experience today – the screenwriters I've interviewed, the screenplays I've written, and the things I've learned from them – to look at the fundamentals of screen adaptation, providing a broad overview of the adaptation process and exploring the different approaches to it.

I'll also be plagiarising a few paragraphs from my introduction to *The Art of Screen Adaptation*, so apologies to anyone who's already read it!

What I *won't* be doing today is telling you *how* to adapt. There are as many techniques for adaptation as there are things being adapted and screenwriters adapting them. Every project is different. Every writer is different. What works for one might not work for another. One size does not fit all. So, beware of people telling you that this is *the* way to do it. More likely, it's just *their* way.

What I also won't be doing today is telling you how to write a screenplay. I'm going to assume that you either already know that or are planning to find out. I've never taken any screenwriting courses, and I haven't read many screenwriting manuals. I've simply read a lot of screenplays, and watched a lot of movies and TV shows – some of which, mostly British, I'll be using as examples as we go.

Mainly, though, I taught myself to write by writing – which is, of course, the best way to learn. And it was partly through writing adaptations, initially on spec and for

my own pleasure, that I taught myself the basics of screenwriting: story and character, plot and subplot, theme and tone and genre.

You may want to adapt your own work for the screen, you may want to adapt the work of others. You may want to adapt plays, novels, short stories, even true stories. But whatever kinds of stories you want to adapt, this series of webinars aims to give you the wherewithal to go out and do it.

Let's start, then, as stories traditionally do, at the beginning.

Adaptation has been around as long as drama. The Greeks adapted their myths, and the Romans adapted the Greeks. Shakespeare adapted anything he could get his hands on – as fans of *Upstart Crow* will know – and composers, playwrights, filmmakers and novelists have adapted Shakespeare.

The Bard was first filmed in 1899, a record of part of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree's stage production of *King John*. He was pipped to the post by Dickens – twice – with short versions of scenes from *Oliver Twist: The Death of Nancy Sykes* in 1897 and *Mr Bumble the Beadle* in 1898.

But the first screen adaptation of any kind came barely a year after the Lumière brothers' screenings in Paris which marked the birth of cinema: a 45-second scene from the Garden Centre Theatre New York adaptation of George Du Maurier's novel *Trilby* – published 1894, staged 1895, filmed 1896.

It's also strange to think that Thomas Hardy lived long enough to see not one but two silent film adaptations of his 1891 novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, the first in 1913, the second in 1924 – both made in America, both now believed lost.

Flash forward 100 years, and adaptation remains a mainstay of the screen trade. Novels, short stories, graphic novels, non-fiction books, newspaper and magazine articles, documentaries and stage plays: all these and more are plundered for screen material. Old films are remade; foreign-language films are reinterpreted; feature films are expanded into TV series and TV series compressed into feature films; screen dramas are transformed into stage musicals which then morph back into movie musicals.

And with the growth of Sky, Netflix, Apple, Amazon and the rest, the hunger for 'content', and intellectual property – 'IP' – to feed that content, is now greater than ever. Yet despite the popularity of screen adaptation, comparatively little has been written about it, certainly from the point of view of the people who actually do it.

It was this gap that I set out to fill in *The Art of Screen Adaptation*, through interviews with some of the top names in screenwriting. In each interview I explored the writer's individual approach to adaptation before focusing on two case studies from their CV – with the exception of the conversation with perhaps screen adaptation's best-known exponent, Andrew Davies, where I took the opportunity to couple the set questions with a more wide-ranging tour of his career.

I also re-interviewed two writers I'd talked to previously: Hossein Amini, who I'll be grilling again for the third webinar in this series, and Christopher Hampton. Hoss was Oscar-nominated for his film adaptation of Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove*, while Christopher has twice won Oscars, for adapting his own play *Les Liaisons Dangereuses* and for co-adapting Florian Zeller's play *The Father*. Talking to Hoss and Christopher, and reading and watching their work, has taught me a huge amount about adaptation over the years – just as, when Christopher was starting out, he learned about screenwriting from reading *Five Screenplays by Harold Pinter* and the books they were based on.

Like Christopher, my first screenplay commission was an adaptation. I won't name the book I adapted, or the company that commissioned me – or rather, companies, as a second, larger production outfit got involved during the development process, who in turn had financial backing from a third, even bigger entity. Let's just say that by the time I had sketched out a screen story with the producer and was sitting down to start the script, the location had shifted from Devon to New England, the leads had aged from early teenagers to young adults, and the last third of the novel had been jettisoned.

The novel didn't inspire me, so that wasn't a problem. But cut adrift from it, without the compass of the source material or a compelling alternative course, I wrote rubbish – and that was a problem. I was replaced, the script was rewritten, and the film was never made. I learned some good lessons, though. Never adapt a book you don't love. Never accept a job just for the work. And never, ever, tell yourself, 'I'll fix it in the next draft,' because you might not get a chance to write one.

So when the good people behind the Creative Essentials series of 'How To' books suggested I write one on screen adaptation, I asked myself: can I really tell other people how to adapt when I can't back it up with a produced adaptation of my own? The answer was no, I couldn't. What I *could* do was assemble some of the best screenwriters in the business and ask *them* how it was done.

