

The Sense of an Ending

Julian Barnes' well-received "The Sense of a Ending" won the Man Booker Prize as the best English-language novel of 2011. It is an internal work told from the perspective of Tony Webster, a somewhat unreliable narrator, who finds a piece of his past interrupting his unremarkable life. Whether such a novel can work as a film is a good question, and the just-released British movie that takes it on makes a decent effort.

The film version also revolves around Tony (Jim Broadbent), a well-meaning divorcee and retiree whose ex-wife Margaret (Harriet Walter) remains a close friend and confidante. He is content running a vintage camera shop and is still involved in the life of his daughter Susie (Michelle Dockery), a lesbian very pregnant with her first child. The arrival of a lawyer's letter triggers a major flashback by informing Tony that one Sarah Ford (Emily Mortimer) the mother of a his college lover, Veronica, has bequeathed him some documents, including a diary.

The flashbacks—they are interspersed with present day scenes-- takes him back to his 1960s school days and his involvement with the intellectually gifted Adrian (Joe Alwyn) and Veronica Ford (Freya Mavor), at whose family home he spends an awkward weekend. During their university days, their relationship ends, and Tony (played by Billy Howle as a young man) receives word from Adrian informing him that he is dating Veronica. Tony replies to Adrian in a vindictive letter only to learn later that the sensitive young man has written a diary and committed suicide.

Back in the present day, Tony wonders if his letter triggered Adrian's death and seeks to learn what happened to his old flame through Adrian's diary. He is able to re-establish contact with the older Veronica (now played by a reserved Charlotte Rampling), but a distance remains between them. His daughter delivers a grandchild, but his attempt to re-connect with Veronica fails, though he does learn a shocking revelation about the Ford family.

This most English of material is crafted by Ritesh Barta, an Indian director who tasted commercial success with his first feature made in Mumbai, "The Lunchbox" (2013). Some of that film's lovingly contained passion is evident in this film, and a calculated underplaying seems right for what is a restrained domestic mystery.

Barnes' novel, however critically accepted, displayed, for this reader, a dry, unsympathetic mood, principally because of its indecisive narrator. The script of "Sense of an Ending," written by playwright Nick Payne, has the benefit of being delivered by a fine ensemble of English actors who give a palpable feel and rounded life to Barnes' characters. Some of them are barely used, like Mortimer and Matthew Goode (in a cameo), but especially distinctive is the great Jim Broadbent as Tony.

Unlike the irresolute protagonist of Barnes' novel, Broadbent offers an avuncular presence of a decent chap who, though perhaps undistinguished, tries to do his best with his lot given the questions he tries to deal with. Broadbent is so readily sympathetic on the screen that he inevitably lends sympathy to a person who is trying to find answers about his life. His principal female co-stars, Walter and Rampling, give him

an added dimension as a man either worthy of such sympathy (Margaret)—or not (Veronica).

This movie is an exemplar of what the British might call a prototypical muddling-through—not flashy but still fulfilling.

(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 108 mins.)

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