

The physician at the movies

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Jesse Eisenberg as Mark Zuckerberg, in *The Social Network*. © Columbia Pictures/Photofest

The Social Network

Starring Jesse Eisenberg, Andrew Garfield, Justin Timberlake, and Armie Hammer.

Directed by David Fincher. Rated PG-13. Running time 120 minutes.

I've always believed that in order to enjoy a movie, the characters, especially the protagonist, have to be likable. Consequently, I found much of *The Social Network* difficult to watch. Based on Ben Mezrich's book *The Accidental Billionaires*,¹ it tells the story of the founding of Facebook by Mark Zuckerberg (Jesse Eisenberg) while an undergraduate at Harvard. Mezrich's consultant was Zuckerberg's jilted cofounder Eduardo Saverin (Andrew Garfield), so the book's "nonfiction" label is subject to debate. Zuckerberg, as portrayed in the film, is thoroughly



obnoxious. Not only is he rude and arrogant but he manages to alienate everyone he comes in contact with and to betray his only friend. To call him "hyper" is an understatement. He is portrayed as a fast-talking self-referential obsessive-compulsive manic-depressive. Like many of his Harvard classmates portrayed in the film, he shares the sense of their being "special people." And to some extent they are, having stood out at their high schools and, as one guidance counselor used to say, having built a cyclotron in their backyard or its equivalent. They are placed in a pool of "number ones," making it harder to stand out. As his date, Erica Albright (Rooney Mara), tells him, it may sound trite but "you should try to become the best you" rather than obsess about and envy his privileged classmates. Some students manage to do just that, as witnessed by the Harvard student who graduated at the top of her class last year and then entered a convent. Zuckerberg, on the other hand, craves recognition and, despite his whining, many do recognize the sophomore's genius, or as one student says, he is the "Big Man on a campus" with nineteen Nobel Prize winners, fifteen Pulitzer Prize winners, two future Olympians and one movie actor" (presumably Natalie Portman).

Despite screenwriter Aaron Sorkin's claim that the story is true, he did use a fictional narrative thread,² crediting Zuckerberg's energy to create Facebook and the associated spitefulness as stemming from his being rejected by Albright, something she had every reason to do. For example, at the beginning of the film, he says to her: "You don't have to study; you go to BU (Boston University)," as he tries to impress her with how dating a Harvard student would benefit her. In another exchange, she says, "Dating you is like dating a Stairmaster. You believe that every thought that tumbles through your head is so clever it should be a crime for it not to be shared." Zuckerberg is particularly upset that he is not a candidate for one of the big clubs, which he feels would get him the attention he deserves. When asked why, he says they're exclusive and fun and can lead to a better life, pointing out that Theodore Roosevelt was a Porcellian and that led him to become president. Erica tells him that he is an a—hole and dumps him. He runs to his dorm, blogs that she is a "bitch" and, while drunk, hacks into the home pages of women in the various Harvard residence halls and creates The Facemash site. Using an algorithm developed by his friend Eduardo to rank chess players, he invites Harvard men to rank the women. The site is a sensation, earning him the enmity of the women students and a six-month academic probation for the resulting crashing of the Harvard network. During the hearing, he claims that Harvard should thank him

for showing them the flaws in their network security.

Zuckerberg's accomplishment wins him the admiration of identical twin students Cameron and Tyler Winklevoss (Armie Hammer), who hire him to help them and Divya Narendra (Max Minghella) build their Harvard Connections site. He stonewalls them for weeks, during which time he develops Facebook with Saverin and Dustin Moskovitz (Joseph Mazzello). His vision is to take the whole college experience and put it online on the premise that there is nothing that people like to do more than talk about themselves. The Winklevoss twins are stunned when he announces the launch of Facebook and, on being confronted, he denies that he used any of their code or ideas, which he pronounces to be lame. Facebook fever develops as he expands to Yale, Columbia, Stanford, and Cambridge.

The Winklevoss twins embody all that Zuckerberg envies and despises. They are handsome future Olympians on the crew team, products of WASP wealth, and shoo-ins for the best club. They are in reality trusting fellows, especially Cameron, who refuses for a long time to agree with his partners to sue Zuckerberg. Instead he believes that they should act like "Gentlemen of Harvard." When Zuckerberg gives them

no satisfaction, they schedule an appointment with Harvard President Larry Summers, asking his help with enforcing Harvard's student Code of Conduct about not cheating on your classmates. The portrayal of Summers as a jerk stretches credulity. He disavows their contention that the invention is worth millions, asserting that it is just their imagination and that, after all, he should know because he used to be Secretary of the Treasury. He dismisses them and advises them to invent something else, "which is what Harvard students do." Interestingly, in 2011, Summers would cite Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg as arguably the two Harvard freshmen who have been the most transformative of the world in the past twenty-five years, adding that neither graduated.³

