

A Palimpsest Revisited

Jean-Jacques Annaud's one-of-a-kind medieval murder mystery returns

A title at the beginning of Jean-Jacques Annaud's *The Name of the Rose* declares it to be a "palimpsest" of Umberto Eco's novel – a statement uninformative to viewers unfamiliar with medieval writing. A palimpsest is a parchment that has been used more than once with the earlier text incompletely erased and still legible. To anyone who has read the source novel and seen the film of *The Name of the Rose*, this now makes perfect sense. Indeed, it's an elegant description of what Annaud and his four screenwriters achieved adapting Eco's complex, multi-dimensional novel into a two-hour film. The screenplay skillfully, and somewhat miraculously, balances the dramatic needs of the medieval whodunnit plot with the religious, political and semiotic preoccupations of the novel to create a familiar, but undeniably different text. But herein also lies a paradox. For some, this statement confirms the adaptation's strengths and self-awareness; for others it comprises a poor apology for the film's inevitable compromises.

The novel was an unlikely phenomenon. A difficult 500+ page read, as much about theology, literature, and medieval politics as its central murder mystery. It nonetheless sold over fifty million copies and in the mid-80s it seemed to be on *everyone's* bookshelf – whether they'd managed to finish it or not. In contrast the 1986 film had a mixed response. A major hit in its countries of production – Germany, Italy and France – it was a modest success in the UK but fared poorly in other territories including the US. Lead actor Sean Connery was at a career low, and the film's American financiers withdrew when he was cast citing that he wasn't a big enough name to sell the film. Possibly this was just an excuse. They may have already sensed the complex plot, dark tone, and art house feel would fail to strike a chord with American audiences and they were right. When the film was released in the US, a bright poster

designed seemingly to 'lighten' the film convinced no one and it failed at the box office. Ironically, Connery won the BAFTA in the UK for his performance and only a year later re-invigorated his career when he won the Oscar for Brian DePalma's *The Untouchables* – a role De Palma must surely have cast due to seeing him in

collaborators – is outstanding, and the supporting actors – all with distinctive faces – are a gallery of gargoyles that contrast with Connery's smooth looks and bearing as one of the world's first modern men.

It seems fitting that the plot revolves around a lost book – Aristotle's Book



The Name of the Rose. His character of William of Baskerville is of course partially based on Sherlock Holmes and his dialogue even includes some of Holmes' most famous phrases, "elementary" and "my dear Adso" (Watson). Whatever reservations there were about the former James Bond playing a middle-aged virgin monk, it's one of Connery's best ever screen performances.

One thing critics and audiences did agree on was the veracity of its recreation of the Dark Ages. The production design by Dante Ferretti, and cinematography by Tonino Delli Colli – both frequent Fellini and Pasolini

of Comedy – a work our protagonists believe to be missing, since the film is in something of a similar state. Unavailable on any UK streaming platform, only a dated DVD keeps the film alive (a domestic blu-ray release is conspicuously absent), and there's no ability to screen the film in cinemas without engaging the original production company in Germany. Even the 35mm print we're showing tonight was abandoned in the storage facility where it had been kept since the mid-90s, slated for destruction and barely retrieved in time. Thankfully it's now in a non-commercial archive for the continued enjoyment of UK audiences. Within this context it's an even greater pleasure to be screening this one-of-a-kind film in the cinema again in its original 35mm format.

Thank-you for joining us for this event and playing your part to keep this magical film alive.

