

About a Boy

UK : 2002 : dir. Chris & Paul Weitz : : 112 min
 prod: : scr: Chris & Paul Weitz, Peter Hedges : dir.ph.:
Nicholas Hoult; Anthony Prew
 Hugh Grant; Toni Collette; Rachel Weisz; Isabel Brook

Ref:	Pages	Sources	Stills	Words	Ω	8	€	M	⌘	Copy on VHS	Last Viewed
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Source: Barbican Screen

Barbican Screen – May 2002 – review:

“Hugh Grant stars in a funny and poignant adaptation of Nick Hornby’s acclaimed novel. Will Freeman is a mid-thirties, irresponsible North Londoner who starts to feel left behind as most of his friends settle down and have children. In his search for available women, he invents an imaginary son and starts attending single parent meetings. With Toni Collette, Nicholas Hoult and Rachel Weisz.”

Empire – December 2001 – pre-release note:

“Following the triumphant box office of both London-based rom-com **"BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY"** and Nick Hornby’s previous screen adaptation, **"HIGH FIDELITY"**, **"ABOUT A BOY"**’s already promising returns have now taken a turn for

the even better. Naturally, such success also hangs on positive reviews and strong word of mouth, but considering what music industry insiders are hailing "his best work to date" for Badly Drawn Boy’s single-handed soundtrack, that could be merely a matter of course. The Weitz brothers wrapped filming in July and have kept the novel’s decidedly British feel, even though it is rumoured that a baseball version of **"FEVER PITCH"** is currently in the works.”

Evening Standard – April 26th 2002 – review
 – “Sex and the Single Mum”:

“Hugh Grant’s new film isn’t about a boy, so much as about an immature man – Grant. He plays Will, a playboy who doesn’t get much fun from playing. Commitment is the enemy. Living comfortably on royalties from the one

pop hit – a Christmas ballad, Santa's Super

Sleigh – his songwriter dad penned, bachelor



Source: Metro

Will dates girls until they try to tie him down, then it's back home with their tears on his coat collar.

One day, he makes a discovery: single mums make good lays. Having been divorced, abandoned or widowed, and left with child/children, their demands on a man are short-term ones. Will is in pick-up heaven – haunting single parent support groups and pretending he's a single dad with a two-year old of his own – until he gets landed with Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), a 12-year old and his eccentric mum (Toni Collette).

Mum dresses herself and the boy out of a charity shop as if for the Arctic – "Like a yeti," Will's caustic voice-over comments. But, to his surprise, he discovers himself becoming what he least suspected about himself – a good influence on the boy. Which, in turn, reveals to him what an empty life he leads, how underdeveloped he is, and also how lonely.

I dwell on the film's plot, based on Nick Hornby's novel, at more length than usual because while it sticks faithfully to the cultural identity and social class between Finsbury and Clerkenwell, it derives its romantic comedy-with-edge from a slew of highly professional Hollywood sex comedies of the 1950s such as **"PILLOW TALK"**, **"LOVER COME BACK"**, **"THAT TOUCH OF MINK"**, in which no sex at all occurred – like this film – but whose heroes (Rock Hudson, Cary Grant,

Tony Randall, Jack Lemmon) finally fall into the tender trap they've originally set for the woman. Co-directors Paul and Chris Weitz (of **"AMERICAN PIE"**) and their co-writer Peter Hedges cleverly conceal this American lineage by having a star, Hugh Grant, who's rooted in the English tradition of low-powered sex and high-powered articulateness.

Will is a change of pace and looks, if not exactly life, for Hugh Grant. Gone are the floppy hair bangs, subdued into a sometimes spiky-cat cut, and his accent seems to come down-market a note or two. Occasionally the result, especially in the finale, which implausibly finds him stroking a guitar and singing Roberta Flack at a comprehensive-school concert in Finsbury, suggests a Tony Blair sucking up to the youth sub-culture at a pop-gig photo-op.

Grant's timing is the best on the British screen. You may see more of the whites of his eyes than customary, and the double-takes he does when horrified by some threat of paternity, or simply holding a baby, are in perfect sync with a character who knows he's a "selfish bastard", but is prepared to live with it – until the moment of truth when he has to tell young Marcus that he can choose the right CDs for him, the right trainers; but as for any more important thing, like life itself, he's a dead loss.

At this moment, don supremely well by Grant, Will achieves his own epiphany. He spends a fair bit of time perched on a couch – his own in his film-star-sized pad, a vestigial reminder of the Hollywood genre his character springs from, or in the flats of the single mums he dates. The self-analysis that goes with a couch is enshrined in an unsparingly candid voice-over commentary that sometimes contradicts the infidelities that the character is professing, and sometimes chastises his unreformed self..

