

The Station Agent Film Summary

The Station Agent by Thomas McCarthy

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Context

By the time Thomas McCarthy sat down to pen *The Station Agent*, he had already generated an impressive resume of achievements in both television and film. His television credits boasted not only a recurring role on David E. Kelley's acclaimed drama *Boston Public*, but also impressive guest appearances on several critically lauded shows, including *Law and Order*, *The Practice*, *Spin City*, *Ally McBeal*, *Ed* and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. McCarthy had also attained recognition for his appearances in several motion pictures, including *Conspiracy Theory* with Mel Gibson (1997), *The Guru* (2000), *The Last Shot* (2004) and the blockbuster hit *Meet the Parents* (2000), featuring Ben Stiller and Academy Award winner Robert DeNiro.

McCarthy's extensive experience paid off handsomely with *The Station Agent*, which the National Board of Review called "one of the year's best films." Influential film critic Richard Roeper described *The Station Agent* as "a pitch-perfect slice of life," and other critics found the story about the little man named Fin both irresistible and insightful. The film was nominated for three Screen Actors Guild Awards, including one for Outstanding Performance by a Cast in a Motion Picture. At the Sundance Film Festival, it received the Best Drama Audience Award as well as the awards for Best Screenplay and Best Performance by a Female Lead (Patricia Clarkson). At the IFP Independent Spirit Awards ceremony, the film was honored with both the award for Best First Screenplay and the John Cassavetes Award, a prize given to the best feature made for under five hundred thousand dollars. Beating out strong competitors such as *21 Grams*, *The Barbarian Invasions*, *Finding Nemo* and *Lost in Translation*, *The Station Agent* won Best Original Screenplay at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards. Considering that *The Station Agent* garnered such resounding accolades, it is relatively unsurprising that Miramax acquired distribution rights to the film for an estimated one and a half million dollars.

The Station Agent is a powerful motion picture about friendship and acceptance. Much of the film's potency can be attributed to the mesmerizing talent of the lead actors who play the three main roles. Interestingly, Thomas McCarthy specifically wrote the three roles for the actors who actually ended up playing the parts: Peter Dinklage, Bobby Cannavale and Patricia Clarkson. Needless to say, this was quite a novel and idealistic occurrence in the film world, but one that appears to have been very effective.

An active off-Broadway thespian, Peter Dinklage began his movie career in 1994, when he played the role of Tito in director Tom DiCillo's *Living in Oblivion*. Since then, he has appeared in numerous films, including *Human Nature*, with actors Tim Robbins and Rosie Perez and director Jon Favreau's *Elf*, in which Dinklage held his own against *Saturday Night Live* comedian Will Ferrell. In *The Station Agent*, Dinklage delivers a brilliant portrayal of a dwarf named Fin, who is torn between the desire to belong and the fear of being hurt.

Bobby Cannavale plays the unforgettable Joe Oramas, a bored, incessantly talkative and aggressively friendly hot dog vendor with a chronic inability to take a hint. Despite



never having formally studied acting, Cannavale has recently forged a strong reputation in both film and television. He has appeared in movies with Hollywood luminaries, including Denzel Washington and Angelina Jolie (*The Bone Collector*) and Richard Gere, Susan Sarandon and Jennifer Lopez (*Shall We Dance?*). Cannavale's television credits range from his role on *Third Watch* to his guest appearances on the Emmy-winning *Will and Grace*.

Patricia Clarkson embodies the character of Olivia Harris, a depressed artist who is separated from her husband and deeply traumatized by her young son's death. Widely applauded for her captivating screen presence and extraordinary acting ability, Clarkson, a graduate of the celebrated Yale School of Drama, has earned both an Emmy for her guest appearance on HBO's series *Six Feet Under* and an Oscar nomination for her role as Joy Burns in the film *Pieces of April*. Her acting portfolio also boasts guest appearances on the television shows *Frasier* and *Law and Order* and roles in many feature films, including *Miracle*, *The Untouchables* and author Stephen King's *The Green Mile*.