Geoffrey M. Badger
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LostReels.co.uk



Screenwriter Andrew Birkin remembers



LR: *How did you first get involved with the project?*

AB: I was in Hollywood doing something else and was staying in Malibu with some friends and my partner, and I got a phone call saying would I meet Bernd Eichinger who came over and told me a bit about *The Name of the Rose*. I didn't know it, I hadn't read it, but I was pretty interested in the idea of a monastery and this lost book of Aristotle, and the idea of laughter being a sin as a central theme. And we went from there. They'd already had two scripts done, one by Gérard Brach which was wonderful and very poetic but completely unfilmable – it would have gone on for four hours and cost mega-dollars – and then they had a second one done by a guy in America called Howard Franklin that I referred to as 'Raiders of the Lost Monastery' because that was at the other extreme. It was very much a Hollywood script and it lacked a lot of the nuances, the parts that actually interested me. Then I met with Jean-Jacques Annaud who came up to Wales where I was living, and talked a lot about religion and Aristotle, I guess he was vetting me. Then I got the thumbs up to go ahead and start writing it. I wrote a draft screenplay I thought was pretty good. It was probably a little too 'Ingmar Bergman-ish' in the sense that it was a little closer to the Gérard Brach than the Franklin. I made a central part of my take on it the relationship between Baskerville and Adso. I felt that in the third act that [Baskerville] should have to choose between the books and the Boy, and that he would choose the

Boy. Having been this man of letters, words and ideas, and being unemotional, I liked the idea that in the end his emotions would win out. Eichinger didn't like this at all – he said everyone will say he's gay. The upshot was, I would go to Germany and spend however long it would take to work with Jean-Jacques and Eichinger.

LR: *What else do you remember about finalising the script?*

AB: I seem to remember I recorded the entire movie so that Jean-Jacques would know where the stresses came. Jean-Jacques could speak English, but it wasn't fluent English, and in my experience one of the problems is that unless the script is full of underlines, which are too strong, or italics which are too strong, sometimes you don't get the inflections. I suggested it and he said that would be great, so I recorded the whole movie for him playing all the parts.

Jean-Jacques was also very meticulous about storyboarding, and he basically storyboarded everything from the screenplay which was printed on A3 so that half of it was the screenplay and half of it was his storyboard, and he stuck to that rigidly.

LR: *How about the shoot? Do you have any particular memories of the filming and Sean Connery?*

Well Sean I knew anyway from way back. I'd done some second unit on *Diamonds Are Forever*, and I'd been with him in Spain - he was making *Shalako* and we were making a Michael Caine movie next door – and we all used to get together in the evenings, so I knew him. And in fact, when I arrived at Eberbach at the hotel and Jean-Jacques wasn't there because they were shooting and there was a note from Jean-Jacques saying 'Do not speak to Sean until you have spoken to me, because he wants to put in ideas and it's too late to start putting in ideas' and this was Jean-Jacques' point. So I didn't get a chance to reply and went down to the bar, and there was Sean sitting without Jean-Jacques.

He said, 'Andrew, Andrew, can I talk to you about a few ideas?' and I'm like 'Er, er.', but I didn't really, I said 'Sure tell me, what ideas have you got?' I can't now remember what the ideas were particularly, but they all seemed fairly reasonable, so when Jean-Jacques got back later and I explained I'd run into him and thought a couple of them were really good, he didn't want to hear them. He said this has happened to me before, I've been shooting a movie and somebody came up with an idea and it seemed a good idea at the time and it was only later in the cutting rooms that I realised, 'Oh my God that line was in there for a very good reason because it pays off in Act III' or something to that effect. So he was very inflexible on changing anything.



Birkin was persuaded to act in the film by Jean-Jacques Annaud. Here seen (on the right) with Michael Lonsdale

LR: *Any other thoughts on the film?*

AB: I still think the casting [of Adso] was wrong, and it's a pity they didn't go for the more risky approach. In the book, Adso is described as looking like a Botticelli Angel, and I talked to Eco a few times and he thought that was very important too. The film is a bit too safe. I know that would be countered by, 'We got that girl, and they're actually having sex in that scene', but that's not what I mean by the dangerous edge of things. You know that Browning poem? 'Our interest's on the dangerous edge of things. The honest thief, the tender murderer, the superstitious atheist.' I love that. The dangerous edge of things. Not to be just black or white. But that's just me. That's just my opinion.

Many thanks to Andrew Birkin. The complete transcript for this interview can be found on the lostreels.co.uk website.