

The Bookshop (2017)



Young Christine assists Florence part-time in the bookshop. (c) Greenwich Entertainment

I discovered the wonders of bookshops while still a middle schooler in Indianapolis, so I was absorbed from the very beginning by Spanish director Isabel Coixet's film. Adapted by the director from a novel by Penelope Fitzgerald, the story is set in 1959 in the fictional town of Hardborough on the coast of Suffolk. The tale of an outsider up against entrenched power she does not comprehend, it is a sad story that nonetheless ends on a positive note when we realize who the narrator is.

[Florence Green](#) (Emily Mortimer), a free-spirited widow, arrives by boat to fulfill her long-cherished dream of opening a bookshop. She and her husband had shared a passion for books. She thinks she has found the perfect site in what is called The Old House, which has stood unoccupied for a long time, but soon learns that not everyone agrees. Invited to a party hosted by local grand dame Violet Gamart (Patricia Clarkson), she receives a rather frosty reception from the guests. When the hostess learns to her horror that Florence has already moved into the house, Violet moves through the crowd to meet her and declare, "The fact is many of us are not at all convinced by the sudden transformation of the Old House

into a shop. Many of us believe it should be a kind of local arts center." Actually, this is *not* a fact, Violet never having exhibited any interest in art. Her nose seems out of place because she had been out of town when Florence had negotiated the sale of the house, and she is the Person in town who insists on being at the center of every significant change.

Sticking by her decision to open the shop, Florence is helped by a few locals in putting up shelves. She also hires Christine (Honor Kneafse), a bold schoolgirl who demands twelve pounds a week. She does not read books, but she needs the money for her family. During the unpacking of the boxes of books that arrive by boat the girl sees a copy of the novel *A High Wind in Jamaica*. The girl asks what it is about, and Florence, probably hoping to entice her to read it replies, "It's about good pirates and evil children." No go—until much later.

Another helper of note is Wally (Harvey Bennett), a redhead even younger, who brings a note from a Mr. Brundish requesting that if any worthy books come in, they be sent to him for possible purchase. The reclusive man, played by Bill Nighy, receives a copy of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, and asks aloud of no one, "Fahrenheit four five one. What kind of book is this?" He soon sends the note, "Please, at your earliest convenience, send more books by Ray Bradbury." He also appreciates Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. When Florence asks if he thinks it is a good novel, and he replies that it is, she orders a huge supply of the book, prominently advertising it in her show window.

After a series of notes back and forth, Mr. Brundish finally invites her to tea, and despite the difference in their years, each comes to respect the other deeply. Indeed, in one tender moment when Mr. Brundish encounters reading near the shore, he expresses the wish that they had been able to meet at a different point in their lives.

In the meantime, the snobbish Violet comes up with a scheme to force the interloper out of the Old House by having a friend who is a PM to get a regulation passed that allows local councils to take over a property for civil use. Florence is dismayed to learn that there is nothing she can do to prevent the closure.

When Mr. Brundish gets wind of the nefarious scheme, he decides to confront the woman whom he despises, but will this be enough to save the bookshop? The way that the story ends is in keeping with the passage from Ecclesiastes though I do not think he would approve of the way in which Christine, rather than Mr. Brundish, resolves the dispute. The identity of the film's narrator (voiced by Julie Christie) will warm your heart, however, demonstrating that the power of goodness is passed on to others, knowingly or not.

This review will be in the October issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store. Past issues of VP are available back to 2012, all of which are accessible to annual subscribers