

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Napoleon Dynamite and Maria Full of Grace*]

Of Mormons and Mules

By Steve Sailer

NOT EVERY MOVIE this summer will be a blockbuster sequel boasting computer wizardry and butt-kicking babes in bustiers. Perhaps the most promising small film on the horizon is August's "Bright Young Things," Stephen Fry's adaptation of Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*. In the meantime, two quite different low-budget movies about intriguing teenagers, "Napoleon Dynamite" and "Maria Full of Grace," will debut.

"Napoleon Dynamite," a \$400,000 comedy that was snatched up at the Sundance Festival for \$3 million by Fox Searchlight, is the first feature written by two Brigham Young University graduates, 24-year-old director Jared Hess and his pregnant wife Jerusha. The director says, "The characters are inspired largely by people I grew up with in Idaho, especially by my five younger brothers."

At the screening I attended, Hollywood's Bright Young Mormons were out in force as the theatre resounded with the lovely laughter of wholesome-looking starlets from the Great Basin. The twenty-something crowd found the small-town misadventures and eventual triumph of an ornery high-school geek (voted "Most Likely to Find Sasquatch")

a cartoonish but redolent delight. This mild, PG-rated film is now rolling out to 1,200 theatres.

Personally, I didn't find the movie terribly funny, and it made me feel downright wizened to realize that I'm too over-the-hill to get the jokes that are slaying all the Mormon hipsters.

Also, I was embarrassed by how much our el dorko hero—as played by a tall BYU student named Jon Heder with a blondish afro, thick glasses, perpetually peeved expression, and a brown polyester three-piece suit—looked like me, circa 1977. The production designer, another BYU grad, described the mish-mash "retro-ugly" aesthetic of Preston, Idaho's inhabitants like this: "We had this sense of people who lived in a world where all the styles that got left behind were just piled up on top of one another."

One of the less remarked demographic trends is that the makers of "Napoleon Dynamite" represent the future. As coastal sophisticates fail to reproduce themselves, an ever-increasing percentage of young white people come from conservative, religious backgrounds. Mormon Utah has by far the highest birthrate, of course, but in the 2000 election, the 19 states with the highest white fertility all voted for Bush, while nine of the ten states at the bottom of the white birthrate list voted for Gore.

"Napoleon Dynamite" consists mostly of disjointed skits, and doesn't develop a plot until halfway through when Napoleon decides to help his only friend, a Mexican immigrant, defeat the snooty blonde beauty for class president. In contrast, "Maria Full of Grace," the story of a 17-year-old Colombian girl who transports 62 golf-ball-sized drug pellets to New York in her digestive track, is nothing but a freight train of a plot.

Coming in July, the R-rated "Maria" is, oddly enough, a Spanish-language film written and directed by a young American named Joshua Marston, whose father had grown up in Colombia. Marston is devoted to cinematic realism, so he researched the lives of drug mules intimately. His key question became why some Colombians become criminals while others don't.

The director ran into an analogous conundrum on the national scale when the endemic violence in Colombia grew so threatening that he had to shift his production at the last minute to neighboring Ecuador. Why has Colombia long been notorious for people chopping each other up with chainsaws, "Scarface"-style, while Ecuador clings to respectability?

Pretty young Maria is employed de-thorning rose stems in Colombia's honest export industry. It's boring work—although there are plenty of other jobs that smell worse. But it's not good enough for Maria. Nor is her boring boyfriend's dutiful offer of marriage when she announces she's pregnant. Maria then wonders if she can trick an expensively-dressed young man with a fast motorcycle into thinking the baby is his, only to discover that this recruiter for the cartel merely wants to get into her gastrointestinal tract.

Marston's unsentimental approach works well, until the "happy ending," when Maria decides to stay here as an illegal alien. Her fatherless baby will be born a U.S. citizen, making her alarmingly hard to deport. The movie assumes that she's escaping the turmoil in her native land, but we Americans can be forgiven for worrying whether this single teen mother with a taste for trouble isn't just bringing some of it with her. ■

BOOKS

[*An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell*, Robert K. Landers, Encounter Books, 562 pages]

Writing Irishman

By Ralph de Toledano

JOHN O'HARA ONCE remarked, "The Irish, especially the egg-heads, prefer their Irish to conform to the James T. Farrell prescription." This categorization is significant. H.L. Mencken, who, with reservations, admired Farrell as a writer and a person, would write to him, "A Canadian asked me to nominate the best living American novelist. I sent in the name of a Chicago Irishman named Farrell." "Chicago" and "Irishman" should have been underscored, as they were in Mencken's mind, as they were for Jim Farrell's friends and critics.

