

Genius: “Just simply corny”

David Walsh
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Directed by Michael Grandage, written by John Logan, based on the book by A. Scott Berg

Genius, about the writer Thomas Wolfe, is the second film this year about a prominent 20th century American literary figure and, unfortunately, like *Papa: Hemingway in Cuba*, directed by Bob Yari, about Ernest Hemingway, this latest work is not good at all either.

The terrible shortfall in these two films’ attempts to get to the bottom of artistic achievement cannot simply be the fault of the individuals involved. How, in general, would an operation like the current film industry, dedicated to instantaneous box office success, rouse itself to any feeling for intellectual commitment? A great wall separates the producers, writers and directors at present from the kind of mental effort it takes to represent the world in a serious artistic manner. For the most part, unhappily, they have only clichés and guesswork at their disposal.

Thomas Wolfe was the author of four lengthy novels, two published during his short life— *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) and *Of Time and the River* (1935)—and two after his death in September 1938 from military tuberculosis of the brain at the age of only 37— *The Web and the Rock* (1939) and *You Can’t Go Home Again* (1940).

To speak more precisely, the subject of British director Michael Grandage’s film is not “the writer Thomas Wolfe,” but the relationship between the writer Thomas Wolfe and his editor, Maxwell Perkins. This is one of the most famous literary alliances in American letters. Perkins (1884-1947), who joined Charles Scribner’s Sons in New York in 1910, has a deserved place in history for signing F. Scott Fitzgerald and shepherding into print *This Side of Paradise* (1920) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925). Remarkably, he also edited and published Hemingway’s first novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

Grandage’s film begins in 1929, when Wolfe (Jude Law) pays a visit to Perkins (Colin Firth) at Scribner’s, expecting another rejection, and encounters instead the editor’s offer to publish the book. The pair set to work winnowing their way through the unwieldy manuscript.

Both Wolfe and Perkins make sacrifices in their personal lives for the sake of the former’s novels. Wolfe is involved with Aline Bernstein (Nicole Kidman), a married costume designer 20 years his senior. At first, Wolfe demonstrates a great deal of affection for Aline. They enjoy his success together. Later, as he grows tired of her, he proves to be a self-centered male egotist of the first order. And her dramatics only further alienate him.

Perkins has a more conventional personal life. He has a wife, Louise (Laura Linney), and five daughters in the suburbs. Wolfe is

something of a son to him. Perkins, too, eventually gets into difficulty at home when he devotes himself to editing Wolfe’s bushels of manuscripts at the expense of paying attention to his family.

Wolfe walks around New York a good deal, declaring his love for Life and his passion for Life, and so on. It is never entirely clear what it is about life that he is so enamored with.

In any case, Wolfe writes non-stop. Words, for better or worse, flow out of him, sometimes put on paper on the top of a refrigerator (the real Wolfe was six feet, seven inches tall). At the drop of a hat, he produces 50 or 80 pages. It drives Perkins to despair at times. The latter explains how he sees his work: “My only job is to put good books into the hands of readers.” On Wolfe’s second novel, the paring-down work is Herculean.

Wolfe becomes resentful of Perkins. It is said in the press and whispered in his ear that Perkins is the real author of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Wolfe’s autobiographical work about his early life in Asheville, North Carolina. He breaks with Perkins, deeply hurting the older man, and goes with another publisher.

F. Scott Fitzgerald (Guy Pearce) also makes an appearance. By this time, Fitzgerald is in a terrible way, unable to write, broke and with a wife, Zelda (Vanessa Kirby), who has gone mad. Wolfe is unkind to Fitzgerald during a dinner at Perkins’s home, lording over him his own success.

The break-up of Wolfe and Mrs. Bernstein proves very painful. When he tries to return to her, she has turned cold. She wants him, she says, to experience the suffering “I had to go through to feel nothing.”

Wolfe’s premature death is a great tragedy. In a letter Perkins receives after the novelist’s death, Wolfe apologizes and expresses his undying gratitude and friendship.

One of the disadvantages with which Grandage was working in the making of *Genius* was a script by John Logan. Logan is credited with writing *RKO 281* (1999), the story of Orson Welles and *Citizen Kane*; *Any Given Sunday* (1999), one of Oliver Stone’s hysterical outbursts, about professional football; *Gladiator* (2000), the bloody revenge film set in ancient Rome; *The Last Samurai* (2003), a foolish work about a former US soldier in late 19th century Japan; *The Aviator*, Martin Scorsese’s dreadful miscarriage about recluse billionaire Howard Hughes; *Sweeney Todd* (2007), the “musical horror comedy” directed by Tim Burton; and more.

