

## University of Melbourne and Flinders University

**Annabelle Murphy**

### **Reasons to be cheerful: A study in reverse adaptation**

#### Abstract

1. INT. MICHAEL'S OFFICE. DAY

Michael sits at his desk frowning at his laptop. He types the word *ABSTRACT* into the computer and sighs.

MICHAEL  
(frustrated) Oh, bloody hell...

He sighs again.

Michael stared at his laptop frowning. The word *ABSTRACT* was the sole blot defacing the purity of the screen. He sighed and ran a weary hand across his face. What was the essence of what he was trying to say here? That his PhD project was to write a 'reverse' adaptation of his feature film screenplay to the novel format? The exact *opposite* of the traditional book to screen practice. That his adaptation differed from commercially driven 'novelisations', in that it was an exploratory attempt at creating a standalone *literary* work. Strange, he thought, that in our contemporary media landscape where story content was (according to Clare Parody), a 'very liquid asset' flowing and 'branching' across multiple platforms (Parody 2011), the humble 'reverse adaptation' should still be so rarely attempted. Why? Perhaps as Jan Baetens ironically suggested, novelisations were generally considered to be so 'bad' their stench had tainted the whole field, both in scholarship and practice.

This was all very interesting, Michael sighed, reaching for the coffee. But, *how* could he write this into his abstract in a fresh and hopefully engaging way?

#### Biographical note:

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#### Keywords:

Adaptation – Transmedia – Reverse adaptation – Script-to-novel

A couple of years ago I began a PhD in Creative Writing at Flinders University, for which my creative project was to adapt one of my own feature film screenplays into a novel. The intention was to create a standalone work of literary merit not dependent upon its relationship to the originating screenplay for its success. This process is the reverse of traditional ‘adaptation’ which, like Eddington’s ‘arrow of time’, is generally thought of as moving in only one direction: from past to present and from book to screen.

‘Reverse adaptation’ is still a surprisingly rare phenomenon in our twenty-first-century storytelling landscape, and forms the cornerstone of this writing and research. It is not to be confused with, but has perhaps been ‘tainted’ by, its cousin the commercial ‘novelisation’, whereby blockbuster films like *Star Wars* or *The Matrix* are adapted from screen to prose, specifically as a form of commercial tie-in to the film franchise. It is a form of writing frequently held in contempt. Jan Baetens tells us that novelisations have generally been deemed ‘so “bad” that nobody thinks they deserve any serious interest’, and thus the study of novelization has a ‘near-absence in the scholarly field.’ (Baetens 1991: 51).

As this is a ‘creative’ paper, I can only touch upon some areas my practice-led research had taken me into. Issues such as the use of ‘tense’ (screenplays are invariably in the present tense), word count and word choice, internal monologues and character history, image and action based writing all come into play. My research has also led me to examine the fundamental *raison d’être* of each creative product and how these influence the words on page for each form, the seminal difference being that a film script is a blueprint, a ‘sell document’ for a final work, whereas a novel is complete in itself and engages directly with the end consumer. Effective communication is paramount in both, but a novel can be wallowed in. A script exists to excite interest in time-poor potential investors. Consequently, one universal feature of a well written script is brevity.

Below, I present two extracts of writing. The first is from the originating screenplay, the second is the corresponding adapted extract from the novel. The first extract, in film parlance, closes the first act (about 17 minutes into the film) and provides a significant turning point into the second act. In the novel, the extract bridges Chapters 2 and 3, but its dynamic effect on story and character is similar.

A minimum of story set up is necessary to understand what is going on. Our two heroines, George (the first person narrator) and Ann (her antagonist – or so she thinks) have already had a ‘cute meet’ at school, where hostility was instantly sparked between them. Ann is Head Girl, captain of the rowing team and a ‘golden girl’ in every sense (or so it would appear). George is new to the school, sullen and solitary. She is on a mission; just to get through Year 12 and out of school forever. George has been moved about from school to school and has learned to practice the art of never getting ‘attached’. What the two girls have in common, although they don’t know it yet, is that they are both champion rowers. These extracts begin at George’s first training session with the new school rowing team.

**Extract from *Reasons to be cheerful*: the script**

EXT. BOATHOUSE - RIVERBANK - DAY

George kneels next to a single seat boat at the edge of the river, checking its rigging. A shadow is cast over her.

COACH THOMPSON

Hi. Gloria is it?

GEORGE

Georgia. George.

COACH THOMPSON

Listen, we might break you in with a four oar. This is a single sculler. It takes a bit of getting used to.

GEORGE

I *am* a sculler and I don't do teams.

