

BOOK REVIEW

The Music of Chance

With only a handful of characters, some gothic trimmings, and a premise as easily summarized as a Bruce Willis movie, **The Music of Chance** tackles all those serious themes that American novelists aren't supposed to be good at anymore: **fate, loyalty, responsibility, the nature of evil, and the real meaning of freedom.**

Paul Auster's hero, Jim Nashe, is a 33-year-old with a penchant for reading Dickens and a passion for playing Schubert and Fats Waller on the piano.

Jim Nashe is a Boston fireman with a two-year-old daughter and a wife who has just walked out on him. Knowing he cannot work and raise a kid at the same time, he sends his little girl, Juliette, off to his sister's. Six months of sporadic visits pass and Nashe realizes that his daughter has begun to forget him. Suddenly, the father that abandoned Nashe as a child dies, leaving his son and daughter a large amount of money. Nashe, knowing that his daughter will be happier with her aunt, pays off all of his debts, buys a red Saab and spends a solid year doing nothing but driving back and forth across the country.

Equating money with freedom, and freedom with the open road, Nashe hits the highway. He drives for a year, sleeping in motels, eating at diners, living in the present, and **burning his bridges** (to do something with the result that you will not be able to return to a previous situation again, even if you want to) as profligately as he burns gas and oil. Eventually, his cash reserve **dwindles** (to gradually become smaller and smaller), and he's confronted with the dilemma of what to do, and who to be, once it's all gone.

But then, **serendipitously** (by accident), he picks up a vagabond named Jack Pozzi ("My friends call me Jackpot"). Young, scruffy, and genially egotistical, Pozzi turns out to be a gambler in desperate need of a **stake** (money that you risk as the result of a card game). Seems he's been invited to play poker with a couple of reclusive **oddballs** (someone who behaves in a strange or unusual way), an **optometrist** (someone who tests people's eyes and orders glasses for them) and an accountant.

Jim and Jack **hatch a plan** (form a plan etc in secret) to **fleece** the couple (to charge someone too much money for something, especially by tricking them) of ridiculously wealthy bachelors in a poker game. Of course, Flower and Stone, gained their fortune by gambling...in this case, by winning the lottery. In addition to purchasing a mansion, the two eccentrics have also bought ten thousand stones, each weighing more than sixty pounds. The stones were from the ruins of a fifteenth-century Irish castle destroyed by Oliver Cromwell; Flower and Stone intend to use them to build a wall in the meadow behind their mansion.

Then — oh, but you think you heard this story before? The older guy lends the younger guy the money, right? And the younger guy loses it all, right? Right. Every dime, and then some.

But here's where Auster gets sneaky, and where things turn unpredictable, and sinister. The optometrist and the accountant refuse to let Nashe and Pozzi leave their secluded Bucks County estate until the poker debt is paid in full. Under the watchful eye of an armed **"foreman"** (a worker who is in charge of a group of other workers) they're put to work building an absurd wall of 10,000 stones. Freedom is suddenly no longer just a word in a pop song or a hamburger jingle. And bad luck becomes as real, and thwarting, as an electrified fence. "You tampered with the universe, my friend," says Pozzi to Nashe, "and once a man does that, he's got to pay the price." The price, as both men ultimately learn, is exorbitant.

Unfortunately, the millionaires are not the lousy cardplayers the duo were expecting, and the plan backfires. Desperately trying to pull victory from the jaws of defeat, Nashe throws his car into the pot, only to lose that as well. Finally, the four agree on one more bet: they will cut the deck. If Nashe has the high card, he gets his car back; if Flower does, Nashe and Pozzi will owe them ten thousand dollars. Flower gets a seven. Nashe gets a four.

Now all but indentured to the millionaires, Nashe and Pozzi agree to a plan to work off their debt; they will build the wall for Flower and Stone, a meaningless wall that nobody will bother to see. For the rest of the novel, Flower and Stone are conspicuously absent. Nashe shrugs this off as fifty days of exercise, but Pozzi views it as nothing less than a violation of human decency.

The two men are watched over by Calvin Murks, the millionaires' tough but amiable hired man. When Pozzi takes a swing at Murks for cracking a joke about being too smart to play cards, Murks begins wearing a gun. Pozzi sees this as proof that he is nothing but a slave.

Even after the two men have completed working off their debt, the millionaires add on the charges the men have accrued as a result of living at the estate. Pozzi, convinced there is no way out of the contract, escapes the meadow. Nashe finds his young friend sprawled on the grass a day later, beaten into a coma. Murks claims innocence and takes Pozzi to a hospital while Nashe continues to work. Two weeks later, Murks tells Nashe that Pozzi checked himself out of the hospital and vanished, but Nashe is convinced that his friend died from his injuries.

Time passes, the wall grows and Nashe gets more and more obsessed with taking revenge on Murks, since Flower and Stone have become too distant to bear the immediacy of his hatred. When Nashe has completed enough work on the wall to pay off his debt, Murks and his son-in-law Floyd take Nashe out to celebrate. Nashe beats Floyd in a game of pool, but refuses the fifty dollars he has won; Floyd accepts this, saying that he owes Nashe a favor. Soon after, the three men pile into Murks's new car (Nashe's old Saab) with the slightly more sober Nashe behind the wheel. Nashe promptly takes the car up to eighty miles an hour and collides head-on with a lamp post.

