The Land of Steady Habits: Postcrash American disillusionment

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Written and directed by Nicole Holofcener; based on the novel by Ted Thompson

The Land of Steady Habits is directed by Nicole Holofcener (*Friends with Money*, *Enough Said*) and based on the 2014 novel of the same title by Ted Thompson.

The film follows Anders Hill (Ben Mendelsohn), who has recently both quit his job on Wall Street and divorced his wife of several decades, Helene (Edie Falco). Their son, Preston (Thomas Mann), a recovering addict, has graduated from a prestigious university, but finds himself working at low-paying jobs, the latest being a position teaching adults to read, alongside his mother.

The events unfold in southwest Connecticut, in New York City's affluent suburbs.

When we meet him, Anders is somewhat overwhelmed buying household supplies for his new condominium. ("I'm looking for things to put on my shelves. … Starting over.") He shows up inappropriately, and disconsolately, at a Christmas Eve party, an annual event, co-hosted by his wife, her closest friend, Sophie Ashford (Elizabeth Marvel), and the latter's husband, Mitchell (Michael Gaston).

Asked by an old friend why he retired from finance "so early," Anders replies angrily, "Do you really want to know? … It's a system of monstrous greed, and that's the business. Save yourself. Do over the other guy. And don't worry about the consequences. And for what? More toys? Bigger houses? Trip to the goddamn Caribbean? … No, thank you."

Unhappily, this is virtually the only time in *The Land of Steady Habits* the subject comes up. By its end, the viewer would be entirely within his or her rights to have forgotten Anders' original motivation, presumably a driving force in the drama.

In any case, isolated at the Christmas celebration, Anders ends up outside doing drugs with the Ashfords' son, Charlie (Charlie Tahan) and a few of his friends. The party ends abruptly when Charlie overdoses and has to be rushed to the hospital.

In a fit of misplaced generosity, Anders has given their five-bedroom house to Helene, but now discovers he cannot retire and pay the mortgage at the same time. He borrows money from a friend, Larry (Josh Pais), who seems to be leading his own rather dissolute single life ("Don't you think it's a little tragic?" Anders asks him). Larry takes Anders to a demoralizing strip club. Drunk, our hero directs a taxi to his old address by mistake and "breaks into" his own house in the middle of the night, waking up his wife and her new boyfriend, embarrassing himself further.

Preston is having problems of his own. He takes $2,000 from one of his illiterate clients and gambles with it, having promised the man he would double his stake. Helene is forced to fire him, and Preston ends up sleeping in his car.

Charlie Ashford shows up at Anders' place in the middle of the night. He is fleeing his parents, who want to send him to rehab in Arizona. Instead of alerting Charlie's parents, Anders ill-advisedly smokes dope with him again. The teenager flatters him, "You have the balls to live your life, dude. That's what sets you apart from the rest of these fucking zombies. You can't go halfway. You can't be *you* and stay in favor." Charlie then disappears. Preston later stumbles on his dead body by some railroad tracks. The subsequent unhappiness spreads itself evenly over nearly everyone.

The chief difficulty is that Holofcener's film only dips its toe into the vast reservoir of disillusionment, disappointment and misery that the stock market and speculative boom have produced in the US, even for sections of its beneficiaries.

A University of Rochester study in 2009 concluded that "achieving fame, wealth and beauty" were "psychological dead ends." In the words of one of the study's authors, "Even though our culture puts a strong emphasis on attaining wealth and fame, pursuing these goals does not contribute to having a satisfying life." Another of the co-authors commented that what was "striking and paradoxical" about the research, according to the university website, was that "it shows that reaching materialistic and image-related milestones actually contributes to ill-being; despite their accomplishments, individuals experience more negative emotions like shame and anger and more physical symptoms of anxiety such as headaches, stomachaches, and loss of energy."

The Land of Steady Habits is neither sharp nor angry enough. It has tantalizing possibilities. The state of the two sons, Charlie and Preston, addicted to or (barely) recovering from drugs or alcohol, is perhaps the most telling. One is on the run from his own parents, and the other is homeless. Both are almost entirely at sea. Tahan and Mann effectively bring out the tragic elements.

Ben Mendelsohn, an Australian performer, does well as Anders. He manages to communicate something of the good intentions, self-destructiveness and sad-comic features of his character and his condition.

But Anders is saddled, unnecessarily (this is not in the novel), with a "love interest," Connie Britton as Barbara. It is not Britton's fault, but the part is negligible and only contributes toward facilitating an unconvincing, quasi-happy ending. Sentimental music does not help either.

Not all of Holofcener's additions are subtractions. In a nicely done scene, Preston, now working for a liquor store, delivers a crate of wine to a ridiculous mansion, only to discover the owner is a former

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classmate, who has made a fortune in "LEDs." Preston asks him, "What are LEDs?" "You know, lights. The green alternative, you know." … "Would you say LEDs are your passion? … I just didn't think this was your style, you know." "My style? What … I mean, what's your style? Delivering liquor?" "Looks that way."

