

Dark secrets

reviewed by [John Petrakis](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

The title of Philip Roth's 2000 novel, *The Human Stain*, suggests something left behind unwillingly, something to regret, even something to be ashamed of. It alludes to the infamous sexual stain Bill Clinton left on Monica Lewinsky's dress. The novel, and now the film adaptation, are set during the Clinton impeachment hearings, when the media and public couldn't seem to get enough of talk about sex, deceit and desire.

Coleman Silk (Anthony Hopkins) is a respected college professor and dean who is rumbling through his sunset years with a good job and a loving wife. That changes when Coleman is accused of racism for using the word "spooks" in his classroom. Coleman is so angry at such political correctness, and so incensed that the faculty and administration won't stand behind him, that he resigns in a huff, leading to the sudden death of his wife from a heart attack.

Just when it appears the tale is going to focus on one man's search for revenge and his effort to recover his good name, a new revelation pops up. Coleman is black himself, and has been "passing" as a white Jew since his college days. Thus, the "stain" begins to materialize. It has to do with ambition, identity and the need to find one's place in the world. "All he'd ever wanted . . . was to be free," a character says about Coleman. "Not black, not even white, just on his own and free."

As Coleman tries to recover from the loss of his job and the death of his wife, he encounters novelist Nathan Zuckerman (Gary Sinise), who becomes the pseudo-narrator of the story. (Roth fans will recognize Zuckerman as Roth's literary alter-ego, who has appeared in several of his novels.) More important, Coleman gets sexually involved with Faunia Farely (Nicole Kidman), an uneducated janitor at the college who has her own share of dark secrets. This raw affair means that Coleman must also deal with Lester Farely (Ed Harris), Faunia's ex-husband, a psychotic Vietnam vet.

Through Zuckerman we discover Coleman's difficult past, including his rejection by a white girl he loved, his final repudiation of his black family, and his decision to begin

life as a white man. Through the damaged Faunia, Coleman starts to appreciate the pain that exists around him, while learning to trust for the first time. ("This is not my first love," he says of Faunia, "it's not my great love, but it's my last love.") And through Lester he begins to understand how violent stains can leave ugly scars that never heal.

For all its good intentions, the film has its share of problems, starting with the scattered script by Nicholas Meyer (*The Seven-Percent Solution*, *Star Trek II*, *IV* and *VI*). Roth novels have defied adaptation for over 30 years, since they tend to be so internal and cerebral, and Meyer's script shows why. He employs many of the devices from the novel, but they are like pieces from different puzzles. It would have been better to drop the Zuckerman character altogether. We don't need a writer around to reveal Coleman's story (a series of straight flashbacks would have done nicely), and Zuckerman, whose presence is so vital in the novel, where he goes off on tangents about love, loss, life and death, is reduced to a sounding board in the film, shifting focus away from Coleman.

The direction by Robert Benton (*Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Places in the Heart*) is perceptive during the gentle scenes, but less assured when things get ugly (which they often do). This disparity leads to some uneven acting, despite the all-star cast. Hopkins is solid as the bitter Coleman, a man who is beginning to bow from the chip he has been carrying around for so long. Sinise seems lost in a part clearly intended for a much older man. Only Harris, as the deranged vet, seems to plug into the extreme emotions that are necessary to fuel this tale of lifelong regret.

The biggest casting mistake, however, is Kidman. Though she has shown an affinity for "slumming" in the past, playing roles that are more down and dirty than her normal screen persona, it doesn't work here for one simple reason: she is just too beautiful. The filmmakers make no attempt to change her face (as they did in *The Hours*) to take her Hollywood looks out of play, and since the issue of sex is so vital to the tale, her looks can't be ignored. Late in the film, when various people tell Coleman to abandon his affair with Faunia, since she is a loose cannon with a deranged ex-husband, we would tend to agree if it weren't for the fact that the woman he is bedding down with night after night looks like . . . Nicole Kidman.

The movie just scratches the surface of Roth's novel. The film has its moving moments, including a beautifully shot dance between Coleman and Zuckerman, and a final confrontation on a desolate frozen pond that conjures up images of the

afterlife.

But by trying to gather together so many of Roth's nuggets of wisdom, the film ends up dropping a lot of them. We are left with a good-looking film with some strong acting about a man who made a mistake and tries to fess up. As even Bill Clinton would agree: that's not enough.