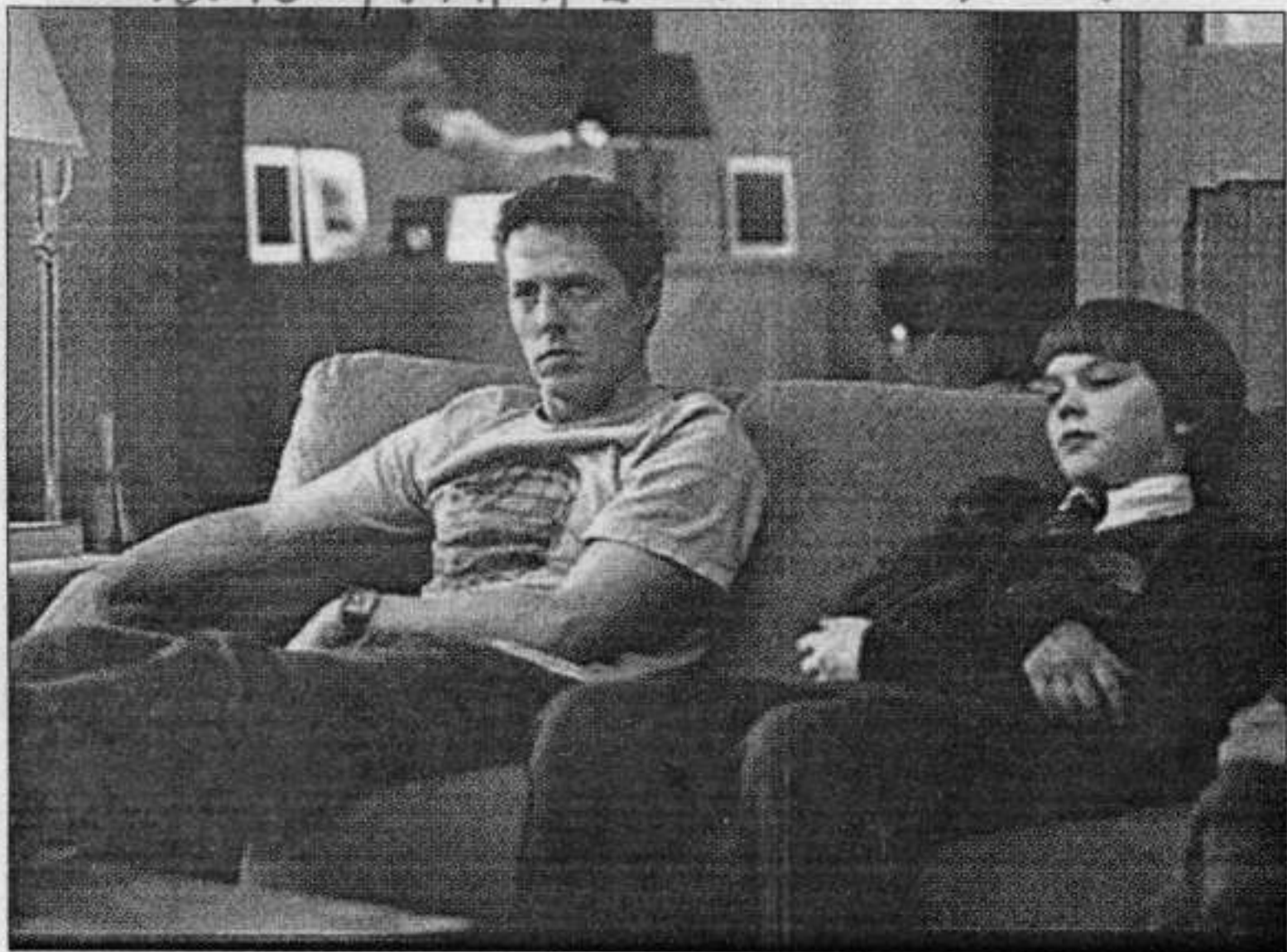


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**A BOY-TO-BOY TALK:** *Hugh Grant and Nicholas Hoult strike up an unlikely friendship in "About a Boy," from Paul and Chris Weitz.*

## ABOUT A BOY

(U.K.-U.S.)

A UIP (in U.K.)/Universal (in U.S.) release of a United Intl. Pictures (U.K.) and Universal Pictures presentation, in association with Tribeca Prods., Working Title Films and Kalima Prods. Produced by Jane Rosenthal, Robert De Niro, Brad Epstein, Tim Bevan, Eric Fellner. Executive producers, Nick Hornby, Lynn Harris. Co-producer, Nicky Kentish Barnes.

Directed by Paul and Chris Weitz. Screenplay, Peter Hedges, Chris Weitz, Paul Weitz, from the novel by Nick Hornby. Camera (color, widescreen), Remi Adefarasin; editor, Nick Moore; music, Badly Drawn Boy; music arranger, Patrick Seymour; production designer, Jim Clay; art director, Gary Freeman; costume designer, Joanna Johnston; sound (Dolby Digital/SDDS/DTS), Bill Meadows, Tony Dawe; assistant director, Chris Newman; casting, Priscilla John. Reviewed at Empire 1, London, Feb. 27, 2002. Running time: 100 MIN.

