The surface of a frantic, unusual adolescence: Running with Scissors

Jeff Lassahn
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Running with Scissors, written and directed by Ryan Murphy, based on the book by Augusten Burroughs

Running with Scissors is based on the memoir of the same title by Augusten Burroughs. The book, a bestseller, focuses on Augusten's teenage years after his mother decides that her psychiatrist should be her son's guardian. It was adapted by Ryan Murphy, who also directed it as his first feature film. He is otherwise best known for the television series *Nip/Tuck*, about two Miami South Beach plastic surgeons.

The film starts out by briefly showing Augusten (Joseph Cross) as a young child who exhibits unusual behavior. His mother Deirdre (Annette Bening) is defined by psychotic outbursts and poetry readings, and his father Norman (Alec Baldwin) is a depressed and alcoholic university professor. As the tensions between the parents escalate, Deirdre seeks the help of an unusual psychiatrist, Dr. Finch, played by Brian Cox. The film's attention then turns to Augusten's teenage years, as his parents separate and his mother's problems become more severe. Dr. Finch takes Deirdre under intensive personal care, and Augusten is forced to live in part at the Finch's residence.

Undergoing intense therapy, Deirdre asks Augusten if he will let Dr. Finch adopt him. Augusten submits after an argument with Deirdre—because, as he sarcastically exclaims, there are no other options. Obsessed with glamour and fame, and brought up in a stylish and tidy house, Augusten is initially repulsed by the squalor and chaos of the Finch house. At the same time, the chaos and quirkiness are also fascinating to him, and he becomes a part of the Finch's generously extended family. The bulk of *Running with Scissors* concerns this period, alternating between the unusual incidents at the household and the emotional crises of its inhabitants: Augusten enters into a relationship with a man more than twice his age; Deirdre cycles through lovers and psychotic outbursts; Finch's daughters and wife confront their own problems.

In all of this, little sticks out. Perhaps the most genuine scene occurs when Augusten, his boyfriend Neil and Finch's daughters Hope and Natalie are together in a kitchen. They actually have time to banter with one another for a minute, and one feels that some of the expressions and laughter developed out of the scene. At several other points, the filmmaker obviously wants the spectator to experience horror and revulsion, but only one moment truly stands out: when Augusten fakes committing suicide.

Dr. Finch suggested this so the boy could be permanently free from school; Augusten washes several drugs down with whiskey at age 13. The camera suddenly shows a close-up of his stretcher whisked through a hospital, and a tube is violently shoved down his throat to pump out his stomach—the same technique used by the U.S. military for the opposite reason, to force-feed prisoners on a hunger strike at Guantánamo Bay.

Joseph Cross does well in bringing out Augusten's qualities, portraying him as young, rash, confused and searching. It is also notable that his homosexuality does not come off either as a caricature or the focus of the film. The rest of the cast also demonstrates considerable effort in their performances, particularly Annette Bening. For a scene where Dr. Finch gives her a generous helping of the powerful relaxant Valium, director Ryan Murphy said that she came on set offering to act any of the five possible ways a patient might react to the drug. Yet even with such research and seriousness, the characters rarely establish any connection with the viewer, whether it be of sorrow, sympathy or joy. Much of this seems to be a result of limited opportunities offered by the film.

There is no shortage of emotional crises—in fact, the sheer number of such events serves in part to mitigate their effect. Characters are constantly in conflict with each other, with their surroundings. Augusten is desperately struggling to be comfortable, as he is tossed around between houses, by his own desires and by his mother's fickle mental state. If not in a drug-induced euphoria or a pretentious and esoteric poetry club mood, Deirdre is in a fit. Her two girl friends in the movie, Fern, and then Dorothy, are created from the same mold. The Finch family spends a good deal of on-screen time in outbursts and fights, sometimes laced with psychological terminology.

Between the scenes of turmoil, Murphy stages unusual incidents, intended to bring out the humorous aspects of the character's difficulties. For this reviewer, nearly all of these seemed artificial and out of place. In a technique used several times in the film, the camera is first focused on Norman and Deirdre at Dr. Finch's large desk, then cuts away, and returns with Augusten and Deirdre in the same spot. In one scene Dr. Finch asks, "Augusten, do you have any questions concerning the state of your parents' marriage?," to which Augusten, sitting next to Deirdre, replies: "I do have one question: what's behind that door?" Dr. Finch replies that it leads to an adjacent room, called his masturbatorium, which he proceeds to show them. This sudden change in mood and subject derails what little was developing, substituting a cheap attempt at a laugh.

The lifelessness of much of the humor can also be explained by its rigidity, with most of the dialogue transferred precisely from the memoir. All that has been done is to stage a scene, humor prepackaged, and recount it. For that matter, much of the dialogue as a whole is repeated verbatim from the memoir, which surely must be limiting for those acting it out.

