

Thank You for Smoking

One of the best, most amusing recent takes on “insider” Washington was Christopher Buckley’s 1994 novel “Thank You For Smoking,” appraised by reviewers as an acidic take on the D.C. lobbyist and the hustling world in which he maneuvers. To set himself a real challenge, author Buckley made his lobbyist/hero a representative of the tobacco industry. Now that devilish satire has been translated to the movies, with sharp, biting effect.

Thank You For Smoking has been adapted for the screen and directed by a new cinema talent, Jason Reitman, son of the veteran comic filmmaker Ivan Reitman (*Meatballs, Ghostbusters*). The story features Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart), the chief spokesman for and vice president of the Academy of Tobacco Studies, whose own son knows him as “The Sultan of Spin.” He forcefully defends the rights of smokers and cigarette makers against health zealots out to ban tobacco and the moralistic Senator Finisterre (William H. Macy) who wants to brand cigarette packs with blatant “Poison” labels.

Nick’s PR skill attracts the attention of the venerable Captain (Robert Duvall), the *eminence gris* of the tobacco industry, who encourages Nick to use Hollywood super-agent Jeff Megall (Rob Lowe) to get a top-line movie made which features “cool” smoking, just as in the old days. Nick is convinced and comfortable in his role, except for the lingering remorse he feels about his divorce from his sweet ex, Jill (Kim Dickens), and the increasing doubts he feels about his work in the eyes of his devoted son Joey (Cameron Bright). His opportunistic involvement with an ambitious young newspaperwoman, Heather Holloway (Katie Holmes), his encounter with an alienated Marlboro Man, Lorne Lutch (Sam Elliott), and a near-death experience with nicotine patches eventually lead to Nick having to gamble his future in hearings before the crusading senator.

This smart comedy should appeal to any Washingtonian who follows the capital’s political life even marginally. The targets are many--K Street sharks, corrupt corporations, fanatic do-gooders, smarmy journalists, Hollywood con-men--and the film offers an equal opportunity slam on all of them. Admittedly, these targets are not always depicted with subtlety--e.g., Nick’s boss, B.R. , is played particularly broadly by J.K. Simmons, and Holmes seems too callow to be an investigative reporter for the “Washington Probe”--but most of the laughs made at the expense of this parade of hustlers are well earned. The super slick Rob Lowe, for instance, is just right as the unflappably cynical agent--rhapsodizing in a Japanese robe before his twinkling pool. Mr. Cowpoke, Sam Elliott, is also spot on as the disaffected Marlboro Man bristling with anger but willing to consider a serious payoff. Functioning as a cynical, but snappy, kind of Greek chorus with Nick are Maria Bello and David Koechner as, respectively, lobbyists for the liquor and firearm industries; Nick is happy to remind them that it is his nicotine crowd that is, by far, the biggest American killer!

The movie stands or falls with the smart script and with the person of Nick, and Aaron Eckhart makes him stand tall. An actor of promise for several years now, he first

received notice in independent films (like *In the Company of Men*) and then appeared in both prestigious and big-budget shows (*Possession*, *The Missing*). A smoothie with leading man looks, he has not yet become a household name. In *Thank You For Smoking*, he has his best role yet, combining the seemingly contradictory elements of oleaginous charmer and earnest human being (he can be both at once); those eyes narrow to nefarious slits or open to signal a true softie.

Eckhart makes believable, too, another strain of this complex character: the genuine libertarian impulse (representing the author, Buckley) that contends that people have to be left to their own choices, even those that are societally damaging. That element of the Buckley book and the Reitman screenplay allows the film to avoid the predictable, politically correct ending that a standard Hollywood comedy would offer. Nick Naylor, who does what he does “to pay the mortgage,” also honestly confesses to his son what he does for a living: “I talk--it’s my job.” Would that more of Washington’s manipulators were that straight.

(March 2006)