'Wonder Boys' revels in life choices, hopes, dreams

Grady Tripp has fallen, and he can't get up. What's worse, he seems to have no idea that anything's wrong.

things wrong.

In Curtis Hanson's wonderfulby olegine "Wonder Boys," based
on Michael Chabon's book,
Grady (Michael Dougias) is a
raffish, graying writer and Pitsburgh university professor
whose first novel propelled him
to literary heights. But his follow-up - well, that's another
story.

It's not that he can't write it.
Just the opposite: He can't stop.
Page after page, he churns forth
prose from his gut, writing and

writing as his real life sinks ever

writing as his real life sinks ever deeper into inertia.

His umpteenth wife hus just left. His affair with the university chancellor (Frances McDormand) is at a crossroads. His supshing him to publish — or perish professionally. One of his students, James Leer (Tobey Maguire), is melting down; another, Hannah Green (Katie Holmes), is trying to seduce him. This is it by premise for the

This is the premise for the three-day odyssey of angst and epiphany chronicled in "Wonder Boys," a memorable, melancholy ride through one lost soul's slow realization that he has outgrown the shine of his potential.

The prime reason for the movie's success is, somewhat surprisingly, Michael Douglas, an actor known more for evoking the tentesterone side of male characters than the sensitive, self-aware side. As played by Dougles, Grady Tripp is a potsmoking, womanizing, somewhat egomaniscal literit snot who's bought into the praise that's been lavished upon him. But in the three days of his life that we see, the file side is revealed – the place where the drugs and lings and lack of self-discipline have dumped him. It's not pretty. What reveals it in stark relief

What reveals it in stark relief is his relationship with James, a promising young writer having difficulty separating fiction from

reality. Grady takes James under his wing. But as Grady decays and his life unravols, he bogins to wonder whether he's in amy position to help James – indeed, whether he has any wisdom at all to offer a young version of

Maguire is the perfect choice for James. His bemused take on the world, deployed so well in "Pleasantville" and "The Cider House Rules," takes on a different dimension here. The interplay of truth and deception that governs James' life gives Maguire a chance to branch out, take the good-hearted characters of his previous films and give them a darker side to conquer. He looks to Grady for support, and finds Grady, equally confused, staring right back.

As Grady's agent, Terry Crab-

As Grady's agent, Terry Crab-tree, Downey rounds out the tri-umvirate of wonder boys. He, too, was a star in his profession, but

now he is barely hanging onto his job, thanks to Grady's unfin-ished manuscript. Seeing the three of them try to claw their way through their lives, each as blind as the other two, is quietly heartbreaking and feels abso-lutely genuine.

MASSIVEMENTS and feels absolutely genuine.

McDormand is her usual welcome presence, this time as a woman balancing the rigors of being a university chancellor with the juggling set that infidelity demands. Holmes, star of the hormones-and-learners-permits TV show "Dawson's Creek," shows again that her movie choices are wiser. She was great in "Go" and "Teaching Mrs. Tingle," and she's great here — as Grady's temptation, but also as his critic.

There is no strict "nice" "

his critic.

There is no strict "plot" to
"Wonder Boys," simply a rolling,
undefined feeling of forward
movement that may not actually
be forward – much like Grady's

life. The pacing is crucial. The textured neighborhoods of Pitts-burgh, rendered in gray winter tones, also fit the mood perfectly.

"Wonder Boys" is a movie about tarnished hopes and making choices — not just the right ones, but the act of making, choices itself. As Grady's book-keeps growing, Hannah renders her opinion: "It reads as if you didn't make any choices at all."

That's what tends to happen in life. Good, caring men like Grady Tripp hurt themselves and the people they love by shutting down and refusing to make choices. To be happy, sometimes we have to make the tough choice.

That's one of the quieter wonders of life, and the exploration of it is the main reason that "Wonder Boys" turns out to be a relevant, moving piece of film

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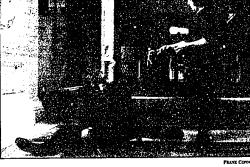
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Michael Douglas as Grady Tripp and McDormand as Sara Gaskell in a scene from "Wonder Boys."

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Scheduled to open March 24

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Through Saturday, March 25, the Historic Redlord Theatre presents Jerome Gurly* Howard, Lurry Fine and Moe
Howard in this cinematic event. David Calendine will be the guest organist.

