

Making connections

by [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

Nick Hornby's novel *About a Boy* brings together Will, a wealthy 30-something bachelor, with Marcus, a 12-year-old who's alienated at school and miserable at home, where his depressed single mother attempts suicide. The idea is that Will, a big kid himself, can instruct Marcus on the basics of how to be a teenager. It's a good setup for a comic novel, and the narrative strategy--alternating between Will's perspective and Marcus's--is clever. Even though Hornby positions Will to score points against his empty lifestyle (Marcus ends Will's emotional isolation), the book stays fairly companionable until Hornby stops trying to disguise the life lessons he's imparting.

Aside from updating the setting from 1993 to the present--an alteration that requires a new dramatic climax--the movie is faithful to the book--faithful to a fault. Paul and Chris Weitz, who co-directed, and Peter Hedges, their collaborator on the script, rely on Hornby's voice-overs as a substitute for the work filmmakers are supposed to do: giving each scene a dramatic arc and using the camera in tandem with the dialogue to build character. *About a Boy* is so literal-minded that it feels clunky and unformed. *American Pie*, the teen comedy that put the Weitzes on the map, was far more sophisticated and original.

There's another problem. The script lays bare Hornby's agenda very early on. The result is that *About a Boy* preaches to the audience in a way *American Pie* never did. Creating a good coming-of-age story requires sleight of hand. We want the hero (or heroes) to learn a moral lesson, but if it's presented too baldly we feel we're being treated like schoolchildren.

The teenagers in *American Pie* go on a collective quest for a sexual awakening and most of them find an emotional one as well; the moral is that the first isn't worth much without the second, but the movie is smart enough not to belabor the point. But nearly every scene in *About a Boy* reminds us that life is without value unless we make connections with people. Marcus's narration in particular is so thematically explicit that he sounds less like an eerily perceptive 12-year-old and more like the

audience's moral guide. And whenever a character experiences a revelation, the pedestrian music by Badly Drawn Boy (which evokes the dreadful folk-rock movie scores of the late '60s) grows soft and contemplative while the camera zooms in for a private moment.

As Marcus, Nicholas Hoult doesn't make much of an impression. The two adolescent actors on the periphery of the film--Augustus Prew as the son of Will's new girl friend (Rachel Weisz) and Nat Gostain Tena as the 15-year-old Marcus develops a crush on--are both more interesting to watch. The movie's strengths are all in the performances of Hugh Grant as Will and Toni Collette as Marcus's mother, Fiona.

Collette gives an imaginative rendering of a distinctive kind of contemporary British woman. In the book, Will refers to her '70s record collection, her '80s politics and her '90s foot cream; the movie updates her musical tastes, but she remains a kind of hippie whose resolute adherence to certain values (leftist, feminist, vegetarian) hasn't brought her happiness but has shaped her son --who doesn't want to disappoint her and hasn't learned to think for himself--in ways that make him a red flag for schoolyard bullies.

Collette is great at drawing both Fiona's depression (her face is puffy with the strain of getting through the day) and her unorthodox sense of humor. And the always appealing Grant does something remarkable: he takes us into the depths of a shallow man. The movie, by contrast, pretends to be profound but is merely showy.

The premise of Woody Allen's *Hollywood Ending* is hilarious: a highly neurotic movie director (Allen), hired to make his first picture in years, develops psychosomatic blindness, but his agent (Mark Rydell) convinces him that if he doesn't fake his way through the shoot, no one will ever hire him again. It's a measure of how dispirited Allen's work has become that he can't sustain a funny idea for more than two or three minutes at a stretch. He doesn't shape the set-piece scenes--like the one where he meets studio head (Treat Williams) in a hotel room whose layout he's tried to memorize beforehand--so they go on and on pointlessly. Either the camera or the actors usually seem to be in the wrong place. Occasionally a performer draws a comic spark--George Hamilton as a producer, Barney Cheng as the Chinese cinematographer's interpreter (whom Allen's character recruits clandestinely as his seeing-eye person)--but Allen throws him into the background after a few scenes or out of the movie altogether. Allen seems as blind as the character he's playing, and tone-deaf, too: the romantic-comedy scenes he plays with Téa Leoni (a gifted,

glamorous performer, utterly wasted here) turn unaccountably serious in the last half-hour. Those still following Allen's career have sat through worse (*Shadows and Fog*, *Mighty Aphrodite*, *Deconstructing Harry*), but *Hollywood Ending* is bad enough. --S. V.

There was a time in movie history when a discriminating moviegoer might have been put on the alert by the heartstring-tugging of *The Rookie*. When you consider the other kinds of manipulation that movies can put us through these days, however, *The Rookie*, which wears its sentimentality on its sleeve, seems rather innocent, and it's foolish to deny the small enjoyments that a movie of this kind provides. Mike Rich's script has an irresistible premise taken from a real-life story, which makes it even more irresistible. Dennis Quaid plays a onetime pro baseball player who gave up his career after an injury and went on to coach high school kids in his tiny southern town. When he finally lands a team with some potential, they make a deal with him: if they win in their division, he has to take that warp-speed pitch of his to a pro tryout.

Most movies that claim to be about baseball substitute rigged moral lessons for the visceral pleasures of the ballfield (*Field of Dreams* and *For Love of the Game* are two glaring examples). *The Rookie*, directed by John Lee Hancock, is an exception. The best reason to see it, though, is Dennis Quaid's finely calibrated performance. --S. V.