

George Clooney's *The Tender Bar*: Writing as a mere “state of mind”

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Directed by George Clooney; screenplay by William Monahan, based on the memoir by J. R. Moehringer

The Tender Bar is a coming-of-age drama film directed by George Clooney, from a screenplay by William Monahan (*The Departed*), and based on the memoir by novelist and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist J. R. Moehringer.

Purportedly a dramatization of the author's formative years on the path to becoming a writer, Clooney's film about an aspiring writer on Long Island in the 1970s and '80s, like so many American drama films of recent years, contains a number of interesting elements, but has an approach so light-minded and airy that it all adds up to very little.

The movie opens in 1973 with 11-year-old JR (Daniel Ranieri) and his single mother (Lily Rabe) moving back into her parents' house in Manhasset, New York (just east of New York City) after struggling to make it on their own. JR's father (Max Martini), a radio DJ referred to as “The Voice,” is generally absent from the boy's life. For father figures, JR has his cantankerous grandfather (Christopher Lloyd), but most of all he has his Uncle Charlie (Ben Affleck), a decent and intelligent man who runs a bar on Long Island called “The Dickens” (named after author Charles), where he teaches “the male sciences” to his nephew: “Change a tire, jump a car, take care of your mother, don't drink your stashies [rainy day money],” and so forth.

Uncle Charlie is also a great bookworm and encourages JR's love of reading, telling him that if he reads enough books he could become a writer. JR's mother, however, is intent on the boy becoming a lawyer, after attending Harvard or Yale, and part of her wish comes true when he is accepted to the latter.

At Yale, JR (now Tye Sheridan) enters into an on-again, off-again Fitzgeraldian romance with a rich

classmate, Sidney (Briana Middleton), about whose social class Uncle Charlie warns his nephew: “Read Orwell on the lower-upper-middle classes. They're the ones who really suck. ... It means the people who think they're rich. The actual rich, you never see. They hide so people won't kill them.”

JR struggles to settle on his authorial theme, telling a priest with whom he rides the train that he's “just a poor boy who wants a rich girl,” but he ultimately rejects what he refers to as “the Gatsby thing” in favor of “the absent father” theme, and the film, as perhaps might be expected, goes steadily downhill from there. JR confronts his father—climactically, of course—before riding off into the sunset from Long Island to Manhattan with the confidence and security of an empty-headed epiphany, according to which being a writer is merely a state of mind; or as the narrator, “Future JR,” puts it, “You're a writer the minute you say you are.” No, this will not do at all.

The movie is not without its virtues, such as its generally warm treatment of the two families that raise JR as he grows up on Long Island. First, there are JR's mother, uncle, grandparents and extended family of aunts and cousins who all live together at his grandparents' overcrowded and somewhat dilapidated house. His second family consists of the “uneducated” but well-read and serious-minded working-class men who frequent the book-filled dive bar run by JR's Uncle Charlie.

The latter group is particularly interested in questions of history, and they are slightly (and rightly) miffed and unimpressed when recent Yale graduate JR doesn't know or care when the Magna Carta was signed. “It's the foundation of English law,” one of the bar regulars says. “You should know it.” “Bulwark against tyranny,” another stresses. But unfortunately, the

characterization of the bar regulars is mostly limited to providing the superficial “local color” backdrop for JR’s *Bildungsroman*.

Another promising element that goes underdeveloped is the class dynamic at play in JR’s interactions with Sidney and her wealthy family. In one sequence, JR goes to Sidney’s parents’ mansion in Westport, Connecticut for Christmas, where the four share an awkward breakfast. Sidney’s architect parents are cold and condescending toward JR. Sidney’s father asks, “What does your mother do, JR?” To which JR responds, “She’s a secretary. And one of the things she always loved to do was ride around looking at houses like this one, and wonder what life must be like in them. Now I can tell her.” However, the scene is not as biting as it should be--Clooney’s teeth here are quite blunted. And this is one of the better scenes, relatively speaking.

Too much of the movie is a tedious hodgepodge of half-realized incidents strung together by narration that tells us things we can see and period pop songs that try to make us feel things we don’t. And this irritating telegraphing of the film’s ideas and emotions only serves to underscore how little the film has to say, and how empty is its emotional content.

By the end of the film even the most interesting character, Uncle Charlie, devolves into a man who, in response to JR’s uncertainty about what career path he should take as he works on his first book, reassures his nephew, “It’s America. Pick something.” But only a filmmaker with his or her head in the sand would think that those words, and this film, would have the intended reassuring effect on audiences today.



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