So I did – and the screenwriters I talked to, and the case studies we discussed, shows the range of adaptations getting made. Hossein Amini: *Drive* and *McMafia*. Jeremy Brock: *The Last King of Scotland* and *Brideshead Revisited*. Moira Buffini: *Tamara Drewe* and *Jane Eyre*. Lucinda Coxon: *The Crimson Petal and the White* and *The Danish Girl*. Christopher Hampton: *A Dangerous Method* and *Atonement*. David Hare: *The Hours* and *The Reader*. Olivia Hetreed: *Girl with a Pearl Earring* and *Wuthering Heights*. Nick Hornby: *An Education* and *Wild*. Deborah Moggach: *Pride & Prejudice* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. David Nicholls: *And When Did You Last See Your Father?* and *Patrick Melrose*. Sarah Phelps: *Great Expectations* and *And Then There Were None*. And Andrew Davies: three decades of adaptations from *House of Cards* to *Les Misérables*.

As it happens, three decades – or maybe a little more – is how long I've been fascinated by adaptation. Many of my favourite films and TV series are adaptations, and have been since I fell in love with cinema as a teenager. British literary adaptations in particular have always struck a deep chord with me – from *A Month*

in the Country in 1987 to *The Sense of an Ending* in 2017, via two of my favourite adaptations, of two of my favourite books: Merchant Ivory's film of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* in 1993, and William Boyd's TV version of his own novel *Any Human Heart* in 2010, which we discussed in detail in my recent book of conversations with him, *The Mirror and the Road*.

In total, counting unproduced screenplays – which we should, since most screenwriters can lay claim to a lot of them – Will has adapted 11 of his own novels and 7 of his short stories for film and TV, and more than a dozen fiction and non-fiction books by other authors. Talking to him about those scripts, watching the feature films and TV series which *have* been made from them, and discussing the freedoms and limitations of fiction versus film, has been a continuing education for me in screen adaptation – an education which began 30-odd years ago, when I started work, on spec, on my first screen adaptation, of a novel by Robert Westall called *The Devil on the Road*.

The book was first published in 1978 and republished in 1981 as part of Penguin's new 'Puffin Plus' series, aimed at teenagers – what we would now call a 'young adult' novel. I read it in around 1985, at the age of 10, when I was in hospital for an operation. My mum gave it to me to pass the time, perhaps struck, as I immediately was, by the vivid illustration on the cover: a guy riding a Triumph motorcycle, wearing red leathers, black gauntlets and a yellow helmet with a smoked visor, scrambling to escape across a field from three Roundhead soldiers on horseback brandishing sabres.

If I was pitching it, I'd describe it as *The Terminator* meets *The Crucible*: a mash-up of time travel and witch hunts, wrapped in a passionate and decidedly grown-up love story. And therein lies the first challenge. The novel is aimed at teenage readers, say of 13 upwards. But if you adapted it faithfully, certain scenes – notably the witchcraft trial at the heart of it – would earn a film an 18 certificate, or mean that a TV series would need to be screened after the 9pm watershed. So which do you serve: the letter of the book, or the audience it was aimed at?

The second challenge – second *and* third, in fact – was that the 18-year-old bike-riding hero spent a fair amount of time on his own or in the company of a cat. My first stab at adapting it, as a 3-part TV series, was filled with slabs of voiceover, taken straight from the novel. The result felt ponderous. My second stab at it, as a film script, stripped out most of the voiceover. Now, the result felt rushed. As for the cat, you could either cut it, which would impact the plot – since it was essentially a witch's familiar, helping facilitate the time travel – or you could keep it and have him talk to it, as he did in the book, which seemed oddly anthropomorphic for a story with an undertow of sex and violence.

The fourth challenge was the setting. The contemporary sections of the novel were set when the book was written, the late 70s, when it was still plausible that someone on a biking holiday could wind up lost in a part of Suffolk where the feudalism and superstition of the English Civil War were as close to the present day as opening a door. Would it still work in a time of 5G, wifi and satnav? But if

you set it in the 70s, like an homage to Hammer Horror and *The Wicker Man*, before going back to the 1640s, you'd have to establish not one but two time periods, and add a chunk to the budget at the same time.

Four significant issues in a 245-page book written for teenagers. No wonder I never quite cracked the script. And it hasn't got any easier, since historical projects are notoriously difficult to land right now. But every time I look at that cover, with its promise of excitement and adventure, its daredevil young hero and its demonic villains, I feel the same tug that I always did and think to myself, 'What if...?'

My second spec adaptation, of Nevil Shute's 1940 novel *Landfall*, came from similar origins. This time it was my dad who gave me the book, when I was about 15, an early 80s Pan paperback with an equally vivid illustrated cover: a World War 2 submarine cutting through a choppy blue-grey and white-spume sea, and an RAF aircraft circling the vessel in the glowering sky overhead. I assumed the submarine was a German U-boat – which is actually the premise of the story: whether a young RAF pilot correctly identifies a submarine before bombing it – so once again, as with *The Devil on the Road*, I was instinctively responding to a dramatic set-up: protagonist and antagonist, battling for supremacy.

