The Natural
Mr. Smith goes to the ballpark

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Only a heart of stone would find THE NATURAL unappealing, but only a mind of mush could fail to regard the film, upon consideration, as hokey at best and dangerous at worst.

THE NATURAL was Bernard Malamud's first novel, a grim little tale about the American Dream. The "natural" is Roy Hobbs, an American Parsifal, a baseball player granted miraculous powers but suddenly prevented from using them just as he almost gets his big chance. Sixteen years later he makes a comeback. With his bat, "Wonderboy," made from a tree struck by lightning after his father died, he hits homerun after homerun until at the climactic moment he goes the way of Casey at the bat. The film version, directed by Barry Levinson (DINER) and starring Robert Redford, reverses the ending of the story and makes it into yet another parable about the U.S. as a paradise lost but, unlike in the book, regained. Hollywood strikes again.

The Malamud novel combines medieval mythology with baseball, America's popular mythology, in an ingenious, literary manner: the team that wallows in the wasteland of last place is the "Knights." They are managed by "Pop" Fisher, the fisher king of the Grail legend. Malamud, like his hero, seems angry, about the same things: frustrated ambition and belated success. For whatever reason, the book has a nasty tone, Horatio Alger gone Nathaniel West. It's only partially redeemed by a romantic streak with an icy brilliance, for example in the description of Roy's friend, the scout Sam Simpson, being carried off on a stretcher: "Overhead the star were bright, but he knew he was dead."

The book certainly does not provide the stuff of which movies are usually made, but it offers a serious effort in a way the movie does not. The transformation from book into film is epitomized by the turn from unhappy to happy ending, but the changes involve more than just that reversal. Happy endings, like "crime-doesn't-pay" endings in 30s gangster movies, can be transparent devices, obviously tacked on. Here the whole tenor of the book is changed, simplified, and cheapened. The film version reshapes many aspects of the novel, ranging from the treatment of sexuality and the family to the presentation of time and history. And the film introduces a reflexive element in its fascination with celebrity. The film succeeds, if that is the word, only as Disney-type entertainment (or, as a girl behind me in the theater put it, "cornball but cute"). At bottom it is just a high-toned version of ROCKY, with boxing and a working-class palooka replaced by baseball and a farm boy.

The opening shot presents Redford looking old and forlorn on a railroad platform, like a figure in a Hopper painting. But the movie retreats from that vision, as if afraid to confront the possibilities suggested by showing the Golden Boy in a less than golden light. Literally! There's no better cinematographer in Hollywood than Caleb Deschanel (THE BLACK STALLION, THE RIGHT STUFF), but the film with its backlighting and gauze shots too often resembles a cross between THE WALTONS and a Kodak ad. After that initial troubling glimpse of Redford, the film provides us with equal parts cheesy comedy, overdone lyricism, stagy melodrama, and numbing platitudes.

The movie systematically eliminates Malamud's bitter irony and turns the downbeat into the upbeat, defusing the pun on the pessimist philosopher's, Hobbs, name. Both novel and movie omit the middle section telling about Roy's life. In the novel,
Roy says to his sometime girlfriend, Iris Lemon (!), "My goddamn life didn't turn out like I wanted it to." She replies, "Whose does?" But in the movie, Iris (Glenn Close) becomes Hobbs' long-lost childhood sweetheart and, unknown to him, the mother of his child. When Redford delivers that line — with the language tidied up, of course — he sounds like a cowboy, using terseness to hint at some unmentionable and infuriating sense of loss. But Iris' changed response gives the film's whole game away: "Think of all those boys you've influenced. There are so many of them." The movie, then, is more than a success fantasy: it is a paean to the relationship between stars and fans, with Hollywood patting itself on the back for being so responsible in creating "positive role models" for U.S. youth.

In the book, "the fans dearly loved Roy, but Roy did not love the fans." He thinks of them as "the slobs in the stands." But Levinson, Redford & Co. love the fans, or at least want them to love the film, so we get "Mr. Smith Goes to the Ballpark." The final baseball sequence contains many reaction shots of enraptured boys in the stands, all waiting to see if Roy proves worthy. In contrast, the novel depicts Hobbs not only as Casey, but also as Shoeless Joe Jackson. It concludes with Roy Hobbs, who did originally agree to a losing fix, weeping "bitter tears." He just cannot tell a kid, "It ain't so."

