

Whose Barney's Version is This, Anyway?

by Beverly Akerman

Early reviews of *Barney's Version* (the film) had prepared me for finding the book's most amusing attributes—particularly its skewering of Quebec nationalist politics and Canadian cultural nationalism—left out. After all, turning a 417-page account of one man's life spanning four decades into a two-hour film demands some streamlining.

But there's streamlining and then there's the hatchet job. I'm sorry to say, despite the smattering of applause from the nearly-full Montreal screening I attended, the film seemed more like the latter.

Sadly, the delicate artistic balance of the novel has been destroyed in this new *Version*, and this drunken lurch is nowhere better demonstrated than in the film's treatment of Jews and women. And Jewish women, in particular.

The novel is the fictive autobiographical confession, “the true story of my wasted life.” It has a largely tripartite structure, with books based on each of Barney Panofsky's three marriages.

Now, the triangle is an ancient, mystical, and frustrating form—just ask any teenager struggling through Trig 101—and still holds great attraction to us today, as morbid interest in Aniston, Pitt, and Jolie; Charles, Diana, and Camilla; or the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost demonstrates. In Barney's case, though, these three wives are in no way a triangle: they are guideposts in the life of a man on a mortal journey, searching for meaning and love. (Perhaps more like the Father-Son than I thought.)

The first Panofsky wife is Clara Chambers (actually Charnofsky, played by Rachelle Lefevre), the hedonist of his youth, a first-class fucked-up bitch. In the book, she is a talented artist whose modest genius is hugely inflated by the feminist commentary that grows around her suicide—a knock-off of Sylvia Plath, with Barney cast as

Ted Hughes. In the movie, Clara's talent is not discussed, and the fame that lives on after her is redacted. Not so Clara's father, played by Saul Rubinek, who appears on the heels of her death as a bearded Orthodox Jew, unmasked in short order as another in the long line of Richler's nasty Jewish characters.

The second Mrs. Panofsky, an archetypal loudmouthed *yenta* of a Jewish American Princess, is brayingly brought to life by the incomparable Minnie Driver—who really should have been cast as Miriam, the third in Panofsky's marital hat trick.

Driver is beautiful, a great actress, and she looks plausibly Jewish, which brings me to the crux of my beef with the liberties taken with this celluloidization of a novel: In Richler's version, Barney's third wife is Miriam *Greenberg*, clearly a Jewish woman who drives a stake through the *shiksa* goddess motif favoured in novels by Jewish men of a certain age and stature. (And not just of a certain age either. The all-round repulsiveness of the Jewish woman is still common cultural currency, as throw-away lines in *The Social Network* demonstrate.)

As an example of the *shiksa* goddess, I offer Cybill Shepherd (in *Tootsie*); if you need a *fer instance* of the opposite, please see this description of Sophie Portnoy of *Portnoy's Complaint*. Then there's most of Richler's earlier oeuvre (e.g. the lovely Gabrielle Lazure as Pauline Shapiro contrasted with the odious Esther, Joshua's mother—who performs a strip tease for her son's bar mitzvah friends—played by Linda Sorenson, in *Joshua Then and Now*).

But in this film, Miriam *Greenberg* morphs into Miriam *Grant* (played by the luminous Rosamund Pike). To emphasize the point, this stylish, classy and sexy *shiksa*'s wedding ceremony is concluded by a man wearing neither head covering nor *tallit*, and is clearly a non-Jewish one (driven home by the phrase, "I now pronounce you husband and wife").

Now, these are by no means the only flaws with this film—it seems to forget the murder-mystery plot line for what might have been an hour; it cries out for voiceovers by Barney as he penned his confessional (rather than the stilted info-dump conversations it

employs); and the resolution of the murder is so heavy-handed it appears aimed at imbeciles (with apologies, of course, to imbeciles). Also, Barney's paunch in his twenties is almost as noticeable in his sixties. Which brings us to another eternal motif in the story, that of Beauty and the Beast (which was, according to Charles Foran, how Richler referred to his relationship with his beloved wife Florence).

Recasting Miriam Greenberg as Miriam Grant resurrects the *shiksa* goddess, just when I finally thought it was safe for this Jewish woman to head back to the movies. Unfortunately, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.

So I guess my question is: whose odious version of Jewish womanhood is this? Screenwriter Michael Konyves', producer Robert Lantos', or director Richard J. Lewis'? Inquiring *yentas* want to know.

To be fair (and really, this comment comes seven-eighths of the way through my review, so how fair could it be?), this Montreal audience appeared to love the movie, the trip down memory lane (though how *could* they have left out Duddy Kravitz' final hurrah?), the talented ensemble cast, Dustin Hoffman's mastication of the floorboards, etc.

Had they read the book? Did they remember it if they had (the book having been published in 1997)? Or maybe they felt the film's poignant finale was enough, that 75 percent of Barney was close enough to the mark.

As A.O. Scott wrote in the *New York Times*: "In spite of Mr. Giamatti's ferociously energetic performance 'Barney's Version' never figures out just who Barney is. In Richler's pages he is above all a voice—profane, sophisticated, tender, mean and funny—and the filmmakers prove unable to compensate for its absence ... in attempting to honor the spirit of the book, they extinguish it. It is a wild, unruly novel of character, in which the character himself is at once incorrigible and irresistible. The film tames and sentimentalizes him, and in showing respect for Barney's author turns his creation into something unforgivably respectable."

Harsher judgement than my film-attending *confreres* and *consoeurs*. But I agree with Scott: the problem with this version of

Barney is that we have trouble imagining what these three women saw in him. Of course, we learn what Clara wanted from the deal, and understand the second Mrs. P's motivations (a woman so odious, she never even merits a name!), but what could the luminous, perfect redeeming wife have seen in him? Frankly, in this version, that's a bigger mystery than Boogie's disappearance.

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