

### “Field of Dreams”

Baseball movies have become almost a genre of their own, a sub-genre of sports movies. There’s the great comedy (*Major League*), the epic drama (*The Natural*), the family-friendly film (*The Sandlot*), not to mention *The Rookie*, *A League of their Own*, *Bull Durham*, and *The Bad News Bears*. All of these are considered classics by baseball fans, who quote them early and often during games. How many times has a pitcher thrown a wild pitch and had someone yell, “juuu-u-u-st a bit outside?”

*Field of Dreams* is unique, and because of that, it may be the most recognized of all these movies. What makes it unique is that while baseball is an obvious theme, the protagonist is not a baseball player nor a coach, unlike the rest of these movies. The movie departs so much from the actual game of baseball that screenwriter/director Phil Alden Robinson, in the DVD commentary, says that he never considered the film to be about baseball (*Field of Dreams*, DVD), and the American Film Institute names it the sixth-best fantasy film of all-time (AFI), and it is the only baseball-themed movie ever nominated for an Oscar for Best Picture (1989).

The adaptation of the book, *Shoeless Joe*, into the movie that became *Field of Dreams* is a faithful adaptation, in terms of the themes and the general plot. The biggest difference, apart from taking it from the first-person book into a third-person film, is the change of the second protagonist from J.D. Salinger to Terrance Mann. One is, of course, one of the most famous authors to have ever lived; the other is a fictional creation made for the movie because Salinger didn’t want his name or likeness associated with a fictional movie. The adaptation of that central character is a perfect example of how

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screenwriters must make changes when adapting for the screen, because of Salinger’s objection, the way the role was written with a new actor (James Earl Jones) in mind, and in the role of the “writer” character in the lead protagonist (Ray, played by Kevin Costner)’s journey to self-discovery.

To begin with, Robinson, knowing that Salinger would not sign off on his name being used, faced the difficult task of replacing the character, but that is a big difference between cinema and novels. A screenwriter adapting real people for the screen always has to deal with their objections, and often legal issues stemming from them. The role of Salinger in *Shoeless Joe* is a major one, and so eliminating that role would have drastically altered the adaptation. To further complicate things, the role was so vividly Salinger that it would be difficult to see anyone but him as that character.

“Salinger, as almost everyone knows, has been holed-up like a badger, on an isolated hilltop in New Hampshire, for over twenty-five years. He has published nothing since a story in *The New Yorker* in 1965. He virtually never gives interviews, guards his privacy as if it were a virgin bride, even refuses to let his stories be anthologized (Kinsella 32-33).”

This excerpt is how W.P. Kinsella first describes J.D. Salinger in the novel. Anyone familiar at all with Salinger’s reclusive lifestyle recognizes that description as being fairly accurate of the real man. Phil Robinson made, then, the wise decision to simply rename the character for the movie, and thus, Terrance Mann was born.

In creating the character of Terrance Mann, Robinson says in the commentary that he had James Earl Jones in mind (Field of Dreams, DVD) for the role. While Jones is

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obviously not Salinger, he plays the role of a reclusive author very well, in large part to how Robinson writes the role, especially his entrance into the screenplay:

“Ray turns to the storefront door. Instead of a buzzer, there is a long wire with a weight on its end hanging from a hole at the top of the door. Next to the wire is a handwritten note taped to the door, which reads: "You better have a goddamn good reason for ringing this bell." Ray laughs. This guy is great. He pulls on the wire. On the other side of the door, a bell rings. Ray has to struggle to control his nervousness. He takes a breath. He hears footsteps inside, approaching the door. He cannot help but smile with delight at the thought of meeting one of his cultural heroes. The door opens. Terence Mann is menacingly huge. He glares at Ray and roars:

**MANN** Who the fuck are you??? (Robinson 51)

This entrance is wildly different from Salinger’s first physical appearance in the novel, when Ray finds him getting out of his car outside his home. He describes him as “a tall graying man. He walks confidently, even a little arrogantly. (Kinsella 60).

Salinger’s first lines are much more polite: “What can I do you for,” he asks Ray (Kinsella 60).

