

Middle School Years: The Worst Years of My Life (2016)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 32 min.

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

Our star rating (1-5): 3.5

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.

Matthew 3:23

Director Steve Carr's film no doubt is appealing to kids who are the same age as its hero Rafe (Griffin Gluck), but adults might find it too over the top at times. Based on the best-selling books by James Patterson, its theme of rejecting dumb rules and the stupid enforcers who suck out all the joy of life is a welcome one. Middle schooler Rafe will no doubt love and admire Hawkeye when and if he discovers M*A*S*H. They are two of a kind. This is a live action film, but some of the pranks pulled off by the boy remove almost all semblance of reality, at least for those who ask, "How could the kid pull this off with limited time and money?" Thus, my mixed feelings about the film.

Rafe is not looking forward to his first day at his new middle school despite the assurances of his mother Jules (Lauren Graham). His behavior has caused him to be kicked out of the other schools in the county, so this is his last chance. A talented artist constantly drawing in his precious sketchbook, his creative imagination conjures up monsters and caricatures of people. These come alive in animated sections scattered

throughout the film—and provide a great deal of the humor. Also, popping up many times in the film is his friend Leo (Thomas Barbusca), his best supporter and encourager. His younger sister Georgia (Alexa Nisenson) also is a great morale booster.

Rafe doesn't even get to the school's front door when he runs afoul of Principal Dwight (Andy Daly), keenly watching every student coming up the walk. He chides the boy for breaking the rule regarding clothing, and when Rafe tries to reply that he hasn't seen the rules, the Principal charges him with breaking Rule No. 1, disrespecting the principal.

Inside, the students walk stiffly to class in straight lines. Rafe speaks with Leo, and is told by the assistant principal to stop blocking the hallway and move on. At the school assembly Jeanne (Isabel Moner) is one of the students who gives a speech as to why she should be elected to the student government. When she begins to explain that she wants to bring art back into the school, Principal Dwight cuts her off. Rafe stands to applaud her, but quickly sits back down when he is the only one to do so. Dwight goes on to extol the test everyone must take in a couple of months. His effusive praise of the test and the students' doing so well on it so turns Rafe off that he sketches a caricature of Dwight and his beloved test and rules. Someone spots it and snatches it away. As the sketchbook is passed from giggling student to giggling student, Dwight spots it and demands it be brought up to him, to Rafe's dismay. Afterward, in the office Rafe pleads for the return of his art book, explaining that it contains his best work of the past few years. The smug Dwight instead drops it into a bucket of chemicals, and the precious art is soon destroyed.

Talking with Leo, Rafe is inspired by him to launch "Operation R.A.F.E.," which stands for "Rules Aren't for Everyone." He vows to break every one of the over 100 rules in Dwight's Code of Conduct. The elaborate pranks, include plastering the walls

of the school with thousands of multicolored Post-It Notes and transforming the school's trophy case into an aquarium, stocked with exotic fish, an eel, and a lobster. (Don't ask how this was paid for or how either were installed in just one night. This is, as I said, more fantasy than reality.)

There's more, lots more, including having to contend with his mother's jerk of a boy friend named Carl (Rob Riggle) who wheedles his way into living with them. Barely disguising his dislike for the children, Carl's plans include shunting Rafe off to a military school, allegedly so the boy can learn some discipline.

The revolt at school grows ever larger, with brainy Jeanne discovering Rafe is the author of the pranks, and then joining him in his schemes, as does Georgia. There are some tender moments between Rafe and his mom, during which we learn that both miss his older brother who has died. There is also a sudden, surprising plot twist that reveals how the boy has been coping with his loss.

The film is a very mixed affair, funny and even tender at times, but lacking in the reality department that made the old TV *Wonder Years* series or *A Christmas Story* so mesmerizing. Principal Dwight is a good stand in for the rule-obsessed Pharisees as depicted in the New Testament. Rafe is no stand-in for Jesus, but he does share his disdain of rules for rules' sake, and Jeanne is wise beyond her years in her belief that the loss of art in their school is a major deprivation. I don't think this film will become a classic, like *Bridge to Terabithia*, but it still is worth seeing and discussing.

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