All in all, however, Holofcener has "softened" the novel, eliminated some of its sharper edges. No doubt in the name of marketability. Unfortunately, the end result is probably *less* appealing, neither fish (comic) nor fowl (tragic) enough.

Thompson's book is written with intelligence and some feeling.

The author describes Anders' decades in "finance": "His sons were born and his father died, replacing the battles of the past with a steady march of paychecks and workweeks, of predawn mornings and pitch-black evenings and stacks of shirts in cardboard boxes. It was a rush to get to the train and a rush to get home; a rush to get into the market and a rush to get out; there were risks in everything, gains and losses in a day's transactions in sums that no man could recoup in his entire working life. There were good days and bad, good hours and bad, a responsibility to shareholders and senior management, to investors and his own family, a ticking clock of quarterly earnings and an expectation from everyone, especially himself, that he would plunge headlong into the roiling seas of the global economy and come back each time a winner."

Meanwhile, Helene works in decaying Bridgeport, "a bankrupt city on every level, littered with dormant factory chutes and docks that had rotted to their stanchions; the red-and-white smokestack of an outdated coal plant standing like the shaft of a giant, filthy candy cane," a city run by politicians who "spoke of a utopian future in which the creative classes were lured out on the Metro North" and who "seemed to blame the city's misfortunes on its own citizens and believed the best route to revitalization was simply to replace them."

Preston had once found himself, "for a period, owing to what he could describe only as temporary insanity," sharing "a trailer with three skateboarders who were cooking meth in the same kitchen where he was sleeping." One evening, when the "other guys were off videotaping one another skinning their faces on public handrails, and as he looked around their long tin box, with its tubes and pots, its terrible chemical air, a couch and a PlayStation and one shitty watercolor of the desert nailed to the wall, he knew he had made it about as far from home as he could."

It would be a mistake to believe that only depictions of the conditions of the oppressed are of interest or value to socialists or the working-class reader.

Frederick Engels, in a well-known letter (in November 1885) to novelist Minna Kautsky (the mother of Karl Kautsky), argued that the socialist-minded novel could "fully achieve its purpose, in my view, if, by conscientiously describing the real mutual [social] relations, it breaks down the conventionalized illusions dominating them, shatters the optimism of the bourgeois world, causes doubt about the eternal validity of the existing order, and this without directly offering a solution or even, under some circumstances, taking an ostensible partisan stand."

Socially critical novels that take up the lives and destinies of the rich have a long tradition in world and American literature and drama. In the US, Edith Wharton's *House of Mirth* (1905) and *The Age of Innocence* (1920), Booth Tarkington's *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1918), Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914), F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned* (1922) and *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and Sinclair Lewis's *Dodsworth* (1929) are only a few examples. Dickens, Balzac and Dostoyevsky, of course, often studied such people in depth.

There is also the category of upper-middle class disillusionment, which has an extensive history too. Reviewers of *The Land of Steady Habits* referred to Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), a study in suburban despair, as well as the works of John Cheever and John Updike.

Less often mentioned, but perhaps more appropriate, is John O'Hara's first (and, by far, best) novel, *Appointment in Samarra* (1934), written when the author was 29 or so. Thompson seems to be paying deliberate homage to O'Hara's book, beginning his book, as the other does, more or less, with a Christmas party and giving Helene a profession similar to that pursued by the protagonist's wife in *Appointment in Samarra* (the title refers to the retelling of an ancient Mesopotamian tale about death and fate).

Set in a small city in eastern Pennsylvania in 1930, the year following the Wall Street crash, O'Hara's novel centers on the final three days in the life of Julian English, a wealthy Cadillac dealer, who spends much of the time drunk. English, for reasons that are never fully spelled out, commits a number of truly self-destructive acts (throwing a drink in the face of an important investor in his business, appearing to sleep with the mistress of a powerful local gangster, becoming involved in a public brawl with a one-armed war veteran), which seem destined (or intended) to ruin his business and his marriage. In the end, he kills himself by running his car in a closed garage.

Appointment in Samarra is a searing, microcosmic picture of petty bourgeois American life at the outset of the Depression, saturated in hypocrisy, social-climbing, conformism and double-dealing.

Critic Edmund Wilson, who included O'Hara—along with James M. Cain, John Steinbeck and others—among "The Boys in the Back Room," wrote that the novelist "subjects to a Proustian scrutiny the tight-knotted social web of a large Pennsylvania town." Wilson, who observed that O'Hara was "primarily a social commentator," argued that the people in *Appointment in Samarra* "are all being shuffled about, hardly knowing what they are or where they are headed, but each is clutching some family tradition, some membership in a select organization, some personal association with the rich, from which he tries to derive distinction. But, in the meantime, they mostly go under. They are snubbed, they are humiliated, they fail. The cruel side of social snobbery is really Mr. O'Hara's main theme."

One reviewer called Thompson's *The Land of Steady Habits* "the first great novel about postcrash American disillusionment." It is not a great novel, it's a good one, but that is still saying something. The film, unfortunately, although it seems sincere, does not do it full justice.

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