

In an era before missing children were on the nightly news and the back of milk cartons, what happens to lost girls? Alice Sebold hopes to, and succeeds, in portraying this grim reality. A sexual assault survivor herself, Sebold tends to dwell on sexual assault in a lot of her work, with her first novel being a pseudo-memoir of her experience as a rape victim attending university. Naturally, the next book she would write would be her most famous and influential work, *The Lovely Bones*, which tells the story of a mid 70s family coping with the loss of their daughter while she communicates with them from beyond the grave. The novel received a film adaptation in 2009 directed by Peter Jackson of *Lord of the Rings* fame. Ideas and abstract concepts are explained through heavy-handed symbolism in both. The young adult fiction book and young adult drama film differ largely due to the nature of cinema being unable to tell the full story of Susie Salmon and her imperfect family. Though Jackson produced a beautiful film that tells the story well, its minimization of active roles for its female characters within the narrative detracts from the story in a way the original excelled in.

The film and novel both open the same way. Just before the first chapter, Susie, from Heaven, reminisces on a snow globe she would admire in her father's study. She worries that the penguin is lonely inside of its globe of solitude, but her father reassures her that the penguin is in fact happy. "Don't worry Susie," Jack explains, "he has a nice life. He's trapped in a perfect world." This obvious bit of semiotics analogizes Susie's experience from Heaven. Objectively, her ever-changing Heaven is better than Earth being the afterlife, but from her perfect world she is compelled to observe her family and never change. This is the same fate as the penguin in the snow globe. Later in the film, during a montage accompanied with the non-diegetic, haunting yet triumphant voice of Elizabeth Fraser of Cocteau Twins performing their song "Alice", in which Susie and Holly frolic through the fields of her Heaven, the snow globe becomes important again. The penguin can be seen as a hedge in the background of her Heaven, cementing the analogy. As they sled through the tundra of Heaven, the film cuts back to Jack in Susie's room flipping the snow globe.

Being a symbolically rich film presenting an abstract concept like the afterlife, it's obvious there would be various symbols scattered throughout including red flowers representing the passion of Susie's love for her father persisting beyond the grave as well as Jack's persistence to "find" her, similar to the passionate symbols of love, like fire and roses, seen in the 1992 film *Like Water for Chocolate*. Another, more prevalent, symbol that is prevalent in both versions of the story is photographs. In Ann Bliss' "Share Moments, Share Life": The Domestic Photograph as a Symbol of Disruption and Trauma in *the Lovely Bones*," argues that the book uses specific photographs as keystones to reveal information to both the reader and the characters. In reference to the photo of Susie's mother that encapsulates her before motherhood Bliss writes, "...the photograph reveals the repressed selfhood that Abigail believed she had successfully concealed beneath the façade of motherhood. Susie's awareness of this hidden aspect of Abigail foreshadows the disruption to the family of both Susie's death and Abigail's departure. Not only is it a photograph of a mother without her children, but it also makes Susie aware of Abigail outside her role of mother for the first time," (865). The film also uses

photographs as a symbol for discovery. The photos that Susie takes of George Harvey, her murderer and rapist, are used as a medium for Susie to communicate with her father that he is her killer. In a cross-cutting sequence to show the parallel events taking place both in Heaven and on Earth, something that happens only in the film, Susie finds the photographs of Harvey at the same time as her father. This discovery is facilitated by the photographs, intrinsically linking the photos with uncovering the mystery.

While the novel markets itself as a psychological fiction with elements of young adult romance, the film changes the genre to be more palatable to a general audience. Peter Jackson, the film's director took the original story and added elements of mystery and suspense. Jackson says in an interview, "One of the great appeals was to create a mystery through the use of dream imagery. It was something we'd never seen before in a film," (Gavin, 23) In the novel, Susie is an omniscient narrator who sees and knows all the inner workings of the characters' lives and psyche. This works well for her the novel but doesn't supply enough substance for her to have a full character arc in a 120-minute film. Jackson changes her role from an occasionally active, omniscient observer to a confused, lost girl in a Heaven she doesn't fully understand, which to an extent is faithful to the novel, though her not understanding that she was murdered is a film-only addition. This allows Susie to have an arc in which she must confront her past to truly move on to the "Wide Heaven" where she'll be completely separated from the happenings on Earth.

The Lovely Bones is a novel written by a woman about an issue that plagues women: sexual assault and violence against women. Therefore, it frustrates me that the portrayal of women in the film compared to the novel is subpar. Due to the constraints of filming a 2-hour movie, the film rolls the 7-year time skip near the ending of the novel into a plot that takes place over about 2 years. This doesn't give the characters enough time to age up appropriately to conquer the theme of reclaiming sexuality after an assault. In her essay "The Postmortal Rape Survivor and the Paradox of Female Agency Across Different Media: Alice Sebold's Novel *The Lovely Bones* and its 2009 Film Adaptation" Laura-Marie von Czarnowsky argues, "In the adaptation, her body and soul are presented as purified, the nastiness and the horror of her experiences as well as any desires that seem to contradict her angelic image are edited out to make for a smoother and more palatable narrative. This however traps the film version of Susie in a limiting over-virginisation, reducing the scope and damaging the power of her postmortal experiences and thus defeating the anti-silence and pro-agency stance Sebold set out to foreground in the first place," (8) Instead of Susie reclaiming her sexuality by inhabiting the body of her then 22-year-old friend Ruth, she consummates her love to Ray Singh with a singular, innocent, Hollywood kiss.

Abigail, Susie's mother, arguably is treated the worst in this screenplay. Most of her character has been cut and generalized to an avoidant coping mechanism when faced with the grief of losing her child. The main detraction from her character is the removal of her love affair with the detective looking for their daughter, Len Fenerman. Through Fenerman, Abigail can express for the first time in a long time a side of her that isn't just a wife and a mother. Abigail and Jack's relationship troubles resulting in Abigail leaving the house is instead portrayed as a disagreement between the two over how to

appropriately cope with the loss of their daughter. Though their relationship strain is rooted in reality, a study conducted by the University of Bergen in Norway concluded that, “emotional problems among couples are seen when women are less able to talk to their partner. Such differences within couples are related to less satisfaction with the relationship to a greater degree among women than men,” (Dyregrov, 239) it’s still disappointing that Abigail’s inner struggle is left only in passing reference to the photograph of her in the album, like a subtle cameo only readers would understand.

Overall, the novel and film are both great pieces of media for different reasons. The novel is great for its centering of female narratives as well as its important themes of sexual assault and promotion of agency among sexual assault survivors. The film succeeds in providing a compelling narrative, an artistic depiction of Heaven with heavy symbolism, well-aged CGI, a score emphasizing its dreamlike qualities, and an overall faithful adaptation of the source material where the medium allowed it. The sidelining of women is the only thing that keeps me saying the clichéd phrase, “the book was better.”

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