Wes Anderson's *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* and other short films: Beginning to look at life more squarely

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American writer-director Wes Anderson has created a series of four short films—*The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar*, *The Rat Catcher*, *Poison* and *The Swan*—based on stories by British writer Roald Dahl (1916–1990), renowned for his complex, challenging children's literature. The films are all available for streaming on Netflix.

Anderson has been one of the more appealing filmmakers of recent decades. His distinctive visual style, quick-witted writing and imaginative approach to storytelling have won him a following. Films such as *Rushmore*, *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, *The Grand Budapest Hotel* and *Isle of Dogs* contain amusing and humane elements, as well as some generally healthy themes: opposition to conformism, contempt for authority and youthful liveliness.

At the same time, much of his work has been marred by many of the problems that have plagued other filmmakers of his generation. Anderson (born 1969) came of age during a stagnant social and cultural period when selfishness, pettiness and a lack of interest in great social problems held sway in artistic circles. Though Anderson's work has been more intriguing than most, even his better films are at times too noncommittal, too precious, too evasive of the more difficult questions. His unmistakable visual flair has sometimes been a means of avoiding difficult social problems, his films a triumph of style over substance.

Of one of his most recent films *Asteroid City*, released some months ago, we wrote that it "revels in its self-consciousness, mannerisms, artifice, even at times preciousness." One could be forgiven for expecting that Anderson's newest project would proceed along the same lines.

However, adapting Dahl's work seems to have brought something new out of Anderson. The result, while not earth-shaking, is at times quite moving and fascinating. It marks something of a departure for Anderson's work—and, in this reviewer's estimation, a welcome one.

The films are adapted from four short stories written at various points throughout Dahl's lifetime. *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar* concerns the titular character (Benedict Cumberbatch), a wealthy, dull and mediocre man (Dahl: "Men like Henry Sugar are to be found drifting like seaweed all over the world… They are not particularly bad men. But they are not good men either. They are of no real importance. They are simply a part of the decoration.").

Driven by an "insatiable longing to get more money," Sugar happens upon a book containing the fantastical story of a yogi who taught himself to see while completely blindfolded. Sugar, eager to use the method to cheat at cards, embarks on a years-long quest to teach himself the power through daily meditation and concentration. Upon mastering the technique, Sugar wins an enormous sum at a casino, only to realize that, after years spent in quiet meditation, the pursuit of money for its own sake no longer holds any interest for him. He instead concocts an elaborate scheme to travel the world using his winnings to fund orphanages for children in need.

In *The Rat Catcher*, an unsavory exterminator (Ralph Fiennes) revels in his rat-like cruelty and cunning, much to the disdain—and dark fascination—of his clients. In *Poison*, an officer in British-occupied India (Cumberbatch again) is trapped in bed with a

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venomous snake under his sheets. He receives help from an Indian doctor (Ben Kingsley) who uses a poison in an attempt to subdue the creature. Ultimately, the social poison of racial prejudice proves a destructive toxin of its own.

The most moving and disturbing of the films is *The Swan*. Delivered as a feverish monologue, it tells the story of a sensitive young boy's torture at the hands of two cruel neighborhood bullies. The actor Rupert Friend narrates the events as a painful recollection of personal trauma.

As the story reaches its climax, with the boy forced to climb a tree with two bloody swan's wings tied to his arms, Dahl (played by Fiennes) interjects: "Some people, when they have taken too much and have been driven beyond the point of endurance, simply crumble and give up. There are others, though they are not many, who will for some reason always be unconquerable. You meet them in time of war and also in time of peace. They have an indomitable spirit and nothing, neither pain nor torture nor threat of death, will cause them to give up." The young boy proves to be such a person.

The films, short as they may be, are in many ways quite gripping. The stories are presented in a sparse, theatrical manner, with events and objects often left to the viewer's imagination. The presentation may strike some viewers as strange or eccentric, but it has the effect of foregrounding Dahl's excellent writing, which comes through clearly, if at times a bit too briskly. Much of the sensuousness of Dahl's language has been retained, such as when a character is described as speaking with "a rich, fruity sound, as if he were gargling with melted butter," or when a character experiences a speeding train with a "tearing, screaming wind, like a hurricane blowing down his nostrils and into his lungs."

The obvious respect for Dahl's work on display here is a welcome rebuke to the identity politics crowd, who have recently taken to rewriting and censoring the author in the name of "inclusiveness." One can see why Dahl has won generations of admirers, young and old, for the richness of his language, his opposition to cruelty and authority, his contempt for the well-bred upper-middle class and his compassion for sensitive souls made to suffer.

Dahl, though often writing in quite an outlandish and fanciful way, approached life and personal relations with a degree of frankness. He was not one to pull punches or turn away from pain and difficulty, even when writing for children. This attitude seems to have brought out something new in Anderson, whose excessive whimsicality has often been something of a weakness. *The Swan* in particular, with its simultaneously disturbing and beautiful elements, is an artistic step forward. No doubt many in the population can relate to the boy's poignant struggle to maintain his dignity even while suffering great torment, and Anderson's unique visual style and sensitivity enhance the story rather than distract from it.

In working with Dahl's stories, Anderson seems to have "gotten out of his own way" to a degree and looked at life a bit more squarely. One hopes he can follow this impulse into his next project.

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