



The Problem with Remakes

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Recently, the Internet has been ablaze with outraged netizens over the reported casting of an African American actress to play Ariel in Disney's upcoming live action remake of *The Little Mermaid*. Undeniably we are familiar with an Ariel with light skin and a sudden change seems like a safe bet by the makers in the age of political correctness but the issue brings up larger questions about Disney, the origins of stories and the very nature and trend of remakes.

The story of *The Little Mermaid* was originally published in 1837 and penned by Hans Christian Andersen, who's work has given us other Disney movies such as *Frozen* and *The Ugly Duckling*. It is not uncommon knowledge that like many other fairytales, the original story was quite dark. In the original, everytime Ariel walks on her human legs she feels like she's walking on swords sharp enough to make her bleed. The story ends in tragedy too – the Prince marries someone else and a heartbroken Ariel throws herself into the ocean where she turns to foam. She can earn her soul back again if she behaves well for the next 300 years.

Most Disney movies are based on stories written hundreds of years ago and stems from various folktales, myths, legends and works by different authors such as the Brothers Grimm or even Victor Hugo for *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. These stories have been retold and republished in various interpretations over the years until Disney decided on a feel good, family friendly version and brought it to the big screen. So when they make one additional change to these stories in any way why must we react and pretend they changed some gospel truth?

Granted, for many of us Disney has been a huge part of our childhoods and it is still a huge part of global pop culture. But it is in the very nature of stories for them to live on, evolve, and adapt over time.

In an opinion piece published in The New York Times on July 10, 2019 titled "Mermaids Have Always Been Black," an author from the Caribbeans argued how mermaids have long been part of folktales in West African and Caribbean cultures long before Anderson wrote his story. Perhaps we are so used to consuming Eurocentric entertainment that a shift in content becomes unwelcoming.

However, handling issues of representation in movies that were originally released many years ago is tricky. In



a similar situation, JK Rowling is frequently under fire in recent times for taking liberties with changing past material to make the Harry Potter series more progressive.

When Rowling insisted that Hermione was black after the release of all books and movies for the stage adaptation of *The Cursed Child*, her argument was that 'white skin was never specified' for Hermione. It is understandable that these movies were released many years ago when representation wasn't a huge deal but now why are we getting a logically flawed argument instead of actually introducing people of colour in the new Harry Potter spin-off films? Even now we have a mostly white main cast in the *Fantastic Beast* films. So why was it necessary to prove that a character we already know as white is in fact black?

A similar argument can be made for Disney. Tiana of *The Princess and the Frog* is the first black Disney princess while Mulan, Jasmine and Pocahontas are all princesses of different ethnicities. By easily replacing an existing character by an underrepresented group, is Disney lazily shirking off responsibility in actually writing a complex new character of such origin? Why make the same movie but stick in a different protagonist as if to fulfill a diversity quota?

The answer to these questions are of course rooted in the commercial aspect of things. The Walt Disney Company is worth about \$130 billion now and is thoroughly busy acquiring powerful companies and rolling out ambitious businesses of their own. They are also churning out live-action remakes of their previous hits every few months with both *Aladdin* and *The Lion King* in theatres right now, while *Mulan* and *Lady and the Tramp* among many others are currently in development. Disney always stood for imagination and dreaming big but there is little imagination involved in banking on old ideas. When was the last time Disney entertained us with a truly new idea?

Remakes are a safe box office bet. It isn't just Disney alone but most major studios in Hollywood that are relying on producing remakes, sequels, prequels, spin offs and reboots of already successful projects since betting money on truly original content is a big risk. From brand new iterations of *Ghostbusters*, the *Oceans* trilogy, and *Jurassic World* to this past week's major announcement that *Gossip Girl* is going to get a reboot, we now live in the age of celebrating past glory.

However everything about the past isn't glorious which is why studios scramble to make up for past sins when they re-release their old work. Sometimes it works, sometimes it feels forced.

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