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Scheduled to open Friday, March 31 Scheduled to open rhooy, march 31
Medil FIDELITY
An adaptation of Nick Hernby's best
seller, the film stars John Cusack as the
owner of a second hand vinyl shop who's
faced to confront his prested adolescence when his longtime gliffiend



Secret: Paul Walker and

Film is a modern-day fairy tale

BY DAVID GERMAIN AP ENTERTAINMENT WRITER

AP ENTERLISOROFT WATER
With a name like 'Erin Brockovich,' it better be good.
After delivering big box office
with the sweet and pleasantly
titled 'Notting Hill' and bigger
box office with the dumb and
cloyingly titled 'Runaway Bride'
last year, Julia Roberts comes
through with a saity, tough-asglue-on-fingernails turn in her
latest stab at a more dramatic
role: as an uneducated but
fiercely determined environmental crusador.

tal crusador. Cheers to Roberts and director

tal crusador.

Cherr to Roberts and director Steven Soderbergh for not trying to hang an ear-catching titude above the credits. Clunky as it sounds, "Erin Brockovich" flits the film like the title character's low-cut, skin-tight outfils.

The movie likely will pack in the crowds. Who wouldn't pack in the crowds. Who wouldn't pack in the crowds. Who wouldn't pack in the ittle gut, and deal out obscene comeuppances left and right to snooty lawyers?

Roberts stars in the real-life story of Brockovich, a single mom with three kids, roaches in the kitchen, a ratty can sky-high debts and no employable skills. After an unsuccessful lawsuit against a rich doctor over a car accident, Erin elbows her way into a clerical job with attorney Ed Masry (Albert Finney), who handled her case. Co-workers complain about her calligir attire, including gaudy makeup and short lasther skirts, and Erin is perpetually in dutch with her boas because of her outspokenness.

But when pro bono files about

But when pro bono files about a sickly desert family land on her desk, Erin uncovers a major

pollution scandal involving a utility and poisoned water. She persuades the reluctant Masry, who has his eye on com-fortable retirement, to pursue the case. Downright ignorant on scientific matters at first, Erin soon becomes expert on such toxic compounds as hexavalent chromium.

toxic compounds as hexavalent chromium.

She sneaks onto utility land, grabbing water samples, plucking mutated frogs from ponds and running from security guards. Her oarthy, unlawyerly demeaner wins over the 600-plus people affected by the tainted water.

Thate hawyers. Frin talls

water.

"I hate lawyers," Erin tells them. "I just work for them.

Erin shamelessly puts her looks to work when the law firm needs records from the local water authority.

"What makes you think you can just walk in there and find what we need? Ed asks her.

"They're called boobs, Ed," she renlies.

They're called boobs, Ed," she replies.

The script is chock-full of choice, ribald exchanges between Erin and the lawyers, her coworkers and Aaron Eckhart as the biker with a heart of gold who moves in next door. He becomes Erin's romantic interest, and surrogate parent to her children when she begins to neglect them because of the case. Roberts simply has never been better as she glares and swears her way through the movie, an R-rated Frank Capra heroine with pinpoint accuracy in cutting down to size anyone who needs cutting. She could serve as patron saint for everyone who has ever belatedly thought of a great retort and wished they could go back in time to deliver it.

Finney is fine in his usual gruff teddy-bear mode, and there's solid support from Eckhart, and Marg Helgenberger and Cherry Jones as two of the plaintiffs.

Soderbergh wisely keeps the

plaintiffs.

Soderbergh wisely keeps the contraom scenes to a minimum. This is Erin's story, and the movie focuses on her dogged research, her empathy with the victims, the toll the case takes on her family and the cateen she gains as events unfold.

"I walk into a room and overybody shuts up to see if I/we got something to say. Erin froudly says." I've never had that before. Slick as the movie is, questions of credibility arise. Erin Brockovich is not your typical trailertrash mom. How could a woman so willful, intelligent, attractive and self-possessed fail so miserably – then abruptly spring full-blown to skewer the pricey legal windbags of Erin's early expectations and how she failed to live glimpses of Erin's early expectations and how she failed to live up to them. Lamenting the pocket change in her checking account, she wistfully recalls her days as a beauty queen in Wichits and how she dreamed of doing "something important with my life."

life."

It'n a half-hearted effort to explain away Erin's dire straits. As played by Roberts, Erin Brockovich had the goods all along, and it's a streth to think she couldn't have pulled herself up by her bedettens can a lift.

she couldn't have pulled herself up by her bootstraps, even a lit-tle bit, beforehand.

At its core, though, "Erin Brockovich" is a fairy tale, with Roberts as a foul-mouthed Sleep-ing Beauty. Movie-goers will have great fun watching her awake.