

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button: Too little made of a life led in reverse

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Directed by David Fincher, screenplay by Eric Roth

Based on a short story by F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* concerns itself with the life of an individual who ages in reverse. Starting from birth as a shriveled old man to his death as a seemingly newborn infant, Benjamin Button experiences the natural aging process backward.

While this may sound like an intriguing premise for a literary work, Director David Fincher (*Fight Club*, *Panic Room*, *Zodiac*) and company are never able, in nearly three hours, to expand it into a profound film. Too much effort is squandered on special effects and other visual "eye candy," while the big questions are left unanswered and unexplored.

Benjamin Button (Brad Pitt) is born in New Orleans on the last day of the First World War to a wealthy family that has made a fortune on...buttons. No explanation is provided as to why Button's biology is working in reverse, other than the presence of a mysterious clock erected at the train station by a clockmaker whose son did not return home from the war. He intentionally designs the clock to run backward in the vain hope that time will also reverse and bring back his son and anyone else who was lost.

Button is born with all the characteristics of a man past 90 years old. His skin is wrinkled, and he is deaf and blind. As he grows older (or younger), his psyche remains that of a child trapped in the body of an octogenarian. Abandoned by his father, he is raised by a black woman named Queenie (Taraji P. Henson), who cares for the elderly at a home. Button conveniently fits in with all the older guests. He eventually falls in love with a young girl, who will become the object of his desire for the rest of his life, Daisy (Cate Blanchett).

The story is told through the memoirs Benjamin wrote down and kept for years, discovered much later by his future daughter Caroline (Julia Ormond) in New Orleans.

There is an effort to contrast that city in the "Roaring Twenties" with the Hurricane Katrina reality of today, but the transition comes off as irritating and largely beside the point.

As Benjamin progresses in life, he is stuck with the psyche of a young adult. His father reunites with him and introduces him to an adult world of brothels and bars. Benjamin then meets a sailor and tattoo artist named Captain Mike (Jared Harris) who shows him the ropes on his small tugboat. On one of their many journeys at sea, the ship weighs anchor in Murmansk in the Soviet Union.

Here we meet Elizabeth Abbott (Tilda Swinton), the bored wife of a British diplomat and spy. The narration tells us that "the most interesting things happen in a hotel lobby," and of course, Elizabeth and Benjamin have a brief though memorable affair. However, David Fincher never allows the audience to see what makes Elizabeth so fascinating to Benjamin. They meet at a table, she talks about her husband being a diplomat, she complains about the hot tea and then all we see is montage of her conversing with Benjamin late into the night. What they are talking about, we never find out. So goes another life "experience" that doesn't reveal much about either character.

Eventually, the world is torn apart by the Second World War, and Captain Mike enlists his crew with the US Navy shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. After a deadly encounter with a German U-boat, Benjamin barely returns home alive. If the events bring to mind another story about a quasi-handicapped man who goes to war and meets larger-than-life characters along the way, that's because the screenwriter Eric Roth also wrote the dreadful *Forrest Gump*. This would explain why many of the motifs are so similar. For example, in this film, the wandering feather is replaced by a hummingbird!

The greatest weakness of *Benjamin Button* is that it remains on the surface of great historical events and never

dives into the psychology of its characters. Many of the people Benjamin meets, like his "timeless" love Daisy, seem to float on the great canvas of the twentieth century. To examine how the times could have affected the various personalities and their outlook on the world is something that Fincher is unwilling or unable to do. This is a work outside history in any real sense.

Then there is Benjamin himself. Pitt does an admirable job playing an old decrepit man, under layers of makeup in the first half of the film, and then glides through the remainder of the film playing the pretty wanderer to whom we're all accustomed. He is supposed to be childlike as an elderly man and something of a sage in his youth. But Benjamin never imparts any of his wisdom to us, even when he is sailing in the Florida Keys or backpacking in some exotic 'third world' locale. Instead, he has lines like: "If you want to change your life, change it." We've heard this sort of thing before in Nike commercials.

For such an unusual life, Benjamin is surprisingly meek and good-natured, although his own psyche is never really opened up. For example, what would it be like to be born on crutches while children your age are able to swing back and forth on the playground? What could the sensation of growing younger every passing day teach us about mortality? Of all the characters in this film, unhappily, Benjamin stands out as the most mediocre.

The one character who does have a brush with greatness would be Daisy, an accomplished ballet dancer who even had the opportunity to work with the Bolshoi Ballet Company. After a debilitating car accident that prevents her from pursuing her dancing career, Daisy is consoled by the average Benjamin. However, by this time, he is in the prime of his life and so is Daisy. They will soon pass one another, so to speak, heading in different directions: she will grow older and wither away while he eventually recedes into boyhood and, eventually, infancy.

All sentimentality aside, there is something oddly affecting about this idea, and yet this is where the film goes on for another hour into an unconvincing honeymoon-like sequence. No mention of what the 1950s or '60s were like for this couple; we just see them messing around in a duplex. They watch The Beatles perform on the Ed Sullivan show, which I suppose is just as good a visual cue as any to say, "Look, it's 1964 now!"

By 1968, Benjamin and Daisy have a child named Caroline, who will end up reading the memoirs and letters at the beginning of the film. At this point, Benjamin decides to leave the two for some inexplicable reason. He

reasons with Daisy, arguing that their daughter "needs a father, not a playmate." Yet this feels unsatisfactory. After all, Benjamin would remember all his life experiences regardless of whether he was beginning to get acne on his face or not. If anything, he could probably relate to his daughter even more as he "aged" into childhood. Instead, he leaves Daisy and Caroline basically to fend for themselves.

Years later, when he returns as a "teenager," Daisy has become a middle-aged woman who teaches ballet. Although one would expect her to lash out at Benjamin after so many years away, during which time he has experienced youth without any additional responsibilities, Daisy just accepts his unannounced visit rather politely. Additional questions pose themselves: Why did Daisy and Benjamin have to separate if she just ends up caring for him in his last days anyway? And: why would Daisy keep Benjamin a secret from her daughter Caroline for so many years?

Stunning visuals can't do everything. Fincher seems stuck on the idea behind *Benjamin Button*, but is never able to bring any real insight to bear on the aging process. Michel Gondry's 2004 *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* dealt with memory loss and successfully argued in favor of loss and experience. But in *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, we don't see how life (especially one in rewind) has made our main character any wiser or more insightful. The viewer is stuck with scenes of Pitt and Blanchett acting as lovers with the sad realization that "nothing ever lasts." However, without a coherent or believable story this "life-affirming" story becomes more of a bittersweet fixation with death.



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