

A film version of Philip Roth's *Indignation*: Young lives overshadowed by war

By Joanne Laurier
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Written and directed by James Schamus; based on the novel by Philip Roth

Veteran writer–producer James Schamus makes his directorial debut with *Indignation*, a faithful adaptation of Philip Roth's novel of the same name, his 29th, published in 2008. The new movie is the latest film based on the work of Roth, one of postwar America's more important fiction writers.

Schamus, as founder and former CEO of Focus Features, was responsible for releasing movies by Ang Lee, the Coen brothers, Todd Haynes, among others. The pairing of Roth with Schamus has produced a generally praiseworthy work.

Set in America in 1951, the second year of the Korean War, Schamus' movie takes up serious issues of war, religion, repression and American psychological dysfunction. It follows the short life of a studious, lower middle class young man from a Jewish family in Newark, New Jersey, and his experiences at a small liberal arts college in Ohio.

Both the book and the film are narrated by Roth's central character Marcus—Markie—Messner (Logan Lerman), the cherished son of a kosher butcher and his wife. Markie is the only child of Max (Danny Burstein) and Esther (Linda Emond), who are determined to see that Markie maintains a student deferment and avoids being drafted into the war. In one of the movie's opening scenes, the Messners join in mourning the death of a relative killed in Korea.

As Max increasingly obsesses about Markie's conduct and future ("The tiniest mistake can have consequences"), the latter, feeling the weight of his father's fears and increasingly overbearing behavior, enrolls in the fictional Winesburg College, hundreds of miles from home. ("Winesburg" is a reference to the work of Sherwood Anderson [1876-1941], the American author who famously wrote a short-story sequence about a stultifying Midwestern community entitled *Winesburg, Ohio* [1919].)

Markie is intent on getting a law degree because (as he explains in the novel) all "I knew about becoming a lawyer was that it was as far as you could get from spending your working life in a stinking apron covered with blood—blood, grease, bits of entrails..."

But Markie escapes his father's heavy-handedness only to land in the clutches of an oppressive, straight-laced institution. He finds his roommates intrusive, eschews the advances of the only Jewish fraternity on campus, and, as a self-proclaimed atheist, strongly resents the requisite weekly attendance at chapel. Furthermore, the war casts a long shadow and the ROTC has a significant presence

on campus.

Mindful of the cost of his education, which his parents are making considerable sacrifices to pay, and the fact that he must stay in school to avoid the draft, Markie devotes most of his time to studying. But then he encounters the beautiful, intelligent Olivia (Sarah Gadon), a young woman also with emotional difficulties. At one point, she counters Markie's comments about her seeming composure in these words: "I, who have eight thousand moods a minute, whose every emotion is a tornado, who can be thrown by a *word*, by a *syllable*, am 'under control'? God, you *are* blind."

On their first date, Olivia initiates a sexual act that throws Markie into crisis. Ultimately, his mother, on a visit, demands that Markie terminate the relationship, not because Olivia is a non-Jew, but because she has attempted suicide in the past. (Both the film and novel hint that Olivia may have suffered sexual abuse at the hands of her father.)

Schamus' *Indignation* is a conscientious and sincere dramatization of the Roth novel. It is intelligent, amusing and insightful. And like the book, it is antiwar. Roth opens his novel with lines from American poet E. E. Cummings's "i sing of Olaf glad and big," which celebrates a conscientious objector who refuses to go to war: "Olaf (upon what were once knees) / does almost ceaselessly repeat / 'there is some shit I will not eat.'"

The author points out "that for the third time in just over a half century, America was at war again." Roth and Schamus dramatize this fact by highlighting Markie's admiration for philosopher and mathematician Bertrand Russell, who went to prison for his pacifism in World War I.

In the movie's pivotal, 15-minute-long scene, Markie is challenged, in inquisitorial fashion, by the college's Dean Caudwell (Tracy Letts). When the former refers extensively to Russell's essay "Why I Am Not a Christian," Caudwell, Winesburg's gatekeeper of morality, responds with ill-concealed hostility to what he terms Markie's "gullibility" in taking at face value "rationalist blasphemies spouted by an immoralist of the ilk of Bertrand Russell, four times married, a blatant adulterer, an advocate of free love, a self-confessed socialist dismissed from his university position for his antiwar campaigning during the First War and imprisoned for that by the British authorities."

