



# Jack Thorne

# Adaptation Workshop

## INTRODUCTION

This workshop is based around a conversation with Jack Thorne, playwright (*Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*) and screenwriter (*Aeronauts/Wonder/The Secret Garden*). This session, developed in collaboration with Screen Alliance Wales and Bad Wolf, focuses on his work in taking the writing of Philip Pullman and adapting it for the screen in the BBC series *His Dark Materials*.


### Age and subject areas covered:

This session has been developed with A-Level students in mind, and will be relevant to students studying English, Media or Film Studies.

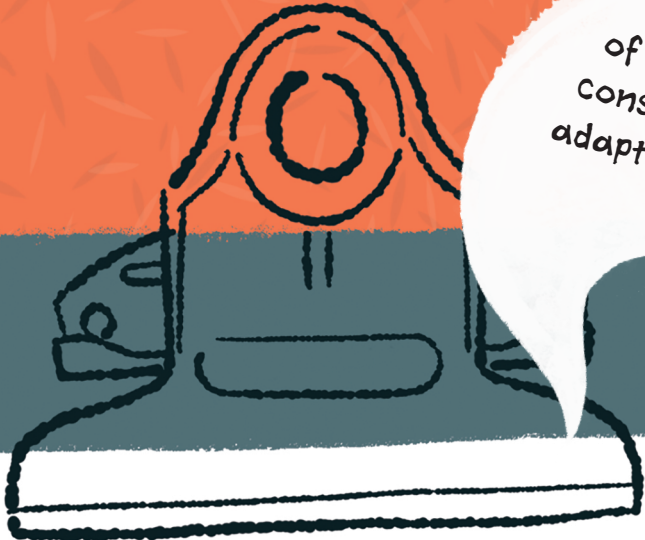
### How to use this resource:

To watch the entire presentation through will take about 45 minutes; however, it has been broken down into 4 chapters to allow you to select a particular portion of the discussion. The topics fall into four areas.

1. Discussing the difference between media
2. How to decide on themes and narratives for the adaptation
3. The process of developing characters and dialogue
4. Other considerations for the adaptation process.



The questions raised during the film will help reinforce the insight provided by Jack to the viewers and ensure they have understood. They can be presented as a discussion question, or as a written task.



'What aspects of language would you consider changing, when adapting a 100-year-old book?'

## SECTION 1: DISCUSSING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MEDIA

In this first section, Jack talks about the fact that a book allows you to hear the voice inside someone's head, while on screen emotion would have to be expressed in other ways. This would commonly be referred to as the principle of 'Show, Don't Tell'. Ask your students to consider a line of text from a book that you are currently studying, or that you know the students will be aware of.

**Can they identify a passage that could be better represented with something else? Maybe a facial expression, some body language or maybe even some music.**

One of the books Jack has adapted in the past is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Given that it was written over 150 years ago, the language that was used would be very different in style to today. You can open this for discussion as a group or present the students with an example of a book from the Victorian age or earlier.

**What aspects of language would you consider changing, when adapting a 100-year-old book for an audience today?**

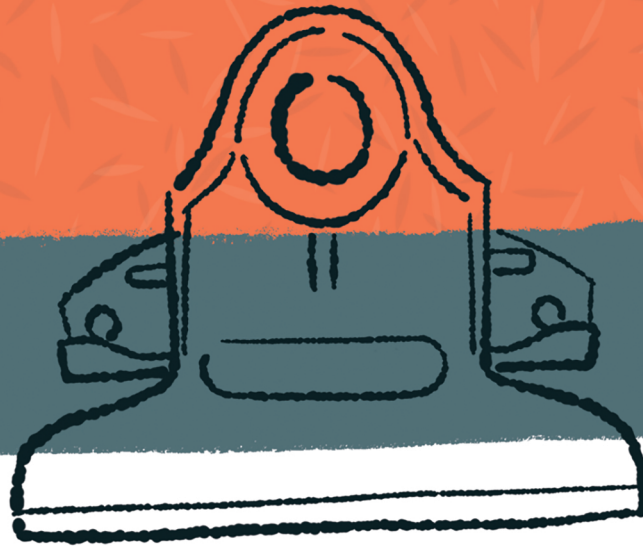
Lastly, television is a visual medium, and when preparing or designing a scene for a film crew, you may need to highlight different things. Again, ask the students to select a short passage of text, or present them with one.

**Ask them to describe the key points you would consider in presenting that scene in a format to be interpreted by a TV or film production crew.**

What elements would it be important to make the set designers aware of? How might it be lit? Would it require some sound design?