The coach is taken a back. Ann appears next to the coach.

ANN

You a sculler *Gloria*?

George glares at her. Ann and the coach exchange a look.

COACH THOMPSON

Look, I'm not doubting you, Georgie-

GEORGE

George.

COACH THOMPSON

But Australia's the second most litigious country in the world and our insurance problems... don't get me started... so, no see you row in a supervised team, no go out alone in single scull. Capice?

George fumes. Ann smiles.

COACH THOMPSON

Ann. Why don't you take Joyce out in a double for a minute and we'll take it from there. You go stroke.

Ann's smug smile drops. The girls are not pleased.

EXT. ON THE RIVER - DAY

On the river, Ann sits in the front of a two seater boat with George at her rear. They bob gently up and down with the river current.

ANN

You right Gloria?

GEORGE

Let's just do this shall we.

Ann's tone is deliberately patronising. George becomes increasingly annoyed.

ANN

There's just a few basic movements. First thing is, if I'm sitting in the front of the boat - I'm called the 'Stroke' and I determine the stroke speed. The most important thing to remember is, you have to match my pace. If you want to stop the boat moving you can put your oar into the water like this... or if you only do it on one side, it will turn the boat. In between strokes, we want to feather our oar, like this...

GEORGE (VO)

(SIMULTANEOUS TO ABOVE)

*It was hard to put my finger on, but there was something about her that really just... gave me the shits...*

CUT TO: *FANTASY FLASH:*

*Ann, in rowing kit plus tiara, waves to worshipping school girls. Suddenly Ninja-George (white karate outfit) drops from the sky in front of Ann. With one high-kick,*

she dislodges Ann's head. Ann's shocked head flies out of frame.

George shakes her head and stares at Ann. Ann's superior prattle continues.

ANN

You just turn it flat,  
parallel to the water and -

GEORGE

Look, spare me the Rowing for  
Dummies. I won the Open 1500  
at Head of the River in Sydney  
last year and I'm fucking  
freezing.

Ann spins to her and looks her full in the face. *BEAT.*

ANN

I won it down here.

George remains unimpressed until Ann breaks her penetrating gaze and turns back to face front - then George's expression goes 'WOW!'. Miffed, Ann prepares to row.

ANN

Fine then. Let's see shall we.

Ann begins to row. George quickly falls into stroke behind her. Slowly at first, then picking up speed. They are both clearly proficient. They pick up pace. Ann is surprised at the smoothness of their rowing. George glances up at Ann's back curiously. As they row faster it becomes evident that they move with the precision of a Swiss watch. The boat 'lifts' out of the water. Ann forces the pace. George stays right with her. Ann picks it up more. Straining, George matches her.

On the bank, the coach looks up from instructing a group of girls. He stops speaking to watch them sprint past.

In the boat, George and Ann stroke at a tremendous rate. Showing real exertion, Ann pushes the rhythm even harder. George meets the challenge.

On the bank, all the girls turn to watch them go past. The coach watches them grow tinier down the river. He slowly stands, transfixed... elated.

Ann and George tear down the river, matching each other perfectly, stroking and breathing fiercely. The bank slides past them. The oar cuts through water. They are in perfect physical and mental unison. Even through their exertion, both girls realise something extraordinary is happening. George appears half disturbed, half exhilarated.

Suddenly, with a final burst of speed, Ann bursts into delighted laughter and stops rowing. George, confused, pulls up as well. As the boat slows down, the girls lean forward catching their breath. After a moment, Ann turns to face George and the girls make eye contact. A strange, intimate, acknowledgement is made. George breaks the moment and looks away. They drift backwards for a long moment.

INT. BOATHOUSE - LOCKER ROOM - DAY

Grace, in a state of half undress, and another rowing mate, Christine, peer theatrically through the locker room door at George, who is in the boat room talking to the coach. George shakes her head resolutely.

CHRISTINE

(low)... I bet you a million million bucks she's on a sports scholarship...

GRACE

So totally.

The sound of a toilet flush. Ann walks out. The girls hastily 'act natural'.

ANN

You girls wanna go down to the Blue Train Saturday night? Ben and some of the guys are going.

Out in the boat room, the coach and George gesticulate. Mr Thompson throws his hands in the air and limps off.

CHRISTINE

Cool. What time?

ANN

After quads practice?... (sees Coach and George)... What gives?

GRACE

The new wunderkind says she's just doing singles.

Ann raises an eyebrow. George storms toward the change room. The girls disperse. George enters, heads straight to her locker and begins to change.

GRACE

Hey. Great rowing girl.

GEORGE

Ta.

CHRISTINE

Where did you get to row like that?