Zuckerberg borrows from his friend Eduardo to finance Facebook but refuses his urging to get advertisers, saying that Facebook is cool and he is not interested in ruining it for the sake of money. He changes his mind when he is introduced to Sean Parker (Justin Timberlake), the ousted founder of Napster, who makes the prophetic statement, "We lived on farms, then we lived in cities, and now we are going to live on the Internet." Parker gets him capital for what he sees as a billion dollar company. Meanwhile Zuckerberg keeps Eduardo in



Andrew Garfield (as Eduardo Saverin), Joseph Mazzello, Jesse Eisenberg (as Mark Zuckerberg), Patrick Maple in *The Social Network*.
© Columbia Pictures

the dark about his joining forces with Parker. When Eduardo is finally eased out of the company, he joins the Winklevoss's suit. Much of the story is told through the deposition process. Parker adds high living, marijuana, bong, cocaine, strip clubs, and sex parties with underage girls to the venture. Add this to the portrayal of hard partying, hard drinking, and the hookup culture so prevalent on today's college campuses and it's hard to fathom how this film got a PG-13 rating when *The King's Speech* was rated R.

Given the characterization of Zuckerberg, the youngest billionaire ever, I found it strange that the film appeared while he is very much alive. Zuckerberg calls it fiction, but Sorkin stands by his screenplay, saying that he relied on depositions taken during the lawsuits filed against Zuckerberg and blogs that he wrote during the period in question. Sorkin does allow Zuckerberg's defense lawyer to possibly negate the value of the depositions by saying that eighty-five percent of them are exaggerations and the rest outright lies. I'm not sure lawyers would agree. Furthermore, when questioned about the film's veracity, Sorkin said, "I don't want my fidelity to be to the truth; I want it to be to the storytelling. What is the big deal about accuracy purely for accuracy's sake, and can we not have the true be the enemy of the good?"⁴ I'm still trying to figure that out. In sum, I guess when you're running a \$50 billion company, it doesn't matter what they say about you, even when the film's closing line is "You're not an a—hole, you're just trying really hard to be one."

Another thing that struck me about the film is how technology that purports to connect one with "friends" was fashioned by a self-referential loner. There's no question that Facebook can be used for good purposes, e.g., keeping servicemen in touch with their loved ones, reconnecting with old friends, posting worthwhile messages, or connecting with the people in repressive regimes as we are seeing in today's headlines. This is alluded to when Marilyn Delpy (Rashida Jones), one of Zuckerberg's lawyers, asks what he is doing on her borrowed laptop at the end of the deposition. He says "I'm checking in to see how it's going in Bosnia." She responds: "Bosnia, they don't even have roads but they have Facebook!" We are told in the end credits that there are 500 million people in 207 countries using Facebook.

Still, too often it seems to me to be merely self-promotional and used by people who obsess and need to tell others about their daily actions, rather than live in the moment and let their lives speak for themselves. I wonder if they wouldn't be better off to communicate with those around them than with unknown people, some of whom could be predators using aliases or making false statements. As I was writing this, there were also privacy concerns raised about ownership and use of Facebook content. In addition, I came across a story about a woman accused of running over her cousin twice with her minivan and leaving her bleeding in the middle of the street after "a Facebook-fueled catfight over a man."⁵ Is this an

isolated occurrence? I don't know, but in the end, the question is moot, since the genie is out of the bottle

Full disclosure: I am a confessed troglodyte and technophobe. I don't own a Blackberry, don't text, and have never accepted invitations to join Facebook even when I recognize the people as friends with whom I wouldn't mind conversing with by phone, e-mail, or in handwritten letters. So take what I say with a pound of salt. My concerns are that we are creating a generation of people who attach too much importance to talking to strangers rather than doing something worthwhile with their time and communicating with those around them. They have their heads focused on the machines, texting and tweeting, rather than on their surroundings, loved ones, and natural community. Then again, maybe it's better than hours spent on video games. For views of a couple who use Facebook and whose judgments I respect, see Addendum 2 below.

Addendum 1

In the end credits, we learn that Cameron and Tyler received a settlement of \$65 million and signed a nondisclosure agreement. They both rowed for the United States in the Olympics in Beijing and placed sixth. Eduardo Saverin received an unknown settlement and his name was restored to the Facebook masthead as cofounder.