The years have softened the view of James T. Farrell, as they have of what Mencken, in a letter to Theodore Dreiser, called the Irishman's "political hallucinations." From birth in a tough Irish neighborhood to his life as an embattled writer and far-left political combatant, to his last years when he still held to his adolescent-style atheism but made his peace with the priests who gave him refuge, Jim Farrell never lost his fighting Irishness or the chip on his shoulder.

Of some of this I can speak with a small amount of personal knowledge. As an undergraduate at Columbia, having read and admired the power of Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, I would worship but never approach him as he stood at the bar of the Gold Rail, a Broadway bar and grill a few blocks south of the campus. Years later, as an editor of the anti-communist/anti-fascist newspaper *The New Leader*, I would handle his copy and applaud his vivisection

of *Mission to Moscow*, Hollywood's version of Ambassador Joseph E. Davies's fictional depiction of the Moscow Trials and the Stalin terror.

I had almost no contact at all with Jim Farrell until the 1950s when, as a *Newsweek* editor and author of *Seeds of Treason*, an account of the Hiss-Chambers case, I traveled the talk-radio circuit. After one such show, on which I was paired with Jim Farrell, he suggested that we have a drink. "Sorry," I said, "Whittaker Chambers [making one of his rare visits to New York] is at my house, and I've got to get back." "That's all right," Jim said, "I'll go back with you. I met Chambers back in the '30s when he was editor of the *New Masses*. I'd like to see him again." I demurred. My house was a kind of refuge for Chambers, and it was seldom that he agreed to the invasion of others. But Jim insisted. It was an interesting evening. Jim sat literally at Whittaker's feet and, *mirabile dictu* for someone to whom conversation was an order of battle, he said almost nothing—just listened.

Now Encounter Books has published *An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell*, by Robert K. Landers—and the Library of America is re-issuing *Studs Lonigan*, which many years ago was dropped from the Modern Library list. For those of us who lived through the political and literary events of the 1940s, '50s, '60s, and beyond, this is almost a return to things past, though in no way in a Proustian sense.

IN THE LITERARY AND POLITICAL BATTLES OF THE DAY, HE SWUNG A MEAN SHILLALY—AS HE DID IN PERSONAL CONTROVERSY.

In *An Honest Writer*, Landers praisefully chronicles almost every word that Farrell wrote, which, given Farrell's overwhelming and unceasing production, is quite an accomplishment. *Studs Lonigan*—which was his entry into the world of Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and the other giants of the '30s, '40s, and onward—the

Danny O'Neill saga, and the novels and short stories that leaped from his pen and typewriter are product enough—and with them go his parallel output of literary criticism and political polemic in the pre- and post-World War II periods.

From infancy, trauma lived alongside Jimmy Farrell. Neither in this biography nor in any of his writing is there any explanation why his slum-Irish mother and father turned him over to his more prosperous maternal grandparents while they continued to have children. The *Studs Lonigan* books and the novels that followed powerfully depicted, sometimes in raw and brutal terms, the slums of a brawling Irish Chicago, dominated by social squalor and the Catholic Church.

Parochial school and the life around him made an atheist of Farrell. That atheism was confirmed during his years at the University of Chicago, years interrupted by jobs and the criminal activities of friends, in which he sometimes participated. It was not until he decided to become a writer that his life began to take direction. But until the last years, his writing was obsessional. The words poured out by the thousands, undisciplined and untutored. It was not unusual for him to work around the clock, missing sleep and meals. Plot and style meant little to him. He was driven always by the need to put down on paper all that he had experienced. His editors tried to stanch the flow, to give him a sense of what form and style meant—but he

ignored their attempted guidance.

He had power, the power of his reportage, the drive of his expression, but nowhere the skills of a writer. Mencken's published letters include many to the early Farrell—it is odd that they were not included in this biography—but they had little effect on him. In one, written in 1932, Mencken scolds,