

The physician at the movies



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Basil Rathbone (as Sherlock Holmes), Ida Lupino (as Ann Brandon), and Nigel Bruce (as Dr. Watson) in *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, 1939.

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Sherlock Holmes and doctors in the movies

Sherlock Holmes is said to be the fictional character most often portrayed in movies.¹ If that's so, then Doctor Watson must be tied with him. Indeed, a number of doctors populate physician-author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works, but none, including Watson, dazzle like Holmes. Instead of modeling Watson on his mentor, Dr. Joseph Bell, Doyle made him Holmes's rather amiable Boswell, who seems never to have patients or a life that might interfere with his trotting off with Holmes to solve another case. I got to thinking about Holmes after purchasing an excellent two-volume set of Doyle's short stories, newly-annotated by Leslie Klinger.² It started me listening to the audiotapes of the Holmes memoirs and adventures while doing errands, and rereading the annotated stories I had just listened to. It was a short jump from there to revisiting some of the better films in the Sherlockian canon.

I was attracted to internal medicine in the late 1950s, before its fragmentation into subspecialties, when its practitioners were considered to be "diagnosticians" (mainly because we didn't have many treatments) and "doctors' doctors."³ So Sherlock Holmes held a special fascination to me. Like Holmes, Dr. David Seegal at Columbia impressed on us

students the importance of observation. He placed incongruous objects (such as a statue of a baseball player) about the back and sides of our meeting room, then asked us to face forward and identify what seemed out of place. Holmes, in "A Scandal and Bohemia,"² remarks to Watson that "You see, but you do not observe," and then illustrates the distinction. Similarly, in "The Boscombe Valley Mystery,"² Holmes explains his uncanny inferences thusly, "You know my method. It is founded upon the observance of trifles." To discover the truth, Holmes coupled his exquisite powers of observation with cogent questioning while noting verbal and nonverbal cues.

The actor most associated with Holmes was William Gillette, who played the character on stage from 1899 until his death in 1935. Gillette made many attempts (as did Doyle) to retire Holmes, but was al-

ways called back by an adoring public. Doyle and Gillette's neighbor, Mark Twain, were avid fans. Gillette's memory lives on in his castle, situated on a state park in East Haddam on the Connecticut River. It was Gillette's adaptations of the stories that formed the basis of the films that many of us, who never saw the actor's performances, consider the definitive embodiment of Holmes in the person of Basil Rathbone. Other actors have portrayed Holmes, notably Ronald Howard (Leslie Howard's son), who played an understated Holmes in a 1950s television series, and Jeremy Brett, who was more flamboyant in the BBC series that many rave about for its authenticity. Still, I much prefer the suave Rathbone, born Philip Saint John Basil Rathbone in Johannesburg, South Africa. An accomplished Shakespearean actor, he was nominated twice as Best Supporting Actor for his roles in two rarely-seen films: as Tybalt in *Romeo and Juliet*, and as King Louis XI in *If I Were King*. Those previous nominations probably kept him from being nominated for his best role as the villainous Sir Guy of Gisbourne in the film classic *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. This was the culmination of his portrayal of reprobates in such classic roles as the evil Marquis de Evremonde in *Tale of Two Cities*, the pirate Captain Levasseur in Rafael Sabatini's

Captain Blood, and Mr. Murdstone, David Copperfield's mean stepfather. When Rathbone forsook his evil ways to fight crime as Holmes, he became one of film's immortals and paid the price of being so stereotyped that people would ask for him to sign his autograph as Holmes.⁴

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes

Starring Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, George Zucco and Ida Lupino.

Directed by Alfred Werker. Running time 85 minutes.

This is the second in the inspired teaming of Rathbone with Nigel Bruce as Watson. The son of a baronet who had been seriously wounded in World War II, Bruce brought considerable credibility to the role of a Victorian doctor who had served in the army before sharing a flat with Holmes at 221B Baker Street. Both this film and the first in the series, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, are set in Victorian London and have an atmospheric air of authenticity. For some reason Twentieth Century Fox gave up the rights to the character after these films, and three years later Universal decided to update the duo to fighting Nazis and other mishmash in a dozen mostly forgettable films. Only the presence of Rathbone and Bruce made them watchable.