Addendum 2

I use Facebook strictly for family and close friends. I ask my business acquaintances and colleagues to connect with me on LinkedIn, a business social networking site. I'm the most engaged on Twitter. I don't believe in online privacy. Some young people are making bad choices about what they are posting online, in their words and photos. Youngsters need to think about the digital footprint they are leaving. Frankly, I have a bit of a love/hate relationship with social media in general. I approach it cautiously. It can consume a lot of time (if you let it).

My first encounter with Facebook was as a sort of community bulletin board for public protest. I stayed with it to reach some classmates. My sense is that Facebook satisfies many disparate social elements and personalities. It is a combination soapbox, e-mail, rants, photo albums, standing distribution lists, as well as a way to cyberstare people. I use it to post my thoughts and links to articles I think are worthwhile and I read the thoughts of only a select few.

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Secretariat

Starring Diane Lane, John Malkovich, James Cromwell, and Fred Dalton Thompson.

Directed by Randall Wallace. Rated PG. Running time 123 minutes.



Secretariat winning the Triple Crown. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

Based on the book *Secretariat* by William Nack,¹ this entertaining film chronicles the career of the horse that some consider to be the greatest thoroughbred that ever raced. It was one of the few films in 2010 to tell a coherent story and not rely on special effects. I agree with Joe Queenan's commentary in the *Wall Street Journal* that 2010 might be the worst year in film history, although it has had many recent competitors.² The greatest of the film's many assets is Diane Lane, who plays Penny Chenery Tweedy, Secretariat's owner. Ms. Lane has shown the ability to light up the screen and carry a film as narrator and participant as she does here. She plays the epitome of a '50s/'60s woman full of class and determination, a "housewife" who refuses to be intimidated in a so-called man's world. Her prim behavior and stylish appearance contrast sharply with that of trainer Lucien Laurin, played by an over-the-top John Malkovich. He provides comic relief with his outrageous outfits and equally outrageous comments. His character is quite different from the real Laurin, but this is a Hollywood entertainment, not a documentary, and it enlivens the film.

After seeing *Secretariat*, I found that many critics took a negative view of it, seemingly put off by what they saw as the film's religious overtones. They may have been sensitized by

the fact that it was a Disney film and that the screenwriters, producer, and director had been involved with such films as *The Blind Side*, *Braveheart*, *We Were Soldiers*, *The Nativity Story*, *Finding Forrester*, and *The Rookie*. These were seen as "uplifting," not "edgy," as many critics would prefer. Add to that, Disney had marketed it to Christian groups, just as Warners had done with *The Blind Side*. What clinched it was Diane Lane's voiceover of a passage from the Book of Job in which Yahweh challenges Job about the creation of various animals, including horses. As Lane recites the passage, Secretariat is shown entering the starting gate and seeming to act out in a remarkable verisimilitude to the biblical words.

Do you give the horse his strength or clothe his neck with a flowing mane? Do you make him leap like a locust, striking terror with his proud snorting? He paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength, and charges into the fray. He laughs at fear, afraid of nothing; he does not shy away from the sword. The quiver rattles against his side, along with the flashing spear and lance. In frenzied excitement he eats up the ground; he cannot stand still when the trumpet sounds.

—Job 39:19-24, New International Version

One the many examples of such critical reviews is illustrative.³ The chief critic for Movie Line, Stephanie Zacharek, began her review by saying: "If, like most sane people, you're inclined to flee movies that open with biblical quotes, you might want to concentrate on the image that accompanies those words."⁴ She goes on to talk about how the viewer should forget the "biblical stuff" and concentrate on the image of the horse's supernatural alertness, his twitching ears, and enormous eyes and nostrils. She missed or chose to miss the filmmakers' desire to pair words and pictures. In so doing, the filmmakers were riffing off the title of one of the many books about Secretariat, *The Horse that God Built*.⁵ Later, after stating her fears of the possibility of an "aggressively religious message" she added, "I will tell you—if you haven't guessed already—that I'm a left-leaning agnostic, and the closest I can ever get to believing in the existence of God is in the presence of animals. (I find human beings to be highly flawed inventions, but maybe that's just me.)"⁴ This all goes to prove the old adage that what you get out of a movie depends on what you bring to it.

Frankly I missed all this in enjoying the film. Indeed, I found it particularly amusing because the parts of the film that were off-putting to me were the scenes involving Tweedy's rebellious daughter, Kate (A. J. Michalka). Caught up in the antiestablishment tenor of the times, she rebels against her parents' middle-class values and petitions her high school principal to turn the annual Nativity pageant into a Vietnam War protest. After first being rebuffed, she volunteers in a commune in Chile and then gets the green light the next year to go ahead with her vision. Though I found it to be



Dylan Baker, Diane Lane, Nelsan Ellis, Otto Thorwarth, and John Malkovich in *Secretariat*.

extraneous and distracting, I guess it was the screenwriter's way of bringing a little bit of the flavor of the times into the film and also keeping it from being focused only on the horses, the stables, and the racetracks. It also served to show how Tweedy was much more tolerant of her daughter's beliefs than her lawyer husband Jack (Dylan Walsh) who considered her to be a "Commie."