The women in the film are, by contrast, unsatisfactory. Not that Toni Collette doesn't get the English accent off impeccably, but her depressive-mum-in-atrocious-knit-balaclavas (!), who throws love-kisses at her kid on his first day at the comprehensive, never quite gels: she's like a bag-lady with a headache. Her best scene is one where, for once, she comes out fighting, not whingeing, and has an argy-bargy with Will just as he's getting off with a new girl that pushes the comedy to the dangerous edge of a charge of paedophilia.

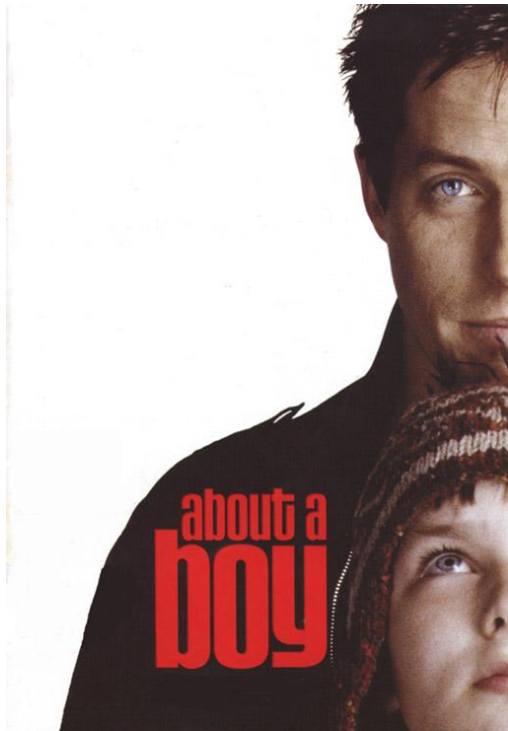
Rachel Weisz, as another, svelter, pick-up, comes very late into the story, with no time for development; though her son (Anthony Prew), aghast at the possibility of Will "getting up" his mum, achieves an unnerving moment of high, painful comedy with a shriek of "She's not keen on him, she's only keen on me!"

Nicholas Hoult's Marcus copes valiantly with a hideous pudding-basin haircut reminiscent of the 1920s comic-strip Buster Brown¹, and his side of the story has been greatly contracted from what it was in Hornby's novel. But then, Grant is "the money" and shows he's worth every penny of it, not just in his set-piece scenes, but in half-liners ("Oh... you're in the bath?" spoken to a caller on the SOS line while doing a voluntary stint for Amnesty, and endowing the innocent remark with erotic potential) and in second thoughts ("Well, I almost made it," spoken as he swerves away in the nick of time from the compulsion, caused by his conscience, to help out at a soup kitchen.) He wears a public face and a private face, and a huge part of the pleasure is watching one replaced by the other with a card sharper's finesse. With his skills in residence, Finsbury can at last look Notting Hill in the eye. ** ” – **Alexander Walker**

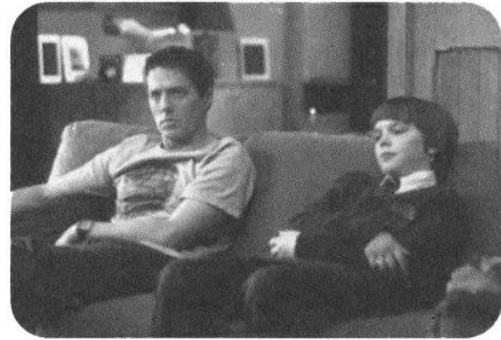
Metro – April 26th 2002 – review:

¹ *The Buster Brown character didn't have a pudding-basin haircut.*

“As if to underline the fact he's trying to lose the sweet, floppy image, Hugh Grant has binned his trademark droopy locks: his latest character, Will, a shallow trustafarian [sic] has hair as spiky, well-tended and carefully presented as his personality. According to Will, every man is an island and he, specifically, is Ibiza, which gives a fair notion of his ideals and aspirations. Will may act like an overgrown, sexually charged teenager with an exceptional amount of pocket money, but he's stumped by real children: an imaginary toddler, dreamed up to help him pick up single mums, is more in his line. However, when this chat-up technique fizzles, Will finds himself stuck with weird Marcus (Nicholas Hoult), a 12-year old he met when hitting on a pretty friend of Marcus's depressed mother (Toni Collette). Pretending to be a single parent in order to pull similarly detached mums turns out to have much less future than Will's reluctantly embarked-on friendship with Marcus, and gradually, the two boys – one regressed, one vulnerable and bullied – help each other to rejoin the mainland. Paul and Chris ("AMERICAN PIE") Weitz offer a surprisingly warm version of Nick Hornby's comic novel; there's a lot of fun poked at kaftan-wearing, meat-avoiding hippy types but none of it is malicious, and the central relationship comes alive thanks to an impressive portrayal of sulky sensitivity from Hoult, combined with Grant's frequently exploited ability to be useless and loveable simultaneously. *** ”



