

Written by Mike Schulz

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ANTWONE FISHER

It's a bit late, but it finally arrived. The closing of each year brings with it at least one touching, inspirational, triumph-of-the-human-spirit movie designed to make audiences weep and Oscar voters genuflect, while certain Midwestern film critics roll their eyes and wish they could throw things at the screen. (Previous examples: *I Am Sam*, *The Hurricane*, and *Shine*.) For a while, it looked like 2002's might be

About Schmidt

, but the film barely qualified; it wasn't incompetently made, and it did provide a few laughs. At last, though, we have a winner.

Denzel Washington's directorial debut, *Antwone Fisher*, has made it to the area, and while it might cause some viewers to choke back tears, it made me choke back something else entirely; though based on a true story, I don't think there's a believable scene in the movie. And with the actual Antwone Fisher responsible for the screenplay, the film is also one of the most embarrassingly self-aggrandizing cinematic works I've ever seen. Numerous writers and directors – Ingmar Bergman, Federico Fellini, Woody Allen – have used film therapeutically, to work out inner demons and personal neuroses, but they don't make their cinematic stand-ins martyrs; they see themselves as at least

somewhat

responsible for their own lives.

Antwone Fisher

, though, is hip-deep in self-pity. God knows, Mr. Fisher's life story is inspiring – if only all

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victims of childhood abuse could recover so spectacularly – but it has also inspired a completely fraudulent movie, one that, in the end, is nothing but two hours of Mr. Fisher giving himself a big ol' bear-hug and inviting us to watch.

If you took *Good Will Hunting* and removed all of its profane, bitter humor, you'd be left with *Antwone Fisher*

. At the film's start, Fisher (played by Derek Luke) is a Navy seaman who is continually reprimanded for fighting with ranking officers. His behavior lands him in the office of a Navy psychiatrist (director Washington) who, after several failed attempts at conversation, finally gets Fisher to open up about his horrific past. We learn that the young man, whose father was murdered and whose mother gave birth to him in prison, was physically and emotionally abused in his childhood foster home, and betrayed and abandoned by everyone close to him. With the help of a potential girlfriend (Joy Bryant) and the good doctor, Fisher must face his past in order to heal, which encompasses Fisher seeking out his birth mother and confronting those who hurt him the most.

Again, Fisher's story is incredibly moving, but its actual presentation is a complete botch. The film's flashbacks to Fisher's life in his foster home border on the cartoonish. His foster mother is merely a malevolent, sadistic monster, so grotesque a caricature that she wouldn't be out of place in *Flowers in the Attic*, and though it pains me to say it, the young actor playing Fisher as a child isn't believable for a second; he's wide-eyed, sitcom-cute, and about as connected to the material as a kid starring in a cereal commercial. Criticizing a young boy's acting might seem staggeringly unfair, but it's impossible to feel for Antwone Fisher, or

Antwone Fisher

, when the actor playing him gives you no indication of the depth of the boy's childhood trauma.

Yet the film's present-day scenes are even worse. The sequences between Fisher and his doctor have been done to death in countless other films, and there's nothing in the way of insight, or even (as in *Good Will Hunting*) entertaining dialogue, to make the ones here memorable, or even bearable. All the cinematic doctor-patient clichés are accounted for: Fisher begins reticent and ends up gabby, he and the doctor (suffering, of course, from Problems of His Own) form a tentative bond, the two have a mid-film fight that threatens their relationship, they eventually patch things up and hug. The film's one distinction in this area is that it makes explicit what is usually just insinuated, by having Washington's psychiatrist actually tell the young man – and here's where Fisher's self-aggrandizement hits new lows – that his life has been more enriched by Fisher than he'll ever know. Antwone Fisher – all things to all men!

Add to all this a completely throwaway romance, an ultra-syrupy musical score, a totally

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unexplored, gratuitous subplot involving the psychiatrist and his wife, and a wowsler of a Hollywood tearjerker ending, the logistics of which caused this viewer, at least, to laugh out loud, and you have *Antwone Fisher*, the most ridiculously overrated movie of 2002.



BIKER BOYZ

Derek Luke, it must be said, does what he can with *Antwone Fisher's* stale material, but he's more impressive in *Biker Boyz*,

mostly because he, like the film's other actors, triumphs over the script as opposed to being buried beneath it. There's absolutely nothing new to be seen here – young hotshot Luke strives to be the king of back-alley motorcycle racing, and battles several upstarts and father figure Laurence Fishburne for the crown – but it's agreeable pulp, *The Fast & The Furious*

by way of *Boyz N the Hood*

. The movie is a little tedious and barely worth discussing, but it does give Fishburne his first chance at a real performance in ages (his recent film work, *à la The Matrix*

, has been all glower and no substance); he shows true range here, and his chemistry with Lisa Bonet makes you hope a few screen romances will be heading their way soon. Reggie Rock Blythewood's direction is rather forced and melodramatic, yet he does show an instinct with his cast; in addition to Luke, Fishburne, and Bonet, Djimon Hounsou and Orlando Jones do fine work, and Blythewood even makes Kid Rock look like an actor. Now

that's talent.

