

ALBA AUGUST
BECOMING ASTRID

Monday, February 25, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Michael Phillips / Chicago Tribune Not Rated 123 Mins.

With some screen biographies, you go in pre-disposed to like the film because you're hot for the music ("Bohemian Rhapsody"), or you admire the subject's political brinksmanship ("Darkest Hour"). Or maybe you grew up adoring the books written by the movie's protagonist.

For many, that third example will surely be the case with "Pippi Longstocking" author Astrid Lindgren and the engrossing, beautifully acted new film depicting a dramatic portion of her life. The Swedish writer's tumultuous early years, focused on her late teens and early 20s, take up most of the acreage in "Becoming Astrid," opening Friday at the Gene Siskel Film Center.

My own experience with Lindgren's work is practically nil, though the 1984 film version of Lindgren's folkloric fantasy "Ronja, the Robber's Daughter" is pretty terrific. As it happens, so is "Becoming Astrid," guided by a superb performance from Alba August as Lindgren. The movie, co-written and directed by the Danish filmmaker Pernille Fischer Christensen, has been finessed with such emotional care, the familiar conventions of the script never become a liability. The movie works just fine for Lindgren newcomers as well as Lindgren buffs; all you need, really, is an appreciation of moment-to-moment human contact.

We meet Astrid Ericsson, one of four children raised on a Swedish farm, at age 16, in the 1920s. Family life means chores, church (the family lives on church-facilitated land) and the occasional, stultifying community hall dance, boys on one side, girls on the other.



A born storyteller, Astrid gets an internship at the local Vimmerby newspaper, run by the unhappily married and substantially older Reingold Blomberg (Henrik Rafaelsen), father of seven. The short description of "Becoming Astrid" involves the affair between these two; Astrid's resulting pregnancy at 18; the legal obstacles to their happiness; and Ericsson traveling to Denmark to give birth to her son, Lasse. In Copenhagen, Astrid places her infant in the care of a loving foster mother (Trine Dyrholm). At odds with her traditional parents, Astrid pursues her career as a stenographer, then a secretary. But the strain, confusion and heartache of being apart from her son is a great deal to carry.

The real strength and lasting value of "Becoming Astrid" can be found in the margins, and the silences, of these circumstances. The key moment, for me, arrives early, in a scene at the newspaper office. Blomberg has begun to make his intentions known; cautious but excited, Astrid (with newly bobbed hair, the talk of the town) seems to bloom before our eyes, but she's rightly wary about where this might lead.



Director Christensen lets the camera linger for several remarkable seconds in this scene. We see every possible flicker of feeling emerge, subtly, on August's face. Such a moment, I suspect, could only have been captured by a female director of genuine skill. Throughout "Becoming Astrid," August acquits herself brilliantly; the woman we come to know is a tangle of impulses and qualities, and feels vibrantly alive.

In the prologue, we see the elder Lindgren at home, opening birthday cards and cassette tapes from schoolchildren. How, one "Pippi" fan wonders, "can you write so well about being a child," and losing a loved one, and forging on, when Lindgren's own childhood was so many years ago? "Becoming Astrid" answers that question with tact, grace and an unusually sensitive realization of what it takes to win over a child. Especially one's own.

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BURNING

Monday, March 4, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by Manohla Dargis / New York Times Not Rated 148 Mins.

One of the most beautiful scenes in a movie this year — in many years — comes midway through “Burning.” Two men and a woman are lazing around outside a home. They’re in the South Korean countryside, near the border with North Korea, where the squawk of propaganda drifts in and out from loudspeakers. Now, though, in the velvety dusk light, the sound of Miles Davis’s ethereal trumpet fills the air, and the woman begins swaying, taking off her shirt. She is dancing for the men, but mostly she’s dancing in what feels like ecstatic communion between her and the world.



Desire, ravenous and ineffable, shudders through “Burning,” the latest from the great South Korean director Lee Chang-dong. Set in the present, the movie involves the complicated, increasingly fraught relationships among three characters whose lives are tragically engulfed as desire gives way to rage. The story has the quality of a mystery thriller — somebody goes missing, somebody else tries to figure out why — one accompanied by the drumbeat of politics. The larger, more agonizing question here, though, involves what it means to live in a divided, profoundly isolating world that relentlessly drives a wedge between the self and others.