Schamus has elicited strong performances that generally correspond to Roth's ideologically intriguing characters. Besides Anderson and Russell, there are other literary and historical figures hovering over *Indignation*. In an interview, Schamus

mentions poet Sylvia Plath as having inspired Gadon's characterization of Olivia. Three months before her tragic suicide in February 1963, Plath wrote that she was reading Roth "almost religiously." In addition, Schamus makes use of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and his tragicomic character Malvolio to portray the love that one of Markie's roommates at Winesburg, Bertram Flusser (Ben Rosenfield), has for the protagonist. "Olivia," of course is a central figure in that play.

The movie's cinematography is an integral element of Schamus' direct, careful approach. The Messners' Newark neighborhood is appropriately drab, presaging the city's drastic economic decline. In the novel, butcher Max is struggling to keep customers as his cramped establishment is threatened by a new supermarket. (Interestingly, Newark produced Roth, Beat poet Allen Ginsberg and comedian Jerry Lewis more or less in the same generation). Conversely, the vibrantly colored pastoral college setting is marred by military drills.

Providing an intellectual breath of fresh air is Roth's atheism, which is front and center in both the novel and movie. Markie lets Dean Caudwell know that he does not draw sustenance from God, but from his own rational, intellectual efforts. In an interview published in the *Guardian* in 2005, Roth explained that "I'm exactly the opposite of religious, I'm anti-religious. I find religious people hideous. I hate the religious lies. It's all a big lie."

Most importantly perhaps, it has been decades since the appearance of a major novel or film about the Korean War, a brutal and bloody conflict in which US forces suffered serious defeats and reverses. The darkness of the war is clearly on the mind of the novel's narrator when he describes in graphic, extended detail the slaughtering of animals he witnessed in Newark.

In an interview, Schamus elaborated on the parallels he saw between the novel and contemporary events. He pointed to the rise in the early 1950s "of a paranoid, almost fascist political movement with the McCarthy era," adding ironically, "so, obviously, this has nothing whatsoever to do with 2016." Moreover, the director pointed in the present day to "this bizarre foreign policy that has us embroiled in these wars overseas that nobody can figure out why we're in. ... And in fact, millions of young Americans are getting caught up in this."

Roth presumably wrote *Indignation* in the midst of the sectarian violence engulfing Iraq, brought on by US military occupation, and the American military's bloody "surge" in early 2007. One million lives had already been lost in Iraq by this time.

Roth, as noted, is one of the most distinguished American literary figures of the past half-century. In both his books and public statements, he comes across as an angry man. And so he should be.

The novelist is quite right to be hostile to "the gigantic hypocrisies ... the gloomy tabulation of unspeakable violent events ... [the] surveillance overkill that will come back to haunt us, great concentrations of wealth financing the most undemocratic malevolents around, science illiterates still fighting the Scopes trial 89 years on, economic inequities the size of the Ritz, indebtedness on everyone's tail ... the old American plutocracy

worse than ever." ("My Life as a Writer," March 2014 in *The New York Times Book Review*)

The force and intelligence of his legitimate hostilities (including, apparently, to identity politics—"I don't accept that I write Jewish-American fiction. I don't buy that nonsense about black literature or feminist literature. Those are labels made up to strengthen some political agenda") make his work stand out.

And yet neither *Indignation* the novel nor its film adaptation is quite as dramatically compelling and forceful as it might be. The manner in which Roth presents present-day social ills, as just noted, is very much to the point. The novel is like that, it is a list of disasters or quasi-disasters, without rank and without a central driving force.

In considering the unhappiness that unfolds in *Indignation*, the novelist catalogues a number of psychological and social factors that are given more or less equal weight. Indeed, if one were to be frank, the individual psychological and sexual traumas are given greater weight than the Korean War and the big questions of postwar American society bound up with that. Sexual urges and their suppression are the most active elements in Roth's novel and Schamus's film. The war inevitably recedes somewhat into the background. Indeed, one has the feeling at times that for Roth the source of the horrors of war lies hidden somewhere in the psycho-sexual landscape.

For example, when considering "what had driven Olivia crazy" and had caused his own miseries, Markie (in the novel) can only point to the "rectitude tyrannizing my life." He goes on, indicting "what the conventional world deems impermissible" and noting how "pathetically conventional" he himself had been. This is a bit anemic and unconvincing. And this holding apart of the social and emotional elements weakens the story. We are left, in the end, with some of that ... and some of this—and not enough of the central things.

More could be said, but there is this: unlike most in today's artistic community, Roth is certainly not blind or complacent. He remains "indignant," and that is something.

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