

Ruby Sparks (2012)

Rated R. Our ratings: V -1; L -3; S/N -4. Running time: 1 hour 44 min,

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Philippians 2:3-4

“I’m going to buy a paper doll Calvin and Ruby, the girl of that I can call my own...” “Paperhis dreams.

Doll” by Johnny S. Black – 1915

2012 Fox Searchlight Pictures

Directors Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris have followed up their delightful Little Miss Sunshine with another funny film that combines romanticism and fantasy. The film’s protagonist, writer Calvin Weir-Fields (Paul Dano), reminded me of an old song, popularized in the 1950s by the Mills Brothers and more recently by Michael Buble’, “Paper Doll.” The song tells of a man, disappointed by “a fickle-minded real live girl,” wanting to buy a paper doll that he can call his own, and who will always be waiting when he comes home at night.” The song with its somewhat bizarre conceit of a man having total control over a female has was a big hit, and I hope that this

equally bizarrely premised film might be also, so warmly human is its story of transformation. Its fantasy premise is similar to that of Woody Allen's *Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which a screen character steps down from the screen and woos a lovely but somewhat mousy theater patron.

Los Angeles resident Calvin is a one-book writer whose novel achieved great success when he was at the ridiculous age of 19. However, now it's several years later, and he finds himself the victim of writer's block. He has broken up with his long time girlfriend, who has gone on to write on her own. Instead of finishing a new work, he spends his time at author signing events and lectures. He lives alone with his dog in an immaculately white-walled modern house. It might be a telling sign that there are no paintings or photos on any of the walls, and he uses a portable typewriter, not a computer, for writing. He exercises frequently with his brother Harry (Chris Messina) at a health club.

When his therapist Dr. Rosenthal (Elliott Gould) suggests that he write a one-page character description, Calvin writes about the mysterious girl he has been dreaming about. Inspired now, he types and types. He has a dream encounter with a woman. During a visit by Harry and his wife and baby, Harry discovers a bra and a pair of women's panties. What is going on? Calvin isn't sure himself. As he writes he gives his dream woman a background—Ruby, born in Dayton, Ohio; red hair; a lover of Humphrey Bogart and John Lennon, What a surprise one morning to come down and find Ruby cooking breakfast. The next few minutes are funny as Calvin does double takes and tries to confirm that he is really seeing what he is seeing. He scrunches down under his desk to call Harry in case Ruby should come in. The scene in which he introduces Ruby to his

sceptical brother is also amusing. To prove that he has not hired an actress, Calvin accepts Harry's challenge to type some new addition to her, thus influencing her, much as a puppeteer pulls a string to get a marionette to do what he desires. He types in that she knows French, and sure enough, when they go back downstairs, Ruby speaks fluent French to them.

For a while Calvin and Ruby live an idyllic life, with his mother Gertrude (Annette Bening), who lives hippy style with her furniture making lover Mort (Antonio Banderas) in a rustic haven in Big Sur, highly approving of her. However, Ruby begins to assert herself, wanting to obtain her own apartment and friends, and to go out alone. Calvin is upset by this—after all, she is his creation. He does not like sleeping alone when she stays away. He types in that Ruby wants to stay close to him. Wow, does she, no vine ever clinging as closely to a tree! He types in that she is happy and full of joy. She giggles and laughs constantly, and often inappropriately.

Then at a party hosted by his agent Langdon Tharp (Steve Coogan) the plot becomes darker. Calvin encounters his former girl friend who now is a successful writer. As they argue she tells him that she left because their relationship had centered on him and his desires. "I am not your child." Calvin goes in search of Ruby and finds her stripped to her underwear with the sleazy guy who had hosted one of his author's appearances. He and Ruby leave, with the story coming to what some might consider too predictable a climax.

The film offers an intriguing look at the creative process of a writer and the old issue of does the author control the product, or as the creative process progress to the point of producing a well-rounded character, does the process take over and control the writer? So many authors have said that at times their characters took on a life of their own, and that they felt more like a scribe than one in control. I can't think of a film in which this has been better shown than this

one.

The film also is a good study in the development of the main character. Calvin, like most of us, is very self-absorbed. He has had great success early in life, with everyone fawning over him and telling him what a genius he is. All of this has clashed with the self-doubts that most of us harbour, and in his case, is reinforced by his fear of the failure of his next project. Ergo, writer's block. The film is a chronicle of his getting over this by letting go or giving up his control of Ruby—in one scene the phrase “control freak” is used. Calvin has been like the control freak in “Paper Doll,” a guy so wounded by “a real live girl” that he wants a paper doll that is incapable of loving anybody but him. Real life relationships are messy and difficult to maintain, especially if both partners exercise their free will and not pander to the other. I think this point could have been better made by a different ending, one that did not pander to the romanticism of the audience. Despite this defect, this is a delightful film with plenty to think about and discuss.

For Reflection/Discussion

There are spoilers in the last questions.

1. What is Calvin like when we first meet him? What do you think the unadorned walls of his luxurious house reveal about him? What does his use of a typewriter suggest about him and the world?
2. How is early success often a problem with a writer?
3. If you have seen it, compare Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* with this fantasy. (And if you haven't, this is a good time to round out your film experience.)
4. What is Ruby like? How is she at first everything that

Calvin desires in a woman? How might this not be a good thing? How do differences in partners lead to more growth than for couples who are completely alike? Why is it important for partners in a relationship learn negotiating skills, rather than seeking to manipulate one another? (I mean a negotiation between equals. Note how in one scene Harry expresses his envy of Calvin because his own wife Susie has a mind of her own.)

5. Compare Calvin with: his brother Harry. With his mother and her lover. Compare the latter's house with Calvin's. What might have contributed to his being so different?

6. In one scene Calvin says (to Harry, I think) that what has happened is a miracle and that he just must accept it rather than uselessly trying to explain it. What do you think of this? Are there such "miracles" ("more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than dreamt in your philosophy")? How might life become devoid of its freshness and mystery if we approached it only through rationalism?

7. How does Calvin react when Ruby starts to assert herself? How does he go back on his pledge to Harry about manipulating her? How might the vocation of writer lead to, or at least contribute to, a person being a control freak?

8. How does Calvin change during the course of the film? Might the unwelcome observations of his former girlfriend have contributed to this? Has the criticism of others, unwelcome because it is painful, led you to some self-reflection and change?

9. What do you think of the ending? Satisfying for romantics, perhaps? But how might a different one make for a better film? Which of the already introduced characters might Calvin have met in the park? How might this have shown that he truly is on the road to maturity?