

In the Dark

by George McCartney

Beat the Clock

I have no idea whether Oscar Wilde took an interest in America's national pastime, but I have little doubt that Disney's new baseball film, *The Rookie*, would have intrigued him. It palpably confirms his contention that life imitates art.

First-time director John Lee Hancock's film is based on the unlikely story of Jim Morris (Dennis Quaid) who began his baseball career as a mildly promising southpaw pitcher in the minor leagues until injuries forced him to quit at age 25. Then in 1998, he came back to pitch his first major-league game at 35. Sound familiar? That's because Bernard Malamud had already told Morris's story in his novel *The Natural*. Malamud's narrative concerns another gifted athlete named Roy Hobbes who finds his career brutally thwarted in youth and somehow manages to return to the game at 34, achieving a brief tenure on fame's scorecard. The difference between the two tales is that Hancock and his writer, Mike Rich, have hewed to the Disney tradition of pleasing the public. While Malamud makes us consider the troubling denouement of Hobbes' comeback, Hancock stops with Morris's triumphant debut at The Ballpark in Arlington, Texas, when he took the mound as a relief pitcher for the Tampa Bay Devil Rays. Not until the closing credits do we learn that his comeback came to an end two seasons later. Of course, we are told nothing of his shoulder tendonitis and the new operations performed on his elbow during his abbreviated professional tenure. The film wants to engage us in the spectacle of a man pursuing his lifelong dream. It doesn't want to question the nature or consequences of that dream. This said, *The Rookie* is a perfectly enjoyable and (oddly enough for a Disney production) genuinely affecting popular entertainment.

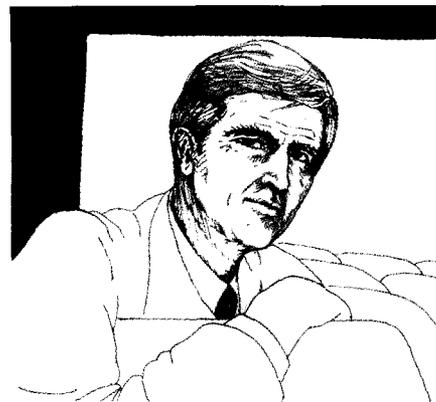
Morris grew up with a passion for baseball that went unappreciated by his father, played by Brian Cox, whose performance gives gruffness a bad name. The father's Navy career demanded frequent relocations that disrupted young Morris's chances to develop his talent under consistent coaching. When he complains, his father coldly tells him, "It's my job to

decide when we move; it's your job to make the best of it." When his parents finally settle in Texas, it's in a town that lavishes funds on its high-school football squad at the expense of its baseball team. Morris nevertheless manages to get himself drafted by the Milwaukee Brewers. A few seasons into his minor-league career, however, pitching-arm injuries halt his progress. After several surgeries, including one that replaced his left shoulder tendon with one taken from his ankle, he calls it quits. He then returns to Big Lake, Texas, becomes a high-school physics teacher, and begins raising a family.

He also becomes his school's baseball coach. The film depicts his efforts to help his players overcome their lack of confidence. After one exasperating loss, he chides them for quitting on him. "Worse," he continues, "you quit on yourselves." When he notices the dispiriting effect his words are having, he resorts to the patented exhortation all coaches carry in their back pockets. "I'm talking about having dreams," he tells them more gently. "You don't have dreams; you don't have anything." Like kids everywhere, they recognize an opportunity when they see one. Turning the tables on him, they point out that he quit on his dream. They challenge him on his own terms: If they win division championship, he will have to try out for the big leagues again. Of course, his team wins, and Morris, honoring the bargain, tries out.

Under the scrutiny of a recruiter's radar gun, he discovers, to his amazement, that he can pitch the ball at 98 miles an hour, 12 miles faster than he did at 25. Just as amazed but professionally skeptical, the scouts train a dozen more radar guns on Morris and tell him to throw and throw again. His speed confirmed, the franchise makes him an offer.