Landfall was a breakthrough for me in learning the art and craft of screenwriting and adaptation, but not an immediate one: it took 7 drafts and several years before I really felt I'd nailed it. The first draft was basically the book in script form – 240 pages reduced to 130 – including a third act which – with the greatest respect to Nevil Shute – didn't live up to the promise of the first two: a pilot is accused of accidentally sinking a British submarine, court-martialled, transferred from Coastal Command in Portsmouth to Bomber Command in Yorkshire, flies leaflet raids over Germany, then is transferred back to Portsmouth to work on an experimental weapons programme. Meanwhile, his girlfriend, a nurse in Portsmouth's naval hospital, thinks he may be innocent, and sets out to prove it.

Shortening the script over subsequent drafts helped tighten the episodic structure, but I still needed a better third act. My first attempt at this was to introduce the weapons programme earlier, expand the character of the scientist leading the experiments, and set up a love triangle between him, the pilot and his girlfriend, onto which I then layered a spy subplot – the scientist turning out to be the spy, the pilot and his girlfriend unmasking him. It was exciting, like *The Dam Busters* rewritten as an espionage yarn, but it didn't work, because it wasn't really related to the premise of the story. So three or four drafts in, I ditched my new third act and went back to the drawing board.

The answer to the third act was, as it almost always is, in the first and second acts. The story is about air patrols and submarine warfare, that's what gets it started, so that's where it needed to end. I stripped out the spy subplot and made the experimental weapon an anti-submarine device, so the hero is ultimately able to do battle with the German U-Boat which he was unknowingly pitted against at the beginning – coming full circle to that dramatic confrontation on the book cover which inspired me in the first place. I left in the love triangle, though, as it provided

conflict and obstacles in acts two and three which were resolved and overcome in the action climax.

I've done more work on it since then, but I was, and am, very proud of that seventh draft. Even with all that incident in it, the script had gone down to a fat-free, fast-paced 90 pages – a length I like, because it's easier to contain the whole thing in your head – and I'd accidentally learned some things I've applied to every script since: enter a scene as late as possible, leave it as early as possible, and link it to the next scene in some way – either with a visual transition or a dialogue hook – so that the progression from scene to scene seems natural and inevitable.

Needless to say, after all that, it never got made – not least because I didn't have an option on the source material. The novel had previously been filmed in 1949, and the film rights sold in perpetuity to the company that made it. The company later went out of business and their film library passed to another company, and then another. I know where the rights are, but I also know how difficult it will be to get them, so I turned my attention to other projects – including that first screenplay commission. I didn't have the option on *The Devil on the Road*, either, and it limits what you can do with a script. Unless you're lucky enough to know a producer, who can secure the option for you, you won't be able to do the one thing you need to do to get it made: go to market.

So that's my journey, or parts of it. Now let's embark on yours, starting with **what to adapt**.

You may already know what you want to adapt, and if it's something you wrote – a play, a novel, a short story, a non-fiction book – then you'll also own the rights, which puts you ahead of the game. If you want to adapt something that someone else wrote, and it's still in copyright, then you'll need to secure an option on it – or, at the very least, find out whether the option is available.

The option is what it sounds like: for a certain sum of money, for a certain period of time, you acquire the option of developing a piece of source material – sometimes known as a 'property' – for film or TV. For as long as you have the option, you can write or commission a script and pitch the project to producers, hoping that someone will pay you to develop it further and pay the copyright owner to extend the option. If you haven't finished the script, or secured interest in the project, by the time the option expires, you generally have a choice of renewing it – for a further fee – or letting it lapse.

If you don't have the option, you shouldn't be writing the script – unless it really is for your own pleasure. Apart from anything else, you could invest a lot of time, energy and emotion in an adaptation only to find that the rights have been bought by someone else and the project is in development, in production or about to be released.

You also need to be careful of the differences between UK and US copyright law: works which have entered the public domain in the States may still be under

copyright over here. The early fiction of P.G. Wodehouse is a good example – much to my disappointment, having had a lot of fun at one point writing a spec adaptation of his 1923 novel *Leave it to Psmith*.

If you're looking to option copyright material, you have to be realistic about what will be available to you. Unless you're best friends with the author – or you *are* the author – you probably won't get hold of a current bestseller. The less recent – or less commercial – the source material, the more chance you may have; although, of course, that may also make it harder to get an adaptation off the ground.

The good news is that thanks to the internet, authors are easier to get in touch with than they used to be. Many have their own websites, sometimes with direct contact details. Some can be messaged on social media. Others are reachable via their agents or publishers – though be prepared for industry gatekeepers to respond to polite rights enquiries with the ferocity of a lioness defending her cubs.

If the material is in copyright, you may also face the question of how involved the author – or their literary executors – want to be in the adaptation: everything from frequent intervention to benign neglect is a possibility. But that's a bridge you can probably cross if you're lucky enough to come to it.

On the other hand, you may feel all that sounds like a lot of hassle and decide to adapt something which is out of copyright – or it may be that you've always wanted to adapt that classic book you've loved since you read it as a kid. In that case, there's nothing stopping you from writing that script – but there are a few things to bear in mind when you get to the stage of pitching it.

A well-known story, to a certain extent, pitches itself, which is one reason why they're optioned and filmed and televised, many times over in the case of particularly popular titles. The better-known the story, though, the greater the chance that someone else will also be adapting it, possibly someone with a strong track record and a distinctive voice. Take *Great Expectations*, for example. There have been four high-profile adaptations of that book in the last 25 years, all by prominent screenwriters: Tony Marchant's 2-part TV version in 1999; Sarah Phelps' 3-part TV version in 2011; David Nicholls' feature film version in 2012; and Steven Knight's 6-part TV version last year.

