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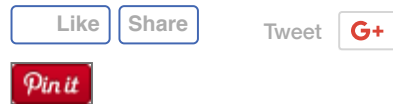


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Film Review: The Sense of an Ending

An elegant anthem to one man's effort to make sense of a tortuous past and achieve closure, anchored by mesmerizing turns from Jim Broadbent and Charlotte Rampling.

By [Erica Abeel \(Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93\)](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93) Mar 6, 2017



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Based on the 2011 Booker Prize-winning novel by Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* will be catnip to viewers of a certain age. Yet the film, directed by Ritesh Batra (*The Lunchbox*), should also resonate with anyone who has looked backwards at life and tried to make peace with past actions—or inaction—that continue to haunt them. The cinematic adaptation of a man in search of closure somehow worked better as a novel, maybe because fiction lends itself to

Barnes' seamless interweaving of present and past. But if Batra's execution of the double time plane verges on clunky, its pursuit of an enigmatic past will keep viewers riveted.

Tony Webster (the reliably superb Jim Broadbent) is a retired, divorced septuagenarian, who has chosen a wife (Harriet Walter) and life that seem designed to shield him from emotional tumult. It's a path he has followed from a fear of engaging too deeply—"he had wanted life not to bother him too much, and had succeeded," Barnes writes. Anglophiles will recognize a figure dear to British novelists, who have rung many variations on this type of disengaged male and, in Barnes' phrase, "the national pose of perpetual insouciance."

Tony is occupied running a tiny antique camera shop and accompanying his pregnant lesbian daughter Susie (Michelle Dockery), rather uselessly, to birthing class. The catalyst that boots him from his fusty routines is the arrival of a letter from Adrian (Joe Alwyn of *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk*), a former schoolmate and kind of golden boy, leaving him money and a copy of his diary. For mysterious reasons, though, the diary is withheld. Through a series of flashbacks, Tony explores the long-ago triangle of his elusive girlfriend Veronica (Freya Mavor), who later left him for his beloved Adrian, and the effect on their lives of Tony's vicious response.

The novel explored the issue of selective memory and how people gloss over actual events to avoid judging themselves too harshly. The film gives the theme of self-deception a go by flashing back to a benign *faux* letter written by young Tony (an excellent Billy Howle), wishing the couple who betrayed him the best—but again, the notion is too abstract for cinematic translation and the flashback muddies more than it illumines.

More compelling are the school playbacks with gorgeous young Tony and Adrian and classmates, fairly brimming with homoeroticism, and the tortuous encounters between Tony and cock-teasing Veronica. Further plot twists ensue when Tony spends a tense weekend with Veronica's family, as her dishy mother (Emily Mortimer) is drawn into an intrigue resolved only in the denouement. In the third act, through sleuthing verging on stalking, Tony finally confronts the aged Veronica (Charlotte Rampling), who's lost none of her cold elusiveness, in an effort to exorcise his role in Adrian's tragic fate.

Anchored by Broadbent, the acting is across the board first-rate, especially the encounters between him and a glacial Rampling in a role almost too tailor-made for this grand actress. Unfairly, though, the accomplished Michelle Dockery, hugely pregnant as Susie, might be viewed by some as Lady Mary slumming. In the third act, Batra expertly ratchets up the tension when Tony, in his obsession to decode the past, blunders into a series of misidentifications. The final reveal—surprising, if not exactly shocking—could have benefited from better foreshadowing. Even so, *The Sense of an Ending* is elegant, provocative grown-up fare that should play well at the art house.

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