

Uncut Gems: How to win bets and alienate people

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6 June 2020

Directed by Benny Safdie and Josh Safdie

Uncut Gems (2019), now available on Netflix, tells the story of Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler), a Manhattan jeweler and gambling addict with a huckster's smile.

The film assaults one's senses with its mix of shouting and vulgarity, tacky music and harsh artificial lighting. Like Ratner, it esteems financial success, delights in the gaudy and proceeds at a breakneck pace. But, also like its protagonist, *Uncut Gems* shows little capacity for reflection and, though entertaining, ultimately reveals a lack of substance.

Sandler's Ratner barrels through each day accumulating debts, fending off creditors and looking ahead to his next big win. He is coarse, pushy and rude, except when asking for a favor or a second chance, particularly from creditors and loved ones. His unrefined taste in jewelry and clothing matches his manners and outlook. If Ratner is meant to be a lovable rogue, the film doesn't give us much about him to love.

The story opens at a mine in Ethiopia, where a worker's leg has been mangled. His coworkers crowd around, some tending to him, others yelling at the visibly uncomfortable Chinese managers who arrive at the scene. Meanwhile, two other miners find an unusual, multicolored opal they chisel out of the wall.

Ratner buys the uncut opal and enters it into an auction, hoping to make a big profit. His employee Demany (LaKeith Stanfield), who steers rich clients into his boss's showroom, brings former NBA forward Kevin Garnett (playing himself) to work one day. When Ratner, a basketball fanatic, shows the opal off to Garnett, the latter is amazed and feels a mystical connection with it. Garnett wants to buy it, but Ratner says he must bid at the auction. Disappointed, Garnett asks to hold on to the opal for that night's game,

promising to return it the next day. Ratner reluctantly agrees, asking for Garnett's diamond-studded Celtics ring as collateral.

No sooner is Garnett out the door than Ratner races to another jeweler to pawn the ring, intending to buy it back later. Cash in hand, Ratner hustles to his bookie (who is not pleased to see him) to place a bet on a basketball game. Ratner's breathless maneuvering, which leaves little room for error, is part of his unending quest for new profits and adrenaline rushes: a quest that utterly dominates his life.

Ratner owes money to Arno (Eric Bogosian), who sends two goons to tail and threaten him. During their confrontations, Ratner shows a certain amount of courage, perhaps rooted in his unshakable belief that a big win is right around the corner. As Ratner keeps up his patter of oily jocularities, transparent excuses and solemn promises, Arno gazes at him with a mixture of intimidation and incredulity. When the thugs punch Ratner and throw him into a public fountain, one's sympathy is limited.

Julia (Julia Fox), one of Ratner's employees, is also his lover. She lives in an apartment that Ratner keeps as a refuge from his wife and family (who are at best an afterthought for him). Julia works in the showroom according to her mood. In the nightclubs, she keeps her eye out, like Demany, for rich potential clients. She provides Ratner with excitement and solace until, in a nightclub, he finds her in a closet with singer the Weeknd (Abel Makkonen Tesfaye, the child of Ethiopian parents, coincidentally or not). As he often does, Ratner causes a scene.

While most of the characters in *Uncut Gems* dislike Ratner, his wife Dinah (Idina Menzel) loathes him. Early in the movie, Dinah insists on the divorce they have been postponing, and Ratner, absorbed in a game

on which his money is riding, is indifferent about its timing. But after he kicks Julia out, Ratner begs Dinah for a second chance. Dinah responds calmly and deliberately, “I hate being with you, I hate looking at you, and if I had my way, I would never see you again.”

Ratner’s daughter Marcel (Noa Fisher) treats him with open contempt. He attends her school play, but instead watches the scores come in on his smart phone. When he realizes that Arno’s underlings have tailed him to the auditorium, he picks a fight with them. After taking him for a harrowing ride, they lock him naked in the trunk of his own car. When Ratner tries to talk to Marcel afterward, she barely acknowledges him and soon walks away.

In his grasping, amoral philistinism, Ratner resembles (cartoonishly and on a far smaller scale) the financial speculators who dominate the world economy. Yet the filmmakers fail to make this connection or create any distance with which the viewer might consider the action critically. Apart from the fleeting references to Ethiopia, they do not explore the larger economic and social world that Ratner inhabits. They do not even examine Ratner’s own personality. His behavior and that of the bookies, jewelers, creditors and hoodlums who populate the film are accepted as given, if not implicitly admired. In this, the Safdie brothers show the unfortunate influence of director Martin Scorsese, one of the film’s executive producers.

Sandler gives a creditable performance, but his role does not require much subtlety or emotional range. Fox and Bogosian, too, deserve praise. Although *Uncut Gems* is engaging and increasingly suspenseful, it ultimately is an unsatisfying and unpleasant movie.



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