

Written by Mike Schulz  
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## ***THE GHOST WRITER***

Calling Roman Polanski's *The Ghost Writer* "lighthearted" isn't entirely accurate, as the movie is a moody suspense thriller concerning high-level government conspiracies, and its color palette seems to shift only from gray to very *dark gray*.

Then again, this is a Polanski film we're talking about - coming from the man who gave us *Rosemary's Baby*, *Repulsion*, *Chinatown*, and

*The Pianist*

, it's practically

*Gidget*

*Goes Hawaiian*

Yet beyond *The Ghost Writer* being something of a genre lark for its director, this classically structured entertainment breezes along with such masterly wit and confidence that you find yourself grinning even when - *especially* when - the onscreen deeds are at their dirtiest. Ewan McGregor plays the unnamed author of the title, assigned the task of completing the memoirs of a former Prime Minister (Pierce Brosnan) after the Brit's previous ghost writer washes up on a beach in Martha's Vineyard. In the manner of so many paranoid thrillers, McGregor's involvement quickly leads to hidden agendas, uncovered secrets, motivational mysteries, and threatening shadow figures in black sedans, and you could easily consider the movie old-hat if Polanski's supremely smart and elegant orchestration didn't make it feel so new.

Based on Robert Harris' novel *The Ghost*, the film boasts a sharp, fiendishly clever screenplay (written by Harris and Polanski) in which the narrative complexities are always coherent, if not always plausible, and the dialogue is laced with a liberal dose of mordant humor. (After McGregor informs an ally that he's afraid for his life, the man snorts and replies, "They can't drown *two* ghost writers, for God's sake. You're not *kit tens*

.) It's Polanski's directorial finesse, though, that really keeps

*The Ghost Writer*

humming. Barring a nerve-jangling, gorgeously shot sequence that finds McGregor escaping onto, and then off of, a departing ferry, there aren't many large-scale set pieces in the film. But

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Polanski's senses of rhythm and composition are so controlled yet so exciting that even the most minor passages here percolate with giggly/scary anticipation; a lengthy tracking shot of an incriminating note being passed along at a cocktail party manages to keep you breathless for almost a full minute.

And Polanski performers wonders with his cast, some of whom - Olivia Williams, Kim Cattrall, a nearly-unrecognizable Jim Belushi - haven't been this strong in years, if ever. (The vital Eli Wallach, at age 94, briefly swipes the film as a helpful beachfront denizen.) McGregor, with his dazzling, boyish charm, makes for a remarkably engaging and empathetic protagonist, but it's Brosnan's very-thinly-veiled Tony Blair figure that's most welcome; he's affable, guarded, vaguely untrustworthy, and, at all times, wildly charismatic. (A friend recently asked if there are actually *two* Pierce Brosnans out there in the world - the one who bores and/or embarrasses us in *Laws of Attraction* and *Mamma Mia!* and the one who kicks ass in *The Thomas Crown Affair* and *The Matador* - and I'm happy to report that the latter one shows up here.) Gloomy and expectedly nihilistic though it is, the movie is a sensational amount of fun; think what you like about Polanski the person, but when he's working at the quality level of his *Ghost Writer*, it's hard to argue with the greatness of Polanski the director.



### **DIARY OF A WIMPY KID**

Ordinarily, I'd be about the last person to recommend a manic, aggressively synthetic family flick featuring fat jokes, fart jokes, booger jokes, and the rather shocking sight of its hero peeing on his older brother. Director Thor Freudenthal's *Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, however, is cheerfully gross, a frequently funny and surprisingly resonant adaptation of Jeff Kinney's beloved stick-drawing "journal" (one unread by me, though probably not for much longer). Detailing nine mostly hellish months in the life of middle-school dweeb Greg Heffley (played by Paul Rudd-in-training Zachary Gordon), the movie includes a bunch of comic escapades, especially its wrestling and trick-or-treating subplots, that drag on past the point of interest, and as Greg's

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parents, those terrific comedians Steve Zahn and Rachel Harris are given too little to do. Still, in its exploration of that torturous middle ground between childhood and adolescence, Freudenthal's film is affectionate and oddly touching, offering an abundance of excellent young performers [among them Robert Capron, Devon Bostick, Karan Brar, Grayson Russell, and *(500) Days of Summer*

's wonderfully poised Chloe Moretz], and gags to make even jaded adults laugh out loud. I thought the quickly-seen headline on the school newspaper ("Cheerleader Gains Pound") was pretty riotous, but it didn't hold a candle to our viewing of the educational short *It's Awesome to Be Me!*

, complete with breakdancing solo, or the auditions for the school's production of *The Wizard of Oz*

, which found students singing the choir director's favorite song - Bonnie Tyler's "Total Eclipse of the Heart." Yes, for the youth of today, we children of the '80s are officially the subjects of mockery. In

*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*

, I didn't even mind.



