

Daniel: The Movie

Four of Doctorow's novels have become film entertainments, but only for one of them, *The Book of Daniel*, did he write the screen play. The book was released in 1971 and the movie a dozen years later, and as the decades have passed, audiences for the novel and film have gotten further and further away from the historical event. I am referring, of course, to the arrest, conviction and execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in 1953 and the unmasking of their spying. I can easily imagine a 30-year-old watching the movie as long ago as 1983 but leaving it with little conception of the film. The dialogue of *Daniel* is rapid, many scenes are brief, and critical lines are uttered and replaced by less significant ones before their meaning can be absorbed. In both the novel and the movie, the Rosenberg family has been renamed Isaacson, and instead of two sons, Doctorow has given the parents a son, Daniel, and a daughter, Susan. Frequent scene-switching between the youth of the Isaacson children and their adult experiences deprives the film of an obvious dramatic center and further impairs understanding of the story. And decades of accumulating evidence, much of it not available when the novel and movie were written, has abolished the central conception of *Daniel*: an apparently innocent Jewish couple from mid-century New York was railroaded to a conviction in a kangaroo court and unfairly executed on charges of espionage. In the beginning and end of the movie, Paul Isaacson, the father, played by Mandy Patinkin, is dragged into the execution chamber at Sing-Sing as though he'd been the victim of a Stalinist interrogation. I am sure that never happened.

I think that departures from the novel undermine the movie. The Paul Isaacson of the novel was not a handsome man and probably had few prospects as an actor. Mandy Patinkin's youthful good looks distract us from the original character. Nor does Rosenberg seem to have been a devoted Jewish father, affectionately kissing his wife on the cheek and doting on his

children. In *The Book of Daniel*, the son renders his father with obvious repugnance, and if Rosenberg himself had been a conventional Jewish father, he would never have embedded his family in a network of Soviet spies. The parents' refusal to share names with the Justice Department insured their joint execution and deprived their sons of a normal upbringing, permanently affecting their lives. Rosenberg, according to the literature of the actual case, was an aggressive man who never shrank from combative political exchanges with other students at CCNY, where he acquired his degree in electrical engineering. Sidney Lumet, the director of the movie, builds up sympathy for the family by presenting one of his leads as a very decent man, which is inconsistent with the historical figure as well as the character in the novel. Lindsay Crouse, cast as Isaacson's wife Rochelle, is presented as ignorant of her husband's clandestine activities, a claim extensive evidence no longer supports. The execution scenes for the Isaacson parents are not included in the novel and have been added to the movie to stimulate audience sympathy. It all seems so unjust—unless a viewer knows the facts.

The film also departs from the novel in the rendering of the Isaacson son, Daniel, played by Timothy Hutton. In *The Book of Daniel*, Doctorow offers the reader the narrative of a deeply disturbed graduate student composing his version of family history in the Columbia University library. The movie begins and ends in 1967 or 1968 and follows much of the storyline of the novel, with flashbacks to the thirties, forties and fifties, which fill in essential domestic history. But if the Daniel we see in the movie is angry, the character in the novel is a psychiatric case. Timothy Hutton is obscene and lacerates other characters with ugly insults. The film seeks to build up sympathy for the son, a sympathy the novel nearly precludes. A modern audience can accept a certain amount of nastiness in a young man, especially when it derives from what is presented as the grossly unjust persecution of his parents, and when the figure is protective of his

vulnerable younger sister. The sick, abusive Daniel we find in the novel is obviously harder to excuse than the character crafted by the filmmakers.

Subsidiary roles in the film are very well done. Ed Asner turns in a fine performance as the Isaacsons' aged and kindly Jewish lawyer, Paul Ascher, trying not only to defend his clients but also to take care of their dispossessed children. Joseph Leon as Selig Mindish, central in the novel as the Isaacson's betrayer but a minor figure nonetheless, is effective as the mediocre dentist lusting after Isaacson's wife. Lee Richardson is excellent as the middle-aged, slovenly reporter writing about the case for the *Times*. Tovah Feldshuh plays Mindish's daughter, Linda, to great effect in her brief appearance at the end of the story, when the setting shifts from New York to Los Angeles. Most regrettable, however, is the recasting of the concluding scene of the novel, when Daniel confronts Mindish at Disneyland. He hopes to extract a confession from him, certain that another obscure couple played the treasonous role attributed to his parents. But in the movie, Daniel is taken by the Mindish daughter to the parents' retirement home, which sacrifices the sad and unforgettable comedy of Sadie and Selig happily careening with youngsters in their miniature cars at "autopia." Here the dialogue between Mindish and Daniel seems to be taken verbatim from the novel, but the effect would have been greater if the amusement park had been retained.

The story ends where it began, with a protest march in Washington against the VietNam war, another scene lifted from the novel. Doctorow sends Paul and his wife to the capitol (in the novel) to participate in the October 1967 "march" on the Pentagon. Robert Lowell and Norman Mailer appear very briefly in *The Book of Daniel*, a moment presumably traceable to the account Mailer gives of the event in *Armies of the Night*. Curiously, the conclusion of the film would have left an audience from 1983 with three eras of protest to contemplate—that of the 1930s, the

late 1960s, and then the phase of dissent that appeared after Reagan expanded defense spending and renewed his attacks on the Soviet Union in the first years of his terms in office. (The last phase, needless to say, is absent from the book, which was published nearly a decade before Reagan became president.)

Does the film treat the Isaacsons (or the Rosenbergs) as guilty? As in the novel, the matter is somewhat ambiguous. The Rosenberg sons, Michael and Robert, claimed for decades that their parents were innocent. Doctorow hides behind his characters in the novel, but a reader inevitably wonders if he does not agree. One lawyer in the film intones during the trial phase that "it's never been proven that secrets *were* stolen," but Daniel himself mutters that "nobody really knows what happened." I would wonder if a movie-goer from 1983 (or later) would have a clue as to what the government investigation was even about; it is not until mid-way through the movie (if not later) that Isaacson whispers to his wife that "Mindish has been arrested." Daniel offers the standard liberal interpretation that held sway for decades, until the claim was demolished by the Venona files: "They only arrested my mother to get my father to talk, to break my father." Robert Lewin, who adopted Daniel and his sister in the novel, faults Ascher, the Rosenberg lawyer, for conceding in court that government documents were stolen at all. Following the novel, he suggests to Daniel that the Justice Department coerced Mindish into making a bogus confession. But a moment later he adds, somewhat wistfully, "Maybe he [the father] *did* hold something back."

The fundamental weakness of the film, as I've said, is the constant cutting between past and present. The storyline moves from the late 1930s to the late 1960s, with scenes from the lives of the parents and the adult lives of the children jostling one another for the attention of the viewer; three actors play Daniel Isaacson at different stages of his life. The cutting may have

been essential to the story and reflects the narrative design of the novel; but it costs the movie a sense of focus, and those unaware of the background of the event are unlikely to have a distinct sense of the story.

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