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Igby Goes Down

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Igby Goes Down

Abstract

This is a review of *Igby Goes Down* (2002).

Some reviewers have complained that *Igby Goes Down* is all too transparently autobiographical - that Burr Steers, writer/director of the film, has transformed the grievances of his own wealthy whitebread youth into those of Igby Slocumb, an idealised hero with the wit and wherewithal he might have wished for in his own salad days. But whether or not you consider autobiographical fiction suspect, it goes to the heart of what it is to fashion meaningful lessons from the raw resources of life. What makes *Igby Goes Down* more than your average morality play is that Steers is not searching for a guiding rule that will deliver mere success or even happiness. Igby's gradual journey from New York to the West coast is a sort of inverse Journey to the East, in pursuit of an ultimate object of faith that will not fail him. The film's fêted black humour is so very dark precisely because Steers and his eponymous hero are reluctant to compromise their ideals. It is the combination of scepticism and faith that makes *Igby Goes Down* a Trojan horse for modern religious insights.

Kieran Culkin is full of the tremulous bravado of youth as the youngest son of the Slocumbs--a family in name only, as we discover in the opening shots of Igby and his brother Oliver (Ryan Philippe) attempting to suffocate their mother with a clear plastic bag. The ensuing narrative is a sort of apologia for this event, and for all Igby's brash rejections of authority--social, religious, romantic, familial--as he moves from place to place. Igby is the archetypal youngest son of Biblical myth: a Joseph betrayed by his brother, alienated by his family, and left to live by his wits in a strange land full of power-plays and moral riddles. Culkin is supported by a Hollywood cast who redeem their lurid characters with complex performances that are full of humanity.

The leitmotif of people as "signposts" runs throughout the film. Oliver musingly observes that their father is a "'slippery when schizophrenic' sign for instance. along the highway of life." But Igby's singular combination of detached cynicism and openhearted engagement allows him, like Joseph, to see the signs for what they really are - and the moral outlook is bleak. Steers puts his caustic wit to work shooting down every perspective that comes within his sights: Christians, Darwinians, Republicans, Leftists, the military, intellectuals, artists and even German poets (surely not Rilke!) are found lacking. There seems to be little left for the hero or his audience to put their faith in. Certainly not God who, by implication, is either insane like his father (a mumbling and occasionally nude Bill Pullman), or cruel like his mother (pill-popping Susan Sarandon), who is heard to reason "his creation was an act of animosity. Why shouldn't his life be?"

Ultimately the movie transcends even traditional Hollywood idols of romance and family, just as Igby, alternating between hope and renunciation, finally transcends his dependence on people (or "signs") altogether. What makes *Igby Goes Down* more than a post-modern critique of society's golden idols, is the heroic vision that lies at its core. Yes, Igby is a know-it-all brat, but he receives enough beatings in the film, and takes them bravely enough, for us to forgive this, the first line of defence for an unexpectedly tender soul.

Igby's spiritual maturation is the bright core to this dark comedy. It is Igby's courageous authenticity that draws others to him, and he is able to forgive those who have shaped his own tragedy because, like Joseph, Jesus and the ascetics of every tradition, he can see the edifying providence of suffering. In its moral orientation, *Igby Goes Down* is a

polar opposite to Shyamalan's *Signs*. The film is a Pandora's Box of the evils within American society, but amongst them Steers hides what he considers to be pre-eminently valuable in the individual, giving new life to some of the classic spiritual paradigms lying outside of American mainstream religion. In his open-minded yet uncompromising resilience, Igby is Steers' vision of hope, tempered by his own life experience.

And if that seems too moralistic for you, what holds the film through its harsher moments and its slower sections is Igby's irreverent sense of humour. Humour is his key to liberation, keeping the mind muscular and able to grapple free from the mis-molding of the soul that reality can bring. Ultimately it enables him to transcend both hypocrisy and tragedy, and start out on faith's long, lonely journey toward something better. So if you're not inspired, at least you'll laugh - and that's the first step.