### ***THE BOUNTY HUNTER***

I expected to detest the romantic action comedy *The Bounty Hunter*, in which Gerard Butler's gun-toting Neanderthal is entrusted with the return, and subsequent imprisonment, of ex-wife Jennifer Aniston. And I did. Director Andy Tennant's staging and timing are continually insipid, Aniston delivers her umpteenth portrayal of Jennifer Aniston, and Sarah Thorp's script is lousy with howlers; there's even a reprise of that sub-vaudevillian routine in which one character, thinking that Butler is in the Senate, asks from which state, and Butler says "Oklahoma" while Aniston says "Kansas," followed by him quickly saying "Kansas" while she says "Oklahoma." (The movie's opening credits include the title card "An Original Film Production." Oh, the irony!) As for Butler himself - perhaps the most relentlessly self-regarding movie star since the heyday of Pauly Shore - he again does that romantic-lout thing in which his incessant megalomania and the sight of him chewing with his mouth open are meant to be endearing; sure, he's better-looking, but the guy is really just a bad American accent away from Larry the Cable Guy. So what *didn't* I hate? Well, there's a moderately funny moment when Butler, holed up in his ex's apartment, enacts revenge by erasing her TiVo-ed programs. (An equally nice touch: They're all episodes of *30 Rock*

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and

*Weeds*

.) The supporting cast of Christine Baranski, Jason Sudeikis, Jeff Garlin, Siobhan Fallon, Peter Greene, Cathy Moriarty, and the brilliant Carol Kane helps enormously. And the finale does provide one image I thought I'd

*never*

see: Jennifer Aniston blasting away at

*The Bounty Hunter*

's chief villain with a shotgun. If only she'd directed it toward Tennant, Thorp, and Butler, we might've been spared a lot of anguish.



**HUBBLE 3D**

There are so many stunning, even awe-inspiring astronomical images in *Hubble 3D* (currently playing at the Putnam Museum & IMAX Theatre) that you wouldn't need to be given much more to make the movie easily worth your ticket price. The joy of director Toni Myers' 45-minute documentary, though, is that it actually

*does*

give you more. I was happily blissed-out during the film's imagined treks to the farthest reaches of our galaxy; the dizzying cascades through the stars brought to mind, and improved upon, that magical opening to Robert Zemeckis'

*Contact*

; and the hypnotic descent into the cloudy canyons on Orion's belt was downright extraordinary. Yet as it follows the 2009 crew of the space shuttle Atlantis, a team sent to make repairs on the understandably weathered telescope, we're also treated to healthy doses of friendly, quick-witted humor - there's none of that stilted, conversational awkwardness you generally find in IMAX endeavors of this sort - plus a lot of enjoyable prankishness courtesy of the gravity-defying environs. (The most amusing bit finds an astronaut attempting to assemble and consume what looks like a chicken taco.)

*Hubble 3D*

is perhaps too light on drama; given only passing reference to what is specifically damaged on the spacecraft, the true danger of the crew's mission is barely felt. It remains, however, a marvelously watchable piece of work, and perhaps the most sheerly

*positive*

adventure the Putnam has booked in years. While the camera gazes at our homeland from

## Roman's Holiday: "The Ghost Writer," "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," "The Bounty Hunter," and "Hubble 3D"

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space, narrator Leonardo DiCaprio - with soothing cadences that suggest a sweetly laid-back babysitter - asks, "Will we ever find anywhere as perfect as planet Earth?" Some of the more environmentally-focused docs we've seen at the venue over the years might offer an argument or two, but the spectacular

*Hubble 3D*

doesn't need DiCaprio to offer its answer: Nope.