

Indignation

Philip Roth has written over 25 novels in the past 50 years, making him one of America's most eminent authors. With that prodigious output, he has inevitably been scouted by Hollywood for potential adaptations. However, perhaps because of their literary complexity, only a few of his novels have reached the screen, and none has proved a blockbuster. One of them, "Goodbye, Columbus" (1969), won decent reviews and box office, but others—such as "Portnoy's Complaint," "The Human Stain," and "The Humbling"—barely made a ripple. That hasn't stopped filmmakers from trying: the latest effort comes from writer/director James Schamus who has brought "Indignation," a Roth novel from 2008, to the screen

Much of Roth's work springs from his biography, albeit with inevitable changes in details and locations. "Indignation," a coming-of-age story, is certainly triggered by Roth's own background. The tale is told in one long flashback narrated in over voice by Marcus Messmer (Logan Lerman), who is an infantryman during the Korean War.

That voice shifts to 1951, where we observe Marcus as a precocious but inexperienced high school kid from New Jersey. He longs to pull away from his anxious, hovering, working-class family and is able to escape to a school in a new environment, in this case a private Christian college in Winesburg, Ohio. He quickly realizes his isolation among the few token Jews on campus. His youthful, but confident, atheism also clashes with a culture of chapel attendance and invocations of the Lord.

Two incidents roil his world: 1) his unexpected sexual initiation from a beautiful classmate Olivia (Sarah Gadon), a "troubled" girl with whom he is smitten, and 2) his confrontations with Dean Caudwell (Tracey Letts), who tests his patience and his personal ethics. The relationship with Olivia cannot withstand the opposition of Marcus' mother (Linda Emond), who sees calamity in this fragile girl, and a ruse to avoid chapel produces a final confrontation with the dean that brings on his expulsion. The draft and the Korean War incident close the circuit.

Lerman (from "The Perks of Being a Wallflower") does an admirable job of portraying the bright but callow Marcus, a youth certain in mind but little touched by life who runs up against mysteries he cannot explain away. You can sympathize with the kid's confusion before the puzzlements of a wider world but may bristle, too, when he plays the smart aleck. His confusion is most evident in his dealings with the ravishing Olivia—played as an unattainable porcelain doll by Gadon—and in his encounters with Dean Caudwell.

The exchanges between Marcus and Caudwell form the heart and moral center of "Indignation." What could have been a facile face-off between a tough kid against an authority figure is made more resonant because of the way Letts (a noted playwright as well as an actor) portrays the dean. Presented early as a stereotype of the proto-fascist headmaster, the dean's character grows more complex when he interrogates young Messmer about his life, in school and out. Letts' dean doesn't pontificate so much as parry Marcus's earnest objections, especially on chapel attendance. He does not automatically berate Marcus and recognizes that the child is bright with potential. Even when he finally has Marcus cold for cheating (paying a kid to attend his chapel

meetings), the dean's mood is close to understanding (if not forgiving) with never a raised voice. His is a serious protagonist to contend with, more than Marcus can handle.

Schamus is a film veteran, especially as a producer and a studio executive. He has been associated with the director Ang Lee since their first collaboration in "The Wedding Party" (1993), both as a producer and a writer. Here he debuts as a director and, while hardly flashy, he sets pieces in place effectively while staying close to the novel itself. He has taken on a hard nut of a story and achieved an unsentimental and serious tone, but one unlikely to be a Roth movie breakthrough. However, perhaps it will lead some moviegoers to take a dip in the rich Roth oeuvre. (*The film runs 110 mins. and is rated "R" for sexual situations*).