

Midnight in Paris

reviewed by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [July 26, 2011](#) issue

Woody Allen fans were in a rough spot for nearly a decade and a half. His movies continued to come out at the usual rapid rate, but beginning in the mid-'90s they were so lazy and dispirited that Allen seemed to be spinning them off out of habit. But now, with his sexy, sun-drenched Mediterranean comedy *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* and the enchanting new *Midnight in Paris*, Allen seems to have a new lease on life.

Gil Pender (Owen Wilson), a successful Hollywood screenwriter, is struggling to write his first novel. His prosaic fiancée Inez (Rachel McAdams) wants to live in Malibu and can't understand why he can't just continue to turn out commercial scripts ("The studios love you," she reminds him). They're in Paris as guests of her parents, and Gil is in heaven. He thinks it's the most romantic spot on earth; he's always longed to live there and loves studying the '20s, when the literature and art he adores flourished. But Inez finds Paris corny and quaint. When Gil rhapsodizes about walking in the rain, she looks at him as if he's lost his senses, even though Darius Khondji's ravishing gold-tinted cinematography makes it clear that she's the one who can't see what's right in front of her face. (McAdams manages to make Inez's moneyed banality funny rather than mean.) Furthermore, Gil can't even enjoy their museum outings because Inez has run into a pretentious, pedantic college friend (Michael Sheen) and insists that he and his wife come along.

The movie might be subtitled *The Uses of Nostalgia*. It opens with a montage of Paris scenes set to 1920s jazz: Allen is hinting that the city's glorious past is still alive for those with eyes to see it. That turns out to be true for Gil, who wanders off on his own one night, gets lost, and is picked up by a '20s Peugeot that takes him to a party. Eventually he realizes that he's disappeared into the Paris of the era he's dreamed about, and he sees Cole Porter playing his latest tunes on the piano; among the others on hand are F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. In Gertrude Stein's salon he meets Adriana (Marion Cotillard), an aspiring designer

who is having an embattled affair with Picasso. The magic of the past liberates him: the '20s have become real because they are so real to Gil. His writing grows more confident. He also realizes the limitations of nostalgia—unlike Adriana, who wishes she were living during *la belle époque* in Paris, the 1890s.

This charming fable has links to Allen's 1985 Depression-era comedy *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (perhaps his best picture), in which Mia Farrow is a small-town waitress whose naive love of movies brings a character right off the screen to romance her, and also to his hilarious short story "The Kugelmass Episode," where a world-weary middle-aged New York Jew finds himself in the pages of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

Allen always seems to be at his best in these mishmashes of literary parody, romantic comedy and Pirandello. In one scene, merrily recycled from "The Kugelmass Episode," Gil wanders through an antique bookstall and comes across Adriana's memoir—with his name mentioned in it. In a scene from the '20s, he runs into filmmaker Luis Buñuel and suggests the plot of *The Exterminating Angel*, which Buñuel directed, famously, in the '60s. (Buñuel listens to the bizarre, symbolic storyline and responds with "I don't get it.") The casting of characters from the past with familiar faces from the present is inspired—Kathy Bates as Gertrude Stein, Adrian Brody as Salvador Dali, Corey Stoll from TV's *Law & Order: LA* as a hilarious Ernest Hemingway speaking in Hemingwayesque prose. Alison Pill plays Zelda as a frizzy-haired Dixie spark plug, and Cotillard, with her melted-butterscotch voice and delicate shifts of emotion, is as indelible a screen personality as the waiflike Margaret Sullavan was in Hollywood in the '30s.