

Barney's Version

Canadian novelist Mordecai Richler's picaresque novel of 1997, "Barney's Version," becomes a picaresque movie of the same name, a neat parallel with an earlier Richler novel from 1959, "The Apprenticeship of Duddy Kravitz," which became an acclaimed film of 1974 and made a star out of a young Richard Dreyfuss. Richler writes about his own milieu, the bustling, Jewish confines of Montreal, with a story that covers 35 years in its protagonist's life.

The protagonist is Barney Panofsky (Paul Giamatti), a schlemiel and a schlub, a macher and a putz—line up all the Yiddish attributes—who is the wayward, unfocussed kid of a cop father, Izzy, played by Dustin Hoffman (who here does a nice turn as an honest, bawdy paterfamilias (see both actors in photo below). He also may be the murderer of his best friend (Scott Speedman).

Barney becomes a producer of a long-running Canadian soap opera and makes a career out of it. He is also a schemer, a drunk, and a serial marrier. His first (loopy) wife (Rachelle Lefevre)—from a Roman interlude—kills herself, and his second (Minnie Driver) drives him nuts as he pines for what will become his third bride, lovely, sweet Miriam Grant (Rosamund Pike). He lives his dreams for a while, having two fine kids in the bargain, but that dream cannot last.

A major weakness of "Barney's Version," is its treatment of women. Here, I think the writer Richler can be blamed for depicting females who are stereotypical and one-dimensional. Many major North American writers have had trouble writing convincingly about women, think of Philip Roth, Norman Mailer, and Saul Bellow, among others, and Richler here, as re-written by screenwriter Michael Konyves, is guilty of the same. Wife No. 1 is a coarse cipher; wife No. 2 is narcissistic and vulgar. Wife No. 3 is perfect (rather too perfect) and though played sweetly by Ms. Pike--an English actress who can express quality and range)--here she lacks definition next to the ebullient, often Barney.

But the reason to see this movie is Paul Giamatti, one of our great film character actors. "Barney's Version" aims to be both funny and poignant, and it achieves that in the character of Barney, a role made for the skills and persona of Giamatti. Think of his leading roles in "American Splendor" and "Sideways," marvelous and revelatory takes on the contemporary sad sack, and stack this one along side it. His rough-bearded face, hang-dog eyes, every-present gut, wiseacre tone—all combine to give his Barney a resonance and believability to cherish.

(The film is rated "R" with a running time of 132 minutes.)

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