For the most part, Bruce portrays Dr. Watson as a kind and lovable bumbler. As Holmes says in this film, "Watson, I'm afraid that you are an incorrigible bungler," before smilingly patting him on the shoulder. As in today's buddy films, Watson provides the comic relief, serving as a useful foil to propel the story, although he has his moments as when, at the end of this film, his practicality trumps the seemingly invincible Sherlock. If you decide to watch *The Hound*, you will hear Holmes call to Watson for another service, "Quick, Watson, the needle!" In the 1979 Gothic remake of *The Hound* by Hammer Studios, that line was replaced by "Pass the muffins."

This film stands out because of the confluence of two separate stories and the imposing presence of George Zucco as Holmes's villainous archenemy Professor Moriarty. An added attraction is the luminous presence of Ida Lupino, who later became the only female director in the post-World War II era and an inspiration to a generation of women directors. As a dowager in the film responds when Lupino's character calls herself "tiresome," "No one on the right side of senility could call you 'tiresome!'"

The film is filled with all the expected appurtenances: Holmes's violin, his pipe, his elaborate disguises, a clutter of books and papers as well as such exotica as a lucky chinchilla foot, a clubfooted man, and an ancient Incan funeral dirge. Throw in the Star of Delhi, the crown jewels in the Tower of London, a Baedeker, a verse from Coleridge's "Rime of the

Ancient Mariner," and a portcullis, and what more can you ask for? It's enough to make you hanker for the days when screenwriters were actually literate.

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Thomas Haden Church and Paul Giamatti in *Sideways*.

© Twentieth Century Fox

Sideways

Starring Paul Giamatti, Virginia Madsen, Thomas Haden Church, and Sandra Oh.

Written and directed by Alexander Payne. Rated R. Running time 123 minutes.

I get needled by my children for being a trendsetter, albeit an invisible one. I wear clothes long enough for them to come back in style. I ate blueberries daily, long before scientists proved that it made old rats live longer. And I have been turning down Cabernet and Merlot for years in favor of Pinot Noir. So, it was with some consternation that I received the news from my son, whom I had converted to drinking Pinot, that the film *Sideways* had made the wine trendy and more expensive. Movie buffs were flocking to the Santa Barbara wine country and mouthing lines from the movie.^{1,2} Clearly, I had to see this film, especially when I learned that the Pinot-loving central character was an author who was sweating out

the inevitable rejection after being strung along by a publishing house. Happily, that's where my identification with the character ended. This much-ballyhooed film seems like one long product placement for Pinot as well as for the motels, restaurants, and wineries of Santa Barbara county. The winery owned by Fess Parker, best known as Davy Crockett on TV, was the stand-in for the scenes shot at "Frass Canyon."

In contrast to the many critics and the Academy Award voters who gave it the Oscar for Best Screenplay, I found the film and the script lame. Instead of being titled *Sideways*, it should have been called *Nowhere* or *Losers*. The film details a weeklong trip from San Diego to Los Angeles to Santa Barbara and north by Jack (Thomas Haden Church), a self-loving extrovert, and Miles, a self-loathing introvert. Miles is played by Paul Giamatti, son of Bart Giamatti, late president of Yale and baseball commissioner. Giamatti, a graduate of Choate and Yale, is a gifted actor, and his portrayal of Miles carries the film. Miles is a writer who remains deeply depressed two years after a divorce, and who still nurtures the hope of reuniting with his ex-wife, whose most memorable quality was that she had the best palate of any woman Miles ever met. Miles's main activities seem to be drinking Pinot and popping Xanax and Lexapro, resulting in nightly collapses. It's a wonder he ever wakes up, which is how the film opens, with him being late to pick up his washed-up actor friend Jack for a bachelor fling before Jack marries a wealthy young lady. Miles envisions the week as one long series of wine-tastings, golfing, and reconnecting with his freshman college roommate. Jack, on the other hand, sees it as one long f—a-thon during his last week of "freedom." Jack immediately starts turning on his charm (such as it is), and snares Stephanie (Sandra Oh), a sexpot divorcee biker. Their steamy affair is punctuated by Jack's pledges of undying love for Stephanie and her little girl. Stephanie punches him out and dumps him after learning that he is about to be married, but Jack remains wounded yet unbowed. In a presumed act of mercy he beds an overweight, starstruck waitress, only to have her trucker husband catch them *in flagrante delicto*. This leads to scenes that represent the lowest points of an otherwise dumb movie.