The rest is as you would expect. After some initial reluctance, his wife (Rachel Griffiths) urges him to take Tampa Bay's offer to join its minor league. She understands their family might not weather the regret her husband will suffer if he doesn't hit the road with the boys of summer. Better to endure his temporary absence



The Rookie

*Produced by Walt Disney Pictures
and 98 MPH Productions
Directed by John Lee Hancock
Screenplay by Mike Rich
Released by Buena Vista
and Walt Disney Pictures*

Clockstoppers

*Produced by Nickelodeon Movies
Directed by Jonathan Frakes
Screenplay by Rob Hedden
and Andy Hedden
Released by Paramount Pictures*

and a budget straitened by minor-league pay (\$600 per month) than risk their marriage.

For an inspirational film, *Rookie's* performances are unusually restrained and all the more convincing for that. As Morris, Quaid gives us a portrait of a decent, dedicated family man. He looks and moves the part of an aging jock who has a special affinity for kids because he is still so much one himself. As his wife, Lorrie, Griffiths perfectly conveys a woman who loves her husband both for his manly devotion to his family and his boyish passion for athletics. The other actors are also fine. The film doesn't descend to the ersatz cuteness so typical of this genre. The boys on Morris's high-school team behave with all the unfocused energy of youth. They're heedlessly rebellious one moment and trustingly cooperative the next. Despite the soundtrack's smarmy flourishes, the film is almost visually chaste. This allows Hancock to get as much punch as possible from the few scenes in which he does resort to cine-

matic italicizing.

I found one such scene especially suggestive, but perhaps not in the way it was intended. When Morris first arrives at Arlington, the camera watches him from above so that he's dwarfed against the monumental stadium walls. In the next shot, we see him from street level, walking through the gate and up a ramp. Hancock sets his camera on alternating angles so that everything in the frame seems to be about to slide off to the left in one shot and then to the right in the next. The entire sequence is meant as a visual analog to the excitement and anxiety Morris feels as he approaches his dream.

I couldn't help thinking, however, that this sequence also suggests the pitifully reduced role that the individual athlete plays in today's corporate sports industry. I recalled the huge scar we see on Morris's shoulder at the beginning of the film, marking the place modern medical technology had remade its ligature. Although the film barely mentions it, others have suggested that Morris's late-blooming pitching prowess began with this procedure. Hancock makes this scar a badge of honor and commitment. Morris is a man who has known defeat but hasn't surrendered—he's earned his second chance. Fair enough. Morris, no doubt took a substantial risk in returning to the game and suffered anew for his efforts. His willingness to undergo this ordeal is not without nobility. Still, I couldn't help thinking about the student athletes in my own university's high-powered athletic programs and how many of them bear surgical scars on their knees and shoulders. When money-making athletes, both collegiate and professional, suffer injury today, they're often advised

to submit themselves to surgery to repair the damage. Coaches and agents are typically impatient with the body's lengthy healing process. Why lose an entire season of play when the doctor can put you back on the field within a few weeks? The best sequence in an otherwise forgettable Arnold Schwarzenegger film, *The Sixth Day*, shrewdly satirized this thinking by extending it to its all-too-logical conclusion. When a valuable quarterback sustains irreversible injuries on the field, he's whisked to a hospital where he's dispassionately put to death and then cloned. In no time at all, his vital double is once more scoring points for the franchise. Professional sports have surrendered so completely to the corporate ethos that athletes are now regarded as little more than very expensive appliances to be kept running and scoring at all costs.

Here's the question: Now that *The Rookie* has become a popular success, how long will it be before some young athlete asks a surgeon to replace his shoulder tendons with a few from his ankle? And how much are you willing to bet that he will have the full support of his sports- and scholarship-crazed parents? Why not? It's just like exchanging drive belts in a car engine. And if you can get better performance from the machine, what's the worry? Hey, you might want to throw some steroids into the tank while you're at it. Just make sure they're the untraceable kind created in a high-tech pharmaceutical lab.

Now there's a dream worthy of Dr. Frankenstein.

