

# Is *The Changeover* just *Twilight* set in New Zealand?

Tom Peters  
8 May 2018

*The Changeover*, a “supernatural romance” released in New Zealand last year, is now out on DVD. The film was adapted by directors Stuart McKenzie and Miranda Harcourt from a 1984 young adult novel by popular writer Margaret Mahy, who died in 2012.

As is typical, the New Zealand media reviews were full of hyperbolic and nationalistic praise. The country has a small film industry, which produces a handful of features per year, mostly low-budget, with the exception of Peter Jackson’s blockbusters.

Radio NZ’s Lara Strongman called *The Changeover* “the New Zealand film of the year” and “one of the most important works of culture” produced in Christchurch since the 2010 and 2011 earthquakes, which left much of the city in ruins. Reviewers highlighted the combination of magic with supposedly realistic characters and setting.

The film is a generic teenage fantasy. Despite some strong performances and interesting cinematography, the central characters and romantic plotline are neither believable nor interesting. The story conforms to a well-worn pattern that has more in common with the *Twilight* series than with Mahy’s complex and subtle novel.

The film centres on 16-year-old Laura Chant (played by Erana James), a troubled schoolgirl whose family lives in one of the few remaining houses in the desolate residential “red zone,” a working-class area that was bulldozed following the earthquakes. After six years, the disaster is still clearly visible, with many buildings remaining damaged. The scenes of suburbs where everything has been demolished, except roads and lamp-posts, have an eerie and surreal quality.

Laura’s father has committed suicide. In a voiceover, she says the earthquake “broke” the city and her family. She helps care for her five-year-old brother

Jacko, while their mother works late in a bookstore. Laura is clearly not completely ordinary: she receives vague supernatural “warnings” or premonitions that another disaster is about to happen.

One day, while searching for their missing cat, Laura and Jacko encounter Carmody Braque, an elderly junk store owner played by Timothy Spall (*Denial*, *Mr. Turner*). Braque, it is later revealed, is a practitioner of black magic, who has achieved immortality by possessing young children and imprisoning their souls inside toys. He casts a spell on Jacko, who quickly develops a mysterious illness and is rushed to hospital.

Spall performs well as the thousand-year-old, superficially charming and tacky villain, who likes Tai Chi and the music of Gustav Mahler. He creepily becomes younger and chirpier as Jacko’s health deteriorates, and poses as a grief counsellor to ingratiate himself with Laura’s mother.

Only Laura, with her mystical intuition, understands that Braque is somehow sucking the life out of her brother. Her distraught mother refuses to believe her, saying she is “sick in the head, like your dad.” She implores Laura to save Jacko by donating bone marrow, after the doctors discover that his blood cells are self-destructing.

Laura instead appeals for help to Sorensen Carlisle (UK actor Nicholas Galitzine), an attractive older school student whom she instinctively recognises as a good witch. The Carlises are part of the city’s wealthy establishment, with a large house, a swimming pool, and parks and libraries named after them. Sorensen’s mother and grandmother, who are also witches, explain to Laura that she is “a sensitive,” meaning she, too, has the potential to become a witch through a mysterious ritual known as a “changeover.”

After some hesitation, Laura undergoes the ritual,

which involves a strange and violent hallucination. This enables her to reverse Braque's spell, kill him and save her brother.

The main problem with the film is its clichéd central relationship. Laura and Sorensen have nothing in common, apart from physical attraction and a shared interest in magic. They come from completely different worlds. Yet the audience is meant to believe that they fall for each other without any real complications. Sorensen is a stereotypical dark and brooding young man, who says little, but goes to heroic lengths to help Laura escape from the hospital, understand Braque's spell and undergo the changeover.

The post-earthquake setting is apparently meant as a metaphor for Laura's state of mind. Co-director McKenzie told one reporter that Laura was "putting herself back together again in a similar way that the city is." The film's producer has said the film is about "female empowerment."

But what does this mean? The film's shallow romantic plot is part of a more general caricature of class relations, which perhaps reflects unconscious attitudes and prejudices on the part of the film-makers. Laura and her working-class family are essentially passive victims—"broken" by the earthquake, her father's suicide and Jacko's life-threatening illness—and forced to rely on the bourgeois Carlises. Laura's personal "empowerment" consists of gaining magic abilities and a wealthy boyfriend, thereby rising above the level of her peers.

By contrast with the benevolent Sorensen, Laura's working-class friend Nicky is mean and self-centred. She reproaches Laura for having no time to socialise, even when her brother is in hospital. Laura's classmates are depicted as a violent rabble, who try to burn her alive in her changeover vision. One shouts at her: "They burn witches don't they?" The hallucinatory bonfire scene strangely recalls sensationalist reports of "out of control" student and youth parties, which often feature in the media. These misanthropic and rather formulaic scenes do not appear in Mahy's novel.

The novel tells a less individualistic and more sympathetic story. Mahy makes clear that, through her changeover, Laura not only learns to control her supernatural abilities, but also matures emotionally. She becomes reconciled with their estranged father,

who, in the book, is alive, and also accepts her mother's new boyfriend (who is left out of the film).

The romantic relationship in the novel is more interesting and ambivalent than that in the film. Sorensen, whose nickname is Sorry, is far from the one-dimensional movie hero. Somewhat comical in the book, "almost flamboyant," he speaks with a stammer and is prone to unpredictable mood swings. His hobbies include photographing birds ("the feathered kind") and reading trashy women's romance novels, for "research," which Laura despises.

The class gulf between Laura and Sorensen is a source of tension in Mahy's novel. Laura lives in a "rough" neighbourhood and is defensive about her family's impoverished circumstances (they don't even own a telephone). She is repeatedly struck by the thought "that life was very easy for Sorry Carlisle in the same ways in which it was very difficult for her." Laura both resents and envies the Carlises' wealth.

Laura and Sorensen gradually become closer, particularly after he tells her about his troubled past, involving abuse at the hands of his adoptive father and neglect by his mother. There are hints throughout the book that Sorensen, because of these experiences, is at risk of becoming a "wicked" witch like Braque.

Mahy's distinctive combination of realistic characters and settings, with magical and folktale elements, has won her a large international audience (*The Changeover* received the Carnegie Medal in the UK and the American Library Association's Best Book for Young Adults). But the human complexity and realism of the novel is, unfortunately, transformed, in McKenzie and Harcourt's film, into a simplistic romance and a bleak, dystopian attitude towards working-class youth.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**