Jack's other aim is to get Miles "laid," with little success until Miles reconnects with his favorite waitress, Maya (Virginia Madsen), who has divorced her philosophy professor husband since their last encounter. The Giamatti-Madsen interludes are the only scenes that have any charm whatsoever. Nonetheless, Miles, while less of a jerk than his friend, is not much of a hero. He goes berserk after hearing that his ex-wife has remarried, and runs down a hilly vineyard swigging wine all the way. Later, in a wine-tasting room, he learns that his book has been rejected, grabs the wine discard bowl, and, as he drinks from it, pours it all over himself in a frenzy. Indeed, the messages in this film are completely irresponsible. Miles starts out the trip by visiting his mother, ostensibly to take her flowers on her birthday. But it's really to break into her dresser, where she

keeps money in an Ajax can, and lift a raft of \$100 bills. He drinks and drives, consuming bottles of wine in daily binges to the pass-out stage. Jack has no respect either for marriage or his naive fiancée, and hops in bed with anything that moves at the merest acquaintance.

There are some funny touches, as when Miles gives a primer on wine and how to drink it. After looking at it lovingly, tipping it gently, nosing it, and aerating the wine, he professes to be able to detect "citrus, strawberry, passion fruit, the faintest soupçon of asparagus, and a nice Edam cheese." The recitation ends when he sees his boorish friend drinking wine while chewing gum. Asked by Maya why he is into Pinot, Miles launches into a self-revealing dissertation about the temperamental nature of the grape and how it needs constant attention and patience to understand its potential. To this, Maya responds with revelations of her own. She is going to become a horticulturist because she loves to think about what was going on when the grape was growing in the sunshine, the people who tended the grapes, how many are dead now, and how wine continues to evolve. One is torn between marveling at another couple finding one another and laughing out loud at yet another tortured piece of baby-boomer philosophy. However, by the time Jack finally marries his meal-ticket in an Armenian Orthodox Church, winking at the best man while he puts on the ring, and the divorcees reconnect after a spat, one has checked one's watch too many times and is past caring.

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Ray

Starring Jamie Foxx, Kerry Washington, Clifton Powell, and Regina King.

Directed by Taylor Hackford. Rated PG-13. Running time 152 or 178 minutes.

Biopics of the 1940s and 1950s are famous for spreading false history. Why ruin an image and risk a lawsuit? Indeed, sometimes knowing less is better. *Ray* challenges that concept for much of the movie, and then resurrects that idea in the best 1950s biopic tradition.

Ray Charles (born Ray Charles Robinson) was blinded at age seven by an ailment that I could not fathom from the on-screen presentation. The filmmaker takes great pains to show how Ray is haunted by the drowning of his younger brother George six months before his blindness, using endless flashbacks and depictions of delusions related to blood



Jamie Foxx as the American legend Ray Charles in *Ray*.

Photo by Nicola Goode. © 2004 Unchain My Heart Louisiana, LLC. A Universal Release.

and flooding. His single mother, Aretha Robinson (Sharon Warren), a sharecropper and laundress, is forced to send him off to a school for the blind so that he might receive the education that is not available in their impoverished section of rural Florida. She does so with the admonition (heard often during

the movie): "Don't let nothing or nobody turn you into a cripple."

Relying on his hearing, Charles (Jamie Foxx) starts out his career by mimicking other singers. We first hear him doing an Eddy Arnold impersonation of "Anytime," made famous in a later recording by Eddie Fisher. Pressed into service in a Seattle nightclub, he morphs into Nat King Cole. Later, when Charles comes under contract with Atlantic Records under the shrewd guidance of Ahmet Ertegun (Curtis Armstrong), he begins to find his own voice. He first fuses gospel with rhythm and blues into soul with "I Got a Woman," which offends some black churchgoers. Then he adopts a highly sexual style with "What'd I Say?," which catches on with middle class, young white record buyers and is labeled "jungle music" by its detractors.

The film does a good job in depicting white racism and the effects of Jim Crow laws, especially at the beginning in Florida, where white passengers at the front of the bus are steered to clean restrooms and hot meals, while black passengers at the back are told to make good use of the outhouses because they will find only bushes available in the Carolinas. The filmmakers also depict blacks exploiting blacks when Charles's mother is cheated by the woman who contracts her to do laundry and when Charles is made the boy toy and cheated out of his nightclub share by a woman manager and her partner.

