



ABC CLARION

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Swiss Army Man Review

by Sarah Hou

Prompting the most walkouts at the Sundance Film Festival this year, the hilarious and bizarre picture *Swiss Army Man* is really one of a kind, challenging the audience with its absurd flights of fantasy so that one either loves it or hates it. Dubbed as the “farting corpse movie”, the film revolves around a flatulent dead body being carried around and releasing bodily emissions throughout the 97 minutes. The protagonist Hank, played by Paul Dano, finds himself on a deserted island ready to end his life. His suicidal attempts are interrupted when he spots Radcliffe’s decaying body washing ashore. Hank rides the cadaver like a jet ski toward civilization by grace of its gassy nature, and the two’s adventure/bromance begins there.

During his trek back home, he discovers more survival utilities in the corpse, now nicknamed Manny, including the abilities to pump fresh water from its mouth, create sparks with a simple finger snap, and act as a compass with one of its body parts. However, the absurdity does not end there, as Radcliffe’s Manny begins to gain consciousness and show signs of life. The relationship between Manny and Hank starts out as that of father and toddler and evolves into that of friends as Hank teaches Manny about the many facets of life.

The creative genius behind this film is the Daniels (Daniel Scheinert and Daniel Kwan), a fresh directing duo known for their crazy imaginative minds. They seem to be especially fond

of weird bodily functions like those in the *Swiss Army Man*. Many physical phenomena have appeared in their past works, including DJ Snake and Lil Jon’s “Turn Down for What” music video in which an unstoppable beat gets into a man’s pants and the short film “Interesting Ball” in which a man gets sucked into his friend’s ass. The pair received a directing award for the drama this year at the Sundance Film Festival despite the heavily divided responses to the film.

It is apparent that many negative reactions resulted from the juvenile body humor. However, underneath its puerile and flip-pant surface, *Swiss Army Man* actually deepens as it goes, becoming a profound drama that nibbles at the sensitive and philo-

sophical side of human existence. As Hank answers Manny’s questions about the world and what it means to be alive, he himself begins to face his own problems as he is forced to examine his own life from a completely new angle. Manny could have been purely a figment of Hank’s imagination and a projection of Hank’s mind, which means Hank would have been carrying a dead corpse around and talking to himself this whole time (that would be pretty sad and depressing). It is through Manny’s lens that Hank comes into terms with his insecurities, loneliness, and all the frustrations in his past. From their conversations, recollections, and flashbacks, we learn that Dano’s hapless character is probably a withdrawn, awkward guy, estranged from parents and afraid to approach the girl he likes. He feels restrained by the many con-

ventions that society puts on people and is thus scared to express his feelings in avoidance of judgment. While Manny disregards these societal conventions by candidly saying whatever he wants and well, farting constantly in public, Hank is seen constantly shutting him up and too embarrassed to open up. As Hank spends the whole movie educating Manny on how to be human, he goes through this mental journey of self-realization and eventually learns to celebrate and embrace his weirdness.

Swiss Army Man is an amalgam of absurdity and genuineness. Sure. Watching the childhood idol Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived, turn into a putrescent, flatulent corpse is agonizing indeed, but an impassioned and heartfelt viewing experience awaits once you get past its overall grossed-out premise.

Sorcerer to the Crown Review

by Sydney Peng

Sorcerer to the Crown, written by the Malaysian author Zen Cho, has an unfortunate title, in that it sounds like a generic medieval mage story in the vein of Gandalf or Merlin, serving some ancient king trying to retake the throne. Instead, the book is set in Regency-era England with a black main character and all the prejudices that entails, which grows even worse as magic starts to fade, leaving him as the unfortunate scapegoat.

The book’s plot follows Mr. Zacharias Wythe and his attempt to both restore magic to the sorcerers and deal with petty power plays involving murder accusations. Zacharias is a refreshing character; he’s smart and capable, but also rather quiet and prone to waiting things out. A non-confrontational fellow, he tries his best to navigate the thorny racism of his time, including terrible rumors and irritating ‘peers’ who fancy themselves better than him, while serving his country as best he can. Most of his conflicts are because of his sense of duty trapping him in a web of interfering interests.

Said web crosses with the other main character, the hilariously scrappy and irreverent Prunella Gentleman. Her characterization is a rarity, especially with female protagonists--she’s brash, brazen, and prone to making mistakes, while being an utter genius at the same time. She isn’t a cold, calculating killer type of heroine, nor is she saddled with the rather-reviled ‘damsel in distress’ or secondary love interest archetype. Rather, she serves as a prodigy whose combative personality, surprising ruthlessness, and sense of humor rope her into all sorts of trouble, which she overcomes through her own skill and cunning. She influences the story just as much as Zacharias, and possibly more, given her refusal to bow to pressure or sit on the sidelines.

The book’s voice is perfect for both of these characters--it’s told in an old-fashioned manner that recalls Jane Austen or the Bronte sisters, without getting too long-winded or confusing to read, and it perfectly conveys Zacharias’ excessive formality or Prunella’s goofiness. The style and tone is

quite similar to Susanna Clark’s Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell, but this book is much quicker to read and has a smaller fondness for footnotes. While the magic system between the two are also rather similar, Zen Cho adds different elements, such as Malaysian characters and myths, a Persian simurgh, and sorcerer’s familiars.

Cho’s writing is also quite funny, in a dry manner that’s prone to understatement or implied jabs for insults. Under the patina of silliness or quaint wording, however, she also manages to touch upon heavy subjects, ranging from discrimination in any form, such as racism or sexism, oppressive governments or economies, and complex relationships with parental figures.

Sorcerer to the Crown was definitely a high note for me this year, as a fine fantasy novel and a new author to watch. While it certainly stands alone, this book is written as the first in a trilogy, promising more escapades to come.

Learning Never Stops by Brandon Ho

In the very beginning, you were taught by your parents and by yourself. You didn’t really know anything about the world, you had no prior information to use. You learned everything from scratch. Your parents guide you along the way, and you discover the basic principles that govern your universe.

You realize basic things that will serve as the foundation of discovery for the rest of your life.

You learn how to stand, you learn how to walk, and you learn a bit of how to talk as well.

A couple of years later, you might go to a preschool or a daycare. You’ve already learned how to survive on a day to day basis, and now you’re moving on to finer details of life.

Instead of being taught by your parents, you have a teacher.

Perhaps you’ll learn how to draw, or how to write, or how to do simple arithmetic.

Soon, you’ll start going to elementary school.

You’re no longer learning new skills. Instead, you begin to refine your old ones.

But more importantly, you’re not just learning how to do things anymore. You’re learning why things happen. You’re discovering the world around you, not just learning how to live in it.

But at some point, a new element is added to your education: preparation.

Your field of discovery may become more narrow and specific, and you begin to search for practicality in your education.

You’re no longer learning purely for discovery. You’re learning to be ready for the world ahead of you.

When you graduate from the preparation stage, your education stagnates to some extent. At this point, you’ve learned almost everything you need to survive in the world. While your life used to be dedicated to learning and discovery, you now begin to put your education to use. The time of education has faded away, and you’re moving on to a new frontier.

But the learning never stops.

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