

## Cedar Rapids

Cedar Rapids, Iowa, as a daring, hip, urban metropolis ready to deflower the mind and body of the innocent? Well, it is for an insurance salesman from the sticks who has never been *anywhere*. That is the core joke in the aptly named “Cedar Rapids,” a sweet and likable comedy (now in theaters) which could be subtitled “The Nerd’s Progress.”

The salesman, a super-cosseted bachelor named Tim Lippe (Ed Helms), has never known anything outside of his small (fictional) town of Brown Valley, Wisconsin—though he has evolved enough to have a surprising affair with his middle school teacher, the flamboyant Ms. Vanderhei (Sigourney Weaver), who still calls him “Timmy.” Helms is a natural for this character, having rung a number of changes on it already as the naïf Andy he portrays in TV’s “The Office.”

Through a fluke, he gets to represent his company, Brown Star Insurance, at the annual regional insurance agents’ conference in sophisticated Cedar Rapids. Tim is all a twitter (and not in a web way) with attending—he’s never even been on a plane before! Everything at the fabulous conference hotel is new—and exciting or threatening—to him: the young hooker outside the entrance, the really spiffy lobby, a clerk claiming his credit card, his grandiose hotel room, and, especially, his roomies for the duration of the conference, the gentlemanly Ronald Wilkes (Isiah Whitlock, Jr.), the first black he has ever met, and the tyro salesman and party animal Dean Ziegler.

While Ronald is a solid sort, people have warned Tim about the noisome, vulgar Dean, just the sort to get poor benighted Tim in trouble. Which he promptly does, helped along by another convention gadabout named Joan (Anne Heche) who regularly sows her own wild oats at these convention gatherings. Before he knows it, Tim is roped into a talent show, gets smashed, smokes dope, and loses his clothes, all while still hoping to impress the hallowed leader of the group, the pompous Orin Helgesson (Kurtwood Smith) and take home the coveted Brown Star Insurance award for his office.

A classic fish-out-of-water story this one, without many real surprises but notable for its sly rather than obvious humor and for its genuine sympathy afforded the lead character. It was craftily directed by Miguel Arteta, known mainly for his TV work. The script, written by Paul Johnston, may also bear the marks of one of the film’s producers, Alexander Payne (a canny observer of American mores), and it offers poignancy along with its wit. The script also gives the characters some neat twists. For example, dignified Ronald’s favorite TV program is the tough HBO drama “The Wire”—the very show on which Whitlock, Jr. made a memorable appearance as a crooked state senator! Further, it turns out that the crass and loutish Dean is, at bottom, a consummate salesman who truly values and stands up for his clients.

Perhaps the sweetest thing about “Cedar Rapids” is, finally, the value it assigns to the (for most of us) mundane insurance business. Sure, the film uses small town tropes and makes fun of business convention clichés, but ultimately it does not mock but rather offers an honest valentine to the insurance agent, the unsung community representative who can actually help protect families and their possessions.

Personal Note: “Cedar Rapids” had a particular resonance for me because I’ve known the town over time through my older brother, who lived there and raised a family over more than 40 years. To my mind, it may not be a sophisticated place, but it represents a bastion of Midwest sense and civility—and I’m delighted to see it portrayed as sexy!

*(Rated R for some raunchy language and scenes, it runs a crisp 86 min.)*

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