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### Screen to Script: A Study of *Fireproof*

#### Abstract

Emotions, opinions, values, culture, etc. need a medium to express it may be either oral, written or visual medium. Literature being the written or the print medium serves as a tool to express a variety of issues and happenings. When facts are expressed through stories, they reach the readers effectively. Stories were first communicated orally throughout history before the written text. In this mode of storytelling, the speaker is able to use tone, pitch, tempo and body language to shape the content of the story. In its written form, the storyteller's tone is weaker which enhances the freedom of interpretation for the reader. Another form of storytelling developed through films, particularly films adapted from novels. Due to the high interest shown to the films, literature is in an unstable state. Hence, in order

to sustain literature, the writers have entered the arena of novelization enhancing and entertaining the readers through words.

Art is defined as a thing of beauty in itself or as a symbolic statement of meaning. Art in its varied forms includes music, literature, film, photography, sculpture, and paintings. The filmmakers rely on images and visuals whereas writers rely on words. The writers through their descriptive writing describe a person, place or thing in such a way that a picture is formed in the reader's mind. In the present scenario, film novelizations have entered the literary arena. The novelists transform the screenplay of a film to a novel capturing the essence of the film. Novelizations of films are challenging as the writer has a difficult job of capturing the reader's mind that has already been filled with the visuals of the film.

The present world is advanced in technology and the people are attracted to and are interested in the visual medium. Any information that one wants to communicate can be better communicated in the form of images. Due to the various merits of the visual medium, books are commonly adapted as films and television series. But now the writers have found a new platform under the banner of novelization to exhibit their creative writing by capturing the visuals and putting them back in the form of words. They novelize films thus, keeping literature more stable and alive.

Both the Christian writers and filmmakers try to capture the interest of the public through the print and celluloid media respectively to present their values through stories. Hence, following this storytelling strategy, the Kendrick Brothers have made a brilliant attempt by incorporating the theological view of marriage into a fictional story in their film *Fireproof*. And this film has been beautifully novelized by Eric Wilson.

*Fireproof* is a 2008 American Christian film released by Samuel Goldwyn Films and Affirm Films, directed by Alex Kendrick, who co-wrote and co-produced it with Stephen Kendrick. The film stars Kirk Cameron, Erin Bethea and Ken Bevel in their

lead roles. The film was successful at the box office, becoming a surprise hit, debuting at No. 4 and becoming the highest-grossing independent film of 2008, grossing over \$33,000,000. It received awards from evangelical Christian organizations, including the Best Feature Film award at the 2009 San Antonio Independent Christian Film Festival.

*Fireproof* was filmed during October and December 2007 in sixteen locations, all of which were donated. Craig Von Buseck of the Christian Broadcasting Network said that the film was “beautifully shot in and around Albany, Georgia, home to Sherwood Baptist Church.” The Albany Fire Department donated its fire station locations, trucks and even some of its crew for use during the filming. The film’s supporting cast also included nearly 1,200 volunteers from Sherwood Baptist Church. Along with them were a professional film crew of eight who worked below rate.

The marriage relationship is not appreciated or taken very seriously in the present materialistic society. The easy thing to do when things get difficult is to divorce. Both the novel and the film are an attempt to challenge the culture’s perspective on marriage. There are some great action sequences and moments of suspense throughout but, the heart of this story is found in Caleb’s resolve to save his marriage and to fight for the woman he loves.

Marriages will fall apart if love is not expressed. This remains the key theme of the film. The screenplay writers Alex Kendrick and Stephen Kendrick bring this theme in the background of Christian faith. Alex Kendrick says, “All we wanted to do was to make a movie that honoured marriage, and how faith can restore it. It has struck a chord I don’t think anyone expected” (qtd. in Bowles). With a low budget of \$500,000 the film has earned \$6.8 million at the box office in the opening weekend becoming a surprise hit.

Even during the production stage, the film gained good support from the lay people. The film was filmed with a single camera and almost all the locations used in the film like the house that was on fire, the hospital, the houses, the fire station, etc. are existing places that

were donated for filming. The only area constructed specifically for the film was the area where Caleb crawls when he rescues a little girl from a house that is on fire, which was not part of the actual house. Cameron comments on the film saying, “*Fireproof* was never marketed as a Christian movie. This is a movie about marriage. . . . The fact is, though, the gospel is presented, is done well, and it’s a central part of the storyline” (qtd. in Marrapodi).

The Kendrick Brothers sought Eric Wilson to novelize their film *Fireproof* and Wilson has done justice to the film. Eric Wilson is a New York Times bestselling author, known for novels that explore earth’s tension between heaven and hell. Wilson was born in California and raised in Oregon, and now lives in Nashville, Tennessee. He published his first book in 2004 and since then, he has had at least one novel published each year. He is a *New York Times* bestseller, Retailers Choice Award Winner and his name is listed in *Who’s Who in America*.

Wilson’s *Fireproof* brings in all the thematic content of the film *Fireproof*. The film was produced as an attempt to bring out the realities of marriage life and the issues regarding divorce and pornography. The book, *The Love Dare* is used as a tool to rescue the marriage of Caleb and Catherine Holt. *The Love Dare* serves as a plot device in the film. The film is about how God dared to love the humankind and how one should dare to practice that kind of love with the people around them.