The less well-known the title, the more chance that you will have it to yourself – but again, that lack of name-brand recognition may affect its marketability. If you have a burning desire, though, to adapt a less popular Dickens, or Bronte, or Chekhov, or whomever, then you absolutely should – after all, the untrodden path gives you the opportunity to leave your own footsteps.

And then there are true stories, a genre which has hit the headlines recently in the form of *Mr Bates vs The Post Office*. Gwyneth Hughes' script was based on her research rather than a particular book or article, but turning real life into screen drama is a very particular form of adaptation. In the second of these webinars, screenwriter and playwright Rebecca Lenkiewicz will be discussing her screen

work with Nicole Davis, including her BAFTA-nominated screenplay for *She Said*, based on Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey's book about their *New York Times* investigation into Harvey Weinstein. I could probably give a whole talk on this genre, both from my own writing experience and from talking to other screenwriters, but I'll focus on just two aspects here: life rights and commercial potential.

Again, you need to be careful about the differences between UK and US law, this time in the area of libel and defamation. Even if you're adapting a non-fiction book, and therefore relying on the research of the author, if the story is about real people who are still alive, you'd be well advised to bone up on the subject of 'life rights' – that is, the permission to use the personal details and characteristics that make up someone's life – to make sure you don't get slapped with a lawsuit.

As for commercial potential, you might think that a dramatic true story which no one has told before would be a strength in pitching a project – and given the right pitch, to the right people, at the right time, maybe it is. But in my experience, you're just as likely to be told that the obscurity of the story makes it harder to sell – particularly if it's in a genre which is already difficult, like historical drama. You certainly shouldn't let that stop you telling that story, but forewarned is forearmed.

Whatever you adapt, you need to love it. Your choice of material, and the way you approach it, will reflect your personality and passions – it has to, to stand a chance of the script exciting anyone else. You're also likely to be living with the project for a long time: outlining it, writing it, rewriting it, pitching it, hopefully selling it, rewriting it again – and again, and again. If you are lucky enough to sell it, you may go through more than one production company, more than one set of producers and script editors, more than one director or leading actors, before it finally gets made.

So you've found something you want to adapt, now you need to decide **what medium to adapt it for**.

Assuming it isn't a commissioned adaptation, in which case the choice will very likely have been made for you, film versus TV is pretty much the most important decision you'll make – and should clearly be guided by the material you're adapting.

Some definitions might help us here. A short story is generally reckoned to be anything up to 10,000 words. A novella, anything up to 40,000 words. A novel, 40,000 words plus. And for a stage play, an hour of playing time amounts to about 10,000 words.

The rule of thumb for screenplays is that one page of script equals one minute of screen time. A feature film screenplay is usually between 90 and 120 pages long, a TV episode between 30 and 60. Based on standard screenplay formatting, 60 pages amounts to about 13,000 words.

Straight away, then, we can see that short stories, novellas and stage plays are, at least in terms of length, a natural fit for feature films – but that, in moving from novel to screenplay, you’re going to have to lose some stuff.

Adapting **stage plays** for the screen is almost an art form in itself. I’ve only attempted it once – a modern version of *Henry V* set in the world of high finance – which I’d completely forgotten about until I was preparing this webinar. Since I wrote the script about 30 years ago, and no longer have a copy of it, I think we can assume it wasn’t very good. Since I’d rather not steer you wrong – and at the risk of seeming self-serving – I’m therefore going to point you towards my interview with Christopher Hampton in *The Art of Screen Adaptation*, and towards my earlier book of interviews with him, *Hampton on Hampton*, since I don’t know a finer practitioner of the stage/screen art than Christopher.

He has adapted three of his own plays for the cinema – *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, *Total Eclipse* and *The Talking Cure* – two plays by Florian Zeller – *The Father* and *The Son* – plus several more unproduced adaptations of his and others’ stage work. The film *Dangerous Liaisons* was in fact a double adaptation, both of his play and the original novel by Choderlos de Laclos, while *The Talking Cure* formed part of a very complex journey from page to screen: John Kerr’s non-fiction book about Jung, Freud and Sabina Spielrein, *A Most Dangerous Method*, became, first, an unproduced screenplay called *Sabina*, which Christopher wrote for Fox and Julia Roberts; then the play, *The Talking Cure*, staged at the National Theatre with Ralph Fiennes and Jodhi May; and finally a film, *A Dangerous Method*, directed by David Cronenberg and starring Michael Fassbender, Viggo Mortensen and Keira Knightley, based on Kerr’s book, Hampton’s play, the original version of his screenplay *and* his own additional research.

As a side note, Christopher’s 1996 adaptation of the novel *Mary Reilly* – Valerie Martin’s sideways take on *Dr Jekyll & Mr Hyde* – was, again, effectively a double adaptation, both of Martin and Stevenson, and is, in my opinion, the best screen version of Stevenson’s pre-Freudian novella, joining the dots from one book to the other with unsettling, atmospheric and psychologically acute effect.