George shrugs. Grace and Christina exchange a frustrated look.

GRACE

(Sharp) Did they tell you somewhere they were going to charge by the word?

George looks at Grace, surprised.

GRACE

If you're going to be the new star of the rowing team you'll have to ditch the monosyllabism.

At the words 'new star' Ann glances at Grace then George.

GEORGE

('innocently') Why?

CHRISTINE

THAT is a monosyllable.

Unexpectedly, George smiles. It transforms her face.

GEORGE

So.

GRACE

Very funny.

CHRISTINE

(Smiles) Not.

GEORGE

All the big words are  
monosyllables. Life. Death. War.  
Peace. Love. Hate... Win.

GRACE

Lose... Sleep.

CHRISTINE

Food

GRACE

Sex.

Laughter. Ann watches George, reassessing her.

GRACE

... Hey. Come out with us  
after training on Saturday.

CHRISTINE

Yeh.

Ann watches George's reaction. There is none.

GEORGE

Nah...

CHRISTINE

Ann tell her.

Ann thinks for a moment.

ANN

(indifferent)

Sure. Come.

George slowly turns away from Ann and back to the  
business in her locker.

**Extract from *Reasons to be cheerful: the novel***

**From CHAPTER TWO**

A little bit later I was kneeling at the dock rigging up a single scull boat. This was the bit I liked. Just me and the river. Teams of girls were passing me in every direction carrying boats made for two, four and eight rowers. Just FYI, so there's no confusion,

a team of two rowers is called a 'pair' or a 'double', depending if they use one or two oars each. Using two oars is called 'sculling'. If each rower is using one oar they are a 'pair'. If they're using two oars, then they are a 'double', as in 'double sculls.' The same applies to 'fours' and 'quad sculls'. Eights only ever use one oar. I'm a sculler and I only ever do singles. You keeping up? You'll be tested on this later. Anyway, I'm about to get into the boat when a shadow falls over me. And I don't mean metaphorically.

'Georgina, isn't it?' I look up at the silhouette of the Coach standing over me.

'Georgia. *George*,' I say. *Seriously*. Is it so hard? I didn't bother to smile. His blinding tooth glare made up for the lack of mine.

'Have you done this before?' he said, leaving me no time to answer. 'Look, the single takes a bit of getting used to. Might be smart to break you in with a four. Okay? See those girls over there, if you just go and...' He pointed to a group of shivering Year Nines.

As I said. This day just had to be got through.

'I know what I'm doing,' I said. 'I'm a sculler. I don't do teams.'

I could see he was shocked at that. Probably it was my tone. I know I'm not exactly Miss Congeniality. At that moment, Captain Ann appeared next to the Coach. She smiled ever so sweetly down at me. I kept rigging, trying to ignore her.

'So you're a sculler, *Gloria*?'

The coach stepped in.

'Look, I'm not doubting you Georgie...'

'George.'

'But Australia is the second most litigious country in the world and our insurance problems – don't get me started. So, I don't want to put you off on your first day, but no, see, you row in a supervised team, no go out alone in sculler. Ooookay?' I knew there was no point arguing, but I just couldn't help myself. Steam came from my nostrils as I stood up.

'Look. I know what I'm doing. I don't need...'

'Ann,' he said, turning to the aforementioned, 'why don't you take Joyce out in a double for a few minutes and we'll take it from there. You go stroke.' Blondie wasn't expecting this. Her evil smile morphed into a look of horror. I would have enjoyed it, but my face was doing exactly the same thing.

'Actually, I was just about to go and help Martina with the fours,' she said.

Yeh. Go girl... Suddenly rowing fours with a bunch of Year Nines seemed like paradise.

'Do this first, then help Martina.' Thomo smiled at us both, having solved the situation to his, and only his, satisfaction. He limped away happily, leaving Blondie and me facing off. She was sooo not pleased.

So next thing I know I find myself sitting in the back of a double, listening to Blondie-locks harp on.

‘...just a few basic movements. First thing is, if I’m sitting in the front of the boat, I’m called the ‘Stroke’ and I determine the stroke speed. The most important thing to remember is you have to match my pace exactly. If you want to stop the boat moving you can square your oars into the water like this. Or, if you only do it on one side, it will turn the boat.’ She’d given this speech a hundred times before and she was deliberately stretching it out to irritate me. *Wasn’t she?* Surely she couldn’t be *this* annoying without trying.

‘You still with me, Gloria?’

‘Let’s just do this shall we,’ I growled. It was hard to put my finger on it, but there was something about her that really just, well, gave me the shits. Blondie’s voice became even more patronising.

