

When Did You Last See Your Father?

A new British film in town with dramatic potential is *When Did You Last See Your Father?*, based on writer Blake Morrison's candid memoir of his relationship with his father, a country doctor, in the weeks leading up to the latter's death from cancer. The story is told entirely from Blake's point of view, contrasting scenes of the present with frequent flashbacks of father-son struggles and conflicts he has lived through. Though earnest, and cast from strength, the film finally disappoints and does not earn the heartfelt response for which it clearly aims.

When Did You Last See Your Father? stars Colin Firth as Blake and Jim Broadbent as Arthur Morrison. Blake has always been the put-upon son, never encouraged, never championed by his father, whom he has seen all his life as a blustering hale-fellow who genially cuts corners, chases petty privileges, and has dalliances with other women. We see throughout the picture Brook's parade of disappointments, snubs, and rejections by Arthur, but so relentlessly catalogued they themselves become wearisome, without, sadly, producing much sympathy for the son sustaining them.

Left in the wake of her husband's eccentricities is Brook's mother Kim, played by the estimable Juliet Stevenson, who has little to do but react and play the doormat (and who is, by the way, way too young to be Firth's mother!). Other excellent British actresses, Gina McKee (who plays Brook's wife Kathy) and Claire Skinner (Brook's sister Gillian) don't get enough to do in this story firmly focused on the dysfunctional father-son impasse.

There are elements of a reasoned, gentile soap opera here, but neither the characters nor the script function effectively on the emotions. A few sections work, as with some final, affecting, and honest scenes of wife and son gently taking care of an old man near death. Too many others, like a delayed (and all-too predictable) outburst of sobbing by Brook after his father dies, just don't.

When Did You Last See Your Father? was directed and co-written by Anand Tucker, a filmmaker, born in Thailand and now established in England, who showed real talent in earlier directorial efforts, *Shopgirl* and *Hilary and Jackie*. Somehow, somehow, this time he misses the boat.

(July 2008)