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TUESDAY, SEPT. 11, 2012

'The Words' Crafts an Intelligent Drama

Fiction intersects real life in Bradley Cooper film

By [David Lührssen \(by-author-16-1.html\)](#)



The Words is a story about the allure of storytelling framed by an author whose new novel is about a frustrated novelist acclaimed as "the storyteller of his generation" only after passing off someone else's work as his own. Maybe it says something about his generation that the real author is old enough to be his grandfather?

The novelist who reads this story to a packed auditorium is the smarmy-looking Clay Hammond, played with a snarky edge by Dennis Quaid, but he isn't the protagonist, only the narrator. The star of The Words is Hammond's fictional creation, Rory Hansen, embodied by the almost impossibly handsome Bradley Cooper. We meet Rory at the top of his game, stepping into a limousine with his gorgeous wife (Zoe Saldana) after being feted at a reception as "one of the most exciting and sensitive young writers." But there's this grizzled old man in a shabby raincoat lurking in the shadows (Jeremy Irons aged beyond his years). We are given the impression that we haven't seen the last of this stalker, who will deliver an unwanted back story to Rory's best seller.

The music by Emmy-nominated Marcelo Zarvos helps to set a somber tone, a note of restraint against the story's urge to romanticize the writer's life even as it hints at the lonely inner space of an author's imagination. Rory is like a writer from a picture book in a postcard version of New York, his creative endeavors supported by an only slightly grudging dad as the Postal Service brings rejection letter after rejection letter. Visiting an idyllic Paris straight from Woody Allen, Rory strays into an antique shop and reaches for an old leather valise. He couldn't suspect that a hidden compartment contains the yellowed typescript of an unpublished novel by a post-World War II expatriate. Sinking deeper into despondency over his own failure as a writer, Rory types the old manuscript on his laptop, feeling the words pass under his fingers, symbols of everything he might want to say—but can't.

The dots are there to connect. The old man wrote the lost novel when he was young, and—remember—we haven't seen the last of him. But does everything he says necessarily ring true, or is it too close to fiction?

The Words is much like one of those polished Hollywood dramas of an earlier age, where an

ethical problem is embedded in romantic settings inhabited by beautiful stars. It's an escape from the mundane into a lovelier world where problems not only remain, but are examined under a golden magnifier. *The Words* becomes melodramatic, especially as the old man tells his story, but melodrama is often a normal emotional response to tragedy, and the screenplay never tries to squeeze tears from the audience. Writers-directors Brian Klugman and Lee Sterntal have crafted something rare in contemporary Hollywood—an intelligent adult drama that wonders, like its narrator, about those points where fiction intersects with real life. How could the story have ended differently?

ALSO FROM DAVID LUHRSEN

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