McCarthy wisely sat back and allowed these three talented performers to do what they do best: act. As Fin, Joe and Olivia, they form an "against all odds" friendship that is the core of his riveting drama, *The Station Agent*.



Summary and Analysis

The Station Agent opens with a railway scene. A long train passes through and Finbar ("Fin") McBride, a dwarf, is watching it go by as he smokes a cigarette and glances at his pocket watch. He returns to his small, simply furnished apartment and packs a little backpack. After putting on the backpack, he knocks on a nearby apartment door. An elderly African American gentleman with glasses, Henry Styles, opens it. Both men wear dark suits. They leave their apartments and walk next door to the Golden Spike, the model train shop where they both work. Fin begins his day by turning on a train display in the front window. After receiving the day's schedule from Henry, he begins to work on a model train.

Later in the day, a young boy comes into the shop to order a model train and notices Fin walking across the store. The boy gapes at Fin, but does not say anything. Protectively, Henry asks the boy if he has forgotten anything and the boy leaves. The next scene shows Fin walking down a sidewalk. Nearby, children are tossing a football. Once Fin passes by, one of the boys loudly makes several jokes about Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Fin says nothing; he merely continues walking. He enters a grocery store, where a couple stares at him and engages in humorous whispering.

When Fin stands in front of the checkout register, the cashier does not see him. She begins to speak to an average-sized male customer behind Fin. When the man points out that Fin is in front of him and should be served first, the cashier apologizes, saying that she did not see him standing there. Fin regards her with a cold, indifferent tolerance. It seems quite apparent that this is not Fin's first time experiencing such a humiliating episode.

The next exchange takes place in a bar. Fin and Henry discuss their evening plans. Along with their group of train aficionados, they will be watching a train-chasing movie filmed by Carl, one of the group's members. While Carl is narrating his film, Henry comments privately to Fin that Carl is quite a chatterbox. Fin grins slightly. The day ends with Henry and Fin on the rooftop, both of them smoking. They do not speak, but trains can be heard in the background.

In the next scene, Fin is again working in his area in the Golden Spike. Henry peeks in and informs him that it is time for lunch. Henry leaves and then Fin hears something fall. When he goes out to investigate, he finds Henry collapsed on the floor. During the majority of his screen appearances, Henry has been depicted smoking, foreshadowing the fatal tragedy that has now befallen the elderly gentleman. Henry's death at this point acts as the inciting moment in the movie: it is the key event that makes the subsequent story possible.

A meeting with Henry's lawyer, Mr. Tiboni, reveals that Henry has bequeathed Fin property in Newfoundland, New Jersey. It consists of one half of an acre of land with an abandoned train depot on it. Fin's apartment and the store have both been sold and he has only six weeks before all traces of his former life have vanished. Tiboni also



explains to Fin that the property in Newfoundland is pretty, but very remote and isolated; he tells Fin there is "nothing out there."

Approximately three weeks later, Fin closes the door to his former home and heads out carrying only his backpack and a small blue suitcase. He journeys by foot along the train tracks. When he finally arrives at the property he has inherited, he is drenched from walking in pouring rain. On the train depot's porch, he notices a mailbox that has fallen from its hook. After finding that the depot lacks both water and electricity, Fin quickly changes into dry clothes and uncovers a sofa that will function as his bed. Later, in the darkness, he stands outside and smokes.

The next morning, noise from outside awakens Fin. He walks across his yard and discovers a hot dog vendor, Joe Oramas, manning a mobile food wagon parked there. Joe is filling in for his ailing father. Once he spots Fin heading his way, Joe, who has been talking animatedly on a cell phone, quickly ends his call. Joe excitedly tries to lure Fin into conversation, but Fin is extremely distant and reluctant to give even monosyllabic responses. However, Fin does use the opportunity to ask Joe if a store is located nearby. After getting directions to a store, Fin returns to the depot with coffee from Joe's wagon. He tries to reattach the mailbox to the side of the depot but is unable to make it stay.

