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## Anna Karenina: Read the Book, Skip the Movie

By: Ben W. Heineman Jr.  
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*Tolstoy's epic novel reveled in the humanity of its characters. Alas, that quality was lost in translation to the screen.*



For the holidays, buy someone you care about deeply Tolstoy's novel, *Anna Karenina*. Don't settle for silver or bronze - or modern dress - when you can give the purest gold. But do not go to *Anna Karenina*, the current movie, thinking you will get a two-hour essence of the novel. Joe Wright's film, while perhaps interesting in its own terms, is a perversion of one of the world's great books.

Once you have started the novel, you will be completely transported into a complex world that will enthrall, inspire, and awe you and ultimately break your heart. At the center is one of the great heroines of literature. You will fall in love with Anna as she leaves a cold marriage with a well-to-do Russian bureaucrat (Alexei Karenin) for a passionate affair with a young military officer (Count Vronsky), which evolves into pregnancy, societal recrimination, separation from the son she had with Karenin, moments of ecstasy with Vronsky, and then a slow spiral into guilt, insecurity, jealousy, and, ultimately, death. Surrounding the love triangle are the two contrasting marriages

of Anna's brother, Stiva, and his wife, Dolly, and Dolly's sister Kitty and the landowner Levin. They are mirrors within mirrors, creating a sequential and dynamic series of vivid comparisons and reflections.

*Anna Karenina* is on lists of the top ten novels of all time (get the new Viking translation by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky). Ask anyone who has read it, and it will be among his or her favorite novels, if not at the top of the list. The reasons are many. But at the core is Tolstoy's genius at creating a universal world we are allowed to enter: of engaging people in a vivid but highly structured society who reflect the emotions, thoughts, motives, unconscious drives, conflicting actions, mistakes, happiness and sadness that is as close as we will ever come in literature to the totality of the human comedy (marriage) and the human tragedy (death). Shakespeare is Tolstoyean.

*Anna Karenina*, the film, ostensibly follows the arc of the novel, and the screenplay by Tom Stoppard includes many of the main characters and main scenes. But it is all slick surface. The film is a kaleidoscope of arresting visuals - most set in a faux theater to give the film an operatic feel, some using real landscapes, all set to an original score. The set pieces are stunning, exemplified by an opening scene at a ball where Vronsky acts with indifference to Kitty, who has come with high expectations of a relationship and engages in a waltz of seduction with Anna. But the remarkable visual, often surreal, images obscure the essence of the novel: the humanity of character. Most remarkable is that Keira Knightly's Anna is superficial, selfish, and, hard as this is to achieve, unsympathetic. Vronsky is a pretty boy lacking in dashing and dangerous masculinity. And all the other characters who are in the great novel here have no depth, no development. They are literally cartoonish, made to utter but a few lines to move along the fast-paced tableaux. (The unpretentious Levin of the countryside, often seen as Tolstoy's alter-ego, is a scythe-swinging shadow of a real character.)

The one exception, oddly enough, is Karenin, played with a stoic complexity by Jude Law. He alone is allowed to change during the film, and he alone elicits sympathy, because he is not just an image but, as both the cause and victim of Anna's transformation has some semblance of real personhood. One of Stoppard's earliest plays was *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966), which told *Hamlet* from the point of view of two minor courtiers. It is almost as if Stoppard is returning to that technique: looking primarily at *Anna* from a completely different angle - the cold husband whose lack of love drives the central dramatic action of the novel. The film could have been titled *Alexei Karenin*, not *Anna Karenina*.

What kind of *Anna* is it, then, which is largely images and surfaces, with little humanity, and where, in the little humanity that exists, Karenin is more sympathetic than Anna?

The film does raise the age-old argument about why and how novels can be - should be - translated into film. The modern debate begins with George Bluestone's provocative 1957 book, *Novels Into Film*, reissued by Johns Hopkins University Press 2003. A.O. Scott's [review](#) in *The New York Times* damns more literal adaptations of novels like Wright's earlier *Pride and Prejudice*, with Knightly taking a wonderful turn as Elizabeth

Bennet. He praises this *Anna*, the ninth film version: "It is risky and ambitious enough to count as an act of artistic hubris, and confident enough to triumph on its own slightly - wonderfully - crazy terms. Pious Tolstoyans may knit their brows about the stylistic liberties..."

I knit my brow not because of stylistic liberties but because the film is so grossly divorced from the novel. For those who have never read *Anna*, Wright's movie could be viewed as an interesting piece of film-making, with striking visuals and dramatic rhythms. Symbolism replacing story. Even on its own terms, however, I found it to be directorial solipsism - look at me and all the film techniques I have employed - and tedious and empty. But for those who have read *Anna*, at least for me, the film is quite horrible, destroying, not just missing, the essence of a wonderful work of literature. For example, we can reflect endlessly on the contrast between Anna and Kitty. We love Anna for her passion and her pain and her understandable if doomed yearning for vibrancy in her life, while we admire Kitty for her strength and steadfastness and her old-fashioned virtue.

Of course, films of novels cannot faithfully replicate the whole work. Nor do they have to be slavish Cliff Notes. But they can, in the unique way of movies and in a variety of possible styles, convey the essence of the novel and its characters. Otherwise why bother? This movie is far more about Joe Wright and Tom Stoppard than about Tolstoy's masterpiece. Often, films of novels inspire people to go read the original work. Not here. My holiday advice: buy the novel as a true gift for those you love. And skip the movie.

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