Despite my caviling, *The Rookie* is unusually well produced for a family film. *Clockstoppers*, on the other hand, is more

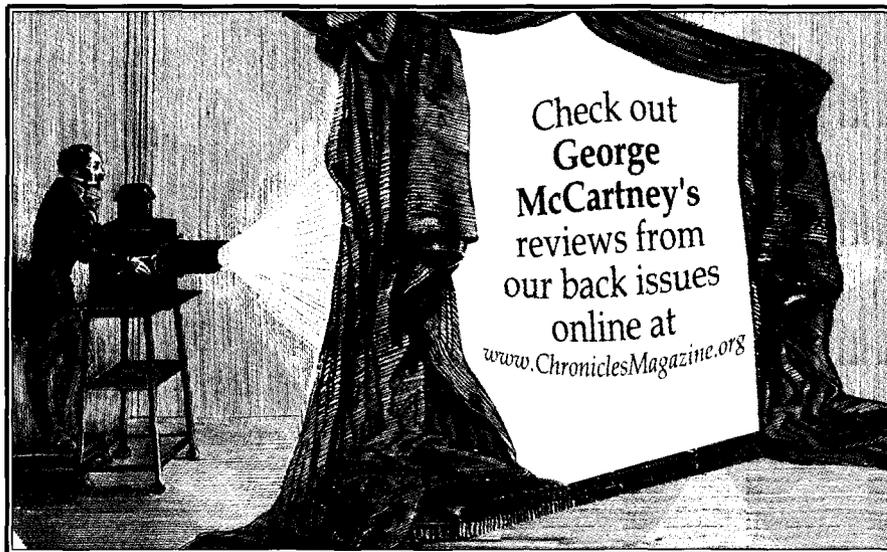
the norm in this category. It's the kind of sloppily made, unpretentious fare that would have rated second billing on a double-feature marquee 50 years ago. Only its special effects are up to date, and, unexpectedly, they're quite charming. I can't remember when I last saw hypertime rendered so believably.

What's hypertime? Well, it begins with a molecular accelerator, the title's "clockstopper." You strap it on just like your wristwatch, push its buttons, and, pow, your molecules are pulsing at light speed while everything else around you stands stock still. (Don't worry—there's a scientist on hand to invoke Einstein's theory of relativity by way of murky explanation.)

Can you imagine the possibilities? Our 16-year-old protagonist Zak certainly does. Having accidentally come upon a molecular accelerator in his father's workshop, he straps it on and throws himself and his girlfriend into hypertime. As they leisurely stroll their California village among their frozen fellow citizens, they're perfectly at liberty to take their amusement where they will. I found it thoroughly heartwarming when they chose to use their power to put a couple of adolescent thugs in their place and then exact a bit of citizen revenge on the town's traffic cop, notorious for giving tickets before the meter runs out.

The clockstopper turns out to have been designed according to quantum principles developed by Zak's father, a distinguished university physics professor too busy circumventing time to give Zak much of it at all. A research and development lab, named "QT" and run by the sinister Henry Gates, has gotten hold of the absent-minded professor's ideas and developed the mechanism with funding from the Department of Defense. Sound familiar? Gates gets testy when he discovers one of his clockstoppers has left the lab and sends out operatives to correct the situation. The chase is on. You can be sure that, when the clock finally runs out, Zak and his father will discover that what they need most is some quality time together.

Directed by *Star Trek: The Next Generation* star Jonathan Frakes, *Clockstoppers* is not much, but I'll say this for it: The kids with whom I saw it found the film delightful. You might also, but try to see it in hypertime. That way, the movie's 90 minutes won't seem quite so long.



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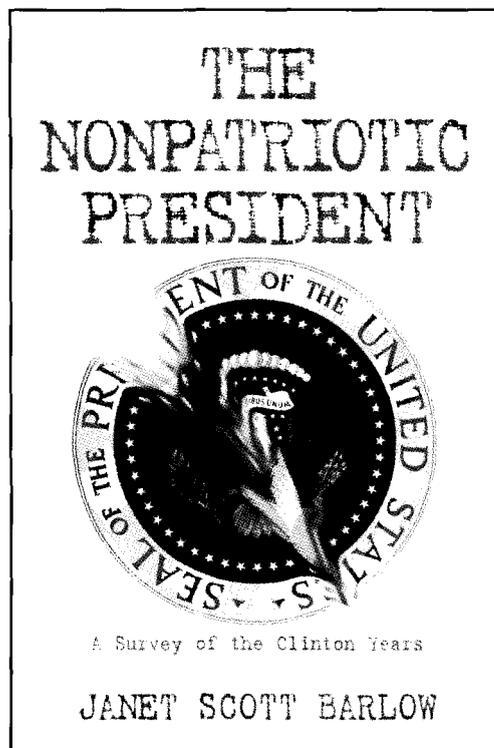


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