

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Broken Flowers & The Beautiful Country*]

In the Name of the Father

By Steve Sailer

IN THIS AGE of family break-up, the theme of separated fathers and sons underlies the summer's sci-fi popcorn movies, such as "War of the Worlds," "Batman Begins," and "Revenge of the Sith." It also drives two of the season's quieter releases for grown-ups, "Broken Flowers" with Bill Murray and "The Beautiful Country" with Nick Nolte.

In "Broken Flowers," which opens August 5, veteran minimalist auteur Jim Jarmusch has his most commercially promising film. With 1984's "Stranger Than Paradise," Jarmusch began making glacially paced exercises in sensory deprivation that bored you into the giggles. The highlight of "Stranger" was watching two dullards on a midwinter visit to Cleveland try, and fail, to figure out something to do. Go look at the frozen Lake Erie? Their lapses into hopeless silence lowered your resistance enough that when Eddie eventually dredged up the suggestion that maybe they could take in a Cavaliers NBA game, and Willie scornfully replied "The Cavs? They're like one and fifty!" just by contrast this dialogue seemed almost as brilliant as Captain Renault's "Round up the usual suspects" at the climax of "Casablanca."

"Broken Flowers," though, has a more elaborate and conventional plot. Murray plays an aging and depressive Don Juan named Don Johnston, whose latest girlfriend leaves him because he's uninterested in marriage and children, and, frankly, a bit of a blank. But then Murray receives an anonymous letter on pink stationery from an old flame revealing that after they broke up in the 1980s she bore his son, and the young man has now gone on the road in search of his father. Murray's neighbor, best friend, and complete opposite, an enthusiastic Ethiopian immigrant (Jeffrey Wright) with five kids, talks Murray into tracking down his four ex-girlfriends from that era. Whichever woman likes pink, his buddy theorizes, must have written the letter.

Murray first reunites with lovely Sharon Stone, who explains of her late racecar-driver husband, "And then Donnie exploded in a ball of flames." Less hospitable is the daunting Jessica Lange, now a prosperous "animal communicator." But the four encounters prove inconclusive—all the women like pink. (Hey, they're girls.) So Murray returns home, wistfully wondering whether each young man he passes is the son he hopes will give his life meaning.

Teaming Jarmusch with Murray, America's great minimalist movie star, must have seemed ideal. Yet the pairing is a little too perfect, making "Broken Flowers" the Jarmusch movie for people who hate Jarmusch movies. At this point in his career, the melancholy Murray barely has to do anything—he merely hints at one of his famous facial expressions and we mentally fill in the blank for him. Murray's stasis is so watchable that Jarmusch's trademark tedium never quite kicks in, making "Broken Flowers"

more entertaining but less amusing than "Stranger Than Paradise."

Likewise, Murray seems better suited to play the still center in a three-ring circus like "Lost in Translation" than in a slower tempo film like this.

Opening July 8, "The Beautiful Country" is indeed a beautifully filmed story about the Vietnamese son of an American G.I. Because he's Amerasian, everyone in Vietnam mistreats him; they think he's ugly. You'll have to take that on faith, however, because the director (who is, oddly enough, Norwegian) couldn't find a Eurasian actor. The pure Vietnamese fellow he hired, Damien Nguyen, looks like all the other Vietnamese who are scorning him for his mixed features. "Colorblind casting" might work in theater, but in film you have to get race right, especially when your movie is about heredity.

The hero sells himself into indentured servitude to pay for a hellish freighter voyage to New York's Chinatown. Eventually he escapes and hitchhikes to Texas. There he gets a job as a handyman on a cattle ranch alongside his father, Nick Nolte, who is blind from his war wounds.

The masculine pathos of the final scenes is moving. After a lifetime of racist ostracism, the son is pleased to find that he shares the DNA of this magnificent wreck of a man. And when the father finally figures out who this fellow with the Vietnamese accent actually is, he's glad his son has come halfway around the world to work with him. Of course, being real men in cowboy country, the two don't ever mention any of this to each other. Their contented taciturnity makes for a memorable ending. ■

Both are rated R.