Wilson beautifully highlights the central theme and the nature of the characters through his descriptive writing. The reason that descriptive writing is so important in a novel is that novels, unlike films are not visuals. On watching a film, all the sensory work is done for the viewers by a camera and a microphone. But, only words work in a novel. Hence, it is important to use words to help the reader see, hear, smell, taste and touch. Novels hold one huge advantage over the big screen that is, the power of the human imagination. The readers

are able to paint a picture of a particular character in their minds using certain details that is given by the writer.

When a film is novelized, the writer has to multiply the 20,000 to 25,000 words of screenplay to at least 60,000 words. In order to multiply the words, the writer has to invent new scenes that add flavour to the main plot of the film and the writer also adds passages that describe the situations, setting and characters. The writers make a challenging attempt when they write a novelization of a successful film.

Wilson, in his *Fireproof*, has flawlessly captured the visuals and put them in the form of words. The costumes of the characters are described in the novel exactly as they appear in the film. The settings like the Phoebe Putney Memorial Hospital, the Albany Fire Department, Catherine and Caleb's house are picturesquely brought out in the novel. The characters in the novel seem to be real and lively as Wilson has given life and personality to the characters through his descriptive words. He has described the character John Holt as he is presented in the film.

The character Mr. Rudolph, Caleb's neighbour is realistically presented in the novel. Whenever Caleb fights with Catherine, he comes out of his house and hits the garbage container with his baseball bat to relieve his frustration. The dialogues between Mr. Rudolph and Caleb sound real. In the film too, the conversation is realistically pictured.

Wilson has picturesquely presented the house of Captain Campbell though the exterior of the house is a different building. The interior of both Caleb's and Catherine's parents' house were shot in different rooms of the same house that served as a setting for Caleb and Catherine's house. The summer camp with a wooden cross is the place where Caleb accepts Christ in his life. The place looks calm and is in the midst of woods. Wilson has captured the true beauty of the place from the film.

The film presents two different portrayals of telephone conversations. The words spoken by the person on the other side of the phone are not present in the film but, the conversation is perfectly brought out in the novel. For instance, in certain scenes where Caleb speaks over the phone to his father John Holt, the dialogues of John are not open to the viewers in the film. The viewers have to understand and assume the conversation through Caleb's replies over the phone. But, in the novel both Caleb's and John's dialogues are evident as it has been described and presented to the readers in a more literal manner. Similarly, in the telephone conversation that takes place between Caleb and the florist, only Caleb's dialogues are presented in the film. But, in the novel the dialogues of the florist have also been presented to the readers.

The writers, who novelize films, add more to the scenes that are in the film. Wilson has added certain scenes to add flavour to the main plot and theme of the story. Though he has added scenes to the original screenplay, he has not changed the original scenes of the screenplay. The author presents Joy Campbell with a small chalkboard on her lap through which she communicates whereas, in the film Joy Campbell remains dumb as the stroke affected her ability to communicate but, there is no hint about the chalkboard in the film. The novel also mentions about 'Wheel of Fortune', a television show for the dumb whereas, the film makes no such mention of this show.

Robin Cates, Catherine's co-worker and friend visits Catherine at her home and gives her the scented candles. Robin flips through the wedding album of Caleb and Catherine. Seeing the pictures of the happy couple, Robin asks Catherine, ". . . if you could go back to your wedding day and talk to yourself, what would you say?" (Wilson 36). Hearing this question, Caleb eavesdrops on them to hear Catherine's answer. Catherine replies that she would tell herself not to marry Caleb and the answer shocks Caleb. This part of the story is

not in the original screenplay but, it adds to the theme by relating how their seven years of marriage life is on fire.

Wilson adds a lot of scenes and character development that are not found in the film. The relationship between Caleb and Catherine seems to be realistic. The firefighting scenes excite the readers. Wilson has a knack of capturing what is on screen and making it richer and deeper in its written form. The book presents certain moments that are not featured in the film and they work beautifully in the written form. Wilson has captured the heart of the film and has transposed it in this novel.

There is a scene in the novel where Caleb tucks his savings in an envelope and seals it. The author does not disclose the purpose for which Caleb seals the money in an envelope at this point. Wilson stirs the interest and curiosity of the readers by creating a twist or suspense in the scene that is disclosed only towards the end of the story. This suspense part is not from the original screenplay of the film. The suspense is maintained in a perfect manner by the author.

Wilson has done a wonderful job by staying true to the film's storyline, while adding some minor scenes and characters that served well to enhance the original screenplay and its thematic elements. The emotions of the characters are brought out effectively in the novel. The novelization of the film has gained support from the readers. The readers find the novel to be inspiring. The novel takes the readers deep into Caleb's story. The readers get to know more about John Holt, Michael Simmons and the life that Caleb experiences at his work place.

In literary adaptation, the main aim of comparing the two media is based on the success of the film to capture the vital meaning and values of the novel thus, making it a successful film. Similarly, in film novelization the main aim of comparing the two media is based on the success of the novel to capture the vital meaning and values of the film. Eric



Wilson has made a challenging and brilliant attempt in novelizing the film *Fireproof* by capturing the vital meaning and values of the film. The scenes and descriptions that are created by Wilson add more life to the main plot and central theme of the film. The award and accolades won by the novel and the millions of copies of the novel that have been sold out show the positive acceptance of the novelization by the readers and its success. As an art, literature is the organization of words to give pleasure and through them it elevates and transforms experience. Hence, writers help to sustain literature by novelizations.

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