

The entanglement with life

The Human Stain directed by Robert Benton

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The Human Stain, directed by Robert Benton, screenplay by Nicholas Meyer, based on the novel by Philip Roth

The Human Stain, directed by 71-year-old Robert Benton (*Bad Company*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Places in the Heart*), is a serious, if flawed, adaptation of the remarkable Philip Roth novel. It does something rare in contemporary American filmmaking: it takes a sober and nonconformist look at certain complex aspects of contemporary social life.

The filmmakers' attitude toward the Roth book seems contradictory. On the one hand, Benton and screenwriter Nicholas Meyer demonstrate a reverence for their film's literary source—published in 2000—so deep-going as to suggest something akin to a cinematic inferiority complex. On the other, they have chosen to cut down Roth's outraged and sharp-eyed critique of American society in the late 1990s, particularly the manufactured Clinton impeachment scandal. The result is an intelligent copy rather than an inspired embodiment of the book's essential spirit.

The film (like the novel) is narrated by writer Nathan Zuckerman (Gary Sinise), who has functioned as Roth's literary alter ego in a number of his previous works. Zuckerman is a refugee in the hills of Massachusetts from a difficult personal history, when Coleman Silk (Anthony Hopkins) enters his life. Silk, a former dean and classics professor at fictitious Athena College whose dynamic leadership broke up the faculty's senile old guard and put the college on the academic map, resigned in protest after being accused of making a racist remark while taking attendance.

Unaware that two students registered in his class, who had never attended, were black, Coleman asked if they were "spooks" (i.e., phantoms). "Spook" is also, however, a derogatory term (of another era) for an African-American, and Coleman finds himself in hot water. "I was referring to their possibly ectoplasmic character," says Coleman to his accusers. The injustice of the charge causes his wife, Iris, to suddenly drop dead. With an eye to avenging his wife's "murder," Coleman urges Nathan to write a book about the incident.

Silk's obsession with the project gets dropped when he takes up with the semi-literate and emotionally damaged Faunia Farley—a 34-year-old part-time milkmaid, postal clerk and college janitor. This further shocks the academic community, which has already ostracized the 71-year scholar. Even Zuckerman tries to dissuade Coleman from engaging in the relationship, insultingly calling him "Achilles on Viagra." Further complicating matters is Faunia's ex-husband Farley, a psychotic Vietnam veteran. Farley is a violent man who menacingly stalks both his ex-wife and her lovers. He blames the accidental death of their two young children in a fire on Faunia, who, as the kids were suffocating, was in a car outside the house having sex with another man.

As the incongruous pair become soulmates, Coleman reveals to Faunia his deepest secret—and biggest lie. Coleman, one of the first Jews permitted to teach in a classics department anywhere in America, is in reality an African-American. Being light of skin and acutely sensitive to the obstacles facing blacks in America, and having just lost the (white)

girl of his dreams as a result of her discovering his color, a young Coleman abandoned his mother, brother and sister and escaped his segregated, working class neighborhood in New Jersey. He enlisted in the Navy during World War II as a Caucasian. Later "passing" as a white student and shunning the black academic institutions, such as Howard University, he obtained an Ivy League education and specialized in a relatively esoteric field.

Coleman and Faunia devour each other, decanting into one another all the angry disappointments of their lives. As Roth puts it, "each of them protecting the other against everyone else—each of them, to the other, *comprising* everyone else... They are the disaster to which they are enjoined."

Coleman and Faunia are eventually done in by Farley, a fact known only to Nathan. He will now write the book about Coleman, who has become more of a mystery with his unmasking. In the novel, Zuckerman asks: "Was it the social obstruction that he wished to sidestep?... Did he ever relax his vigilance, or was it like being a fugitive forever?... Spooks! To be undone by a word that no one even speaks anymore. To hang him on that was, for Coleman, to banalize everything—the elaborate clockwork of his lie, the beautiful calibration of his deceit, *everything*. Spooks!"

The film's Achilles' heel, so to speak, is director Benton's quest to build up the love story at the expense of the book's social observations. In an interview with *movies.com*, the filmmaker lauds the scriptwriter for dispensing with "a lot of Roth's novel that had to do with political correctness [i.e., Roth's objection to "political correctness"]." Instead, Benton was pleased that the scriptwriter concentrated "on the love story between Coleman and Faunia and the stories of the older Coleman and the younger Coleman. So he constructed, in a sense, two intersecting or parallel love stories, which I thought would work well for me."