Charles's agent negotiates a very lucrative deal with CBS Paramount, and Charles once again changes his style with his classic signature song, "Georgia on My Mind," and country hits like "I Can't Stop Wanting You." The Georgia song turns out to be ironic since, unlike his friend Quincy Jones, Charles continues to play the Chitlin' Circuit, otherwise known as the Jim Crow circuit. He is making good money and pleads that he is a singer and is just following the law. Then, one day in the 1960s, he resists, and cancels an engagement in Atlanta. He is sued and is banned by the Georgia legislature from ever appearing in the state. The closing credits note that on March 7, 1979, the ban was lifted, and the Georgia legislature apologized and declared "Georgia on My Mind" its state song.

Despite some high points, the film is depressing and overlong, even in its shortened version. The music is overshadowed by Charles's incessant womanizing and his heroin addiction. He marries a lovely woman, Della Bea Robinson (Kelly Washington), and they have two children. Charles buys

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them bigger and bigger mansions that he spends hardly any time in. On the road, he settles in with different versions of Mrs. Ray Charles. The first, Mary Ann Fisher (Aunjanue Ellis), is very influential in his developing his style. She is succeeded by the brassy Margie Hendricks (Regina King), the lead singer of the Raylettes. When Margie tells him she is pregnant, he tells her to get rid of the baby because he has a family. She replies that “between the dope, the music, and me, you left your family a long time ago.” In an interesting conflation of life and art, they record the smash hit “Hit the Road, Jack.” Margie leaves the group, has the baby, and then dies of an overdose of drugs and alcohol.

The film is choppy in that the narrative line is constantly interrupted by flashbacks, with part of a song thrown in here and another affair inserted there. The main problem, however, is that the director/screenwriter tries to make Charles over into a noble guy in the last 30 minutes. The film shows Charles having a change of heart and undergoing heroin detox cold turkey to save his wife and children. His wife and children are shown beaming beside him when he is honored in Georgia. However, as Terry Teachout points out, this happy ending is “contradicted in every particular by Charles’s astonishingly candid memoir, *Brother Ray: Ray Charles’s Own Story*.”¹ Charles apparently liked heroin, and had no regrets about his addiction. He actually had two wives. Both his first wife (not shown) and his second, the one depicted in the story, divorced him. He also had so many affairs that the *Washington Post* ended Charles’s obituary as follows: “Estimates of his surviving children varied. He is believed to have had 12.”¹

In the end, I found the reactions of two of my colleagues who are black most interesting. One young woman in her late 20s was surprised to learn that Charles was such a womanizer and has not wanted to listen to his music since seeing the movie. Another said that her mother, now in her 70s, wouldn’t let her daughters listen to Ray Charles in the house, calling him a “nasty, dirty old man.” Yet it turned out that her mother wanted to see the movie, and enjoyed it so much that she asked for the DVD for Christmas, because “it was her time” and it brought back memories of the 50s. The moral of the story, which the filmmaker missed, was, as Teachout notes, that we shouldn’t try to “obscure the never-to-be-forgotten fact that great artists are not always good people.”¹ The same goes for athletes, scientists, and even doctors.

Reference

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“Miracle of the Blind Born” by Domenico Passignano
Photo credit: Scala / Art Resource, NY

Jesus as Doctor

He went around healing sores, restoring sight,
and could cure deafness with a little spit
which he would rub into those stubborn ears.
Cripples rebounded at his thrilling touch,
and he talked sullen lunatics out of their fits.
But his true specialty was reanimation:
when he stood at the bedside, the fresh corpse
would leap off the couch as if electrocuted.
He was the first in his family to be pledged
to our sacred profession, yet the training was simple:
no books, no lectures, just open-air instruction
in God’s hospital, with a practicum in sin.
As for me, a doctor’s son, a dull fellow
with a talent for hard work: I pick at brains,
tap joints, pull muscles, peek into the dark
cavities of the flesh to discover—what?
Anatomy is destiny, or some such bromide?
Oh, I know a thing or two about diagnosis,
can crack a case like Sherlock, but the cure—
the cure is missing, the recipes don’t work.
Listen! Outside, the groans are getting louder;
time’s running out, the invalids are impatient.
My colleagues have already decided: a death
will be provided before the day is over.

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