

The Spectacular Now: The happiness of youth

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Directed by James Ponsoldt; written by Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber; based on the novel by Tim Tharp

Many things stand in the way of writers and directors making compelling films about real life: the current cultural atmosphere, what filmmakers do or do not know, the supposed demands of the market, financial realities, and numerous other factors. We tend to see a good many works that are one-third or one-half accomplished. There seems to be an increased interest in treating life honestly, but good intentions are insufficient.

The Spectacular Now is a film about young people in an American town (it was shot in Athens, Georgia), based on a novel by Tim Tharp (2008). Sutter Keely (Miles Teller) is a senior in high school, who enjoys having a good time, generally fueled by alcohol. No one would confuse him with an overly earnest or emotionally mature individual. His mother works as a nurse, his father has disappeared from his life and his older sister has married money.

After an especially boisterous night, Sutter ends up asleep on the front lawn of a house that is not his own. Aimee Finecky (Shailene Woodley, *The Descendants*), who goes to the same school as Sutter, but travels in distinctly different circles, discovers him there. Aimee is inexperienced socially, cerebral and under the thumb of various people, including her best friend and her mother.

Having just broken up with a more glamorous and popular girlfriend, Sutter eventually determines to take Aimee under his wing, as it were, and introduce her to partying, having fun and standing up for herself. He has no intention of falling for her, much less, as his best friend Ricky (Masam Holden) predicts will happen, “breaking her heart.” Needless to say, things take various unexpected turns.

Before long, Aimee loosens up, drinks all day long

out of a flask like Sutter and even makes sexual demands on him. She also insists that he find out what has happened to his absent father, about whom his mother (Jennifer Jason Leigh) refuses to speak. Eventually, Sutter does just that and, contrary to the soothing stories he has told himself about his father, discovers the older man (Kyle Chandler) to be something of a womanizing barfly.

Meanwhile, Aimee has a plan: that she will break from her mother’s grip and attend college in Philadelphia and that Sutter should accompany her. That proposal throws him into a crisis ...

The film and Tharp’s novel each has its attractions. The book (set near Oklahoma City) is often amusing. Tharp’s Sutter, the narrator of the novel, offers various pointed remarks about the absurdities of contemporary American suburban life. None is so insightful individually as to be worth citing, but the observations accumulate in a pleasing fashion. One feels a certain affection for the narrator and his generally well-intentioned actions, many of which go awry. The novel even has a certain genial anti-establishment flavor to it. Without forcing matters too much, Tharp manages to get in some barbed comments about America’s various predatory wars, Guantanamo and such.

The film version of *The Spectacular Now* is an improvement upon the book in some ways, a falling off in others. The screenwriters, Scott Neustadter and Michael H. Weber (co-writers of *(500) Days of Summer*, 2009), and director James Ponsoldt have contrived to toughen the story somewhat. There are hints of a straitened or at least constraining economic state of affairs. It may seem faint praise, but it is always helpful when a film pays attention to how contemporary America actually looks, its stores, malls, gas stations, residences and so on.

The adults in particular have gained in the transition from book to film. The parents and stepparents in the

novel are largely absent and, when they do appear, lacking in dimension and generally unpleasant. Jennifer Jason Leigh and Kyle Chandler are convincing as Sutter's parents, each hard-pressed in his or her own way.

Film as a medium has the advantage, or disadvantage on occasion, over the novel form in that actual human beings repeat the lines and act out the drama. Tharp's weakness is that too much of his humor passes over into the merely facetious and the quasi-literary. To the extent that the filmmakers have matched their protagonists to the setting and circumstances, they have necessarily harshened the tone somewhat.

On the other hand, it is not to the filmmakers' credit that they have provided the work with a more or less happy ending, which one can see coming, fairly unstoppably, from some distance away. Tharp's original conclusion seems more plausible and consistent with the rest of the events.

At any rate, the differences between book and film are not immense.

A chief difficulty is the overall slightness of the two efforts. While both the novel and the movie make passing reference, in different ways, to contemporary life, that contact hardly even rises to the level of a serious brush with our present conditions and psychology. The economic and social matters here remain almost entirely outside the area of what's most important; they have next to no impact on emotional life or problems, which remain in the realm of the "timeless."

Unfortunately, if one were to note that the film could just as easily have taken place 10 or 25 years ago as now, the screenwriters, and director in particular, would most likely consider it a compliment—but the comment would not be meant as one. Again and again, we feel compelled to point out, *there is a connection* between the urgency, commitment and "presentness" of a work of art and its dramatic weight and emotional impact.

While *The Spectacular Now* is not tedious and the performers are appealing, its hold on the lives and circumstances of its characters, and on the larger social whole to which they belong, is rather loose, diffuse, not terribly compelling. The work generally wishes its protagonists well, without taking sufficient pains to get to the bottom of their situation.

As a result of this diffuseness and its focus on

individual moral or emotional choices, *The Spectacular Now*, probably without wishing to, drifts into a sort of conformism. The film especially is clearly scolding Sutter for his insistence on living "in the moment." His former girlfriend, Cassidy (Brie Larson), tells him somewhat sadly, "I want a future ... you can't do that."

No one wants to encourage irresponsibility, but this is the second or third film in the past couple of years about adolescents for whom the ultimate standard of maturity is whether or not a central figure is making serious plans "to go to college." (See, for example, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*: Growing up in the early 1990s.) There is a definite class bias and set of assumptions here. Teenage recklessness and even self-destructiveness are not primarily the product of "bad decisions," but generally miserable conditions and prospects, which are only getting worse.

One might make the same point in regard to the film's moralizing about Sutter's father and his drinking and philandering. Really, it is somewhat shameful that contemporary filmmakers too often seem to carry out their work with an eye as to how the "family values" crowd (either the "left" or right-wing variant) will react.



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