What Roth weaves into the fabric of every character and every scenario is what didn't "work so well" for Benton. In the book, as Coleman prepares to counter the attacks of his politically correct detractors, he makes an evaluation of the 1990s student generation as "far and away the dumbest generation in American history... Our students are abysmally ignorant. They've been incredibly badly educated. Their lives are intellectually barren. They arrive knowing nothing and they leave knowing nothing."

And in the most politically charged speech of the book, Coleman points to what he sees as the source of this problem: "It's as though not even that most basic level of imaginative thought had been admitted into consciousness to cause the slightest disturbance. A century of destruction unlike any other in its extremity befalls and blights the human race—scores of millions of ordinary people condemned to suffer deprivation upon deprivation, atrocity upon atrocity, evil upon evil, half the world or more subjected to pathological sadism as social policy, whole societies organized and fettered by the fear of violent persecution, the degradation of individual life engineered on a scale unknown throughout history, nations broken and enslaved by ideological criminals who rob them of

everything, entire populations so demoralized as to be unable to get out of bed in the morning with the minutest desire to face the day...all the terrible touchstones presented by this century, and here they are up in arms about Faunia Farley.

“Here in America either it’s Faunia Farley or it’s Monica Lewinsky! The luxury of their lives disquieted so by the inappropriate comportment of Clinton and Silk!... I’m depraved not simply for having once said the word ‘spooks’ to a class of white students—and said it, mind you, not while standing there reviewing the legacy of slavery, the fulminations of the Black Panthers, the metamorphoses of Malcolm X, the rhetoric of James Baldwin, or the radio popularity of *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, but while routinely calling the roll.”

Roth’s view of American life in *The Human Stain*—the third part of his unofficial trilogy, following *American Pastoral* and *I Married a Communist*—is limited, but direct and forthright. There is no contemporary American novelist who writes of the media and the political establishment with such well-deserved contempt:

“In the Congress, in the press, and on the networks, the righteous grandstanding creeps, crazy to blame, deplore, and punish, were everywhere out moralizing to beat the band: all of them in a calculated frenzy with what Hawthorne (who, in the 1860s, lived not many miles from my door) identified in the incipient country of long ago as ‘the persecuting spirit’; all of them eager to enact the astringent rituals of purification that would excise the erection from the executive branch, thereby making things cozy and safe enough for Senator Lieberman’s ten-year-old daughter to watch TV with her embarrassed daddy again. No, if you haven’t lived through 1998, you don’t know what sanctimony is.”

Unfortunately, Roth does not go much beyond this outrage. *The Human Stain* never considers the right-wing elements behind the impeachment scandal nor the deeper historical significance of this near-coup d’état. Nonetheless, the novel’s angry, socially critical viewpoint remains in the foreground throughout. Perhaps because they thought such an approach less marketable, perhaps because they disagreed with it in part, perhaps just out of a general Hollywood tendency to soft-pedal and reduce everything to the lowest common denominator, Benton and Meyer have excised a good deal of the sting from their film.

The film version of *The Human Stain* begins in 1998, “the summer of sanctimony,” with a shot of a group of Athena College students making insipid comments about Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky. The remarks seem somewhat pasted on and artificial. In fact, the few references to the Clinton crisis that Benton and Meyer do include, such as right-wing prosecutor Kenneth Starr’s brief appearance on a radio broadcast, are somewhat perfunctory.

On the other hand, the general shape and scope of Roth’s story are intelligently brought to the screen by Benton. One of the film’s most moving scenes is Coleman’s farewell to his mother before he embarks on his life in white society. Feeling like she is being murdered by her son, Mrs. Silk says: “I don’t know why I’m not better prepared for this, Coleman. You’ve been giving fair warning almost from the day you got here. You were seriously disinclined even to take the breast. Yes, you were. Now I see why. Even that might delay your escape. There was always something about our family, and I don’t mean color—there was something about us that impeded you. You think like a prisoner. You do, Coleman Brutus. You’re white as snow and you think like a slave.” These last words are chilling.

