

While a kestrel for a
knave begins with a
sense of hope



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While A Kestrel for a Knave begins with a sense of hope, it soon becomes clear that the novel and film are both ultimately about Billy's defeat. To what extent do you agree with this statement? The statement " While A Kestrel for a Knave begins with a sense of hope, it soon becomes clear that the novel and film are both ultimately about Billy's defeat. " is one that I wholeheartedly concur with.

A Kestrel for a Knave is a brilliantly written novel by Barry Hines that was successful in overcoming the issues of transference to film presented in From Page to Screen, and, though they are separate art forms, both adaptations (page and screen) capture superbly the bleak existence of Billy Casper, the initial hope and companionship brought by his pet Kestrel hawk but most of all his tragic defeat. As the novel progresses, his hope diminishes and is eventually extinguished in the final moments of both book and film.

The film, in my opinion, through what is possible visually through the screen and the accompanying soundtrack amplifies the harsh reality of Billy's life that the book simply cannot, also increasing the sense of hope that Kes brings. Unfortunately for readers it becomes apparent that the novel and film is about Billy's inevitable defeat and the tragedy of this is increased by the fact that both page and screen adaptations of A Kestrel for a Knave undeniably begin with a sense of hope which is seen when Billy speaks to Mr Farthing's class about how he trained Kes.

In both the novel and film Billy is treated as a failure at school and unhappy at home; however he discovers a new passion in life when he finds Kes, a kestrel hawk. Billy identifies with her " silent strength" and she inspires and instils in him the trust and love that no-one else, not even his family can

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provide. Kes gives Billy a sense of satisfaction, achievement and the will to live another day while others in Billy's position would have given up on life long ago.

Kes is effectively Billy's best friend and whom he spends most of his spare time with and as Billy has trained the hawk himself he feels a great sense of pride when speaking of Kes in Mr Farthing's class. In the novel Mr Farthing coaxes Billy into speaking about the hawk, and when Billy begins his story he immediately changes. Though Billy lives with his mother and Jud his true closest companion is Kes, and whilst speaking about Kes his whole "school persona" of one word answers and mumbling disappears. For the first time at school, Billy is engaged as he is discussing his one true passion, the hawk.

He sheds his lonely, independent shell and really opens up to the class. In the novel Hines changes his writing style to enhance the sense of emotion and attach the reader to Billy. In the film and novel we (like Mr Farthing) see in this scene Billy's full potential, what person he could be if given the attention and care he deserves. Billy (vividly in the novel and expertly acted in the film) re-enacts Kes' flights and states that "that's it. I'd done it. I'd trained her. It's a smashing feeling; you can't believe that you'll be able to do it but I did!" and is met with applause from his peers.

In this we see that there is hope for Billy; that he will not have to "go down t'pit" as he states in the first scene with Jud and that his passion for life, his everything, is Kes. Kes is what is keeping him from defeat and against the odds he has found, in his circumstances, something to live for. Unfortunately following this scene where there is a sense of hope are scenes where, as readers (and viewers) we realise the tragic situation that Billy is in and the

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story begins to become one of defeat. Billy is tasked to write a "tall story" by Mr Farthing; an "imaginary story" that "really get his imagination going" (pg. 87).

Billy writes what is in reality what we would consider to be an average day. His interpretation of "something that is unbelievable and far-fetched" (pg. 88) is what we accept every day without a second thought: Mrs Casper has no time for Billy: "Oh stop pestering me! I'm late enough as it is!" She finds her social life and nights out more important than listening to what Billy has to say, yet in his Tall Story Billy's mother makes him breakfast in bed and she does not have to work and will be at home for her family. Hines makes effective use of detail as Billy observes the carpet, the radiator and the vase of fresh daffodils.

We take these for granted now and they would not have been rare when the novel was written, but they sadly are not part of Billy's life. The Tall Story tells us of Billy's longing; not for just a normal home but for his mother to show some affection towards him (she makes him breakfast in bed), Jud to go away (he joins the Army), his Dad to return, the teachers to be nice to him and for school to be interesting. Billy's dire circumstances are amplified after reading the Tall Story as we realise that none of what Billy desperately longs and yearns for is going to occur and the sense of defeat becomes more apparent and prevalent in the story.

This scene is omitted during the film but, as mentioned in the article From Page to Screen: "Given the inherent differences in the ways novels and films work to make their meanings and to engage their audiences, and given the different conventions governing the production, distribution and reception of <https://assignbuster.com/while-a-kestrel-for-a-knave-begins-with-a-sense-of-hope/>

each, it is scarcely surprising that the process of transposition from one medium to the other should be fraught with difficulties (omission of scenes being one of them)" including Billy's Tall Story in the film would have been highly difficult.

The film is not at a loss however as scenes such as the one where Billy visits the Youth Employment Office fully capture the sense of defeat and all but extinguish the sense of dwindling sense of hope remaining: Beautifully written by Hines and equally so captured on film, the Youth Employment Office scene is one where Billy, desperate to hide from Jud enters the room only to be met with a harsher reality than Jud's impending physical retaliation for not placing the bet: his future will be one working in the dreaded mines.

