

LIST

## Five Authors Who Adapted Others' Stories (Plus Their Own)

**Randee Dawn**Wed May 31, 2023 10:00am | [2 comments](#) | [Favorite This](#)

Here's a sad truth about writing for most authors: This is not a lucrative business. Years can go by between publications, and there's never a guarantee anyone will end up earning royalties on their books. So it's no wonder that several legends of speculative fiction have cast their gaze toward Hollywood over the years...and took up jobs penning screenplays and teleplays for books and stories written by *other* authors. The five authors we're highlighting below wrote their own successful works of science fiction, fantasy, or horror, but also adapted books and stories originally penned by other writers for both the big and small screen (and of course, you'll note some overlap with [this previous article](#), where we looked at six authors who'd done well adapting their own works).

So without further ado, here are some famous names you'll definitely recognize... and some of the scripts they wrote that you might not know they had anything to do with!

## Richard Matheson

The prolific Matheson, who died in 2013, is known for adapting his own fiction as well the works of others for both film and television. His self-adapted works range from 1957's *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (original novel: *The Shrinking Man*) to 1971's feature *Duel* (directed by a young Steven Spielberg) and 1980's *Somewhere in Time* (original 1975 novel: *Bid Time Return*).

But he spent nearly as much (if not more) time writing scripts for shows like *The Twilight Zone* and *Amazing Stories* while adapting others' works, including five tales from Edgar Allan Poe for Roger Corman's films (including 1960's *House of Usher*, 1961's *The Pit and the Pendulum* and 1963's *The Raven*). Matheson also adapted Jeff Rice's then-unpublished novel *The Kolchack Papers* as 1972's *The Night Stalker*, and found his works popular for movie adaptations he wasn't directly involved in (like 2011's *Real Steel*, based on his 1956 short story "Steel").

"[My dad] was a very economical and efficient storyteller. He used to describe what he thought was a good piece of writing as 'it's as clean as a hound's tooth,'" his son Christopher Matheson [told Wired's "Geek's Guide to the Galaxy" podcast](#) in 2022. "His stuff is sometimes...just bang-bang-bang-bang. And that can make for a pretty good movie because with a movie, you don't have that long.... And so his already lean and economical stories lend themselves really well to film. It's astounding how many movies have been

made from his stories.”

## Ray Bradbury

Few writers attain the kind of popularity and platform Bradbury had, from which he was able to showcase his fiction—he even created an entire series called *The Ray Bradbury Theater*, an anthology show that ran from 1985–1992 in which he wrote all 65 episodes based on his short stories or novels. Additionally, Bradbury adapted his 1962 novel into a 1983 film, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*; the novel had originally started out as a screenplay in 1958, that itself was adapted from his 1948 short story “The Black Ferris.” Bradbury also earned an Emmy for adapting his 1972 novel *The Halloween Tree* for TV in 1993.

Of course, he worked on some other projects along the way: Bradbury famously adapted Herman Melville’s 1851 classic *Moby Dick* in 1956 for director John Huston. He admitted to Huston early on that he’d **never been able** to make it through the book before, so the director gave him a weekend to read as much as he could—then hired him. But the two men had a fractious relationship on set, a clash that inspired future Bradbury stories and the 1992 novel *Green Shadows, White Whale*. Perhaps that experience soured him on any future

adaptations of others' work: As he admitted in a 1996 [interview](#) in *Playboy* magazine, he turned down Gene Roddenberry when the *Star Trek* creator asked him to write some scripts. "I've never had the ability to adapt other people's ideas into any sensible form," he admitted.

