

Two films based on novels: Notes on a Scandal and The Painted Veil

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Notes on a Scandal, directed by Richard Eyre, screenplay by Patrick Marber, based on the novel by Zoë Heller; *The Painted Veil*, directed by John Curran, screenplay by Ron Nyswaner, based on the novel by W. Somerset Maugham

A lonely, middle-aged schoolteacher sums up her existence in the following way: “All my life, I have been the sort of person in whom people confide. And all my life I have been flattered by this role—grateful for the frisson of importance that comes with receiving privileged information ... The number of secrets I receive is in inverse proportion to the number of secrets anyone expects me to have of my own. And this is the real source of my dismay. Being told secrets is not—never has been—a sign that I belong or that I matter. It is quite the opposite: confirmation of my irrelevance.”

These are the words of Barbara Covett (Judi Dench), one of the two main protagonists in British filmmaker Richard Eyre’s *Notes on a Scandal*, based on the novel, *What Was She Thinking?* [*Notes on a Scandal*], by Zoë Heller. Barbara is simultaneously tragic and toxic as she fixates on the new art teacher, Sheba Hart (Cate Blanchett), at St. George’s, a London secondary school.

The older Barbara is as straight-laced and cynical as Sheba is free formed and bohemian. A long-time history teacher who evaluates the functioning of the working class school as “below the national average, but above the level of catastrophe,” Barbara is a “chronically untouched” spinster whose ingrained “pleasure deferral instinct” only adds to her “drip, drip of long-haul, no-end-in-sight solitude.” On the other hand, Sheba, a mother of two, and husband Richard (Bill Nighy) are “immediate gratification people” who live in “mingled detritus.” Some twenty-years her senior, Richard has been protecting Sheba from “confronting [her] own middle age ... and fundamental lack of drive.”

Messy and guileless, Sheba befriends Barbara with

genuine openness, which Barbara characterizes as “[an upper] class characteristic—this insouciant frankness.” But the latter is much more needy—and Machiavellian. Barbara fantasies that Sheba is the one with whom she will form a “relationship *de chaleur*.” Opportunity presents itself when she comes upon Sheba is a sexual tryst with her 15-year-old student Steven Connolly (Andrew Simpson). Now Barbara has the framework for manipulating Sheba into waking up “to my importance in her life.”

Notes on a Scandal opens with Barbara’s narration as a diarist who punctuates entries with misanthropically humorous observations. It soon becomes evident that the diary substitutes for an engagement with life and a reminder of the thinness of her subsistence. The delusional and desperate drive to entrap younger women like Sheba into a relationship is rooted not in evil but alienation and isolation.

Intelligence is at work. However, when the work ventures beyond Barbara’s dark voice-overs, it is wracked with inconsistencies. As important as Sheba’s affair with an immature boy proves to be for the movie’s central conceit, it is inserted without much deliberation. That being the case, the question then arises as to why Sheba risks everything for an unequal, stunted liaison. (The book points to her arrested emotional development.) Richard’s transformation from hippyish academic to outraged cuckold seems unconvincing; at any rate, his sudden abandonment of a ‘free and easy lifestyle’ in favor of conventional middle class morality (he throws her out of the house) would require further sustenance.

Things are artificially organized to provide opportunities for stormy scenes. Barbara has bided her time in ‘seducing’ the younger woman. Out of the blue, she hysterically demands that Sheba miss an important family event involving the latter’s mentally handicapped son because her cat has died!

It should be noted that Eyre, the artistic director of Britain's National Theatre from 1988 to 1997, allows lead actors Dench, Blanchett and Nighy tour-de-force moments which are generally overwrought. In many instances, the secondary characters are sacrificed to the extravagant theatrics of Dench and Blanchett. This is the case with Steven, as well as talented actor Michael Maloney's character Sandy Pabblem, the head of St. George's. (Is there something in his name that refers to what the students are being intellectually fed? Perhaps, there is after all Covett and Hart.)

Many scenes over overdone: a media too overwhelming in its pursuit of the celebrity deviant; an all too insipid male teacher also in love with Sheba; emotions that too often go from A to Z in nanoseconds.

"In this age of loneliness, isolation and disconnect, we live in cities that house millions of people yet everyone at one time or another yearns for companionship, for someone to reach out and connect with us on some level ... any level," argue the movie's production notes. A legitimate theme treated too carelessly by a filmmaker who pushes for the maximum and somewhat shallow chewing up of the scenery.

The Painted Veil, directed by American filmmaker John Curran and based on the novel by W. Somerset Maugham concerns an English couple, the Fanes, who arrive in Shanghai in 1925 as newlyweds. Kitty (Naomi Watts), a London socialite, counters her encroaching spinsterhood by reluctantly marrying Walter (Edward Norton), a shy bacteriologist. Although a loveless gesture on Kitty's part, Walter ("I think I improve greatly upon acquaintance") thinks that Kitty's feelings will change if she is shifted from her vacuous upper class lifestyle.

The more exotic surroundings, however, drive the spoiled Kitty into the arms of the Shanghai's English Vice Consul, Charlie Townsend (Liev Schreiber). Counting on Townsend's swinishness once the affair is exposed, an emotionally lacerated Walter leaves Kitty no choice but to accompany him to a remote village overrun by a cholera epidemic in China's interior. The couple's mutual resentment, made acute by the chronic terror of death, eventually turns to something else. Stripped bare is the illusory nature of Kitty's passion for Charlie and the triviality of her preoccupations.

Walter's valiant efforts against the contagion encounter hostility from a population heating up against the repression of British colonialism. When the idealistic scientist praises the cooperation he's receiving, a Nationalist (Kuomintang) army colonel retorts: "It would

be nice to do this work together without your country's guns pointed at our people."

The Painted Veil goes beyond lifting the veil on the empty-headedness of the rich. There is a parallel between Walter's attempts at civilizing Kitty ("You dragged me round those interminable galleries in Venice.") and the colonizing methods of the British in China (and those of the US in the Middle East?). According to Norton in the film's production notes: "Walter represents the forces of British Colonialism during that era. People were going into other countries and trying to make them over as their own. Walter also represents Western rationalism—the Western scientific mind that believes that if people would just embrace the way the West does things, they'd have it much easier."

Although the revolutionary ferment of 1925 China is largely absent in Maugham's novel, Curran, who filmed on location, wanted to "anchor the story to the massacre in Shanghai that occurred in May 30, 1925, in which British troops killed a large number of Chinese demonstrators at a major rally. In the aftermath, anti-foreign outrage reached a new peak and China-wide demonstrations were generated."

While the director's laudable intention was to have political context inform the dynamics of the Kitty-Walter relationship, in the film, political references function more as backdrop. The sporadic moments of anti-British violence accentuated by the ever-suspicious face of Colonel Yu, appear as intrusions. Foreground and background are rarely blended. What happens in China is only important insofar as it impacts on the Fanes and their personal troubles. This seems unnecessarily self-involved.

China in 1925 was an erupting revolutionary volcano. For Maugham, who wrote his novel in that year, this did not appear to be significant. With the exception of Kitty's remark about a "cowed and listless" populace, the author barely mentions the Chinese in his *The Painted Veil*. The filmmakers attempt to rectify this by grafting certain historical details onto the storyline, but without altering the conventional spirit of the novel. This makes for a good-looking, and relatively heartfelt, but uninspired movie.



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