The employment officer asks of what Billy is good at and is met with no response. Consulting Billy's report card the officer prints MANUAL as Billy's type of employment and when mentioning mining is met with this response: " I'm not goin' down t'pit" " Conditions have improved tremendously..." " I wouldn' t be seen dead down t'pit" " Well there doesn't seem to be any job in England for you then".

The employment officer inquires of Billy's hobbies but, preoccupied with his thoughts, Billy neglects to mention his one true passion, his one chance to escape his depressing future; Kes. Billy gets up and leaves, not knowing the gravity of what he has just done. The ensuing scene is incredibly sad; Billy sprinting home from school asking all whom he meets " have you seen our Jud? " and calling out " Kes! Kes! " As he becomes more and more frantic we and Billy realise something has happened to his beloved kestrel.

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In the film the shot of Billy alone in the field, swinging his creance and screaming for Kes is incredibly powerful as details such as Billy's slowly changing facial expression as he becomes more desperate and the sad, slow music that begins to play amplify the sense of defeat that he feels and the realisation from a viewer's perspective that he has most certainly lost everything, including hope. Billy enters his house and exclaims " what's tha done wi' it!?" and his mother responds " Where have you been? Your tea's getting' cold! ". Jud throws Billy to the ground when he confronts him and all Mrs Casper can muster is a light slap to his arm.

Billy gets up and says to his mother " he's gone and killed me hawk" Jud, nonchalantly whilst broddling the fire states " so what if I have? What are you going to do about it? " In the novel Billy attempts to bury his head into his mother's skirt and is pushed away out of embarrassment and met with the blow of his mother's words " don't be so daft" however the defeat and despair in Billy's mind after hearing Jud's comment is, in my opinion far better expressed in the film; Billy throws himself down onto the couch and buries his in the pillow as his worst fear in the world has now been confirmed.

Billy lifts his head to yell repeatedly, through tears " you're a bastard! A big rotten bastard! ". Billy then, to the shock of Mrs Casper yells " you bastard! You fucking bastard! " The sad notion here is that the swear word that Billy has just used is the worst he can do, his attempt at a " knockout blow" to Jud as he cannot (nor his mother) physically intimidate; he instead unleashes the largest weapon in his arsenal; language. It is met with this comment from his mother: " Shut up Billy I'm not having that kind of language in my house! "

Billy yells “ well do summat to him then! , begging his mother to understand what Jud has done but she simply disregards this and asks Jud “ what’s tha’ done wi’ it? ”. The line that solidifies in viewers and reader’s minds that all is lost for Billy escapes Jud’s lips; “ it’s in t’bin”. We now know that the novel is ultimately about Billy’s defeat as his closest companion in the world, Kes, is dead and in the rubbish bin. Kes, deceased and in the bin is symbolising the sliver of hope that we as readers and viewers had at the beginning of *A Kestrel for a Knave*; the hope that is now dead.

In possibly the most compelling scene in both film and novel Billy grabs Kes from the bin and runs back inside, dangling the bird in front of his mother’s face with tears streaming down his own, desperately yearning for some comfort, some love, affection and understanding. He receives none and Mrs Casper pushes the bird aside. Billy asks his mother to “ give Jud a hidin! ” to which she asks “ how? ” and Jud snorts in amusement. “ You’ve cried about it long enough now Billy, you can get another can’t you? ” Billy cannot take any more of this and lunges at Jud one last time before leaving the house yelling “ You’ll never catch me! , Kes lifeless in his hand. In the film he goes to the wood, stroking his dead feathered hopes and dreams and buries Kes, defeated, however I do believe that the novel’s ending, though difficult to transfer to film is far more apt: Billy returns to the theatre and relives the traumatic experiences of the day his father left home; a combination of his tall story and tragic past. In a dreamlike sequence, Billy imagines himself on the screen, starring in a film with Kes, triumphing over Jud - but he realises this will never happen.

The suggestion is that things just won't get any better, that hope is lost and that he has been defeated. Hines has shown a distinct change in his writing here however I believe that his credibility is still intact as the highly staccato surreal sequence expresses Billy's despair, distress and ultimate defeat; seeing his past and dead hopes for a life with Kes. Billy returns home, and the novel finishes bluntly with him burying Kes and going to bed. The unexpected and unsatisfying ending maintains the harsh, lonely and bitter note of the novel, emphasising ultimately Billy's defeat.

Though *A Kestrel for a Knave* begins with a sense of hope with the arrival of Kes it becomes apparent from the Tall Story onwards that it will be about Billy's defeat, something we see from scenes such as the Youth Employment Office and the tragic, highly sad ending where Billy is doomed to work in the pit and has lost the one thing he cared about and cared for him. The day, novel and film ends how it started; with Billy returning to bed with Jud; however he now has no Kes, no hope, and is completely and utterly defeated.