

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Slumdog Millionaire*]

Dickens in Bombay

By Steve Sailer

AFTER SWEEPING the Golden Globe awards, “*Slumdog Millionaire*,” the plucky movie about an uneducated underdog from the slums of Bombay who wins 20 million rupees on the local version of the quiz show “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire,” has become the Oscar race overdog.

Seven-year-old Jamal and his older brother Salim are orphaned in 1992 when Hindu nationalist mobs torch their Muslim slum in Bombay—or “Mumbai,” as the Shiv Sena politicians who fomented these pogroms renamed the city in 1996. Although trendy Westerners all use “Mumbai” now, no locals call their famous film industry “Mollywood.”

In their Dickensian struggle to survive, the brothers, along with a pretty foundling girl named Latika, scavenge in a vast garbage dump. They are lured away to an “orphanage” run by a Fagin-like impresario of child beggars who blinds his best prospects to make them more pitiable. Fortunately, our heroes escape to peddle snacks on India’s famous trains and guide gullible Western tourists around the Taj Mahal. As adolescents, they finally make it back to Bombay. Salim becomes a hit man, while Jamal sticks to humble but honest work.

Six years of economic growth later, Jamal, now delivering tea in an outsourced call center, finds Latika enslaved as the moll of his brother’s mob boss. (I suspect this plot twist was hoary when Jimmy Cagney was young.) To make enough money to run off with his beloved, Jamal goes on “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.” There, as fate, karma, or kismet would have it, he finds he knows the answer to each trivia question because it had come up at a memorably dramatic moment in his life.

Jamal’s run of good fortune entrances India, but the evil game show host, who resembles a subcontinental version of comedian Dennis Miller, doesn’t care about his booming ratings. Before the final round, he has Jamal arrested and tortured to find out how he’s cheating. By recounting his life in flashback, Jamal convinces the police captain of his true-heartedness and returns for the final showdown question.

Unfortunately, “*Slumdog*’s” success in the year-end awards largely reflects a lack of competition. The film contains, in theory, most of the elements of a crowd pleaser, but the actual product turns out to be less enjoyable to watch than a good episode of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire.”

One problem is aesthetic. The specialty of eclectic British director Danny Boyle is cranking the kinetic energy onscreen up to 11. He revitalized the zombie genre with “*28 Days Later*” by having the rotting undead sprint after their terrified prey like Usain Bolt. Granted, turbocharging dilapidated zombies didn’t make much sense, but it was exciting. Similarly, Boyle’s directorial razzmatazz made a young lad’s life in an English exurb look exciting in the underrated “*Millions*.”

Bombay, however, doesn’t need to be juiced with the latest video fads. As Salman Rushdie has noted, Indian cities induce sensory overload (most famously conveyed by the bravura opening chapter of Kipling’s *Kim*). A more stately approach, such as David Lean’s in “*A Passage to India*,” would have been more watchable. Boyle comes up with one useful innovation—floating subtitles onscreen next to the character speaking. (About one-third of the dialogue is in Hindi.) Overall, though, the combination of the teeming masses of India’s “maximum city” and Boyle’s zappow digital dynamics is exhausting.

Worse, the script is as on-the-nose as the dog comedy “*Marley and Me*.” Sadly, Boyle and screenwriter Simon Beaufoy didn’t trust their gimmick. “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire” has been a hit around the world because its slow pacing (the opposite of “*Jeopardy!*”) allows viewers to think along with the contestant as he talks out his thought processes. Thinking is fun.

“*Crash*,” an equally contrived but more interactive film, allowed viewers a half minute to rewind the plot in their heads and figure out the climactic conundrum of why nobody was killed when the angry Iranian shot the Mexican locksmith’s angelic daughter at point-blank range.

Sadly, “*Slumdog Millionaire*” doesn’t encourage any thinking about earlier scenes. Instead, each quiz question is followed by a lengthy flashback ending with the answer. For example, after “Who invented the revolver?” comes Jamal’s recollection that concludes with his gangster brother waving a gun around and shouting, “The man with the Colt .45 says shut up!”

Okay, we get it. ■

Rated R for some violence, disturbing images and language.

BOOKS

[*The Reagan I Knew*, William F. Buckley Jr., Basic Books, 279 pages]

Getting Reagan Right

By Daniel McCarthy

THE CASUAL READER might be tempted to dismiss this book as an exercise in nostalgia. What could be more retro in 2009 than a memoir about Ronald Reagan—whose term in office expired 20 years ago—by William F. Buckley Jr., who founded *National Review* more than half a century back? All too many right-wingers still lead saprophyte-like lives in the shadows cast by these men. They recycle Buckley *mots* and sunny Reagan platitudes without ever knowing just when they turned into merchants of kitsch.