Auster quietly raises disturbing questions of servants and masters, of loyalty, freedom and the inexplicable urge to kill.

This insightful novel is a taut study of the self-contradictory mind living by chance while thinking it can get away with anything.

In Paul Auster's world of fiendish (cruel) bargains and punitive whims (capricci), where chance is a shifting and powerful force, there is redemption in Nashe's resolute quest for justice and his capacity for love.

Auster's offbeat (unusual, especially in an interesting way) and strangely compelling black comedy invites speculation about the counterpointing of choice and chance, and carries resonances of Samuel Beckett.

The Music of Chance is an absurdist about the meaninglessness of the universe, it is a thriller with a conscience,

“Music of Chance” has been defined a black comedy or a thriller with conscience. Can you try to explain these definitions? Do you agree with one of them or both or none? Why?

In “Waiting for Godot” by Samuel Beckett, one of the main characters is named Pozzo. What kind of character do you expect him to be?

The Music of Chance

A Film Review by James Berardinelli

Rating: ★★☆☆ (out of ★★★★★)

United States, 1993

U.S. Release Date: 8/20/93

Running Length: 1:40

MPAA Classification: R (Language, mature themes, violence)

Cast: Mandy Patinkin, James Spader, M. Emmet Walsh, Charles Durning, Joel Grey

Director: Philip Haas

Producers: Frederick Zollo and Dylan Sellers

Screenplay: Philip Haas and Belinda Haas based on the novel by Paul Auster

Cinematography: Bernard Zitzermann

Music: Phillip Johnston

U.S. Distributor: I.R.S. Releasing

On the way to New York City, James Nashe (Mandy Patinkin) stops by the side of the road to offer a lift to a beat-up and **bedraggled** (looking untidy, wet, and dirty, especially because you have been out in the rain) stranger. This man turns out to be Jack Pozzi (James Spader), a professional gambler. As the two get to talking, Pozzi tells Nashe of a recent robbery that lost him the ten-thousand dollars he was going to use in an upcoming "sure thing" poker game. Intrigued by the idea of some quick, easy money, Nashe offers Pozzi a **proposition** (an offer or suggestion). He'll advance the ten-thousand if all profits get split fifty-fifty. The deal is struck and the two are off to the rural Pennsylvania residence of Flower and Stone (Charles Durning and Joel Grey), where the games begin.

***The Music of Chance* can be seen on many levels.** At its most literal, it's about the consequences of losing a poker game (building a gigantic stone wall). However, for those who peel back the straightforward plot to peer at what lies beneath it, more imposing and thought-provoking issues are revealed. *The Music of Chance* explores how one moment can forever alter -- and perhaps destroy -- lives. It also reinforces **the old saying that luck is too capricious a force to trust.**

At the centre of the story are three characters. James Nashe is the basic "nice guy" who believes in honouring obligations regardless of the cost. He is also inclined to accept far more of the blame than he deserves. On the other hand, his mismatched partner, Jack Pozzi, is unwilling to accept the blame for anything; he would rather shift it to fate, chance, or anything else he can make a connection with. Calvin Murks (M. Emmet Walsh) represents the crusty authority who keeps these two very different men together in a union that they don't want, but can't deny.

Metaphors abound, from the "wailing wall" to the "City of the World" being built by Willie Stone. In fact, there's so much symbolism that little in this movie has a single, straightforward meaning. There are times when the screenplay tries too hard to be intellectual, spouting such nonsense as prime numbers having souls, but these isolated instances in no way detract from the deeper meaning of the overall story. Character motivation and interaction are driving forces, and necessary for an understanding of everything that happens during *The Music of Chance*.

James Spader, cast against type, is completely believable as the unsavory, unlikeable Jack. M. Emmet Walsh does his usual "good ol' boy" routine with a sadistic twist. The standout, however, is Mandy Patinkin who, with little fanfare, captures our attention and sympathy with his unforced portrayal of James Nashe, the innocent victim trapped and battered by fate. **Nashe stands as a perfect example, if any is really needed, that life is never fair.**

The ambiguity of the conclusion is a potential weakness. Movies of this sort don't have to wrap up all their disparate plot threads for the whole to come together, but *The Music of Chance* would have benefitted from a little more sureness about how everything works out. Although admittedly not for mass consumption, the film may cause consternation even among some typical "art film" viewers. Nevertheless, despite the final scenes' lack of definition, this picture has such a mesmerizing cadence that it's difficult not to be fascinated, whether you understand what it all means or not. **The role of chance in human destiny is a compelling theme** that *The Music* **deftly** (skillfully) plays.

What does it mean that “luck is too capricious a force to trust”? In the light of the film how do you explain this?

What are the main differences between Nashe and Pozzi?

The film is said to be rich in symbolism. Can you detect any symbols and explain what they stand for?

Do you agree with the statement that “Nashe stands as a perfect example that life is never fair”?

The film critic raises the criticism of the film being ambiguous in its ending. Do you agree? If yes, why? If not, why not?

The film critic states that “the role of chance in human destiny is a compelling theme that *The Music of Chance* deftly plays”. Can you paraphrase this statement?

What are the possible readings of the film?