All in all, then, the man knows his craft, so I’ll leave the last word on stage/screen adaptations to him, from the opening chapter of *Hampton on Hampton*: ‘Adapting a play is a much more difficult prospect than adapting a novel. A play is such an artificial construct that it couldn’t be more different from a film; the only thing they have in common is that they’re dramatic forms involving actors. A film is much closer to a novel: it has those freedoms which you don’t have on stage and you’re well advised to use.’

Short stories are perhaps the most sensible material to adapt, as you’re not cutting or compressing but expanding and elaborating – deftly illustrated by writer/director Andrew Haigh in his 2015 film *45 Years*, adapted from the story ‘In Another Country’ by David Constantine. The story is only 11 pages long, but it contains the two main characters and many of the major structural and emotional beats found in the film, which Haigh sympathetically and intelligently rounded out

and provided a context for. The result is a tight yet unhurried 95-minute movie, which honours the elliptical nature of the original story by leaving tantalising narrative and motivational gaps for the audience to fill as they will.

Novellas, too, tend to lend themselves well to film – and in a *New Yorker* article in 2012, novelist and occasional screenwriter Ian McEwan explained why: ‘There’s a strong resemblance between the screenplay (twenty odd thousand words) and the novella, both operating within the same useful constraints of economy – space for a subplot (two at a stretch), characters to be established with quick strokes but allowed enough room to live and breathe, and the central idea, even if it is just below the horizon, always exerting its gravitational pull.’

Novels, of course, could go either way, film or TV. Quite a few shorter novels have been adapted in this country in recent years, including Julian Barnes’ *The Sense of an Ending*, Ian McEwan’s *On Chesil Beach* and *The Children Act*, all in 2017, and Graham Swift’s *Mothering Sunday* in 2021. McEwan himself scripted the films of his two books, after a long break from screenwriting – during which *Enduring Love* was adapted by Joe Penhall and *Atonement* was adapted by Christopher Hampton – and *The Children Act* translates particularly well because the novel all takes place in the present, over a relatively short period of time. The central events of *On Chesil Beach* last just a few hours, but there are also flashbacks – and the final pages of the novel cover several decades, which causes a problem for the filmmakers: do you introduce a new set of older actors for the climactic scenes, forcing the audience to readjust at the possible expense of emotional engagement, or do you age up the younger actors and risk making those scenes all about the quality of the prosthetics? The film takes the second option, and while the story is moving enough to carry it through, you can never quite forget the make-up. Another way of tackling the problem might have been to introduce older actors earlier in the story, or even from the start, although that would have required navigating flashbacks within flashbacks.

The longer the novel, though, the more sense TV makes. Caleb Carr’s 1994 historical crime novel *The Alienist* was optioned for cinema before it had even been published, but its densely-written, detail-packed 500 pages defeated a parade of top screenwriters until Hossein Amini and a team of writers finally wrangled it into a 10-part Netflix series in 2018. It’s impossible to imagine Kate Atkinson’s epic 2013 novel *Life After Life* as anything other than a TV series, and even then the 4-part BBC adaptation in 2022 felt about half as long as needed to be to encompass all 600 pages. David Nicholls, meanwhile, having ambitiously but unsatisfactorily tried to squeeze the 400-page, 20-year narrative of his 2009 novel *One Day* into a mere hour and forty-five minutes for the 2011 film version, has the satisfaction this year of seeing it adapted as a 14-part series, also for Netflix.

If you choose to adapt a novel or non-fiction book for TV, the next question is **how many episodes** it should be. Again, if it’s a commissioned adaptation that decision may already have been taken for you – although that doesn’t mean the producers or broadcasters won’t change their minds later. William Boyd’s 2001 TV adaptation of Evelyn Waugh’s *Sword of Honour* trilogy was originally commissioned as six

weekly 1-hour episodes, before being cut in half and rewritten as two 90-minute parts to be aired on successive nights, a decision apparently based more on audience trends than artistic imperatives.

William Boyd also adapted his own novel *Restless* into two 90-minute parts in 2012, but that format seems to have gone out of fashion. Three episodes is now the usual minimum, more commonly 4 or 6 on UK TV, and generally between 7 and 10 in the US. Episode length varies from around 40 minutes for ITV and Channel 4, to 1 hour for the BBC, to any of the above or longer for streamers. Thirty-minute episodes are occasionally employed, for example the 12-part 2020 adaptation of Sally Rooney's novel *Normal People*, and Andrew Davies' exceptional 15-part adaptation of Dickens' *Bleak House* in 2015, which managed to replicate the cliff-hanger anticipation of the novel's original serial publication.

The other advantage of TV is that a first episode and a series outline may give you enough to pitch the project – in other words, up to 60 pages of script plus a synopsis of one or more pages – rather than having to write an entire 90- or 120-page feature film screenplay on spec before going to market.

I'm at the point of making this decision between film and TV with an adapted project of my own: a short novel called *The Vetting Officer*, which I published on Kindle in 2020 and in paperback last year. I originally conceived the idea as a feature screenplay, but eventually wrote it as prose fiction instead – and while its 140 pages and 25,000 words still seem well suited to film, the structure of the novel has made me wonder whether a 3-part TV series might work better. Part One of the novel is set in the present, and Part Two in the past, while Part Three alternates between the present and the past until the two timeframes collide at the climax. It isn't as straightforward as turning those three parts into the three episodes, though, because one of the main characters only appears in the present, giving you three options: leave her out of episode two, write her into the past as well, or interleave the past and present throughout – losing part of the pleasure of the structure. I suspect, if I do adapt the novel, that I'll take the third option. But at least I don't have to buy the rights the book while I think about it!