While walking to the store, Fin is almost run down by a distracted female driver, Olivia Harris, who has been digging in her purse and fails to see Fin until she is nearly on top of him. To avoid being hit, Fin leaps off the side of the road. Olivia rushes out to help him, but Fin angrily refuses her assistance as well as her offer to drive him to town.

At the convenience store, the "Good to Go," the clerk rudely takes Fin's picture; however, Fin does not say anything in response. He quietly pays for his purchase and leaves. Meanwhile, Olivia is buying a café con leche from Joe's wagon. Joe informs her that a "little guy" has moved into the depot and Olivia immediately recognizes Fin from the description. As she is driving back down the road, she spills her coffee on her hip and, in her panic, again almost runs over the returning Fin. This time, she is even more distressed and apologizes profusely. As he tries to recover both his groceries and his dignity, Fin's only response is to place his hands in front of himself to ward her off. A limping Olivia gets back in her vehicle as a bruised Fin walks towards the depot.

When Fin arrives back home, Joe is again speaking loudly into his cell phone. As before, he quickly ends his call, finding the approaching Fin more interesting. Joe asks Fin if he lives in the depot and expresses delight over the fact that he and Fin are now neighbors. He also takes in Fin's muddled appearance and asks him what happened. Fin tells him that nothing happened, then continues towards the depot. An undaunted Joe invites Fin to the Mill Lane Tavern for a drink, but Fin says no. This compels Joe to ask Fin if he drinks. Fin admits that he does drink, but that he does not like bars. Joe's solution is to fetch a six-pack from the store, but Fin again declines the company. Once he discovers that Fin is going for a walk, Joe tries to get an invite by remarking that he feels like he is "turning into a fat shit out here in the middle of nowhere." Fin expresses



that he still does not desire any company. Joe shakes it off and lets Fin know that he will be happy to go walking with him next time.

In the next scene, the camera focuses on Fin wearing his trusty backpack as he wanders along looking at abandoned trains. After a while, a young African American girl begins following him. Fin turns around and says hello, but the girl dashes away. That night, Fin is examining a document by the light of an oil lamp when he hears a knock at his door. He answers it to discover Olivia, who nervously jokes that she is safe because she does not have her car. She offers Fin a bottle of whiskey, calling it a "housewarming, sorry I ran you off the road" gift. The two drink some of the liquor from Fin's mugs.

Olivia's cell phone rings and when she ignores it, Fin reminds her that it must be her phone ringing because he does not have one. She glances at the phone, but does not take the call. Impressed by an old ticket box she notices in the depot, Olivia tries to open it and tumbles backward onto the floor. After staggering to the sofa and plopping down, Olivia questions Fin about the depot and he tells her about his inheritance. Olivia reveals that her young son, Sam, died two years ago. Embarrassed by her disoriented state, Olivia tells Fin not to look at her, closes her eyes and falls asleep on his sofa. When she wakes up, it is morning. Fin has slept in the bathtub the entire night.

The next morning, Joe is already outside when Olivia rushes from the depot. He humorously asks her if she has missed her train. Using a cup of café con leche as a way in, Joe goes to the depot and questions Fin about what happened with Olivia. He tells Fin that he has not been able to get anywhere with her in six weeks and expresses amazement that Fin seems to have achieved some sort of miraculous breakthrough in a mere twenty-four hours. Fin tells Joe that Olivia just brought him some bourbon. Just then, a ringing sound interrupts Fin and Joe, revealing that Olivia has left behind her cell phone. Joe is extremely impressed; after all, Olivia is an attractive woman. A customer appears at Joe's wagon, but Joe, determined to know all, yells for the customer to wait. Fin wants to return the phone and asks Joe where Olivia lives, but Joe suggests that Fin play hard to get. Before leaving, Joe tells Fin that if he and Olivia are doing anything later, he wants to join them. Fin quickly tells him that they have no plans, but Joe does not believe him and again conveys his wishes to accompany them. After complimenting Fin by calling him "the man," Joe returns to his truck.