‘In between strokes, we want to feather our oars, like this...’

Suddenly, I couldn’t help myself. I had a vision. I was a fighting Ninja and with one giant leap I snap-kicked Blondie’s head clear off the top of her body. It soared through the air and landed in front of a mass of screaming schoolgirls.

‘You just turn it flat, parallel to the water and...’

I shivered and came back to earth. I’m not normally a violent person.

‘Look, spare me the Rowing for Dummies,’ I said. ‘I won the Open single at Head of the River in Sydney last year and I’m fucking freezing.’ Yep. The truth was out.

There was a beat... then Blondie spun around and looked me full in the eyes. She was struck dumb. I could see she didn’t know whether to believe me. After a moment she spoke carefully.

‘I won it down here,’ she said.

‘Wow,’ was the first blinding thought in my head, but I hoped my face was showing something more like ‘Yeh, big deal.’ I doubt it. My second instant thought was, ‘I wonder what her time was.’

After another moment where we just sort of stared at each other, Blondie slowly turned back around and picked up her oars. That’s when my face really did go ‘Wow’, in the direction of her back. Of course.

‘Fine then,’ she said like sharpened steel. ‘Let’s see shall we.’

I picked up my oars and we started to row.

She picked up pace fast. It was easy to see that she was trying to test me. But it was no strain for me and I kept up with her easily. Obviously, that annoyed her, so she ramped up her stroke rate even more. I glanced up at her back. It told me nothing, but the sudden increase in stroke rate told me heaps. She was not happy, Jan. Instantly I was on to it. I matched her exactly, stoke for stroke. We were in perfect time. Come on, do your worst. I almost laughed. Too easy. If this was the best she could do... As

the boathouse moved away from us, I could see the girls and the Coach stand and look at us disappear down the river.

Ann upped the stroke rate again. I matched it, but now it was starting to test me. Not too much, mind you. But I was thinking to myself, yep, she really can row. We tore down the river at almost race pace. The boat lifted out of the water, in the way that it does when the rowers are working perfectly as a team. Reducing friction with the water. This was getting spooky. But still she had more in her and picked the pace up again. I followed, but now straining. I heard her breath as well. She grunted with the exertion. Me too. I was shocked, amazed at how perfectly my stroke matched hers. I wasn't used to team rowing but I had no trouble following her lead. It was as if her natural stroke was the twin of mine. Freaky. Don't think about it. Just row. Don't let her beat you.

Now we were both pulling hard. I'd never felt like this before. We were flying. Like two halves of one machine. She was amazing. She was like me. As good as me. Maybe. Strong. Fast. Accurate. I knew she was straining at the top of her game, wanting me to give in but I just wouldn't. I was sweating like a pig and my muscles were starting to fatigue. My chest hurt with every breath. But I could match her. We hurtled down the river. It felt incredible. Like we had been rowing together forever. Then, for a strange moment as stroke followed painful stroke, and we flew down the river, it wasn't like we were competing. It was like a union.

Ann stopped rowing. Instantly, I feathered my oars. The boat drifted backwards under its own momentum. I was in shock. What just happened? Then I heard a strange choking sound from in front. Was she hurt? I could hear her breath, like mine, was coming in huge gasps as she leaned forward over her oars. Slowly, she twisted around to face me. She was smiling. Then I realised – that sound, it was laughter. We were both breathing hard, unable to speak, but in between breaths she was laughing. Almost like, victoriously. I didn't get it. I felt confused. Out of my depth. Our eyes met. Hers exuberant. Mine reluctant. I looked away. We both sensed something magic has just happened.

I didn't want to know.

### ***From* CHAPTER THREE**

The damage was done.

I was for it now. I hadn't meant to show my hand so early, but it had been forced. I knew what came next, and as we stroked silently back to the boathouse I prepared myself for war. Later, it was reported that, as the coach watched Ann and I speed down the river, he stood slowly, raised an eye to heaven and blessed himself. Perhaps he had visions of rowing Nirvana. His mistake. This wasn't the first time I'd faced the enemy.

Sure enough, as soon as I stepped foot in the boatshed, Thomo cornered me and started arranging my rowing future. I was to do double sculls or quads. I cut him off at the first charge.

'I don't do teams.' I tried to move past him, but he kept talking at me.

Across the busy boathouse, I could see Ann's friend G-R-A-C-E peering out the locker room door at me. Another tall, half-dressed friend joined her, gawking. They couldn't hear what I was saying but my body language must have been signaling it loud and clear. Thomo was getting more and more red in the face as his every attempt at 'reason' failed. Finally, I made like a clear stop-like gesture at him. Talk to the hand, brother.