So you've found something you want to adapt, you've decided what medium to adapt it for, now it's time to think about **how to adapt it**. There are several important things to consider here, including fidelity, structure and point of view. But on a more practical level, do you go straight into the script, or do you write an outline first – or a 'treatment', as longer outlines are called?

I prefer to translate the source material directly into screenplay format, partly because it feels more spontaneous, partly because I enjoy writing dialogue – and getting the characters talking to each other is a great way to find your way into the story. The downside to this is that your first draft may end up being very long, and in need of substantial editing. But as they say, screenwriting is rewriting, so you'll almost certainly end up killing a lot of your babies either way.

Other screenwriters prefer to spend time on an outline or treatment before starting the script. It may mean that there are fewer surprises in the writing process, but it should also mean that you go down fewer blind alleys which you then need to reverse out of. And even if you don't write an outline or treatment at the start, you may have to write one later on, to help you – or your agent, or a production company – pitch the project to the people with the money.

You'll probably need to write a 'logline' as well – basically the quick pitch: what the project is about. Reducing a complex story to a couple of lines can seem simplistic, but it's a key part of selling a project, and it can also help you when you're writing it: reminding you of the story you're actually telling.

There's a useful template for crafting loglines in Charles Harris's book *Jaws in Space: Powerful Pitching for Film and TV Screenwriters*, part of the same Creative Essentials series as my screen adaptation book. The basic version goes (with brackets indicating the parts you fill in yourself): This is a (genre) about a (flawed) (protagonist) who wants (outer goal). The more advanced version goes: This is a (genre) about a (flawed) (protagonist) who wants (outer goal) only to find (necessary character change or insight).

I used that template to create a logline for a novel I was considering adapting a few years ago: *Land of Marvels* by Barry Unsworth. The pitch went: 'At the edge of the Ottoman Empire, on the eve of the First World War, a bankrupt British archaeologist gambles everything to make his name and save his marriage. But as he races to unearth the riches of the past, his fortunes are threatened by the forces of the present, in a land of sand and oil which will come to be called Iraq.' I'd still like to see that film!

The logline, incidentally, shouldn't be confused with the so-called 'tagline' – the promotional phrase on a movie poster. A famous example of this would be for *Alien*: 'In space no one can hear you scream'. That said, I've always thought that the tagline for *Gladiator* would have made a perfect logline – and who knows, perhaps it did when screenwriter David Franzoni was originally pitching it: 'The general who became a slave. The slave who became a gladiator. The gladiator who defied an emperor'. Just 18 words, and they give you the genre, the hero, the villain, the setup, the conflict, and all three acts of the hero's journey. We who are about to write, salute you.

But back to those key considerations I mentioned just now, starting with **fidelity**.

Personally, I agree with Christopher Hampton – and, by extension, Harold Pinter – that the better the book, the more faithful the adaptation should be, otherwise why bother to adapt it in the first place? Hampton's attitude to true stories is the same: if you bend the facts to fit your story, you betray the language in which those facts are speaking to you. I wholeheartedly agree with that, too. With a novel, though, fidelity can take different forms. It is possible, I think, to be faithful to the spirit of a book while being – to borrow a lovely phrase from David Hare – 'promiscuously unfaithful' to the letter of it.

Nick Payne's adaptation of *The Sense of an Ending*, for example, takes huge liberties with the source material. The hero of Julian Barnes' novel, Tony Webster, is prickly and insular, and the tone of the book is summed up by its final word, which was originally going to be its title: 'unrest'. The film makes him much less isolated by considerably expanding three characters – his ex-wife and two old school friends – and creating a new character from scratch: his pregnant daughter, about to become a single mum. These characters give Tony someone to play off and relate to, and facilitate a character arc as old as Ebenezer Scrooge: from curmudgeonly isolation to belated and chastened self-awareness.

Similarly, in *The English Patient*, widely – and rightly – considered a masterpiece of screen adaptation, Anthony Minghella basically reversed the entire balance of Michael Ondaatje's novel; pushing the primary story – Kip and Hana in World War 2, falling in love as she takes care of Almásy – more into the background, and bringing the secondary story – Almásy's love affair with Katharine in the desert, and their betrayal of her husband Geoffrey – more to the fore. And if you think about the film now, you probably remember the desert scenes above all else, so cinematic was that story reversal.

In his follow-up, on the other hand, *The Talented Mr Ripley*, Minghella captures the brittle, superficial mood of Patricia Highsmith's novel, but brings a warmth to the film almost entirely absent from the page; giving Tom Ripley a new backstory which not only humanises him but turns a cold, sociopathic anti-hero into someone whose core motivation – to fit in, to be accepted, to be loved, ultimately – makes him surprisingly sympathetic, even as the tangled web of deceit he's woven drives him to kill the one person who genuinely cares for him in an attempt to avoid exposure and evade capture.