Fin heads to Olivia's house to return the cell phone. As he nears her beautiful, multi-level home, the camera focuses on Olivia, who is inside painting and ignoring a voice talking on her answering machine. A male caller is pleading to speak with her and expressing his hope that she is well. A horn sounds outside and Olivia peeks out and swears in frustration. To avoid the unwanted sympathies of the horn-honking friend, Janice, Olivia hurriedly grabs a bag and pretends to be on her way out to conduct an errand. Janice points out the cell phone, which Fin has placed on the ground for Olivia to find, but Olivia seems as uninterested in the phone as she is in communicating with Janice.



After leaving Olivia's house, Fin visits the Newfoundland library and browses through books about trains. After selecting one, he heads toward the checkout desk. There, he nearly collides with a shocked young librarian, Emily, who lets out a loud scream. Emily explains that she had not noticed Fin's entrance and had assumed she was alone in the building. Once the situation calms down, Fin attempts to check out his book, but Emily informs Fin that she cannot issue him a library card without proof of Newfoundland residency. Suddenly, Olivia appears and offers to put the book on her account, but Fin politely declines the offer. As Emily looks on, showing apparent interest in the couple, Olivia apologizes to Fin for overstaying her welcome at the depot. Fin acknowledges Olivia's apology, but does not speak. Once he departs, Emily admits to Olivia her embarrassment about the way she reacted when Fin startled her in the library.

When Fin returns home, he finds the library book on his porch. After informing Fin that Olivia left the book for him, Joe calls Fin his "hero." Later that evening, Fin sets out to explore one of the abandoned trains. Again, the young African American girl appears and asks him what he is doing. Fin explains that he is examining the train car to find out more about it. In complete innocence, the little girl asks Fin what grade he is in. He states that he is finished with school. She then asks him if he is a midget; Fin says no. They introduce themselves to one another and the little girl's name is revealed to be Cleo.

The next morning, Joe begins brewing café con leche in his wagon and then knocks on Fin's door to wake him. Meanwhile, a noisy pickup truck with big lights pulls up near Joe's wagon. When Fin fails to answer the door, Joe returns to the wagon to greet the two male customers and prepare their coffee. They ask Joe how his father is doing and he responds. The men notice Fin leaving the depot and yell offensive remarks at him. They call him "Mini-Me," then allude to the character Tattoo from the television show *Fantasy Island* by screaming, "the plane, boss, the plane!" Joe tells them to "shut the fuck up!" Despite Joe's response, the men invite Joe to play softball with them and to bring the little guy. Joe ignores the invitation.

A bit later, as Olivia is driving to Joe's wagon to buy a café con leche, she spots Fin reading on a park bench. In exchange for a free coffee, Olivia agrees to drive Joe to the bench where she saw Fin reading. Joe and Olivia chat during the ride over, although Joe carries most of the conversation. Once they arrive, Joe tries to convince Olivia to get out and say hello to Fin, but she refuses. Joe approaches Fin alone and joins him on the bench. Joe notices Fin's notebook and asks him what it is about. For once, Fin responds, informing Joe that it is his train guide. With Fin's reply, the story takes a turning point, as Fin finally consents to allow Joe a glimpse of his personal life. Joe watches trains with Fin for a while and then they leave. After a bit, they notice Olivia getting groceries and Joe arranges for her to give them a ride back to the depot. She is not thrilled, but she gives them a lift nonetheless.