What Jones and Robinson bring to the character are a physical, intimidating presence for Ray to confront, which is a bold idea. Playing it like the more guarded, shy Salinger in the book is both less interesting, but also doesn’t show a movie viewer what this man is hiding as well as his violent, angry defense mechanisms do. It also sets up a much more revealing character arc; Terrance Mann’s willingness to open up to Ray about his own dreams, the central theme of the narrative, is juxtaposed with him letting his guard down. Mann goes from angry and mean to warm and playful by the end of the

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movie, culminating in the famous “people will come” speech at the end of the film, which was made all the more impactful because it was read by the man who also voiced Mufasa and Darth Vader. Writing the part as such creates another obstacle for Ray, as Mann is not only lying to Ray and withholding information, but instills a certain degree of fear into him.

Speaking of that famous speech at the end, the role of the writer character in both the novel and the screenplay/film is so incredibly important. In the novel, Ray’s last line is “take care of my friend,” a request of Shoeless Joe regarding J.D. Salinger. Salinger is the sidekick every hero needs, a recluse who becomes a companion to Ray in his journey of self-discovery (Kinsella 264). The relationship is further amplified by the fact that Salinger used the names of Ray Kinsella and his brother Richard (nonexistent in the adaptation) as characters in two of his stories, and Ray believes that they are somehow magically linked and destined to meet.

While many of the specific plot points revolving Terrance Man are different than those in the book, like Ray hearing his name at a PTA meeting versus seeing a picture of Salinger, the role is still just as big, and in fact it becomes even bigger in the moral and emotional arc of Ray’s character, despite James Earl Jones not appearing until the midpoint of the screenplay/film.

The climactic scene of the movie, like the book, is when Ray decides not to sell his farm. In the novel, that decision is entirely Ray’s, but in the movie, the decision is inspired by that speech Jones gives:

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“People will come, Ray. They'll come to Iowa for reasons they can't even fathom. They'll turn up your driveway, not knowing for sure why they're doing it, and arrive at your door, innocent as children, longing for the past. 'Of course we won't mind if you look around,' you'll say. 'It's only twenty dollars per person.' And they'll pass over the money without even looking at it. For it is money they have, and peace they lack. They'll walk out to the bleachers and sit in shirtsleeves in the perfect evening, or they'll find they have reserved seats somewhere in the grandstand or along one of the baselines wherever they sat when they were children and cheered their heroes. They'll watch the game, and it will be as if they'd dipped themselves in magic waters. The memories will be so thick they'll have to brush them away from their faces. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It's been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt, and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game... it's a piece of our past. It reminds us of all that once was good. And that could be again. People will come. People will most definitely come (Robinson 102).”

Deciding to rewrite and move this speech to before Ray's decision (it was after it in the novel), Robinson makes Mann the active character that James Earl Jones so beautifully portrays in every scene leading up to this moment, versus the more passive Salinger in the novel. The payoff is then in the famous closing scene, when Ray realizes that his “Field of Dreams” was not meant for this active, aggressive Mann, nor was it meant for Shoeless Joe, the titular character of the novel, nor was it meant for the 1919 Black Sox or Moonlight Graham, but it was Ray's actions all along that were helping him reach his unspoken goal of seeing his father again. This only happens after Mann, having given his advice to Ray, disappears with Joe into the heavenly cornfield beyond the outfield grass and vows to write again and see his beloved Polo Grounds. Mann, like

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Salinger in the book, was not only a friend and companion to Ray, but by realizing his own dreams, is a symbol of Ray’s quest to both discover and realize his inner dream.

In conclusion, the adaptation of J.D. Salinger’s character from the W.P. Kinsella novel to the screenplay by Phil Alden Robinson, where he becomes Terrance Mann, shows a masterful job of turning what was a decent book into an Academy-Award nominated film. Robinson was able to maintain the “reclusive author” character despite Salinger’s objections in using his name, while writing it for and tweaking it for the more physically and vocally powerful presence of James Earl Jones, and actually increasing the character’s already major role in the story.

In the long run, the result was not only a polished, award-winning film, but a memorable and lasting performance by James Earl Jones as the reclusive author Terrance Mann. As much as we quote “there’s no crying in baseball,” or play “Wild Thing” when a relief pitcher enters the game, we recite excerpts of the “people will come” speech and think of that deep booming voice telling us not to sell our baseball field.

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