Intriguingly, a new 8-part adaptation of Highsmith's novel drops on Netflix in April, starring Andrew Scott as Tom Ripley, and judging by the elegant and sinister black-and-white trailer, it looks likely to be more faithful to the tone of the source material. The writer/director, by the way, is Steven Zaillian, an Oscar-winner for adapting *Schindler's List*, whose 1998 film of Jonathan Harr's non-fiction legal drama *A Civil Action* is right up there with William Goldman's adaptation of Woodward and Bernstein's *All the President's Men*, and Michael Mann and Eric Roth's true life whistleblower drama *The Insider*.

Another TV series worth mentioning here is *The Night Manager*, adapted by David Farr from the 1993 novel by John le Carré. Director Sydney Pollack long nursed this as a possible feature film project, with screenwriters attached including Robert Towne – the celebrated writer of *Chinatown* – but it took 23 years to reach the screen as a 6-parter in 2016; by which point a large chunk of the novel had been relocated from South America to the Middle East, and one principal character – the tenacious British intelligence officer, Burr – had been rewritten from a man to a woman, played by Olivia Colman, a change even le Carré claimed was an improvement on the book.

Authors, of course, aren't always so generous when filmmakers dismantle their carefully constructed edifices, rebuild them with fewer walls and more windows and then refurnish them completely, so it's nice when they're genuinely complimentary about the finished product – none more so, perhaps, than Iain Banks, who said of Bryan Elsley's brilliant 4-part TV adaptation of his novel *The Crow Road* in 1996 that it was 'annoyingly better than the book in far too many places.'

Sometimes, though, a book merely serves as a jumping-off point for an adaptation. If Marlon Brando's character in *Apocalypse Now* wasn't called Kurtz, would you realise that Francis Ford Coppola's surreal Vietnam epic was a modern adaptation of Joseph Conrad? Certainly it was an inspiration that escaped most viewers of James Gray's recent sci-fi film *Ad Astra*, which is essentially *Heart of Darkness* in space. Equally, you'd be forgiven for not recognising Thomas Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* in Michael Winterbottom's western *The Claim*, scripted by Frank Cottrell Boyce – but what better setting for a story which starts with a man selling his wife and daughter than the Old West during the Gold Rush?

For myself, I've come to think of source material as gift boxes: the original author has made you a present of their story and characters, their descriptions and dialogue, and if they're good, you'd be daft not to use them. There's a good reason why I wrote the first – and, to date, only – draft of my P.G. Wodehouse adaptation in one week: because the novel gave me gift after gift after gift.

In the end, though, your job is to produce a compelling screenplay, not reproduce the source material in Final Draft. However short the story or long the series, you'll still need to cut things, change things, reshape things – and, ironically, add new things to fill in the gaps.

Which brings us to **structure** and **point of view**.

I'm a big fan of structure. Used intelligently, it's like a coat hanger, giving sturdy support and elegant contours to your story. And, as it happens, most stories fall into a classical three-act shape. Beginning, middle, end. Thesis, antithesis, synthesis. Or, as a wise man once said: act one, put a man up a tree; act two, throw rocks at him; act three, bring him down again. Even if you start in the middle and flash back, or chop up your narrative into non-linear chunks, that overall shape will usually still remain.

Fred Schepisi's 2001 film adaptation of Graham Swift's novel *Last Orders* follows five main characters – six, if you count the man whose ashes are being taken on a car journey to the seaside for scattering by his friends – over the course of a single day in the present and several decades in the past. It moves from one character to another, then back again. It uses flashbacks, and flashbacks within flashbacks. And for all that, it still tells a coherent story with a unified shape in not much more than an hour-and-three-quarters while being one of the most faithful feature adaptations of a novel I can think of.

Point of view, I increasingly feel, goes hand in hand with structure. Deciding whose story you're telling will determine how you tell it. A novel might be written in the first person or the third person, it might have one narrator or it might have several, but you get to choose how limited the screen perspective is, or how broad. Multiple perspectives lend themselves well to TV: you can devote individual episodes to particular characters, or go off at unexpected tangents – the penultimate episode of Craig Mazin's series *Chernobyl*, for example, diverted from the scientists depicted in episodes one, two, three and five to focus more narrowly on a small squad of soldiers shooting stray pets in the exclusion zone.

Fiction, of course – and non-fiction if it's well written – gives you access to characters' inner lives and interior monologues in a way that film and TV often struggle to match. A good actor can convey an extraordinary amount while saying very little, but an early decision to make, especially when adapting a first person narrative, is whether or not to use voiceover. I love voiceover. Some screenwriters hate it. If it simply tells you what you're being shown, it's pointless. But if it tells you something you can't see, or contradicts or comments on what you're watching in some way, it can add a huge amount. Try imagining Stanley Kubrick's film of *Barry Lyndon* without Michael Hordern's dry omniscient narration, or Frank Darabont's film of *The Shawshank Redemption* stripped of Morgan Freeman's rich tones.

Examples of all the things I've been talking about – including choice of viewpoint and use of voiceover – can be found in James Ivory's film of *The Remains of the Day*. Apologies to anyone who hasn't seen it or read it – or both – because there are spoilers ahead. But hopefully you'll forgive them, because where the film goes and how it gets there – and how that relates to the arc of the book – is the perfect case study in screen adaptation. A small number of key changes between the novel and the screenplay produce a film faithful to the shape of the book but very different in tone, a film which can be viewed alongside the source material but at the same time sits apart from it as a distinct work of art.

