

## The English Patient

In 1992, Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje won Britain's most prestigious literary award, the Booker Prize, for his novel "The English Patient." Smoothly, if hermetically written, the novel presents an intricate, cross-cutting tale of an inscrutable adventurer's North African past and his grim present in World War II Italy. It surely presented a challenge in its transfer to film, and English writer-director Anthony Minghella (*Truly, Madly, Deeply; Mr. Wonderful*) comes up with a voluptuous, if not entirely successful, adaptation

The story's present is set in a Tuscan villa near the end of World War II, where a young Canadian nurse, Hana (Juliette Binoche), has left her medical unit to help nurse a mysterious burn victim, known only as the "English" patient (Ralph Fiennes). She is joined there by another Canadian (of nefarious background) called Caravaggio (Willem DaFoe), who thinks the patient may have been responsible for a mutilation he has suffered during the war. Also on hand are two members of a British mine-searching unit, one of whom, a Sikh named Kip (Naveen Andrews) becomes Hana's lover. Twirling in flashbacks through this story are the fevered memories of the English patient, who is, in reality, a Hungarian-born aristocrat, Count Almasy, a noted researcher of North African desert cultures, a sort of Lawrence of Maghreb. He is drawn into a torrid romance with Katharine (Kristin Scott Thomas), wife of one of his fellow researchers, Clifton (Colin Firth), but Clifton ultimately discovers his wife's liaison and attempts to kill the three of them by crashing his plane in the desert. That murder-suicide attempt leads to Katherine's demise and finally to Almasy's accident in a subsequent plane crash.

This convoluted plot sounds difficult to follow (and it is), though the calculated murkiness of the novel, which insists on using pronouns in lieu of proper names, is avoided in the film by the simple presence of flesh-and-blood actors. The movie's clarity is enhanced, too, by Minghella's screenplay, which neatly condenses the novel's several narrative lines. This is intelligent, literate filmmaking, often ravishing to look at (stark Saharan and lush Italian backdrops don't hurt), graced with some solid acting (especially from the intrepid Binoche and the ravishing Scott Thomas)...

So why doesn't the whole thing come together better? Some of the problem may be the balancing act the film attempts between past and present; the parts never seem to cohere fully--for example, there is great difficulty for the viewer in figuring out the exact chronology of events. Perhaps even more important is a certain deadness at the core: the central character of Almasy. Ralph Fiennes, handsome as he is, never suggests the mystery and complexity of the figure that the movie (as well as the novel) clearly intends to show.

Supposed to be *misterioso* and Euro-romantic, *The English Patient* himself--whom the other characters are trying to define--remains steadfastly *undefined*.  
(*The film is rated "R"*)

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