

Genius (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

Psalm 133:1

Even my bosom friend in whom I trusted, who ate of my bread, has lifted the heel against me.

Psalm 41:9

Director Michael Grandage's film could be called, or at least subtitled, *A Tale of Two Geniuses*. Based on A. Scott Berg's *Max Perkins: Editor of Genius*, it is the story of the relationship between editor Max Perkins (Colin Firth) and novelist Thomas Wolfe (Jude Law). Although writers are often regarded as geniuses, this is that rare, maybe unique, film that suggests an editor also might belong in that category. Certainly those in the publishing and literary world thought so, because Max Perkins was the discoverer of novice writers who became luminaries— F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings.

Actor Colin Firth shines as the scholarly editor, almost always seen wearing his hat in and out of his Manhattan office. Jude Law, nailing the author's North Carolina accent, is a fit foil to Firth, his non-stop garrulousness covering up his inner insecurity. It is 1929 when Wolfe appears at Perkins's office at Charles & Scribner's to pick up what he assumes is his rejected manuscript named *Lost*. Included in his tirade of words is the information that it has been rejected

by all of the other major publishing firms of the city. Perkins has to interrupt him to let him know he intends to publish it. The young writer can scarcely believe his ears. It will need work, Perkins says, "But it will be your book." As we see, it does indeed take a lot of work, including a title change to the more poetic *Look Forward Angel*.

Though in many ways the patient and almost taciturn editor is the opposite of his impetuous and motor-mouthed new writer, they share a work ethic so intense that it puts in jeopardy their relationships with their loved ones.

In Wolfe's case it is with his older, married lover Aline Bernstein (Nicole Kidman), who has been supporting and encouraging his writing ever they first met and she walked away from her husband and two children. Wolfe is so grateful to Perkins that he talks to her about nothing else but the man and their exhausting work in reducing the voluminous manuscript down to a manageable size. Aline, a stage and costume designer, becomes jealous, seeing in the editor a rival luring away a lover who will no longer need her. Later on a breaking point is reached when the two men are engrossed in trying to reduce another of Wolfe's manuscripts down from its 5000 hand-written pages—Wolfe delivers it to Max in three overflowing boxes. Wolfe visits her

at the theater to inform her he will not be coming to her opening night after all. Upset that he is welshing on his promise, she says, "I need you here," but he says he must work with Perkins that night. Losing her temper, she slaps him and walks off the stage.

Perkins's wife Louise (Laura Linney), as well as their five daughters, is hurt by her husband's devotion to Wolfe and his manuscripts. Perkins decides to stay behind when they set forth on the family vacation because he has so much editing to complete on Wolfe's huge text. Wolfe also manages to hurt Louise's feelings at their first encounter at her home: during

dinner when she mentions that she is working on a play, he dismisses the genre, saying that the novel is the better form of writing.

Some have suggested that Wolfe became for Perkins the surrogate son that he longed for. Yet, as close as their relationship became, it was fraught with much disagreement and anger. Wolfe was incapable of turning loose a manuscript, arguing constantly with his editor about the cutting of whole paragraphs and pages. We see a humorous example of his voluminous style when one of Perkins's daughters, reading over his shoulder, observes, "That's a very long paragraph." Her father replies, "It started four pages ago." While Perkins is striving to reduce the 5000-page manuscript that eventually becomes *Of Time and the River* the writer keeps bringing in still more pages, despite Perkins' orders to stop writing. However, he is touched when the author shows up with one last paragraph, and I think you will be too.

The scene that struck me most in the film takes place in a Harlem jazz club to which Wolfe has squired his editor, apparently in order to make a point about his style of writing. Amidst their heavy drinking Perkins tells his host that he is not especially into music. Wolfe asks him to name a song, and the other comes up with "Flow Gently, Sweet Afton." The writer goes up to the bandleader and slips him some money while nodding over at his friend. Soon the trumpeter is playing the hauntingly beautiful melody, totally unadorned. Then he is joined by a band mate, again both playing it straight, but soon each is adding a variation, taking the simple melody to new heights, the various instruments playing over, under, and around each other, imparting a touch of freshness to the listener familiar with the old tune. Wolfe asserts that his writing is like jazz. Perkins's somber mood changes to one of joy as the song progresses, his foot now tapping the floor, and a smile transforming his face.

Along the way we catch glimpses of two other major writers

nurtured by Perkins. The scene with the gruff Ernest Hemingway (Dominic West) is played for its humor, the writer, preferring short sentences and few adjectives, calling Wolfe more florid writing "Crap," whereas in a far longer series of scenes we see the pathos of F. Scott Fitzgerald (Guy Pearce). Not as popular with the public, his *The Great Gatsby* being a commercial failure, and beset by his depressed wife Zelda's descent into madness, he has been unable to write any more. His stint as a Hollywood is a failure, his heavy drinking no doubt contributing to this. In one of many poignant scenes in the film Wolfe and the Fitzgeralds are guests at the Perkins' dinner table where the more successful writer cruelly badgers Fitzgerald so badly that Perkins jumps up and literally strong arms the offender out into the night. Matters between Wolfe and Perkins continue to deteriorate between the two, until... And yet at the end there will be a letter that will make up for all the hurt feelings and angry words hurled at each other.

This is a film that will make you think about the writing and editing process, if you like good books—and especially about the usually anonymous contribution of the man whom few will know made the book, in Perkins's words, "not better, but different"—different in that the editor helped bring out things that were obscured by either too many words or suggesting more precise ones.

Also, we see, as with the recent film about Miles Davis, *Miles Ahead*, a genius is sometimes not a very good human being. Thomas Wolfe was unfaithful to Aline (as we see at the end of that favorite scene described above), cruel to friends and a fellow writer, and capable of betraying the man who had given him his first publishing break. Back in the 30s and 40s the filmmakers would have left out the darker side of the writer, turning him into a secular saint. This film is an example of how things have changed for the better in filmmaking. Scriptwriter John Logan (writer of such excellent films as

Hugo, *The Gladiator*, and *The Aviator*) has shown us the light and the dark sides, the joyful and the profane sides, of genius. For some crazy (commercial) reason it has been relegated to the art house circuit, so you might have to search for it. It is well worth the effort, especially in the light of all the boom-boom computer enhanced thrillers cluttering the cinemaplexes!

Good preaching/teaching scenes: 1. We see how different the patient and generous Perkins is from the impulsive, self-centered Wolfe, who has disparaged F. Scott Fitzgerald for his inability to write following the failure of his novel *The Great Gatsby*. The down on his luck author comes to Perkins' office for support, moral and financial. Perkins listens patiently to him, and then advances him some money. The desperate man is gratified, promising him that he will write him a book. The way that the benefactor says, "I know," reveals that he never expects to get his money back. It is a gift from the heart to a fellow human being deeply wounded by his life experiences.

2. The power of story is suggested by the comment (I think it was by Perkins, but I'm not sure—please let me know if you recall) about amidst the scary howling of wolves a caveman tells a story around the fire so "we wouldn't be afraid of the dark." Just then the camera reveals the Manhattan skyline with three familiar skyscrapers lit up.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the July 2016 issue of VP.