Back at the depot, Joe cooks a meal for the three of them and they sit at "Joe's Lounge," as he calls it. It is actually a set of patio furniture with four plastic chairs and a table. In his quest to make everyone happy, Joe offers Olivia and Fin a puff of his joint. They both decline. To stir up conversation, Joe asks Fin what he thinks of Amtrak; Fin



says he has no opinion, having never ridden on it. Surprisingly, Joe makes them connect hands to give thanks for the meal, but then delivers a somewhat irreverent prayer. He invites the others to contribute their own prayers, but both refuse. Joe takes it upon himself to carry the entire mealtime conversation. He asks Fin if there are train clubs for train fans. Fin explains that such clubs do exist and that members usually get together to watch films of trains. Joe serves the food while Fin describes typical train-chasing movies. Fin states that he is not a train chaser because he neither drives a car nor owns a camera. After receiving a phone call, Joe has to leave suddenly. Fin and Olivia are left with one another and both find silence more comfortable than the pretense of keeping up a conversation.

In the next scene, Fin (or "Sancho Panza," as Joe calls him), is walking "the right-of-way" along the railroad tracks with Joe trailing behind him. They return to the park bench to watch trains. Fin sits down while Joe throws rocks across the river. Later, as they walk through the town, they pass Emily, who is sitting outside the library. She asks Fin if he has received any proof of residency yet; Fin says he has not. Joe is astounded, expressing amazement that Fin has so many women attracted to him within such a short period of time. As the two are walking past the town bar, Joe again invites Fin for a drink. Fin says no once more and Joe tells him to get over the "bar thing."

Meanwhile, Olivia tries to visit Fin at the depot, but finds he is not at home. She notices a sign on Joe's truck saying that the wagon is closed. Olivia hears a voice coming from one of the abandoned trains and she follows the voice to Cleo, who is playing inside the train. Cleo asks Olivia if she is Fin's mother; Olivia responds that she is just a friend. Cleo invites Olivia to board the train and Olivia does.

During their walk back to the depot, Fin answers Joe's questions about different train routes. Cleo is sitting on the depot porch and tells Fin that a lady left him something. It is a video camera from Olivia. At this point, the mailbox can be seen attached to the front of the depot. Cleo asks what the camera is for and Joe tells her it is for train-chasing. Fin denies that this is the camera's purpose.

The following morning, as Joe is opening the wagon, Fin comes out of the depot wearing a yellow shirt. It is the first time he is shown wearing a shirt that is not white. Joe remarks that his lateness in setting up shop is due to his father feeling poorly last night. He gets Fin's help with the chairs and then asks Fin why he never sits in the lounge. Fin responds that he likes to read while he eats. Joe tells him that he can read in the lounge, but Fin argues that Joe will try to talk to him while he is reading. Joe promises not to interrupt Fin's reading, insisting that he will read as well. Unsurprisingly, Joe cannot restrain himself from talking for long; Fin, with a rare smile, reminds him of his promise to be quiet. Joe wonders aloud when they are going to walk the tracks again. Fin responds and then Joe picks up his cell phone and asks the operator for Olivia's number. This request causes Fin to look up from his book.

The next scene shows Fin, Joe and Olivia walking the right-of-way. Fin leads, followed by Joe and then Olivia, who expresses her concern about the safety of walking on the tracks. Eventually, the three take a break and sit down on the tracks. Fin shares his beef



jerky with the others. On the way back, Joe and Olivia switch places and Olivia trails Fin. Back at the depot, Fin explains the concept of walking the right-of-way, which relates to the government's seizure of private land to create a "right of way" on which to construct railroads for public passage. As they are talking, a group of soccer-playing children appears at Joe's wagon to ask for soda. Joe tells them he is closed, but agrees to play soccer with them. Olivia stares silently at the children and depression overtakes her. She jumps in her truck and leaves quickly without any explanation. Shortly after, the camera shows Olivia sitting alone in her bra and panties, staring sadly at herself in a mirror.

