

THE SHELF

Book-to-screen adaptations to look forward to in the second half of 2024

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ADRITA ZAIMA ISLAM

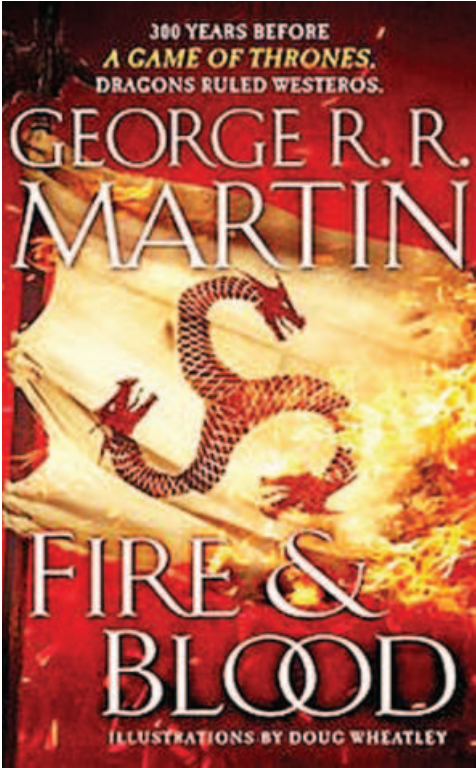
The first half of this year has treated us with some truly amazing book-to-screen adaptations like *Feud: Capote vs. The Swans*, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, and *Ripley*. The second half is also unlikely to disappoint. Here are some book-to-screen adaptations to pack the rest of your year with.

House of the Dragon (Season 2)
HBO, 2024

The first season of *House of the Dragon* left us in the thick of the brutal succession wars, the Dance of Dragons, that eventually led to the disastrous downfall of House Targaryen. The second season is set to pick up with the two warring sides scrambling to secure the alliances of the different noble houses in an attempt to solidify their positions. The final season of *Game of Thrones* and, in many ways, the first season of *House of the Dragon* (parts of the latter based on *Fire & Blood* by George R.R. Martin) left much to be desired. One can only hope this iteration will plunge fans back into the enthralling, gory world that we have come to know and love.

The Lord of the Rings: The War of Rohirrim
Warner Bros. Pictures, 2024

Peter Jackson’s *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, based on the books by J.R.R. Tolkien, was revolutionary. It paved the way for fantasy adaptations in contemporary film media. Now, more than two decades later, we are about to be immersed back into Middle-earth by means of an animated film. *The Lord of the Rings: The War of Rohirrim* will revolve around Helm Hammerhand, the legendary king who ruled Rohan about 183 years before the events of the *LotR* trilogy, and focus on his struggle against the Dunlendings. The movie will expand upon events touched upon in Tolkien’s *The Two*



Towers. An exact release date has not been announced yet.

The Uglies
Netflix, TBA

Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies* series has had a cult following for nearly two decades. Set in a future, dystopian world where the government mandates cosmetic surgery on every citizen when they turn 16 to transform them into “Pretties”, *Uglies* explores themes of autonomy, individualism, societal segregation, and

appearances. After years spent in development hell, the film has finally been announced to be released some time this year.

The Watchers
Warner Bros. Pictures, 2024

The best sort of horror, in my opinion, is always the claustrophobic kind. That was the primary appeal of John Krasinski’s *A Quiet Place*. *The Watchers*, adapted from A.M. Shine’s eponymous novel, promises a similar brand of horror. The film follows a group of people stranded in a bunker in the middle of a forest in Ireland, trying to keep themselves safe from mysterious creatures dubbed “The Watchers” as the tensions within the group edge towards boiling over. The movie was released on June 7, 2024.

The Sandman (Season 2)
Netflix, TBA

Based on the comic book series by Neil Gaiman, the first season of *The Sandman* was a masterful demonstration of how to adapt a story to a different media without compromising the integrity of its source material. The series follows Morpheus, the personification of Dream, and his adventures across various realms and his interactions with different characters. Unlike many other comic-based media, *The Sandman* does not indulge in the villain of-the-week trope. It has a rich universe packed with fascinating characters and intricate lore that keeps the viewers wanting more. Season 2 is sure to follow in that same vein. A release date has not been announced yet.

Adrita Zaima Islam is a local workaholic who deals with her emotions by deprecating traumatised literary characters. Send her your sympathies at zaima2004adrita@gmail.com.

REFLECTIONS

Literature or sadism: The bleak picture of trauma in ‘A Little Life’

ALIFA MONJUR

There are few novelists as cruel as Hanya Yanagihara—and in *A Little Life* (Doubleday, 2015), her pen draws blood. Nine years on, the controversy of the 800-page character study of an irreparably broken protagonist is still ablaze with accusations that it sadistically exploits trauma for profit.

A Little Life begins deceptively enough, with four friends moving to New York after graduating university but as it tracks their lives for the next several decades, Jude St. Francis emerges as the black-hole centre of the story. At first, Jude is reserved and distant, a darkness amidst the friend group’s cosmic kaleidoscope of buzzing parties, dingy apartments, and bloodthirsty ambition. An enigma who divulges nothing, his friends know nothing about him, not even his ethnicity or how he really got the injury which frequently debilitates his legs.

But soon, with a growing ferocity, the reader is pulled into a horrific truth about Jude. Marred by an inconceivable childhood trauma that is he is unable to process, let alone confess or heal from, Jude sinks deeper into disturbing self-harm and self-hatred over the decades.

Yanagihara, a former *Condé Nast Traveler* editor, is a travel writer. She trades in storytelling that is so richly descriptive that the reader is transported to the deepest, darkest depths of Jude’s mind.