While Logan cannot be blamed for the poor final product in every case, there does not appear to be any reason for assuming, based on this history, that he was likely to approach Wolfe’s story with much subtlety or historical insight.

Firth does reasonably well as the indefatigable and principled Perkins, selflessly working long, grueling hours to see that his authors' work reaches the public in its best possible form. As the angry and jilted Aline, Kidman does surprisingly well. She manages to convey the bitterness of spirit entirely legitimate yet utterly useless in the face of Wolfe's waning interest. She is morally in the right, but this does not necessarily help at all in love.

Pearce is one of the brightest spots in the film, as the tormented Fitzgerald, reduced to selling his wares in Hollywood. Astonishingly, by the time of Wolfe's last encounter with Fitzgerald, in the mid- to late 1930s, *The Great Gatsby* is out of print. He informs Wolfe that his royalty check for the novel the previous year was \$2.13 or some wretched figure like that.

The other principal disadvantage was the subject of the film itself, Thomas Wolfe. Wolfe had great innate talent and his books are still worth reading, if only for historical reasons, but they suffer from verbosity, repetitiveness and pointless, grating lyricism. Those three qualities are linked.

Wolfe's first and perhaps best (or at least most genuine) novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, dedicated to Aline Bernstein, follows its protagonist, Eugene Gant, from birth to his college days. The events are very much patterned on Wolfe's own life growing up in North Carolina, with a volatile drunk of a father and a miserly, grasping mother, and a crowd of siblings. There are passages and entire chapters that ring true. His portraits of family members are sharply done. Wolfe, famed for his memory, could reproduce conversation and details of life. The residents of Asheville did not take kindly to the picture Wolfe painted of them in the novel, and with good reason. There are elements of a critical look at cramped, backward small-town existence in the book.

Unfortunately, Wolfe wanted to do more than that, he wanted to grasp and encompass, as his film character tells us, the entirety of American life. He did not do that, he merely strained. The novel lacks the concreteness and social awareness of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser and Richard Wright at their finest and most clear-eyed. Sinclair Lewis's novels stand up better today than Wolfe's, by and large.

His first novel begins with this, what used to be known as "purple prose":

"Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas. The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cut-purse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every moment is a window on all time."

There are hints here of Nietzsche's "eternal return," among other things.

And the language hardly lets up for a moment. Turn to virtually any page of *Look Homeward, Angel* where description dominates and this sort of thing appears: "Spring lay strewn lightly like a fragrant gauzy scarf upon the earth; the night was a cool bowl of lilac darkness, filled with fresh orchard scents." Sincere as Wolfe

no doubt was, the overwrought, overdone character of it all is difficult to take after a while.

In *The Web and the Rock*, one finds this type of faux-Whitmanesque declamation, which tells us very little except that the author is trying hard to make a statement:

"And everywhere, through the immortal dark, something moving in the night, and something stirring in the hearts of men, and something crying in their wild unuttered blood, the wild unuttered tongues of its huge prophecies—so soon the morning, soon the morning: O America."

Historical issues, one senses, must have played a role in the difficulties. The conditions in Asheville, in the post-Civil War South, even if not the Deep South, must have been unhappy and confusing. The static, constantly recurring quality of Wolfe's prose, the furious running in place, presumably had some connection to life in the region. Wolfe, one feels, pursues a conception of life largely outside of history because history is too dreadful, threatening or complex. The flood of words is meant in part to divert attention from the failure to truly investigate the processes that have produced the present stagnation and emptiness. Wolfe *identifies* and *describes* people and things wildly, endlessly, repeatedly, but *explains* almost none of them.

In *Genius*, an unfortunate title as well, Law-Wolfe, as noted above, roams about New York City throwing his arms open to Life in all its Grandeur and Richness. He craves Experience at all costs. Occasionally, the results on screen are merely embarrassing, for example, the sequence in which Wolfe hauls Perkins off to a Harlem nightclub, where Life is Real and Throbbing, and picks up two black prostitutes.

There is very little exacting discussion of life in America in the 1930s. In one scene, Wolfe and Perkins encounter unemployed men amid signs of the general poverty and misery of the era. Wolfe discloses to Perkins his fear that his novel-writing is frivolous under the circumstances, but the editor reassures him rather abstractly and unconvincingly.

In any event, Fitzgerald, in an undated letter to his daughter, may have put it best. He noted that Wolfe "has a fine inclusive mind, can write like a streak, has a great deal of emotion, though a lot of it is maudlin and inaccurate but his awful secret transpires at every crevice—he did not have anything particular to say! The stuff about the GREAT VITAL HEART OF AMERICA is just simply corny."



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