

The Intern: A Film Review

By

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The Intern (2015) from writer/director Nancy Myers stars Robert DeNiro as 70 year old Ben Whittaker and Anne Hathaway as 30-something Jules Ostin. In a rare choice, the film is told mostly from the perspective of the 70 year old rather than the 30-something.

A basic premise of the film is that retired and widowed Ben has tried many things to fill his time in his upper-middle class Brooklyn neighborhood but misses being in the labor force. We learn that Ben, an older Baby Boomer, has lived a full life: was married, had a successful career as an executive working for 40 years for the same company – one that compiled and printed telephone directories, is a father and grandfather. He pursues many hobbies, such as learning Mandarin and practicing group Tai Chi in the park. But like some retirees, he misses the daily interaction that takes place at the office and the sense of being useful. He wants to “get back in the game.” As he says in the initial voice over, “I’m not unhappy, I just know there’s a hole in my life, and I need to fill it.”

Ben applies for and is chosen to be a “senior intern,” in a new corporate program for senior citizens, at a company named *About the Fit*. The company, an online retail fashion site, now very successful, was started by the dynamic and driven Jules about 18 months before. Assigned to be Jules’ intern, Ben becomes both a mentor and a friend to her and to many of the Millennial employees at the company.

Initially reluctant to include Ben in her world (as she says, “I’m not good with old people”) Jules comes to rely on Ben’s wisdom and experience for advice both about her company and her personal life. One of the central messages of the film is that the young can learn from the old. Calling himself a “chivalrous gent,” Ben has a respectful manner, shaves every day (even on Sundays), dresses in a suit and tie, carries an attaché case (circa 1973) and stays at work until the boss leaves. Despite being seemingly outdated, Ben is presented as having a great deal to offer to the young. Some of what he teaches is simple and gender stereotyped like the virtue of carrying a handkerchief to be able to offer it to a woman who is crying. But other things -- like the importance of communicating face to face with others rather than by text or email, are significant. It’s no surprise that this grown up says that his favorite quote is by Mark Twain: “You are never wrong to do the right thing.” Generational reciprocity is shown in this film as younger workers teach Ben things like how to turn on his computer, how to get on **Facebook** and how to do fist-bumps.

There are jokes about the elderly. For example, the depiction of the pleasant but somewhat “ditsy” older woman intern as a terrible driver can be interpreted as both sexist and ageist. Jokes about Ben are mostly about the dated technology he uses; but they tend to be gentle ones. For example, Ben sets two alarm clocks for his wake up call and on his first day at work opens his attaché case and sets up his desk with a flip phone (from

the 1990s?), a calculator, pens, a battery operated clock and several pairs of glasses.

The story line focuses more on Jules' life than it does on Ben's becoming "employed" again. Jules struggles with work-life balance. Her concerns include a difficult relationship with her mother, having enough time for her adorable young daughter, and worries about her stay-at-home husband who is caring for their daughter but is also having an affair. Jules feels that it's her job to make sure her husband doesn't feel neglected. She is also conflicted about investors who are pressuring her to bring in a CEO over her to help her run her company. In a twist on conventional story lines, Ben wants Jules to have it all and not to give up any of her roles, including running her company, saying things like "I hate to be the feminist here, but you should be able to have a huge career and be who you are" and "You should feel great about what you've done and I'd hate to let you see anyone take that away from you."

This film applauds Jules' success rather than making her the villain the way the stay-at-home moms of her daughter's peers attempt to do. Yes, Jules is quirky and overworked, but her company's productive and upbeat atmosphere of mutual respect is, in large part, her doing.

The Intern portrays some aspects of the life of a person in the early stage of old age accurately. With longer, healthier lives it is now possible for individuals to grow older in new ways. Ben illustrates how the "third age" can be a time of opportunity and activity (Angel and Settersten Jr. 2013). Like many Baby Boomer men, he is a mature adult with good health and financial resources, but with few family responsibilities. Like many of his real-life peers, he takes a daily medication (in his case, for high blood pressure), attends funerals of those in his age cohort, and lives alone. When Ben offers places at his table at Starbucks to younger working men, they nod, accept and then ignore Ben while they sit at the table. And when Ben starts to think romantically again, it is in a traditional "younger woman/older man" relationship. Seventy year old Ben begins to date a beautiful work colleague played by 61 year old Renee Russo, rather than the older woman in his neighborhood played by 79 year old Linda Lavin.

Other aspects of Ben's life are not depicted as realistically. Aside from the funerals, a message or two on his answering machine and the neighborhood woman who is pursuing him romantically, Ben's pre-intern life

is depicted as fairly devoid of friends. He doesn't seem connected to anyone from his previous career or have a group of men with whom he hangs around. The new friends he makes at *About the Fit* are not the few other senior interns but are the young workers in their 20s and 30s. Most 70 year olds live fairly age-segregated lives aside from interaction in their extended families but Ben does not once he starts working again. His new friends and his new housemate are in their 20s and 30s.

Although Ben becomes a sort of surrogate grandfather to Jules' preschool daughter, not much is made of his relationship with his own son and grandchildren who live in California. His relationship with his son and his son's family is depicted very briefly in the film's introduction but then no additional interaction between them and Ben is included. Unfortunately, *The Intern* misses the opportunity to explore the importance of grandparenthood and its ability to provide emotional connections and meaning for the majority of grandparents (Hoffnung and Adler forthcoming). The almost exclusively white workplace and neighborhood are also not realistic.

However, this gentle film does cover a lot of ground: ageism and sexism in the workplace and other social settings, intergenerational relationships, marital pressures, dating again at 70, the way technology can both help and hurt relationships, and the important search for a balance between work and love/family. Although neither profound nor ground breaking, *The Intern* is worth two hours of one's time. Writer/director Nancy Meyers leaves us with a sense that relationships between people of very different ages can be mutually satisfying and a subtle message about life and aging. As Jules joins Ben for Tai Chi in the park at the end of the film, he tells her and us to "Breathe deeply."

LITERATURE CITED

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About the Reviewer: Emily Stier Adler, Ph.D. is Professor Emerita of Sociology at Rhode Island College. She continues to teach the Sociology of Aging and does research on a variety of topics including retirement and grandparenting. She and psychologist Michele Hoffnung are currently working on a book about grandparents with the working title “Grandparents, Grandchildren and the Generation In-Between.”