So – it's not about a boy, and it's not primarily about a male relationship either. I guess the poster must just be lying to us then? Source: HMV Choice



Source: Croydon Clocktower prog

Croydon Clocktower – May 2002 – programme review:

“This is the story of Will Freeman (Grant), a 36-year old , too-hip playboy North Londoner (and heir to novelty song royalties) who seeks out relationships with single mothers because he thinks they’re more desperate to find a man (and when he’s done, easier to leave). Of course, all his plans go out the window when he becomes emotionally attached to a woman’s (Collette) 12-year old son, Marcus (Houlton). Will teaches Marcus to become a cool kid, and Marcus helps Will to finally grow up.”

The book was first recommended to me by a perceptive and highly intelligent Finnish 12-year old boy who saw something of himself in Marcus, and something of myself in Will. But as so often is the case, a lot of damage can be inflicted on a book in rendering it “suitable” for the screen. The role of Marcus in the story, Alexander Walker notes almost in passing, has been severely written down, and as such the film is of much less interest to this archive.

Germaine Greer didn’t like it (“*Newsnight Review*” – April 2002) so we’re off to a good start anyway. She was insensed by the film’s dowdy portrayal of single mothers, but most of all by it’s implication that even a self-centred bachelor male could understand and empathise better

with a 12-year old boy than his own mother, who has fed him and washed his underwear. The male critics on the panel pointed out that the Hugh Grant character had himself been a twelve-year old boy once, something no mother can ever claim, but Greer still held to the maxim (viz: Norman Bates in “**PSYCHO**”) that “a boy’s best friend is his mother”. She would hardly, of course, extend the same argument to a father and his twelve-year old daughter, but who says a feminist guru cum establishment don can’t still have her cake and eat it?

Greer also heaped vitriol on Hugh Grant’s ageing “toy-boy” persona, and commented on the “ghastly” hairstyle inflicted upon Marcus. But forgive me, we’re not **all** complete fashion victims, and merely because the boy’s hairstyle doesn’t look like he’s recently escaped from Alcatraz or some American boot camp does not make it “ugly”. For the record, Germaine, the micro-stubble hairstyle boys were pressured into wearing throughout the 1990s is itself deeply repellent to many, and reflects a resurgent macho culture (chiefly stemming from black ghetto trends) which feminists ought to detest. A fashion **can** be near-universally followed and still be repulsive. Fashion – and youth fashion most of all – is a trickle-down cultural phenomenon, teens emulating the styles of their icons, kids emulating the styles of the teens. It’s not some democratic expression from the masses. Fashion trends reveal who are the sheep, and who the individuals. Marcus’ hairstyle looks far better than anything I see on the streets today, and all this concentration of comment about it seems only to reinforce the Rule – one **must** conform to the fashion trends of the day, like them or not, or else risk being branded an outsider. Thanks Germaine for the searing insight.

As to the film itself, we must hold fire awhile, although the subtext seems also to contain a message that one **must** conform and like it. The boy’s dress and hairstyle are out of step with the rest of his school – ergo naturally he is bullied. Answer? Boy must learn to dress like they do. Man lives a bachelor existence and has no yearning to form a monogamous unit, and despite exposure to a series of casualties from other failed monogamous units he is out of step with his peers. Answer? Man must get himself into a monogamous unit like they do. Prognosis – great happiness.

The housebreaking of rogue males may have an endless fascination to some women, but it’s of desperately little interest to us. Furthermore, if the “boy” of the title is meant to be Grant, then there’s a coded assumption that one can only become a “real man” by settling down and starting a family, or ahm... getting yourself “committed” to the institution. Non-conformity is only another way of saying free will, and perhaps a reluctance to join the ranks of the terminally depressed should be read as a sign of mental health, not immaturity.

See subject index under **BULLYING** and **SPECIAL FRIENDSHIPS**.