The story opens the day that a young delivery man, Jongsu (Ah-in Yoo), meets a young woman, Haemi (Jong-seo Jun), in a chaotic, anonymous city. She works as store barker, dancing in scanty clothing while tempting shoppers with raffle prizes. Haemi hails Jongsu and reveals that they know each other from their hometown — he has no memory of her — then blurts out that she’s had plastic surgery. Later, she reminds him that when they were young he once crossed a street to tell her she was ugly, news she casually delivers while searching for a reaction that never comes.

Jun gives a physically open, natural performance that works as a lovely counterpoint to Haemi’s cryptic actions — she has an unseen cat, peels an invisible tangerine — while Yoo invests Jongsu with a reserve that suggests social awkwardness that can seem self-interested. (Slack-jawed, Jongsu hunches like a man in retreat or a teenager who hasn’t settled into his adult body.) Despite his seeming indifference to Haemi, he responds to her friendliness, and before long they’re in bed. This nascent intimacy abruptly ends when she leaves on a trip. When she returns with a wealthy enigma, Ben (Steven Yeun), the three form an awkward triangle, a configuration that derails Jongsu.

The movie is based on “Barn Burning,” a 1992 short story by Haruki Murakami that throbs with unspoken menace and shares its title with a far more blatantly violent 1939 story by William Faulkner. Lee nods at Faulkner (a favorite author of Jongsu whom Ben begins

reading), but takes most of his cues from Murakami’s story. Lee retains its central triangle and some details, while making it his own by, for instance, changing the Miles Davis music. Mostly, Lee slowly foregrounds the uneasy violence that flickers through the Murakami to stunning, devastating effect.

Written by Lee and Oh Jung-mi, “Burning” unfolds in realistic scenes that don’t necessarily seem to be advancing a strong theme. Things happen, casually. For the most part, the story follows Jongsu, who’s as closed-down as the door in the movie’s opening image. Seemingly friendless, he says he wants to write. But his father’s legal troubles have forced Jongsu to take over the family’s run-down farm alone. “What kind of ‘writing’ are you going to ‘create,’” his father’s lawyer mockingly asks Jongsu, as if to remind him of his place in life. The lawyer also compares Jongsu’s father to a protagonist in a story, a remark that suggests our stories are written for us.

For the lawyer, fiction writing is clearly useless, and it certainly has no instrumental value for Jongsu’s father. That the movie is based on a story by a celebrated writer invests this seemingly uneventful scene with dark comedy, even if the larger point is the question of free will. (Is Jongsu writing his own story, or has it been determined by his father, whose rage landed him in jail?) The movie engages this question more directly once Ben — with his silky smiles and laid-back imperiousness — begins disrupting the equilibrium. “There is no right or wrong,” Ben tells Jongsu, after confessing that he torches derelict greenhouses. “Just the morals of nature.”

An understated visual stylist, Lee shoots and edits this scene simply but elegantly, initially cutting between the two men, who are each isolated in the frame. They’re sitting fairly close yet seem worlds apart. It’s the same night as Haemi’s ravishing dance. But now she’s asleep inside, the sun has set, and the men are alone in an exchange that grows darker, figuratively and literally, as Jongsu talks about his unhappy childhood and Ben shares his worldview. As the scene progresses, Lee joins the men visually in two-shots that leave one or the other blurred, only to punctuate this back and forth with an image of them seated side by side like mirrored images.



Here and throughout, Lee allows the actors to fill in their characters, letting them add pointillist detail to their portraits rather than smothering them in close-ups or self-regarding directorial virtuosity. All three leads are sensational (Yeun turns yawns and soft laughter into nightmares), giving performances that retain a sense of mystery that dovetails with the movie’s ambiguity. Again, things happen, often casually. Yet while each event expands the narrative — filling in the larger picture with nods at sexual relations, class divisions and a riven people — they don’t necessarily explain what happens or answer the fundamental question that burns through this brilliant movie. In Korean, with English subtitles.



Monday, April 1, 7:30 pm

Reviewed by A.O. Scott / New York Times Rated R 106 Mins.

Lee Israel may be the single most interesting movie character you will encounter this year, which is not to say that she's altogether pleasant company. She would most likely feel the same way about you, minus the "interesting" part, unless you happen to be a cat or Dorothy Parker. It has been a while since a world-class, life-size misanthrope like Lee has commanded the screen — not another brooding narcissist or a showily difficult cable TV antihero, but a smart, cranky human recognizably made of flesh and blood. Also whiskey, bile and typewriter ink.