'No. I will not do it. I don't do teams. I do just the single scull. I do one race. That's why I win. If you don't like it, I can row with another team.'

I stared him out. He pretty much retreated at that. He could see the battle was lost. I could have told him that straight up and saved him all the effort. I headed towards the locker room, where I would have bet a million bucks they were talking about me... Sigh.

I walked into the locker room and stripped off my t-shirt, crossing straight to my locker. Yep. You could've heard a pin drop. I could feel eyes burning into my back as I got stuck into the business of getting the hell out of there. Someone cleared her throat.

'Hey. Great rowing, girl.'

Arrogant, I know. But I assumed they were talking to me. I nodded slightly and kept dressing.

'Where did you learn to row like that?'

It was the tall girl. Sadly for her, up close, she looked more like a horse than a proper human. But you can't hold that against someone. Footsteps approached and echoed around the room. Ann strode in, putting away her mobile phone. She glanced up at Grace and Black Beauty.

'Hey, Christine. Gracie. Do you want to go down to the Blue Train Saturday night? Ben and some of the other guys are going... Oh.' She saw me. She turned casually to her locker.

'Cool. What time?' said Grace.

'After quads training.'

'Great,' said Christine. Then she turned back to me. Christine must have somehow missed the undercurrent.

'So where *did* you learn to row like that?' she demanded.

'Schools. Clubs.' I shrugged and kept about my business.

Grace butted in.

'Did they tell you somewhere that they were going to charge by the word?'

This so surprised me it almost made me laugh.

'Well, if you're going to be the new star of the rowing team you'll have to ditch the monosyllabism,' she said. At this, I saw Ann dart a look at Grace then at me. Grace didn't notice.

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘That’s a monosyllable,’ Christine replied.

‘So?’

‘Very funny,’ said Grace.

‘Not,’ said Christine.

I smiled slightly. I know it’s against my religion. But I did.

‘All the big words are monosyllables,’ I said. ‘Life. Death. War. Peace. Love. Hate. God... Race.’ I thought for a moment. ‘Win.’

‘Lose,’ added Grace.

‘Sleep. Food,’ said Christine.

‘Sex,’ laughed Grace.

The two of them laughed at how clever we all were. I could see Ann wasn’t laughing. She was looking at me and *thinking*. I could hear the cogs whirring. Grace piped up.

‘Hey. Come out with us after practice on Saturday.’

‘Yeh,’ Christine agreed.

I glanced at Ann. Shouldn’t have, damn it! But I did it before I had time to stop myself. She said nothing and turned casually away.

‘Nah...’ I said. I would have said that anyway.

‘Ann tell her,’ urged Grace. After all, Ann *was* Ruler of the Universe.

Ann turned and looked at me. Expressionless. She took her time to speak.

‘Sure. Come,’ she said indifferently, then turned back to her locker and pulled off her T-shirt.

### **List of works cited**

Baetens, Jan 2010 ‘Expanding the field of constraint: novelization as an example of multiply constrained writing’ *Poetics today* 31:1 (Spring), 51-79

Parody, Clare 2011 ‘Franchising/adaptation’ *Adaptation* 4:2, 210-8

## **Research Statement**

### ***Research background***

Adaptation Studies is a well established area for scholarly research. However, its focus has traditionally involved a paradigm of ‘adaptation’ from book to screen. This writing project explores the ‘reverse adaptation’ of a feature-film screenplay to a novel.

My research has two foci: ‘reverse adaptation’, firstly, from a practitioner’s point of view, as a creative writing process; and secondly, as a portal through which to understand the current wider landscape of creative content transfer across media.

### ***Research contribution***

Virtually no scholarly research exists into ‘reverse adaptation’, and it is rarely professionally seen. This research first acknowledges then moves beyond commercial ‘novelisations’, in as much as ‘reverse adaptation’ attempts to create a literary, ‘stand-alone’ novel, not dependent upon its progenitor for its success.

This project identifies key areas of interest in adapting story and character from script to novel; issues such as use of ‘tense’ (screenplays are invariably in the present tense), word count and word choice, internal monologues and character history, as well as image- and action-based writing. It also identifies seminal differences in the *raison d’être* of each creative product.

### ***Research significance***

This research moves past an out-dated notion of adaptation as solely text-to-screen, by using ‘reverse adaptation’ as a portal through which to focus enquiry upon the wildfire of adaptation, which is today’s storytelling landscape. My work forms a chapter in the book *New ideas for the writing arts: practice, culture, literature*, published in 2013 by Cambridge Scholars Press, edited by Graeme Harper.