

Reel Corner: INDIGNATION

August 5, 2016/ [blog](#)

By Flo Dwek

A Tale of Indignation and Redemption

Philip Roth's novel, *Indignation*, his 29th book, became a national bestseller after its publication in 2008. Roth's haunting coming-of-age tale has now been made into a film by award-winning producer/screenwriter James Schamus, best known for writing such notable films as *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, *THE ICE STORM*, and *EAT DRINK MAN WOMAN* (all by Director Ang Lee).

Schamus adapted Roth's book for the screen and made his directorial debut with this intense and handsomely crafted film. It is a powerful but deeply understated study of a brilliant, young Jewish man who flees the confines of his dreary butcher's son upbringing in Newark, New Jersey, circa 1951, to study at a small Christian college in the Midwest.

The Korean War, then in its second year, serves both as backdrop and backstory to his ordinary, yet remarkable life. Isolated on the repressive ivy- and brick-strewn campus of fictional Winehurst College, the introverted Marcus Messner (Logan Lerman), with his movie star good looks, falls in love - and falls headlong into his own.

Schamus reels us in ever so cautiously with clever pacing, drawing us into Marcus's deepest sexual desires and misgivings as he navigates his tortured relationship with dreamy Olivia Hutton, played with a mischievously sly, yet needy sexuality by Sarah Gadon.

In one particularly memorable scene, Marcus is confronted with a plate of escargot at a small, pretentious French restaurant, where he has taken Olivia for their first date. Close ups of the coiled escargot, with their hidden pleasures, beautifully mirror both Marcus's tightly wound up character and desires, and the soft, ripe-for-the taking sensuality at the core of his relationship with Olivia.

But it is in his confrontations with Winehurst's stony faced Dean Caudwell (Tracy Letts) that Schamus's mastery of dialogue and spot on, tightly controlled direction are at their edgy best. In the film's most memorable and brilliant sequence, Marcus sits uncomfortably across from the tight lipped, self-righteous dean, who grills him mercilessly with a maniacal buildup of personal innuendo and malicious attacks on his character and mores.

This is where the meaning behind the terse title, *INDIGNATION*, rings true and reverberates with the indignities and humiliations of so many small minded, power-driven men of their era. Marcus's sharply worded retaliatory defense is a tour de force of logical debate. And Lerman, sharply on point, turns each phrase into glorious, subversive oratory. Pent up with nausea and disgust, Marcus channels Bertrand Russell, literally and figuratively spewing his guts as he rails against bigotry, conformity, religious intolerance and injustice.

Because it explores so much ground, and with such deliberation, this is a tough film to pin down. True to Roth's fiction, it is focused on character and the telltale behaviors underlying so



many vexing, dueling themes: parental love and suffocation, desire and repression, conformity and individualism, and fate and free will.

All that pent up drama makes it feel more like watching an intimate play unfold than a movie. There are brief, well drawn and poignant portrayals by Marcus's slowly coming unhinged father (Danny Burstein) and by his deeply caring and protective mother (Linda Eamond).

For all of its perfections in direction and acting, and its blatant depiction of an anxious time in American life, there is one aspect of the film's structure that bears mentioning. Without giving anything in the plot away, the rapid, flash-back, flash-forward opening and a flash-forward closing sequence are meant to put the entire film in perspective, giving us context for Marcus's life and the many small actions and consequences that have shaped it.

But despite the profound truths that emerge, the jolting cutaway to the final two sequences happens far too abruptly. We are left with a compressed and accelerated ending that disturbs the slow and steady pacing of the film.

Jolting ending aside, *INDIGNATION* is a deeply moving and troubling story of what it meant for one innocent Rothian everyman to grow up in the tumult of mid-century American life.

INDIGNATION is scheduled to open in select theaters on August 5.