Just in case we can't comprehend the full significance of the movie version of Hobbs, the film's dialogue provides suitable copybook maxims. Talent, Roy's father tells him, is not enough unless it's developed. Later Roy earnestly proclaims, "I've got to reach for the best that's in me." We hear this kind of self-fulfillment twaddle everywhere these days, for instance, in the recruiting slogan, "Be all that you can be. Join the Army." It's also in the Chrysler ad with Lee Iacocca proclaiming, "Nobody ever won anything worthwhile without fighting for it. The commitment to be the best makes the difference."

These supposedly uplifting mottoes support a work-ethic article of faith: hard work leads to success. This is coupled with the democratic belief that the individual controls his or her destiny, so that success is available to all; it's not just a matter of privileged birth or natural ability. In Puritan terms, we need works as well as grace; in Edison's terms, perspiration as well as inspiration. Like ON THE WATERFRONT, THE NATURAL defines tragedy as talent unfulfilled, as the possibility that ability and hard work, even with the person's commitment to be the best, do not guarantee success. THE NATURAL, not surprisingly, refuses to permit the tragic to win out. Like Terry Malloy, Hobbs gets his triumph at the end, even if the course of true ability does not run smooth. He goes out a winner, rather than a doubly damned loser as in the novel. Hobbs also gets a consolation prize — a wife and son — that not only mitigates his failure to accomplish all that he set out to do but solves another problem as well, the conflict between career and family. That conflict has become an 80s obsession. THE NATURAL offers a neat compromise because it suggests that the single-minded pursuit of individual success does not finally preclude family happiness.

Such an analysis of the ideas at work in the screen version of THE NATURAL may seem beside the point, if only because the film's main function is apparently to serve as a star vehicle. In THE NATURAL, Redford, a few years short of fifty, deigns to play a man in his mid-thirties (after an opening in which he is twenty!). Yet he is the person for the part. Redford's a natural because of his looks — there were gasps in the audience after one smile. Even if THE NATURAL were designed primarily to feature Redford once again in period clothing, it hardly answers the important narrative question of how Roy Hobbs got sidetracked from succeeding in the first place.

The film's main narrative device seems to be misogyny, and that's in the book, too. First, the film uses a femme fatale (Barbara Hershey) to stop Roy's first go at fame and fortune. She's a deranged, if droll, groupie, who murderously pursues young men on the rise. Then at Roy's comeback, the vamp (Kim Bassinger) almost succeeds in getting Roy to fix the big game as she acts on behalf of Pop's treacherous partner, "The Judge" (Robert Prosky, the mafioso from THE THIEF), and Gus Sands, the bookie (Darren McGavin, oddly uncredited). But she had a rough childhood, wouldn't you know, so the film indicates she can't help it if she wants to feather her nest.

These characters are obviously not meant to be taken very seriously. But I'm not
sure that holds for Iris, who redeems her kind the way the Virgin Mary redeems womanhood from the fall of Eve. Iris' part bears more than a passing resemblance to Tess Harper's in *TENDER MERCIES*. It's the dream woman, "understanding" and "supportive," who doesn't get in the way of the man's career. In the book, Iris is a grandmother at thirty-three, which makes Roy wonder, "What for the love of mud had made her take him for a sucker who would be interested in a grandmother?" In the movie, the grandchild has disappeared. Iris' child is now Roy's child as well but has been transformed from a daughter to a son. When Hobbs learns that the boy is his, he performs his ultimate heroic feat at the Big Game, literally causing fireworks.

In the book, Hobbs' mother is a whore and his father keeps sticking him in orphanages. In the movie, the father dies almost immediately, and the mother disappears shortly after, but not before we receive the impression that this was an ideal family. Strange as it may sound, the movie may in part refer to the current divorce rate and proliferation of single parents. When Iris says her son's ready to see his father, Roy unwittingly replies, "A father makes all the difference."

Roy may not get to be the greatest ballplayer ever, but in the movie that doesn't matter. After all, he single handedly foiled the take-over bid by the meanies, saving the Knight franchise for their benign owner-manager and surrogate father. And since he has become a husband and father, he can go home again, gracefully surrendering personal ambition for family life on the farm. In the epilogue, as in a Ralph Lauren ad, everyone is white, well-scrubbed, blond, and smiling. Father and son play ball, as at the beginning, in that dreamy slow-motion that signifies lyrical innocence. The cycle can begin again but presumably without any repetition of the tragedies — that would be too mythical.

