



Film A Civil Action

**Directed by Steven Zaillian;
Paramount Pictures/
Touchstone Pictures.**

Q. What did the goat say after he ate the film reels?

A. Hmmmm, the film wasn't as good as the book.

My assessment is similar to the goat in relation to 'A Civil Action'. The audience is told that it is 'based on a true story'. The film is also based on a bestseller by Jonathan Harr entitled 'A Civil Action'.

However, the nuances, subtleties and complexities of character are all lost in the process of transferring a ripping yarn into a big budget movie. The book is a real pot-boiler that you can't put down because you are so keen to learn the outcome of the court case. The film lacks that pace and intensity.

The true story is about the good people of Woburn and the alleged contamination of their water supply by two nasty big corporations; Beatrice Foods and Grace and Co. Eight children of Woburn die of leukemia and the plaintiffs are the families of the deceased children. John Travolta plays the main protagonist; Jan Schlichtmann, the lawyer for the plaintiffs. He is painted in much more stark, black and white colours than the lead character in Harr's book. In the opening scenes we hear his voice telling us that the life of a white working man is worth more than a black working man, that a woman's life is worth less than a man's and worth least of all is the life of a child. We also witness him, expensively dressed and coiffed, one of Boston's ten most eligible bachelors, sauntering along handing out business cards to injured people at the scene of a motor vehicle accident.

In contrast, the Jan Schlichtman of the book is occasionally plagued by self-doubt and pangs of conscience. Yes, he is sinfully extravagant in terms of the expense of his suits, his dry-cleaning and the way he lavishly spends money on litigation conferences at the Ritz Carlton. However, he is not

without redeeming features, including the tenacity with which he researches, investigates and prepares the case for his clients. It was disappointing that the scriptwriters opted for a one-dimensional ambulance-chaser at the expense of the complex lead character in the book.

Another thing that is largely missing from the film is the huge scope of the litigation and the defendant companies' use and abuse of preliminary court procedures in an attempt to exhaust the funds of the plaintiff firm. The defendant solicitor, played most ably by Robert Duvall, is a fascinating study of the ethics of lawyering for a large corporate

client. The role of the judge in regulating the trial process, to the obvious advantage of the two defendant firms, is also largely omitted from the film.

Despite the fact that lots of the light and shade of the book are culled, the film is still worth seeing. It is a modern day morality tale, but the moral is unclear. The lead character in the film has a fatal flaw in that he pursues his client's case at the cost of his partners, his accountant and his financial security. However, he vows at the end that, if called upon, he would do it all again.

It would be an excellent film as prescribed viewing for law students studying professional ethics. It is worth seeing for practising lawyers who wish to contemplate their own lawyering ethics.

However, it is a pity that many of the nuances of plot and character, and the detail and complexity of the litigation process were lost in the process of translating a good book to a film. • **HB**

The Museum Guard

by H. Norman; Alfred Knopf 1999, 310 pp.

Some books are quite remarkable because while almost nothing happens the tension keeps rising. You know that a strange fascinating story is unravelling but you have no inkling of where it will end. In this latest work by Howard Norman who rose to international attention with his previous book *The Bird Artist*, we meet DeFoe Russet a museum guard who falls in love with Imogen Linny the caretaker of the Jewish cemetery in Halifax, Canada. Imogen falls in

love with a painting and becomes so obsessed by the woman in it that she starts to take on her persona. In the process DeFoe is faced with many challenges: he again experiences loss and betrayal and ultimately has to decide whether to commit what is the ultimate crime for a museum guard. This is a wonderful book. Norman writes beautifully clear prose in an engaging, quirky story. • **FR**

Black Notice

by Patricia Cornwell, Little, Brown & Co; 415 pp, \$24.95 softcover.

The eleventh in the Kay Scarpetta series and the first without the smarmy Benton Wesley, who had been killed off in *Point of Origin*.

A mysterious dead body arrives in a shipping container; the investigation takes Scarpetta and Marino to France; a new love interest appears to emerge for Kay (one ATF Agent Jay Tully) although we probably won't know until the twelfth book. Subplots continue to abound, office politics, the undercover world of Lucy, Kay's niece, and the machinations of an ambitious managerialist Deputy Police Chief, who fortunately gets what's coming to her. In addition to undermining Kay she put Pete Marino back in uniform to prevent him working with Kay

— that's how evil she is. Pete ignores her and keeps turning up where he is not wanted, except by Kay.

As always a great read, four or five hours at the most, with the added bonus that any medical students with a full set of Cornwell's works should benefit from the forensic medicine in them. • **PW**

Bits was compiled by Helen Brown, Francis Regan and Peter Wilmshurst.