But those are the imitators. Buckley, on the other hand, was more mentally alive at 82—up to the moment he died at his desk last February working on the manuscript of this book—than his epigones are at 30. Proof of this is that *The Reagan I Knew* could just as fairly have been called *The Reagan I Didn't Know*, for after a 40-year friendship, Buckley suddenly realized he had misjudged the man. At *National Review's* 30th-anniversary gala in 1985, he toasted the then-president as the consummate cold warrior: "What I said in as many words, dressed up for the party, was that Reagan would, if he had to, pull the nuclear trigger," writes Buckley. "Twenty years after saying that, in the most exalted circumstance, in the presence of the man I was talking about, I changed my mind." Reagan would not have unleashed a nuclear holocaust, even in retaliation.

Buckley is by no means the first to underscore Reagan's absolute horror of

atomic warfare. The young scholar Paul Lettow in 2005 wrote *Ronald Reagan and His Quest to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*. But Buckley adds the authority of a participant to this revisionist enterprise, whose implications are profound. Conservatives look to Reagan as the embodiment of their beliefs. But if Reagan was not who he seemed to be, what becomes of conservatism? Was the 40th president a crypto-liberal—a spiritual descendant, as John Patrick Diggins has suggested, of Tom Paine and Ralph Waldo Emerson? Or is conservatism itself not what its adherents have long taken it to be?

Those are bigger questions than *The Reagan I Knew* can answer, and in any case Buckley is not trying to press a thesis with this book. Instead he has assembled a collage: material old and new from an array of sources, and whatever conclusions arise from this book come naturally and unbidden. About half of the volume consists of correspondence between Buckley, Ronald Reagan, and Nancy Reagan: there are rather more letters from Buckley to Nancy, in fact, than to her husband. Several chapters excerpt Reagan's appearances on Buckley's "Firing Line" program. Christopher Buckley and Danilo Petranovich, WFB's son and last research assistant respectively, contribute a foreword and introduction. Rounding out the package is an appendix of vintage Buckley articles about Reagan, spanning 1968 to 1991.

"This book is one in which the large scale of things is quite intentionally diminished or, better, maneuvered around," writes Buckley, "to make way for the cultivation of personal curiosity about someone who became a good friend." This serves to humanize a famously elusive leader. Buckley's Reagan is robust: when we (and Buckley) first meet him, he is about to introduce a Buckley talk at a Los Angeles high school. But the microphones are dead and can only be switched on from a locked booth above the auditorium.

"His diagnosis seemed instantaneous," Buckley recalls. "He was out the window, his feet on the parapet, his back

to the wall, sidestepping carefully toward the control-room window. Reaching it, he thrust his elbow, breaking the glass, and disappeared into the control room." In a moment, "we could hear the crackling of the newly animated microphone."

At their final encounter, in 1990, the ex-president again demonstrates his adventurous streak. He holds out his cup of tea to Buckley: "Stick your finger in this."

"What?"

"Yeah. Go ahead."

The drink is scalding. "Now, watch this," Reagan says as he swigs from the cup. "See? The tolerance of your mouth tissues is infinitely greater than that of your hand! ... You know who taught me that? It was Frank Sinatra."

Innocent mischief animates the exchanges between Buckley and both Reagans. In his letters to Nancy, Buckley jokes about eloping with her to Casablanca. With President Reagan, the running gag is that Buckley has been appointed secret ambassador to Afghanistan. (Speaking of ambassadors, we learn from a Dec. 30, 1980 Reagan letter that Buckley has urged him to send Russell Kirk to Great Britain. Unfortunately, Reagan replies that he cannot see "how anyone could hold that post at the Court of St. James's unless he was possessed of personal wealth.")

The Buckley and Reagan families do not see much of each other, yet are surprisingly close. Buckley encourages Reagan daughter Patti's efforts at poetry, finding in her work "sadnesses that were striking, and youthful melodrama, but also a pronouncedly live ear." He meditates between rebellious son and agitated parents one Thanksgiving when Ron Jr. decides to ditch Yale for ballet school. Thereafter "Ronald Reagan was as determined to subject his son to poverty as Ron Jr. was to live in it. Ron Jr. was entirely submissive in his sequestration—austerity was a part of his theatrical occupation."

The Reagan-Buckley friendship endured two sharp fractures over foreign policy. The first has become legendary. In