

A "writer" in name only

Wonder Boys, directed by Curtis Hanson, screenplay by Steve Kloves, based on the novel by Michael Chabon

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In *Wonder Boys*, a college professor and novelist in Pittsburgh faces a series of crises in the course of a winter weekend. His wife has left him, and his lover (married to a superior) is pregnant. His second novel, on which he's worked for years, remains unfinished, and his New York editor is arriving to check on its progress. A talented, but unstable student, armed with a handgun, latches onto him ... and so forth. There are too many crises to mention, perhaps too many for any entirely healthy work. Things come to a head, and the writer has to make some difficult decisions.

The film is amiable enough, and there are three or four scenes that hint at the reality of relations between people. As the editor, Robert Downey Jr., whose life has been more catastrophic than that of any of the fictional characters here, is serious and seductive. He is fascinating to watch in almost everything he does. Frances McDormand, as the protagonist's lover, when she's not working too hard at her acid tongue and generally acting superior, is also enjoyable.

Michael Douglas plays the lead character, Grady Tripp. Douglas has always struck me as liberal-minded, decent and a bit bland, the product of a complacent and affluent generation in Hollywood. His first great success, in fact, came as a producer, of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in 1975. That doesn't seem an auspicious beginning for an artist, to be the one organizing the details and counting the receipts. He performs reasonably in *Wonder Boys* because neither the film nor the part makes any great demands. There's nothing too punishing about the film, nothing too tough.

It's not clear to me what filmmaker Curtis Hanson (born in 1945) feels strongly about. He's directed a

number of films, genre or otherwise: *The Bedroom Window* (1987), *Bad Influence* (1990), *The Hand That Rocks the Cradle* (1992), *The River Wild* (1994), *L.A. Confidential* (1997). I liked the last—the most successful of his films—the least of any of them. He seems attracted to certain types of extreme, even psychotic, behavior, but to what end? Hanson's work seems a bit impersonal and needlessly oriented toward success on the market.

So many American novelists, screenwriters and filmmakers these days are satisfied to remain on the surface of things. Instead of sifting through the peculiarities of behavior for their more general meanings, these artists offer us collections of “colorful” characters and incidents. There is something superficial and condescending in that. *Wonder Boys* succumbs to this tendency: a blind pit bull named Poe; the shooting of the dog and the conveyance of its body in the trunk of a car; a transvestite towering over everyone in high-heels; the theft of the jacket worn by Marilyn Monroe on her wedding day; a pregnant waitress named “Oola”; her boyfriend, whom the Douglas and Downey characters choose to call “Vernon Hardapple,” etc. I find this sort of “quirkiness” truly tedious.

There is something quite odd about this film, which may, in its own way, be revealing. Tripp is a novelist. He's had a book published seven years earlier entitled *The Arsonist's Daughter*, which everyone in the film praises highly. He's working on another, which by now has expanded to a ridiculous length. At no time, however, is there a single reference to the content of either work or the problems or themes that Tripp addresses. We learn nothing about his art or his artistry. We see him now and again sitting, disheveled, in front

of a typewriter, and at the (happy, complacent) end of the film, clean-shaven, at a laptop computer, but that's all. Is it likely that a novelist would go about his daily life—much less undergo moments of great stress—without once indicating what was impelling him, at great cost, to devote his life to putting words on paper?

Most people are forced to work to live. Artists, presumably, live to work. An artist is only that if his art is at the center of his existence. Tripp, for all we learn about his artistic life, might as well be an accountant or an electrician. Being a “writer,” it seems, is simply the way he goes about making a career, gaining (or losing) prestige and attracting women.

Perhaps there's an objective significance to this. For a variety of reasons—the vast amounts of money involved, ideological confusion, a general cultural decline—the content of movie-making (and to a lesser extent, novel-writing) has been largely emptied out in America, replaced by career and business concerns. X or Y is a “filmmaker” because of a certain degree of success forging ahead in the film industry. I would imagine, aside from the cachet attached to particular projects, it hardly makes a difference in some circles what a given director has made his or her films about.

To discuss an artist without once referring to the substance of his art, but instead focusing on his latest success or failure, his upcoming project, his “track record,” his status in the industry, his personal life, his vices and so on—presumably this is the rule rather than the exception. In that sense, unhappily, Hanson's film is probably true to life.



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