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Letter from Oklahoma

Books Into Movies, Movies From Books

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When **John Grisham's** books were brought to the screen, it became popular to comment on the fidelity of the film version to the book version. I thus felt compelled to read the books before seeing the films. By the time I saw **The Client**, though, I had forgotten the details so I didn't remember that the boathouse scene was embellished in the film.

I don't remember hearing comparisons of the film versions of **Tom Clancy's** novels. One reason might be that the film versions stick to the heart of the story and dispose of Clancy's bombastic prose full of politics and descriptions that aren't needed in movies. The story line is retained and thus there is no need for comparisons. I have not read anything by Mr. Clancy so if I am being unfair to him as a writer, a hard enough job without uncredentialed critics, I apologize and admit that my theory is based on a review of **A Clear and Present Danger**, the movie.

One thing in common with **Grisham** and **Clancy** and why they are at least acknowledged as writers and the sources of the film stories, is that the books were bestsellers first, movies second. In the case of **Forrest Gump**, the book and not the person (Everyman of the 90s) and not the movie (**Tom Hanks**, Big Without Brains), the book appeared eight years before the film and didn't become a bestseller until the movie became a big hit.

The fact that the book has become a bestseller makes me happy for **Winston Groom** and his publisher. Too bad that they couldn't have sold as many hardbacks in 1986 but nevertheless, the movie rights and current popularity at \$5.50 a copy in paperback, Groom is probably better off financially than he was in 1986 when his profane satire first appeared.

I have not seen the movie about **Forrest Gump** and from all descriptions and reviews I have heard and read, I may just skip it. **Robert Zemeckis**, of **Back to the Future** fame, directed **Forrest Gump** the movie. In a public radio interview, he tells us that FG is an icon of the sixties. Perhaps I missed the sixties after all. From what I hear of the film, FG is really just **Tom Hanks** as Big wearing a Medal of Honor or **Barney** the purple stuffed dinosaur rather than anything out of the sixties

and certainly bears no resemblance to the FG who does not say "S--t happens," but "I got to pee." In fact, when running for office, his campaign slogan becomes, "We've got to pee," and it is so effective that his opponent proclaims, "I got to pee, too."

Despite the sales of the book and despite the fact that it is not a long book (it would take two **Forrest Gumps** to make one **Grisham** and four to make half a **Clancy** book), I am not convinced that the book is being read. I have a theory. Books that become known because of a film are bought at bookstores or borrowed from libraries and then go unread. Perhaps the book begins too slowly. It isn't in color as the film is, and there are no stars in the book. The wannabe reader simply puts the book down or returns it to the library unfinished. Should the wannabe be asked about the book, he will simply say that it wasn't that good, at least not compared to the movie. No soundtrack of music from the sixties, for one thing. What he didn't say was that his lips got tired after page five and besides, it was time for a classic rerun of **Gilligan's Island**.

Read the book first and then see the movie. You invested several dollars for popcorn alone so you are not about to bolt if the director has taken liberties with the plot or characters. Even as great a film as **The Oxbow Incident**, in which dialog is taken from the book, strays when the director thinks it needs to. **Henry Fonda** gets the best of both main characters in the book, leaving **Harry Morgan** with nothing to do but look thoughtful and tough.

But I digress. My point about **Forrest Gump** is that if the book had been a bestseller first, **Hanks** might have to explain himself. It is still doubtful that Hollywood would have made a satire even if it cast someone other than **Hanks** in the leading role.

The late **Joe Don Looney** could have made a great **Forrest Gump** because he was intelligent enough to play an idiot, was big enough and fast enough to give credence to what first brought acclaim to **Forrest**, and he had a wry enough view of life in this country to do justice to the satire and irony that is evident throughout **Groom's** novel.

In the book, everything does not work out for **Forrest**. Hardly anything in his life worked out. He gets kicked out of college despite football heroics (for a season), he gets kicked out of the Army despite a Medal of Honor, he gets kicked out of the NASA program, despite saving the lives of his fellow astronauts (one of whom is an orangutan), he gets kicked out of the movie business (he had to pee), he gets kicked out of professional wrestling for throwing the championship (he wins when he should lose), he gets disqualified in the championship game of a chess tournament, he loses his girl and never gets married (although she did have his baby). His sole "success" in life is his "srimp bidness" and even that is not very satisfying in the long run.

By the way, getting kicked out of those venerable institutions are triumphs of sorts for **Forrest Gump** and sardonic observations that will win the reader over. Those moments will be lost on those who give up or are offended early in the book. **Bear Bryant** and Alabama football fans might not laugh as hard as I did when **Forrest** played for the Bear and reported on the doings in the football dorm.

There are some belly laughs in the book, too, the sources being scatological and irreverent. Imagine, if you will, a 6 foot six, 260 pound man dressed as the **Creature From the Black Lagoon** carrying a buck-naked **Raquel Welch** down a Los Angeles freeway.

Forrest Gump, by **Winston Groom**, is a good book. I heartily recommend it. This is the commentary on America that we ought to be discussing. I have not seen the movie but if you have, please read the book and tell me what you think. Don't you wish **Tom Hanks** had dressed up as the Duncie and wrestled with the Professor? Don't you wish you had seen him in a rocket ship with a female astronaut and an orangutan? Don't you wish that he had been captured by cannibals?

That's all for now. I got to pee! ☹