The film begins in 1969 with the burial of Tweedy's mother and her decision to stay back in Virginia to help her sick father Chris Chenery (Scott Glenn) who has withdrawn into himself. She recognizes how important the horse farm is to him and she is anxious that it remain under the family's control, against the wishes of her brother Hollis (Dylan Baker) and her lawyer/husband, who thinks she is over her head and should be back in Denver, not in Virginia. She is supported by her father's long-time secretary Miss Ham (Margo Martindale), groom Eddie Sweat (Nelsan Ellis), and the family lawyer Bull Hancock, played with just the right earthiness and humanity by ex-Senator Fred Dalton Thompson. After her father dies, it becomes more difficult to hold on to the farm and the horses because of the estate tax, which requires that assets be sold off. She manages to hold on to it by selling shares in the horses. Her main assets are two recently-born foals and she arranges with her principal stockholder Ogden Phipps (James Cromwell) to have a coin toss to select first. She "loses," but actually gets the horse she wanted, a chestnut red horse with three white stockings and a star on a thin blaze, who was able to stand up immediately after he was born. Familiarly called "Big Red," he is named Secretariat after the United Nations

organization run by the Secretary-General, suggesting "leadership and power without referring to royalty."⁷ How the perception of that body has changed!

Hancock helps her hire respected trainer Lucien Laurin to work with her horses. As noted, Laurin is portrayed as a flamboyant Southerner (he was a more reserved French-Canadian) who played golf (which he never did).⁸ He dishes out colorful lines like, the young Big Red being so slow that "he couldn't beat a fat man encased in cement being dragged backwards by a freight train." Laurin is instrumental in hiring famed jockey and fellow French-Canadian Ron Turcotte (played by real jockey Otto Thorwarth).

While the story about Secretariat saving the farm is nice, it was actually saved by the horse Riva Ridge, who had been sickly and suffering from diarrhea and a high fever shortly after birth and looking poor and thin.⁷ However, after the administration of antibiotics, he became strong and grew to be a classic thoroughbred, going on to win the Kentucky Derby and the Belmont stakes. His name came from a battle that the Army 10th Mountain Division fought to secure an Italian Apennine range in World War II, and in fact Tweedy's husband and his friends from that division founded the Vail, Colorado, ski resort and named their favorite trail Riva Ridge.⁷ Nor did Turcotte, as portrayed, just come on the scene with Secretariat. He actually rode Riva Ridge many times.

There are many excellently filmed races, one of which is the actual footage of the Preakness Stakes shown on a grainy small television screen to capture the way most people saw the race. The scenes that didn't seem realistic involved the



From *Secretariat*. Photo John Bramley ©Disney Enterprises, Inc.

bluster and braggadocio of Pancho Martin (Nestor Serrano), the trainer of Sham, Secretariat's chief rival at the Derby and the Belmont. He was apparently nothing like his portrayal,⁵ but it helped strengthen the story line that Tweedy, being a woman, got little respect. The highlight of the film is the running of the Belmont Stakes, at a mile and a half the longest of the Triple Crown races. Because of Secretariat's pedigree, it was assumed it would be his undoing. However, coming from behind, he won by an incredible thirty-one lengths. Fittingly, the film ends with the same quote from Job and pictures of the horse (or one of his five stand-ins) with Tweedy doing some horse whispering that film critic Ann Hornaday aptly calls "a moment of transcendent recognition."⁹

The filmmakers use various techniques to convey the strength and power with the sounds of the horse's breathing and the pounding of his hooves as he moves into gear, usually coming from behind such that the biblical quote seems quite prophetic. As film critic Steven Greydanus notes, Secretariat was truly big-hearted in that his heart was found to be more than twice the average size for a thoroughbred, which is about nine pounds.⁵ His was nearly twenty-two pounds, and it was not because of a malformation. As Greydanus notes, it has been discovered since, that some thoroughbreds have a "large heart gene" that is passed from their dam, which was the secret of his stamina. His great sire Bold Ruler was long on speed but short on stamina, the principal reason that Phipps selected the other foal under the assumption that a horse's traits came largely from the sire's pedigree, another good example of why one should never underestimate Mom!

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