## SECTION 2: HOW TO DECIDE ON THEMES AND NARRATIVES FOR THE ADAPTION

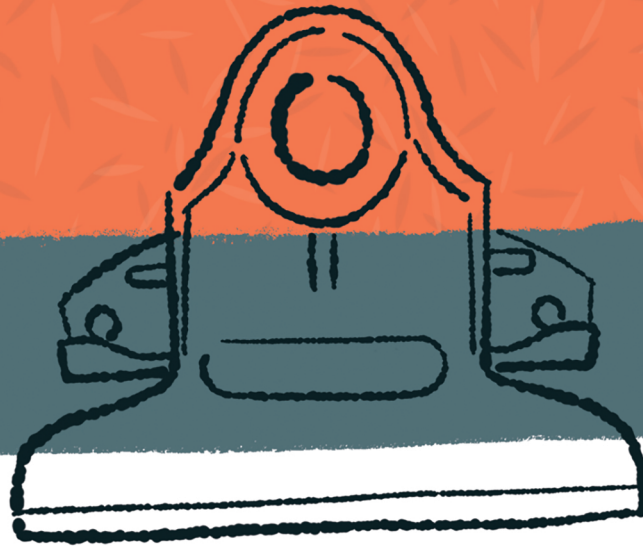
Books are a far more personal experience than a television programme or film, which are generated to be interacted with by multiple people at the same time. To help ensure everyone can follow the narrative, often certain themes and subplots originally in the book are dropped when it comes to the adaptation. Ask the students to think in the context of the last book they read.

Select one plot narrative from your book and focus on that theme alone. What other plotlines do you think you could discard as a result? Is there anything you would add?

Often films and television programmes may have an overarching theme that may not be explicit. Actual events and dialogue may in fact all be linked by ideas of loss, or friendship.

Can the students identify an overarching theme of a TV programme or film they have watched recently?





## SECTION 3: THE PROCESS OF DEVELOPING CHARACTERS AND DIALOGUE

A relevant point Jack raises during the discussion is that casting nowadays is colour conscious, not just colour blind. He gives the example in which, by casting Ariyon Bakare to the role of Lord Boreal in the series, alongside Ruth Wilson's Mrs Coulter, they are both outsiders to the otherwise white Magisterium.

**How important do your students believe this is, and what role and responsibility does cinema/TV have in inclusive representation?**

In the same way as themes may be edited out of an adaptation, so can characters. Jack mentions that they decided not to introduce the character of Toni Markos from the book, as by having his experiences projected onto another boy instead, Billy Costa, it gave them a reason to explore his mother as a character in more depth.

**What characters from a book would your students like to have been explored further?**

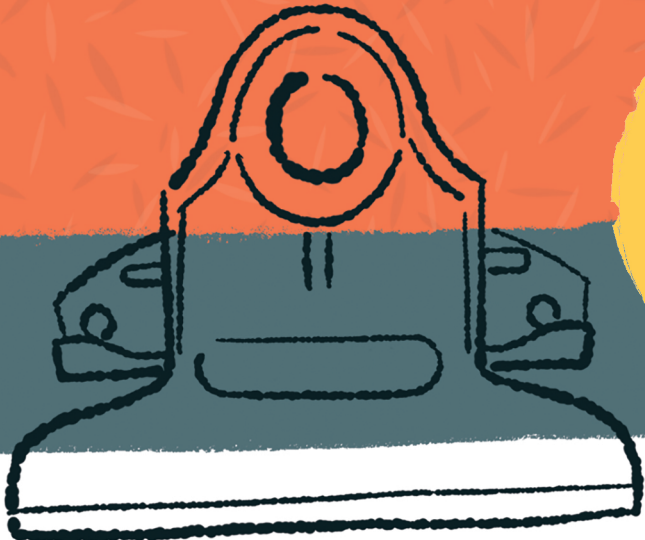
Finally, when developing character for an adaptation, Jack explained his reasoning to why they introduced new scenes that did not feature in the books. Ask your students to imagine they have been given the opportunity to adapt a book.

**Could they take a character from a book of their choice and outline what changes would be appropriate if the characters' nationality or ethnicity were presented in different ways?**

In this instance, care should be taken not to resort to stereotypes, but focus perhaps on opportunities that having someone who speaks a different language or has different heritage may provide.







"How would you break the story up into eight episodes for TV?"

## SECTION 4: OTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ADAPTION PROCESS

During the talk, Jack suggests that if he had less experience of the industry, he may have approached the aspect of how much a script would cost to be presented differently. In general, the budget per minute of motion picture film will be significantly higher than that of a television programme, which must produce maybe eight episodes for less money. What impact do your students think that has?

**What do they see as the difference between TV and film in terms of story in particular?**

In terms of audience, Jack talks about *His Dark Materials* as aiming to be a 4 Quadrant show which appeals to young children, young adults, adults and the elderly. While he discusses the fact that young people may enjoy challenging content, there are limitations. Ask your students to think in regard of a television programme broadcast post-watershed or a film rated 15 or above.

**What changes would be required at a script level to make it a PG rated film, or 4 Quadrant TV programme as discussed by Jack in the presentation? Are there further implications to the story?**

Another challenge in making a serialised adaptation is the need to have a narrative within each episode. You may again provide your students with a book with which they are all familiar or ask them to select their own.

**How would you break it into eight episodes? Would you need to make it non-linear?**

- Sometimes it is necessary to introduce characters earlier or use flashback to tell a story. Would that be the case in this instance?