Another memorable moment is Coleman’s confrontation with his well-heeled and complacent attorney, who advises him to drop the socially unacceptable Faunia and all the baggage that comes with her, including her dangerous ex-husband. Coleman blasts back: “You’re a vocal master of extraordinary loquaciousness, Nelson. So fluent. A vocal master of the endless, ostentatiously overelaborate sentence. And so rich with contempt for every last human problem you’ve never had to face. I never again

want to hear that self-admiring voice of yours or see your smug f—ing lily-white face.”

Although Benton does not give proper weight to Roth’s social critique in the structure and language of the work, the film perhaps pays tribute most directly to the author’s work through the performance of Anthony Hopkins as Coleman Silk (over which the director obviously presided), a performance that gives the movie much of its depth and humanity. Much of the unscripted Roth is embodied in Hopkins’s characterization. He aptly displays the rapturous drive of a bifurcated being, who has painfully and remorsefully jettisoned his birth family to “make his destiny by being subjugated to something else.” A man who comes to abhor the social propriety he has attained at the highest price and who then gives himself completely to an outcast—a risk he knows can be and proves fatal.

In fact, to the film’s credit—unusual for a Hollywood project—there are no caricatures. It has a cast that delivers thoughtful and relatively nuanced performances. Nicole Kidman puts in hard work to portray Faunia, but lacks the intellectual depth to round out the character. Ed Harris is a believable Les Farley, given that the film spends little effort on his plight, that of the Vietnam veteran.

This is an important topic in the Roth book: “There’s no transition. One day he’s [Farley’s] door gunning in Vietnam, seeing choppers explode, in midair seeing his buddies explode, down so low he smells skin cooking, hears the cries, sees whole villages going up in flames, and the next day he’s back in the Berkshires [mountains in New England]. And now he *really* doesn’t belong, and, besides, he’s got fears now about things going over his head. He doesn’t want to be around other people, he can’t laugh or joke, he feels that he is no longer a part of their world, that he has seen and done things so outside what these people know about that he cannot connect to them and they cannot connect to him... He is a trained killer thanks to the government of the United States,” Roth writes in one of the many passages that explain the craziness and brutality of the Lester Farleys—their flashbacks, their Thorazine, their numbness, their rage.

In the course of his postwar life, Lester begins “to know that I can’t die. Because I died already. Because I died already in Vietnam.” The film’s treatment of Lester’s tragedy is inadequate.

And what of the book’s name, *The Human Stain*? The movie offers no explanation or hint of an explanation for this title. Had Benton placed more emphasis on the Clinton experience, then the audience might have seen it as a off-beat reference to the famous stain on Monica Lewinsky’s dress.

The title may be Clintonesque, but it is also more elemental than that. “[W]e leave a stain, we leave a trail, we leave our imprint. Impurity, cruelty, abuse, error, excrement, semen—there’s no other way to be here. Nothing to do with disobedience. Nothing to do with grace or salvation or redemption. It’s in everyone. Indwelling. Inherent. Defining. The stain that is there before the mark. Without the sign it is there. The stain so intrinsic it doesn’t require a mark. The stain that *precedes* disobedience, that *encompasses* disobedience and perplexes all explanation and understanding. It’s why all the cleansing is a joke. A barbaric joke at that. The fantasy of purity is appalling. It’s insane.”

Roth wrote and named his book as an antidote to the moralizing of both the fundamentalist right and the politically correct radical circles.

Despite the limitations of his social views, and the darkness that they perhaps encourage, Roth’s work takes an extraordinarily objective look at humanity. He is neither a cheap optimist nor a cheap pessimist. He conveys the painfulness of life without condemning life. In the novel, the narrator, Nathan Zuckerman, is discussing the state of his solitary existence at 65: “Why, with no warning, should I be lonely? Lonely for what? What’s gone is gone. There’s no relaxing the rigor, no undoing the renunciations. Lonely for precisely what? Simple: for what I had developed an aversion to. For what I had turned my back on. For life. The entanglement with life.”

The treatment of this “entanglement” as it plays itself out in modern America is the strength of Roth’s novel, and insofar as it brings to bear aspects of that treatment, the strength of the film.



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