The somber scene with Olivia is followed by an exuberant one of Fin and Joe chasing a train in the hot dog wagon. Joe is driving at a relatively high speed and describing the experience while Fin captures the train images with his video camera. While Fin appears quietly thrilled, Joe is vociferously enthusiastic. After completing the film, Joe and Fin go to Olivia's house to screen it. As Joe cooks dinner and complains about the meager offerings of Olivia's kitchen, Fin and Olivia sit outside, dangling their feet in the lake. Olivia says that she is not accustomed to having people in the house, especially loud people. Fin states that the house is very nice and Olivia informs him that David bought it as a getaway place. Olivia then explains that she used to live in Princeton, but grew tired of people looking at her with pity in their eyes. She asks Fin why he moved to Newfoundland. He cracks a joke that sends both of them reeling: he responds that he moved there because he wanted to live near Joe. At this point, feeling left out, Joe begs them to come back to the house and talk to him.

The three eat a delicious meal, enjoy entertaining conversation and eventually watch the train movie while smoking pot. As usual, Joe is the life of the party, at one point even writing the message, "For a good time, call Joe" on Olivia's notepad. While they are watching the movie, Joe comments that trains are really cool. When Fin uncharacteristically responds by saying that horses are really cool, Joe confiscates the joint.

After the movie, they relax. Olivia lounges on the couch and Fin and Joe sprawl on the floor, the latter passed out comfortably. Fin and Olivia discuss life and love. Fin confesses his anger about being a dwarf and expresses his amazement that people are so interested in him because of his size. He explains that, ironically, he actually considers himself a rather boring person. Olivia then admits that she is still in love with her husband even though they are separated.

Fin mentions that it is probably time for him to leave, but because of the lateness of the hour, Olivia insists that he and Joe spend the night. Fin finds that he will be sleeping in Olivia's son's room. Once Fin is in bed, Olivia brings him a glass of water and a towel. Then she tells him that her son's death was caused by a fall from the playground monkey bars. She explains that she only looked away for a moment, but by then it was too late to save him. Fin and Olivia share a simple friendship kiss and she leaves the bedroom.



In the morning, Olivia's estranged husband, David, enters the house to discover Fin on the stairs. Just as David inquires about Fin's identity, Joe walks out of the kitchen eating a bowl of cereal. There is tension in the entryway. David is obviously confused about the presence of two strange men in his home. Olivia rushes downstairs and asks David why he has come to the house. David states that he has been trying to reach her, but that she consistently refuses to accept or return his calls. Fin and (reluctantly) Joe exit to wait on the front porch. Olivia and David continue to argue; the scene closes with their loud voices.

The camera next zooms in on Fin reading as Cleo approaches and invites him to come speak at her school. Fin informs her that this is something he is unable to do. Cleo, not understanding, hands Fin a permission slip and explains that he can come on any Friday he likes. Fin continues to refuse. Cleo becomes upset, saying that she has already told people he would come. Fin tells Cleo that he is sorry, but she storms away after yelling, "You're not sorry, because if you were, you would come!"

Joe approaches with two chairs and asks what caused the scene with Cleo; Fin does not answer. The two men sit and read on the porch. Finally, Joe brings up the subject of Olivia by saying he guesses that she won't be having coffee today. Again, Fin does not reply. Later, they end up sitting on top of a train near the depot. Joe is still thinking about Olivia and mentions that he did not like David. Then, unexpectedly, Joe begins to question Fin about his sex life, expressing particular curiosity about the heights of the women with whom Fin has had sexual relations. Fin firmly expresses a lack of inclination to discuss things of that nature with Joe and the conversation ends.

The scene switches to Olivia drinking liquor alone at a table in her house, apparently drowning in her own misery. Then the camera swiftly captures Fin, who is also sitting alone, but at a table in the depot. A train passes by, giving off brief flashes of light but ultimately leaving Fin in darkness.

The next day, Fin receives mail at the depot and is finally able to get a library card with this proof of residency. While Fin is at the library, Emily tells him that he has a nice chin. Later, while walking the right-of-way with Joe, Fin tells Joe about Emily's compliment; Joe finds it rather amusing. As Joe and Fin sit outside the "Good to Go," Olivia passes without saying a word to either of them. Joe invites Fin to accompany him and his father to the Mill Lane Tavern for a drink later and Fin finally agrees to come.