The film's soundtrack is thoroughly clichéd. A good portion of it consists of standard hit songs from the mid-1970s, when the movie is

set, along with two by Nat King Cole. An incident early in the film provides an example of how they are used: Deirdre storms out of the house after screaming unfairly at Norman, who has just come home, delayed, visibly tired from work. Quickly noting Augusten, he proceeds to light a cigarette and mix a cocktail. The song "Quizás, Quizás, Quizás" is playing, with these lyrics: "The days pass this way / And I am despairing." This heavy-handed technique is common, with the song's lyrics or mood tied to a given scene in a rather obvious way. Another warning bell is a very simple orchestral piece, which appears during several dramatic parts and remains unchanged for each.

Though much of *Running with Scissors* is bound tightly to its source material, there are significant and questionable changes. Most prominent is the portrayal of Natalie, the daughter of Dr. Finch to whom Augusten becomes close. In the memoir, she is described as reckless and independent, overweight and unkempt, with "long, greasy, stringy hair." In the movie, Natalie (Evan Rachel Wood) is instead attractive and slim. She is usually wearing skimpy clothing, rather than a greasy polyester McDonald's uniform for an entire weekend. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the change was made for marketing purposes, not on artistic grounds. It has repercussions: the tall, blond Natalie, wearing a nice fur-lined coat, walking down the street and complaining to Augusten about how she'll never get into college because she is a Finch (and therefore, by definition, problematic and troubled)—this does not bear the same weight in its new context.

Likewise, nearly all of the crude language, jokes and sexuality from the memoir make it into the film version of *Running with Scissors*, but the observations about the hypocrisy and absurdity of everyday self-righteousness in America do not. One of Deirdre's lovers is simply a member of a poetry club, rather than a minister's wife. A priest who gave Natalie and Augusten money from the tithe to see movies is never mentioned, nor are Natalie's experiences working for McDonald's. Augusten frequently denounces school in the film without stating why; though in the memoir he complains about the stifling atmosphere of "the factory" (his school) and how much he envies a popular, wealthy girl.

A central problem is that the characters within the film are never given sufficient substance with which to establish themselves. Deirdre is the most prominently unhappy and unsatisfied, from what she describes to Augusten as "the oppression of my mother and the oppression of your father." We never figure out how it is that Norman oppresses Deirdre, and have to assume that his callousness, alcoholism and depression stems from his troubled marriage with her. Do either of their problems have to do with his tenured university position, and her life in a spacious home as a mother and poet? What makes those in this position, which many aspire to, so unhappy?

The lead characters in *Running with Scissors* have psychiatric problems and are receiving treatment by a private doctor in his own home. Dr. Finch's liberal prescriptions and Freudian phraseology are clearly shown to be unsuccessful, and Natalie mentions that he's had to cut back because of the high cost of living. As to what else might work, there is no mention of state health systems—no one has gone there, and it isn't offered up as a possibility. Have they been cut back too? Are they even operating, and for that matter, are these psychiatric problems even properly diagnosed and treated by anyone?

The director of the film, Ryan Murphy, was sought after to direct other projects, but declined until this opportunity occurred. Otherwise, he is known for creating the hit show about two high-end Miami plastic surgeons called *Nip/Tuck*. Plastic surgery is a complex and interesting topic, raising social questions of health, personal satisfaction and science. In 59 episodes, the show has so far addressed malpractice four times, aging three times and obesity twice. Various appearance-altering diseases have each been subjects once. All of this is far outnumbered by the incidence of incest (six times), orgies (five times), hypersexuality and masochism (each twice), and necrophilia, zoophilia, and pedophilia (each once). A villain for two seasons has been "The Carver," a psychopath who disfigures, rapes and murders his victims in the belief that beauty is an evil.

In this case, Murphy has clearly chosen to emphasize and exaggerate the unusual and shocking, while quickly skimming over the complex and substantial issues. The same happens in *Running with Scissors*. Murphy noted in an interview that he identified with Augusten's memoir because "our mothers were the same in that they were both seeking a sense of identity outside of the suburban housewife thing," and also that "When I read the book, I was shocked at how much we were alike. I had never met anybody else, other than me, who had polished their allowance, and things like that. I was very attracted to the 'shiny things' thing, movies and glamour and escape."

That the director sympathizes and feels he has experienced Augusten's childhood—the troubles of his parents, the turbulence and uncertainty of the Finch household, being gay in a country where it can be seen as criminal—is a healthy basis for a film. Yet these are given the same weight as childhood curiosities and an obsession with the superficial. Escape, when circumstances are so unbearable they must be left behind, is the response of Augusten in the film. Before he does, Finch's wife Agnes compliments Augusten, saying he should write a book. A few minutes later, an epilogue notes in a self-satisfied manner that "he wrote a book." The rest of the characters were not so fortunate: his boyfriend is never heard from again, Finch dies after a scandal, Augusten's mother has a stroke and so on. In other words, out of tragic circumstances a few lucky ones might pull through, while the rest remain stuck.

A certain cynicism is a trait of both the writer, Burroughs, and the director, Murphy. The tendency to avoid the most complex and serious topics in favor of the exaggerated, the quirky, the odd—escaping any need to seriously delve into social life—is a common problem in filmmaking at the moment.