Will ..... Hugh Grant  
Fiona ..... Toni Collette  
Rachel ..... Rachel Weisz  
Marcus ..... Nicholas Hoult

Angie ..... Isabel Brook  
Christine ..... Sharon Small  
Susie ..... Victoria Smurfit  
Ali ..... Augustus Prew

# GRANT BUOYS 'BOY' STORY

By DEREK ELLEY

**H**ugh Grant is both the strongest and the weakest component of "About a Boy," a pic version of British author Nick Hornby's 1998 bestseller that can't decide whether it's a romantic comedy in Working Title-branded mode or a lower-key, more observational look at contempo manhood in Hornby mode. There's a strong case for saying Grant, who awkwardly tries to proletarianize his accent, is miscast in the role of the womanizing, child-fearing slacker who gets in touch with his touchy-feely side through a friendship with a pre-teen boy. But the fact is, pic only really sizzles when Grant gives full rein to his patented comic shtick as a bumbling romantic. Pleasant and engaging, rather than laugh-out-loud funny or emotionally involving, the movie looks to reap

comfortable rather than stellar "Bridget Jones"-like returns, as much thanks to the built-in attraction of the original novel as to Grant's name presence. Pic pre-ems April 26 in the U.K. and then travels Stateside.

Though Paul and Chris Weitz ("American Pie") may seem a strange choice to direct and co-write such quintessentially British fare — which, unlike the film version of Hornby's second novel, "High Fidelity," has not been transferred to an American setting — the two brothers in fact do a culturally neutral job in both adapting and directing. (Chris Weitz was educated in the U.K. and subsequently worked there for a spell before returning to the U.S.)

In any event, and despite Robert De Niro's Tribeca Prods. being the original optioner of the novel's rights, the finished product has no feel of Hollywoodization or being

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**FILM**



# ABOUT A BOY

*Continued from page 31*

watered down for an international audience. And though much of the novel's incidental detail and Hornby's involving prose style aren't replicated onscreen, fans of the book will recognize enough of the original not to be disappointed.

Grant plays Will, a late-30s unattached Londoner who's never had a job or been in a relationship that's lasted more than two months. Will has a neat bachelor apartment and a comfortable life living off the royalties of a corny Christmas carol ("Santa Super Sleigh") his late dad once composed, and devotes his time to picking up women and generally avoiding responsibility of any kind. Top of his dislike list is children; but if it means staying close to a babe he fancies, such as single mother Angie (Isabel Brook), he'll even keep quiet about that.

In parallel, pic also introduces Marcus, a 12-year-old, rather nerdy boy who's still walked to school by his mom, Fiona (Toni Collette, with an immaculate English accent). A baggy-trouserred, vegetarian ex-hippie, Fiona is a tad unbalanced emotionally; and Marcus, with his pudding-basin haircut and Dr. Spock-like eyebrows, regularly gets it in the neck from cooler kids

at school. As he notes in his voiceover: "So there you have it. I was having a shit time at home and a shit time at school."

Gently ditched by Angie, Will goes to a single-parent help group, as he reckons it's a good place to meet women. Unnerved to discover that they're either plain ugly, man-hating or emotionally screwed up, but attracted to the sole beauty in the group, Irishwoman Susie (Victoria Smurfit), he invents a totally fictitious story on the spot about being dumped by his partner and left with a 2-year-old kid, Ned. The ruse works, and Will starts dating Susie.

Susie's best friend, however, is Fiona, and on an outing one day she brings along not only her own kid but also Marcus — and at the 20-minute mark the movie's twin strands finally meet. In a very funny scene in a public park, where Grant's fumbling persona is allowed full play, Marcus and Will connect.

Back at the boy's home, however, Fiona has attempted suicide — which requires a mad dash to a hospital that neatly combines drama and comedy. As Will notes in a boyish voiceover: "It was horrible, horrible. But driving fast behind the ambulance was fantastic."

Thereafter, the stage is set for the main story: a friendship between a rather mature but lonely 12-year-old boy and a rather immature but equally lonely 38-year-old boy, both of whom finally learn that, in life, everybody needs somebody. Though this revelation is signaled a good six reels from the end, it's a convenient hook on which to hang further amorous adventures by Will, notably with the very focused Rachel (Rachel Weisz), who — in some of the movie's funniest scenes — has a son (Augustus Prew) of Marcus' age who turns out to be a total psychopath.

Some of the incidental humor won't translate for non-British audiences, from exchanges like "No man is an island" (Fiona)/"I'm an island: I'm Ibiza!" (Will) to Will's favorite home pastime of watching the inexplicably long-running quiz show "Countdown." Also, a subplot of Marcus having a crush on a tough older chick at school — fully developed in the original novel — never really gets off the starting block here.

Still, though the dialogue rarely strikes sparks, the movie hums along in an agreeable-enough way, remaining very character-centered. This is a London in tight closeup, not a capital city of recognizable landmarks or movie geography: A large percentage of the picture takes place in apartments, restaurants and other enclosed spaces, cleanly rather than glossily lensed by Remi Adefarasin and with no directing flourishes by the Weitz Bros.

It's at the 75-minute point, however, that the film's split personality begins to tell. When Marcus asks for Will's help in solving a problem, and Will explains he's actually not the kid's father or brother, there's a lack of emotional undertow, of any tumbler falling into place, to make the scene work. And the pic's climax, set at a concert at Marcus' school, feels manufactured rather than organically grown out of seeds planted earlier: The biggest high in fact

comes from Grant resorting to his usual physical mannerisms, not from any sense of emotional resolution.

Playing a character his own age, Hoult, whose only previous experience is with TV, more than holds his own against the experienced Grant, especially in their numerous scenes just sitting around together in Will's apartment. As the no-nonsense Susie, Smurfit is notable in a relatively small role and Weisz, an actress who needs strong direction, is for once well cast and assured as Rachel. Collette is OK as Marcus' mom, but her character, swinging between serious and goofy, often seems out of kilter with the rest of the cast.

**Fans of the book  
will recognize  
enough of the  
original not to  
be disappointed  
by the 'About a  
Boy' movie.**