Jude’s character is written in such excruciating detail that you can practically feel him bleeding into



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

the ink on the page; your own head echoes each self-loathing thought, every twisted conclusion. You sit powerlessly beside him on the bathroom floor as he slashes his own skin; you are locked in the room with his monstrous abusers as he relives childhood trauma.

The intense connection that Yanagihara successfully creates between Jude and the reader is a rare literary feat. Written almost completely in third person, the reader does not become Jude but becomes someone who deeply cares and worries for him. And it is precisely this written excellence that earns *A Little Life* its controversy. At what point is writing so expressive, so raw, that it makes a dangerous spectacle of human suffering?

Equipped with a powerful reader-protagonist union, Yanagihara plays a cruel game. She dangles the hope of Jude’s recovery temptingly, only to snatch it away each time.

In the end, nothing will save Jude—not success, money, friendship, romance, not even parental love. He will fear those who love him unconditionally and will never believe he is worthy of genuine human connection. Being adopted at age 30 will not console the pain of being an orphan and the terrifying power he commands as an eminent lawyer has no strength against the demons at home.

Of course, I would’ve liked it better if the book ended just one chapter earlier, but literature is more than fan service, and Yanagihara intended, for better or for worse, to elicit the reader’s misery. A happy ending would have meant closing the book with a satisfied smile; it would not have left the reader with a mass of emptiness and pure anger for how Jude’s life turned out. That is why she not only wrote an ‘unfixable’ character but did so with brute maximalism.

Make no mistake, however, of reducing Yanagihara’s graphic writing to mere profit-seeking. Different literary representations of trauma, no matter how ugly or painful, are important. As philosophy professor Eliss Marder puts it, literature is how we communicate aspects of the human experience that exceed ordinary expression and may even exceed human understanding. Similarly, Cathy Caruth, a pioneer in trauma theory, has long considered literature a vehicle for witnessing what cannot be completely known. We cannot reject pain from public comprehension because it is difficult to stomach. For some, trauma is not a backstory from which they can turn away. For some, the world is relentless, unforgiving, and there is no greater purpose nicely weaved throughout to make it all worthwhile.

A Little Life is a tormenting read, but it is so much more than its brutality. Between the lines, Yanagihara sketches an exquisite portrait of human compassion and empathy. She writes most strikingly of friendship as unconditional love, selflessness, chosen family, and a deeply transformative human connection. Undoubtedly, Jude encounters vicious adversaries throughout his life that permanently scar him but the friendship he finds is exceptional. The fact that it still could not completely “save” him does not change the love and compassion he found in so many.

There is a reason why several chapters are invested for the development of secondary characters, and why the only time Yanagihara employs a first-person perspective is from someone who loved Jude unconditionally. These characters’ humanity rises above all and their stories regale the reader with a subtle warmth unlike any other: friends and readers alike end up considering it a privilege to help carry any part of Jude’s burden he allows, even when it is extremely taxing.

Much like *A Little Life* shows, all-consuming connection is not healthy, but it is profoundly human.

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ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

INTERVIEW

A LOOK AT AAPI representation in tech with Kyla Zhao of ‘Valley Verified’

TASHNUVA SUMAIYA ISLAM

This week, Kyla Zhao, the author of *Valley Verified* (Penguin Random House, 2024), graced us with an exclusive interview to give us insights into the changing trends in Asian American literature. It follows the story of Zoe Zeng, a modern Gen Z woman navigating career challenges when she switches from being a high-end fashion columnist to a tech employee in Silicon Valley. As the story unfolds, the readers get to know more about women in the tech industry and the difficulties they face behind the glitz of Silicon Valley.

As a woman in the tech industry herself, Kyla shared her experience as a young employee and the challenges many women face in the workplace and the changing tides in Asian American books.

In this part of the world, a lot of people don’t know about the Asian American Pacific Islanders (AAPI)

Month. Can you brief our readers on this event and its significance?

This lasts throughout the month of May, and is more of a concept in America. I’m not sure if it’s much of a concept in other western countries. Basically, it celebrates the AAPI community, our contributions to the world, and representation in the media. There wasn’t a lot of diverse representation in the past, and whilst it’s still not an ideal situation, we are starting to see a lot more coverage in the media of the AAPI community. That’s really heartwarming.

Has the statistics for Asian representation changed over the years or is it still lacking in many ways?

We’re definitely still in the minority. I think there has been a slight improvement in the numbers over the past decade, but we’re nowhere close to where we should be yet.

However, one thing I’ve started to see is that we are creating a variety of AAPI stories. In the past, one well-known work of Asian-American literature was *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by Amy Tan. I adore the book and think everyone should read it. But many people started to think that’s the only kind of Asian story that could be told—it has to be an immigrant story which is quite sad and focuses on family trauma. For sure, those stories are valid because they speak about a very important part in a lot of Asian people’s lives. But we’re seeing Asians can also be part of joyful, uplifting, and upbeat stories. I think having variety in representation is incredibly important.

A lot of your audiences are Gen Z right now. How is the Gen Z female reader diaspora different from the readerbases we used to see while we were growing up?

I think Gen Z has invented the

phenomenon of ‘girl boss’. Right now, there’s a trend on TikTok and social media to reclaim your girlhood. There’s a lot more willingness to move past the traditional roles of what women are supposed to look like and what they’re supposed to do. It’s still far from the ideal situation because I think a lot of Gen Z feminism is eurocentric. But, I think we’re starting to realise women can do whatever they want. If they want to go into the workforce, they can. If they want to be the girl boss, they can. They also can stay home and be a homemaker. Each approach is equally valid.

This is an excerpt. Read the full interview on The Daily Star and DS Books’ websites.

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