

Movie Review: Atonement

Written by {ga=mitch}

Sunday, February 17 2008 7:00 PM -

Yesterday we ran Mitch's review of "Michael Clayton", which he loved ... giving it the esteemed four football rating we've only seen him dole out a handful of times in the two plus years he's been reviewing movies for us. Tonight, we move on to Mitch's second review of the five films nominated for Best Picture of 2007, "Atonement", starring the smoking hot Keira Knightley. Mitch had a slightly different take on this film.



There are a few things in life that I don't get.

Amy Winehouse winning all of those Grammys; Barry Bonds swearing he didn't know he was putting steroids into his body; mixed drinks with little umbrellas; Reality TV; someone actually rooting for the Pittsburgh Steelers.

To that list, you can add "critics who are in love with the movie 'Atonement'".

I just don't get it, and I'm normally a big snob who, if the mood is right, can really get into slow Ivory-Merchant type films about British class struggles in the late 19th - mid 20th

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centuries.

"Howard's End"? Loved it. "Sense and Sensibility"? Exquisite. "The Remains of the Day"? Brilliant.

"Atonement"? Boring. Tedious. Disappointing.

It is a movie that is too caught up with its cinematography and self importance to remember to tell an interesting story until you are 45 minutes into the film, and needing a double espresso laced with Red Bull to stay awake.

The tale, adapted from a well received novel from Ian McEwan, should be a perfect one for film. A 13 year old fledgling writer named Briony Tallis, lives at her parents gigantic estate, enjoying all of the excesses of British Privilege in 1935. A precocious writing prodigy with an over-active imagination, Briony ends up devastating several lives when she first misinterprets an encounter between her older sister Cecilia (a swizzle stick thin Keira Knightley) and Robbie, the Cambridge educated son of the estate's groundskeeper.

This is compounded by her reading a note meant as a private joke from Robbie to Cecilia, one Robbie didn't mean to send. Fueled by this misunderstanding and her own jealousy due to a crush on Robbie, Briony later accuses him of a crime he did not commit, fracturing the family, and ruining Robbie's life.

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Getting to this point takes well over half of the movie, as we also are subjected to banal upper crust talk about the pending war with Hitler, the state of the economy, and statements on fashion and decorum that no one could possibly find remotely interesting.

Once the false accusation has occurred, the movie does at least pick up, but it is once again laced with long periods of inactivity that had me looking at my watch more often than I ever recall having done before during a film. It is over four years later (and it feels every day of it), and Robbie is now serving in the army in northern France, cut off from his unit and trying to make it back to safety with two others from his regiment. This should have led to some excellent scenes, but it was just a series of long pans over empty fields with three men walking through them.

The one visually stunning scene was the re-creation of the Evacuation of Dunkirk, the extraordinary efforts of France and Britain that rescued over 330,000 soldiers. The staging is impressive, showing thousands and thousands of soldiers wandering around the beaches waiting for the ships that they hoped would be their salvation as the Germans closed in to crush them, an event that probably would have caused Britain's surrender.

Unfortunately, the scenes to me were also somewhat ruined by director Joe Wright's insistence of showing three minutes of soldiers shooting horses that they didn't want to remain behind to be used by the Germans. This may have been historically accurate, but I don't know what was gained by showing it at all, let alone dragging the scene out for so long. I get the concept that they had to kill their horses. I didn't need to see them execute 10 of them to get that point.

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So now that I've spent so much time trashing it, you may want to ask if there is anything at all that I found worthwhile about the movie, and I will say that there was.

The scenes in London following the now 18 year old Briony as she attempted her version of penance, foregoing her spot at Cambridge to serve as a war nurse were quite well done, as were the London scenes with Keira Knightly, as she also served as a nurse while waiting for Robbie's return.

The acting itself was top rate, surprisingly starting with young Saoirse Ronan as the 13 year old Briony, a roll that led to her nomination as Best Supporting Actress. She did an excellent job in turning a role that could have been seen just as a petulant liar and brat into a fully fleshed out role of a young girl that may be wise beyond her years, but still has the maturity level of a child.

Knightley and James McAvoy do an excellent job as the star-crossed lovers, and their chemistry is exceptional. While Knightley has been garnering most of the attention for her improving acting skills over the last few years, McAvoy now has a second strong performance after his turn as Idi Amin's doctor in "The Last King of Scotland", and is set for stardom later this year in the action/adventure blockbuster "Wanted" with Angela Jolie and Morgan Freeman.

But while the quality of acting made it a bit more tolerable, it also made the film's flaws so much more apparent.

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Most years I can look at the five nominated films, and while I may look at one or two of them and think "there were more deserving films", I can still understand why they are there.

When I look at "Atonement", and then see that "Sweeney Todd", "Eastern Promises" and "Gone Baby Gone" were overlooked for it...I just don't get it.

My Rating: Tim Couch (1 ½ footballs).