There was a real Lee Israel, a writer turned literary forger who died in 2014. In "Can You Ever Forgive Me?," based on Israel's memoir of the same name, she's played by Melissa McCarthy, in a performance that more than atones for "Life of the Party" and "The Happytime Murders." Though McCarthy has played abrasive and obnoxious comic characters in the past — it's one of her specialties — Lee is a 3-D grouch of a whole different order.

Early in the film, she treks across Manhattan from her place on West 82nd Street to a literary party at her agent's apartment, which is much nicer than her own. Lee makes the rounds, sneering and muttering into her double Scotch; spars with the agent, whose name is Marjorie; and leaves with a few partial rolls of pilfered toilet paper, a napkin full of boiled shrimp (to be shared with her cat, Jersey) and someone else's overcoat.

It's 1991, and Lee, the author of several popular biographies of bygone celebrities, finds herself in career limbo — or possibly professional free fall. It's too early to blame her woes on the internet, as future writers will. For reasons that Marjorie (Jane Curtin) is a little too eager to explain, Lee's proposed life of the great vaudevillian Fanny Brice is a non-starter. An earlier book about Estée Lauder is for sale at a humiliating discount in a used bookstore. The rent is overdue. There's no money to pay Jersey's veterinary bills. A life of crime beckons.

What Lee falls into is no ordinary criminal enterprise, and her eventual accomplice is not a typical underworld minion. For a time, the only nonfeline companion Lee can tolerate is Jack Hock (Richard E. Grant), a bon vivant of infinite charm, no fixed address and ambiguous professional bona fides. If Lee is a rent-stabilized Dorothy Parker, Jack is a couch-crashing Oscar Wilde — utterly ignorant of literature but naturally witty and great fun to be around. He's game for anything, including serial fraud.

The scam arises by accident. Lee stumbles across — O.K., steals — a Fanny Brice letter and discovers that there's a modestly

remunerative market for that kind of memorabilia in the city's used bookstores. The problem is that the letters for sale are often boring, perfunctory notes valued mainly for the famous signature. Lee sets out to improve the epistolary record (and increase the asking price) by fabricating dazzling missives from the likes of Parker, Lillian Hellman and Noël Coward. (The film's title is a priceless bit of faux Parker.) It's an elaborate gift, but also, she begins to feel, a literary art form in its own right.

"Can You Ever Forgive Me?," directed by Marielle Heller is catnip for the bookish. It will also appeal to anyone with nostalgia for a generally underappreciated era in New York history, when the high glamour felt a little scuffed, the urban apocalypse had been postponed, and Manhattan abounded in bookstores and scruffy gay bars. Enough of these are still around — including Argosy Book Store on East 59th and Julius' on West 10th — to provide the film with locations and an atmosphere of lived-in cosmopolitan bohemianism. There were no Starbucks or co-working spaces back then. A person could breathe, and read.

Partly because the movie is so splendidly and completely absorbed in its characters and their milieu, it communicates much more than a quirky appreciation for old books and odd readers. Ms. Heller and the screenwriters, Jeff Whitty and the great Nicole Holofcener, resist the impulse to moralize about Lee's misdeeds or to sand down her rough edges. Like "The Diary of a Teenage Girl," which handled disturbing material with grace and good humor, "Can You Ever Forgive Me?" is neither judgy nor ethically neutral. Lee and Jack can be gleefully amoral, and will go to great lengths to justify their actions, but they don't entirely lack conscience or decency.

In what is perhaps a violation of the con artist's code, Lee befriends one of her marks, a bookseller named Anna (Dolly Wells). Anna is both a fan and a gentle kindred spirit, at least as far as literary taste is concerned, and the possibility of romance flickers between them. (The fact that Jack and Lee are gay is both crucially important and no big deal.) It's painful to watch Lee's instinctive recoil from the possibility of intimacy, but her stubborn aloneness is also a kind of integrity. The last thing we could ever do is feel sorry for her.

Which brings me back to where I started. Lee is interesting because she is so entirely herself, even as she makes her living pretending to be other people. The writers she impersonates survive because of their outsize individuality, a quality of brazen inventiveness that she is able to counterfeit because she shares it. Of course there's only one Dorothy Parker. It might also be said — Lee Israel herself might have said, in her own voice or Parker's — that it takes one to know one.

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Rafer Guzman, Newsday
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