BOOKS

[*Sandstorm: Policy Failure in the Middle East*, Leon Hadar, Palgrave Macmillan, 196 pages]

Middle East Paradigm Shift

By Andrew J. Bacevich

In *Sandstorm*, Leon Hadar, a foreign-policy analyst at the Cato Institute, launches a frontal assault on the several orthodoxies constituting the citadel of U.S. policy in the Middle East. If in the end his effort to demolish that fortress does not quite succeed, he breaches the ramparts in several places. *Sandstorm* does not fully persuade, but it is a brave, thoughtful, and vigorously argued book on a subject of critical importance.

Hadar's chief purpose is to discredit what he calls the Middle East Paradigm, to which virtually the entire American foreign-policy establishment subscribes as if to holy writ. Evolving in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the MEP consists of three propositions asserted by supposed "experts" with such frequency and conviction as to take on the appearance of revealed truth. According to Hadar, none of the three can withstand close scrutiny.

The first proposition is strategic, an insistence that the U.S. is called upon to play a pre-eminent role in the Middle East. In a Cold War context, pre-eminent implied using American power to keep the Soviets from muscling into the region. But even during the Cold War, considerations unrelated to the Soviet threat influenced U.S. policy. Specifically, from 1945 onward, Washington was intent on displacing the Europeans whose imperial machinations had created the modern Middle East in the first place.

Indeed, from the outset, nudging the Europeans out was at least as important as preventing the Soviets from horning in. Seen in this context, the pivot around which U.S. grand strategy turned was not the showdown of October 1973 that saw Richard Nixon risking war against the Soviets on behalf of a beleaguered Israel. For Hadar, the key event occurred much earlier, during the Suez crisis of 1956 when Dwight D. Eisenhower humiliated France and Great Britain for presuming that they, in concert with Israel, could act independently in pursuit of their own interests.

Hadar concedes the necessity of U.S. exertions aimed at frustrating Soviet designs on the Middle East. He regrets the fact that the demise of the Soviet threat only fueled U.S. ambitions in the region. Once the Cold War ended, American policymakers were no longer satisfied with mere "leadership." The aim now became unambiguous hegemony. However much George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush may differ in terms of technique, all three share a commitment to the idea that in the Middle East Washington needs to call the shots—a notion fostering a penchant for meddling and adventurism that has cost the United States dearly

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while providing little of substance in return.

The second proposition defining the MEP is economic—the belief that Western access to Middle Eastern oil is critical to American prosperity and that only a powerful U.S. presence in the region can assure that access. Few readers will find persuasive Hadar's contention that the United States, drawing the bulk of its energy requirements from sources in the Western Hemisphere, has no particular

need for Persian Gulf oil. He is on far stronger grounds, however, in arguing that the self-interest of oil-exporting nations guarantees the flow of oil far more effectively than does the presence of U.S. military garrisons.

Furthermore, even in crass terms, he finds that the effort to convert the Persian Gulf into a U.S. military protectorate has proven to be a bad bargain. Cheap oil purchased at the cost of many tens of billions of taxpayer dollars—not to mention the lost lives of American soldiers—turns out to be not really very cheap after all. Hadar rightly argues that the region's sheiks, emirs, and presidents-for-life—not to mention free-riding Europeans and Japanese—have been snookering us.

So too, in a sense, have successive Israeli governments. Israel is central to the final component defining the MEP. This third proposition, according to Hadar, is a moral one, reflecting America's commitment to ensuring the survival and security of the Jewish state.

Hadar does not question that commitment. He does question some the consequences to which the commitment has given rise. One has been to provide Israel with enormous political leverage in Washington, permitting, for example, Israeli governments to defy

successive U.S. administrations on the issue of settlements and to do so with impunity. A second consequence has been to foster the belief that it is incumbent upon the United States to "do something" to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. From Kissinger to Clinton (and now Condoleezza Rice), this has encouraged all manner of political grandstanding but has produced few results other than sticking the United States with the bill for the never-ending