## William Goldman

The man who brought us the screenplay for *The Princess Bride* in 1984 (based, of course, on his own 1973 novel *The Princess Bride: S. Morgenstern's Classic Tale of True Love and High Adventure, The "Good Parts" Version*) had it both ways in Hollywood: Not only was he a prolific adapter of his own works, he tackled many others' stories as a screenwriter—and ended up with two Academy Awards. Indeed, one of those Oscars was for adapting someone else's work—Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward's 1974 non-fiction book *All the President's Men*—after which Goldman went on to adapt other books like 1966's *Harper* (based on Ross Macdonald's 1949 novel *The Moving Target*); 1975's *The Stepford Wives* (based on Ira Levin's 1972 novel); and 1990s' *Misery* (based on Stephen King's 1987 novel)

"Screenplay writing is not an art form," he said in *Publisher's Weekly* in 1983 (as quoted in Goldman's [obituary in \*The New York Times\*](#)). "It's a skill; it's carpentry; it's structure. I don't

mean to knock it—it ain't easy. But if it's all you do, if you only write screenplays, it is ultimately denigrating to the soul. You may get lucky and get rich, but you sure won't get happy."

## Leigh Brackett

The number of women writers of speculative fiction who went on to adapt screenplays of any genre in Hollywood is embarrassingly tiny. (Cue hive mind to prove me wrong in the comments, please!) Harriet Frank Jr. published a single science fiction novella ("The Man from Saturn" in *Amazing Stories* in 1953) before going on to write screenplays for a number of films (including adaptations of stories by Faulkner and Elmore Leonard), though no science fiction or fantasy movies. More recently, Hugo-winner Charlie Jane Anders served as a writer on the TV adaptation of *Y: The Last Man*. But Brackett is probably the best known example. The "queen of the space opera," as Gizmodo [wrote](#) in 2015, Brackett published stories and novels throughout the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century and was still being published in the 1970s. She won a Retro Hugo for best novel (*Shadow over Mars*) in 2020, and was known for mentoring up-and-coming authors (notably Ray Bradbury).

Brackett's screenplays (usually credited along with other writers) include films like *Rio*

*Bravo* (with Jules Furthman and B.H. McCampbell), *The Big Sleep* (which she co-wrote with William Faulkner and Jules Furthman), and her solo-penned *The Long Goodbye*. Her first screenplay, 1945's *The Vampire's Ghost* (written with John K. Butler) was classic horror; her final, for *The Empire Strikes Back*, was co-written with George Lucas and Lawrence Kasdan in 1980. Reportedly she delivered a screenplay that George Lucas had asked her to write shortly before she died of cancer; Lucas ultimately rewrote the drafts (maybe he didn't like the character of Yoda originally being called "Buffy," as Den of Geek [reported](#) in 2021) and asked Kasdan to pump up the dialogue; her name was added on as a co-writer of the final script in tribute to her efforts.

## Roald Dahl

Dahl's books are among the most beloved of all children's tales—*Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (1964), *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (1970), *Matilda* (1988), and *The Witches* (1983), just to name a few—and his adult short stories were frequently adapted for anthology TV series like *Alfred Hitchcock Presents* and *Tales of the Unexpected*. However, Dahl wasn't the easiest person to work with when it came to film adaptations. Initially he was set to write the screenplay for what would become 1971's *Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory*, but by the time the film was starting production he hadn't delivered the script. Dahl got all the credit

in the end, but screenwriter David Seltzer was responsible for about 30 percent of the final script (including some of the songs).

Dahl also adapted some of his friend Ian Fleming's works, including the 1967 James Bond movie *You Only Live Twice* (a 1964 novel Dahl referred to as "Fleming's worst book") and 1968's *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* (adapted from Fleming's 1964 children's book *Chitty-Chitty-Bang-Bang: The Magical Car*). As [he told](#) Lisa Tuttle in *The Twilight Zone Magazine* in 1983, "I hate film directors. The only nice experience I had was doing a James Bond film... They left you alone and they followed the script. It was lovely. *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang* was ghastly. Once you get a rotten director, or an egocentric director, you're dead. But they pay a lot, so you take the money and run."

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Who are your other favorite examples of speculative fiction authors that have adapted other genre stories for the big and small screen? Let us know in the comments below!

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