A few other nagging problems remain from the difference between our 80s perspective and the 30s setting. When Roy, surrounded by boys, notices a girl and includes girls in his remarks, the film's attempt to be "correct" in today's terms only makes matters worse. We all know that if, at the end, he'd been told he had a daughter, he probably would have hit a single at best instead of a homerun. Similarly, there's something vaguely annoying about the fact that using 30s baseball means using pre-Jackie Robinson baseball, and therefore having no blacks on the team. The only black in the movie, so far as I could tell, was a railroad porter. The filmmakers' own awareness of the problem seems hinted at by the fact that they use a white shoeshine "man."

THE NATURAL uses Redford's glamour and historical distance as a protective cocoon that prevents us from taking anything too seriously. In the novel, Roy Hobbs is nobody's angel but he is genuinely obsessed: by his longing for a return to childhood, by his dream of being the best, by nightmarish incidents such as a night on a dark road when he thinks his car has run over a young boy — an image of his younger, innocent self — but he can find no body, no blood, no trace. Just because the Roy in the novel is not a nice guy or a team player doesn't mean that he lacks talent. It doesn't cheapen his dream of being the best ever in the game. His imperfections, in fact, make him more interesting than the film's homogenized All-American, even with the anger that flickers around the edges of Redford's characterization.

Some 60s and 70s films resolutely said, "There's no hope." CHINATOWN, for example, or CUTTER'S WAY. Such movies determined to show that darkness is all. ROCKY, AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN, and THE NATURAL, with their rousing conclusions, have equally determined to show that brightness is all. They do everything short of putting up smile stickers so that the audience can go out of the theater feeling reassured that this is the best of all possible worlds.

Debunking has its limitations: movies that dogmatically attack the American dream are sometimes stupid as well as depressing. Movies that try to revitalize the American dream, however, often become pointless exercises in "rebunking." Nostalgic dreaming about the past may reflect a harmless longing for a lost way of life. But images of the past are never value-free; all too often they serve as the basis for a reactionary response to the present's complexities.

Although we see World Fair symbols on the hotel counter and a headline announcing "appeasement" at Munich, THE NATURAL never acknowledges the Depression." History means just "the past" — a simpler, better, more colorful time,
evoked through rudimentary art director’s touches such as period automobiles, steam engines, and signs for 5 cent cigars. A few brief imitation newsreel sequences are pleasant, but display none of the care evident in comparable passages in THE RIGHT STUFF or ZELIG. Finally, if the film as a whole seems like recycled Capra, the musical score by Randy Newman is mainly recycled Aaron Copland, an attempt to evoke the stately populism of the 30s.

The unsympathetic sports columnist, Max Mercy (Robert Duvall), apparently represents a critic since the point is made that he never actually played the game in spite of his bluster about making and breaking careers. Criticizing THE NATURAL does make me feel a bit like Scrooge, since the movie has some nice touches. It’s hard to resist those old codgers, Wilford Brimley as the manager who “gave his heart and soul to the game only to get it trampled on,” and Richard Farnsworth as the coach, Red, who gets off the best line of the film in his neat comment on an Italian meal: “Can’t spell it, but it eats pretty good.

Redford’s emphatic “so there” gesture after Hobbs strikes out the “Whammer” (i.e., Babe Ruth, well played by Joe Don Baker) is just right. That’s the movie’s best scene because it makes baseball come alive, for once capturing that sense of the game — which I identify with Roger Angell — as an experience both exquisite and exciting. Yet a little salty language and a ballpark with billboard ads on the outfield walls don’t add up to a convincing portrait of the game in the good old days — before it became a big business with domed stadiums and multi-million dollar contracts, one we have come to know in terms of instant replay of key scenes on TV.

Ballpark, in the ballpark, ballpark figure, and out of the ballpark â€“ "Ballpark" has been used to mean a broad area of approximation or similarity, or a range within which comparison is possible; this usage the Oxford English Dictionary dates to 1960. Another meaning, "sphere of activity or influence", is cited in 1963. "In the (right) ballpark", meaning "within reasonable bounds" dates to 1968. A "ballpark figure" or "ballpark estimate", one that is reasonably accurate, dates to 1967. The meaning of "out of the ball park" i