Both the novel and the film follow the journey of Mr Stevens, the butler of Darlington Hall, as he travels to the West Country to meet Miss Kenton, the former housekeeper – and unacknowledged love of his life. During the course of his literary journey, in response to a series of awkward encounters with ordinary people, he comes to realise that he needs, among other things, to lighten up a bit. He doesn't put it quite like that; in his first person narration, expertly calibrated by Kazuo Ishiguro to be both dry and droll, reserved and revealing, he says: 'Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in – particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth.'

The first person voice is largely absent from the film, apart from a brief exchange of letters between Mr Stevens and Miss Kenton at the start, heard in voiceover to set the scene. And, apart from a few fleeting moments between Mr Stevens and his new employer, Mr Lewis, so is the 'bantering' subplot, which helps explain why the film, unusually, has a more downbeat ending than the novel. In the novel, Mr

Stevens regards 'bantering' not just as a personal opportunity but as a professional challenge – if that's what his employer wants, that's what he must try to provide – and there's a definite sense that he's looking forward to giving it his best shot when he gets back to Darlington Hall. In the film, Mr Stevens tells Miss Kenton that he's looking forward to getting back, but his heart doesn't seem to be in it; and when he does go back, his one attempt at levity with Mr Lewis is followed by a scene, which isn't in the novel, where he helps his employer free a bird trapped in one of the house's echoing rooms, then watches it fly away over the rolling hills as he closes the window and resumes his interior life.

The film also conflates certain characters from the novel, while expanding others. Mr Stevens' genial new employer, Farraday, is combined with the shrewd American senator, Lewis, who attends Lord Darlington's interwar conference on the future of Europe, providing both a link between the two timeframes and a commentary on the legacy and fate of Lord Darlington and his estate after World War 2. Miss Kenton's future husband, Mr Benn, also becomes more of a presence, and we see scenes of the two of them in which Mr Stevens is *not* present. Paradoxically, then, the film widens its point of view beyond Mr Stevens, only to narrow down his world more at the end.

Even the deleted scenes on the DVD and Blu-ray – both with and without the director's commentary – provide a fascinating insight into the adaptation process. The novel was originally adapted by Harold Pinter, with Mike Nichols slated to direct – but when the project passed to Merchant Ivory, they brought in their regular collaborator Ruth Praver Jhabvala to rewrite the script. Although Pinter supposedly declined to share the screen credit, some of his scenes apparently remained in the script, including one which was shot but cut: the scene from the novel where Mr Stevens, after parting from Miss Kenton for the last time, sits on the pier at dusk and strikes up a conversation with a stranger – and breaks down in tears as he contemplates a lifetime of personal and professional regret.

On the page, the scene is very subtle. Mr Stevens, as the narrator – writing his diary, after the day's events are done – isn't one to say he started crying; he simply acknowledges the stranger's offer of a handkerchief. On the screen, his emotional state is more overt. Mr Stevens cries. But: the scene was cut from the Jhabvala draft. Anthony Hopkins protested: it was essential to reveal his character, and without it he might have to reconsider doing the film. The scene was reinstated, shot, then cut again in the edit. According to Ivory, Hopkins never saw it, and never asked about it – for the simple reason, I'd suggest, that it wasn't necessary. A scene vital to Ishiguro's novel became irrelevant to Merchant Ivory's film – the journey from page to screen, and the process of adaptation, in a nutshell.

So you've found your material, you've chosen your medium, you've written your logline and outline and first draft and umpteen drafts after that. You feel like you've climbed a mountain, and you have. Congratulations. Now it's time to climb the next one: **getting it made**.

Just as there are as many ways to adapt as there are writers, so there are as many routes to market as there are projects. If you've been commissioned, or if you've got an agent, or if you're best friends with a top producer or major director or famous actor, all sorts of doors might open. Or they might not. Christopher Hampton wrote an adaptation of Lawrence Thornton's novel *Imagining Argentina*. He thought Antonio Banderas would be perfect for the lead. They were both represented by the same agency. Sixteen months later, the producer got the script to Banderas via someone he met at a party. Talent is important. Persistence is important. Contacts are very important. But never underestimate the equal importance of blind luck and random chance in getting screen projects off the ground.

If you haven't already been commissioned, and you haven't got bankable friends on speed dial, you'll probably need to find an agent. Most production companies only accept scripts via an agent, and most agents are looking for original scripts rather than adaptations, so you'll also need some of your own work to show them. You'll find literary agents and their specialisms listed in the latest edition of the *Writers' & Artists' Yearbook*, and although it's not as up-to-date as that, producer Farah Abushwasha's Creative Essentials book *A Professional Approach For Screenwriters & Writer-Directors* contains sage advice from 140 film and TV insiders on navigating your creative journey through the screen trade.

You can also find, on the blog page of my website, a link to my choice of the five best books on writing for the big screen (that is, the five best books not authored by me!), including an interview anthology, a screenwriter's memoir, a director's reflections on the craft, a producer's exploration of storytelling, and a published screenplay. And on the media page of the site, you can watch online Q&As with some of the screenwriters from *The Art of Screen Adaptation*, along with a handful of interviews I've done on screen adaptation for Britflicks, Film Ireland, the 21st Rewrite Podcast and BBC Radio London.

And now, I'll try to answer your questions...

