

The biggest difference is structurally. In the book, Lebel is not put on the case until halfway through, while in the movie he is introduced at the end of the first act (about quarter of the way through). The first half of the book shows the elaborate planning The Jackal takes and how the French slowly uncover the plot. Most of the characters, except for the Jackal himself, get an elaborate personal history in the book, which motivates their choice to side with either the OAS or the French Secret Service. This was largely left out in the movie, although it is briefly suggested in the film that Denise (Jacqueline in the novel) lost her fiancé in the Algerian Liberation war. A subplot in which Kowalski (Wolenski in the movie) is lured into France on the pretense that his daughter is sick was cut and, in the film, Wolenski is simply knocked out while in Genoa.

The Jackal meets the gunsmith three times, not twice, in Brussels, not Genoa. The second time he is told that the tubes are not ready, so he will have to come back after test firing the gun. The Jackal fires over twenty bullets into the watermelon before using the explosive bullet, and in the movie this has been reduced to just three shots. Lebel is a henpecked husband in the book, but has a beautiful and caring wife in the film. International police forces give Lebel several suggestions for possible Jackals, but they all prove false alarms. The British police are already investigating Charles Calthrop when someone points out the Cha-Cal connection. A meeting between Dixon and the Prime Minister is in the book but happens between scenes in the film. The Baroness leaves the hotel before The Jackal and she is not interviewed by the police. The Jackal tracks her down and stays for several days until she discovers his identity and he ruthlessly kills her. Jacqueline does not find Colonel St. Clair having killed himself: in the novel he simply resigns his post. The Jackal has only one crutch, not two, that contains the component parts of the rifle. The rifle in the book has a triangular stock, but is otherwise the same. The Liberation Day sequence takes up about ten percent of the novel, but almost the entire third act of the film.

Many other subplots were cut from the novel. A significant amount of time is devoted in the book to the French government's cooperation with the Unione Corse, the Corsican Mafia based in Southern France. The OAS leaders are given considerably more time as they tensely monitor the Jackal's assassination plot, and Wolenski has a much larger role. The British investigation is back-grounded by recent tensions between Britain and France (France had recently rejected Britain's attempt to join the European Economic Community), making Thomas and Dixon's investigation more difficult. In the novel the Jackal picks up Jules Bernard at a gay bar while disguised as Marty Schulberg, an American college student. The movie drops the Schulberg identity and shifts this scene to a Turkish bath. Per Lundqvist, the Jackal's other disguise, was a Danish clergyman in the novel, not a school teacher.

Although a minor point, the movie altered many characters' names from the book: Kowalski becomes Wolenski, Jacqueline the OAS informant is re-named Denise, Madame Challionare becomes Madame de Montpellier, Per Jensen becomes Per Lundqvist, and Alexander James Quentin Duggan (the deceased child whose identity is used by the Jackal to obtain a false passport) is called Paul Oliver Duggan. Duggan's death certificate, seen briefly in the movie, states that the child died of diphtheria, while in the book he was killed in a road accident.