While in the convenience store, Fin overhears that Olivia has ordered groceries and offers to take them to her house. When Olivia answers her door, Fin, concerned, inquires how she is doing. However, she feigns ignorance about their friendship and treats him like a delivery person, closing the door in his face as soon as she pays for the groceries.

Frustrated, Fin marches straight to the tavern. Emily, who is there waiting for her boyfriend, sits next to Fin; soon after, her cell phone rings. She proceeds to have an angry conversation with her boyfriend, telling him not to worry about her because she has met up with a friend. After hanging up, Emily confides to Fin that she is pregnant



and that she has not told anyone else yet, including her family and her boyfriend. Meanwhile, Fin has been looking around the room for Joe, but there is no sign of him.

Emily and Fin exit the bar together. Emily offers Fin a ride home, but he turns it down. As they are leaving, Emily's boyfriend shows up. It is Chris, one of the food wagon customers who insulted Fin previously. Emily is still mad at Chris and does not want to speak to him. She tries to leave, but he pulls her back and causes her to stumble. Fin interferes in an attempt to defend Emily, but Chris pushes him against Emily's car. To prevent him from being hurt, Emily tells Fin to just stop it and leave. Fin complies, waving his arm harshly to shake off the blows to his shoulder and his pride. When he arrives at the depot and tries to close the door behind him, it refuses to shut all the way. In his anger, Fin slams it soundly and it finally closes. Once again, he finds solace in the sounds and lights of the trains that pass through the night.

The next morning, as Fin rearranges the seats in one of the old trains, Joe enters, bearing coffee. Joe apologizes for not showing up at the bar, explaining that his father had an emergency. He says that he tried to call the bar last night, but Fin had already left. Joe asks if Fin has heard from Olivia, but Fin is barely responsive. Then Joe asks Fin if he wants to do anything tonight; Fin answers with a very cold no. Joe becomes angry because he has already apologized and does not understand Fin's behavior. He wants to know what more Fin wants from him. In a disgusted tone, Fin replies that he just wants to be left alone. Offended, Joe stalks away, telling him to "be alone then."

Later, Fin leaves the depot and there is no sign of the food wagon. Joe has gone. Alone, Fin sits on the bench to watch for trains, but he does not stay for long. Next, he stands atop one of the old trains, just looking idly at his surroundings. He seems to find little pleasure in any of these activities now.

In a brief scene at Olivia's house, David's voice is again heard talking on the answering machine. However, there is no sign of Olivia. In his recorded message, David remarks that he is really starting to worry about her.

That night, the bells signal an approaching train. Opening the door to go outside, Fin discovers Emily standing on his porch. She apologizes for Chris's behavior, saying that he is really not a bad guy. Emily, who still lives at home, seems to be trying to get away from her family; she states that everyone there is freaking out about the baby. As is his custom, Fin listens attentively as Emily tells her story, but does not say much himself. When Emily asks Fin if a train conductor usually lives in a depot, Fin explains the difference between a conductor and a station agent. He tells her about the work station agents used to do: they not only delivered mail, but also sold groceries; some even cut hair! The atmosphere in the depot is warm and cozy and Fin and Emily share a brief, tender kiss. Afterward, Fin kisses her gently on the forehead and both of them go to sleep on the sofa. She is at one end; he is at the other.

Cleo is waiting outside the following morning. After witnessing Emily's departure, she asks Fin if Emily is his girlfriend. Fin says that she is not. Then Cleo asks about Olivia and tells Fin that she likes her. Fin says he does too. In the next scene, it is dark and



Fin's watch stands out brightly on a wooden table in the depot. The watch and table are shaking with the vibrations of a passing train. Fin reclines on the sofa, awake.

The next day, Fin, dressed in a yellow shirt and the ubiquitous backpack, heads over to Olivia's place. He sits outside her house, but does not try to initiate contact with her. He returns to her house the next day, this time wearing a white shirt. While he is waiting there, Olivia, screaming into the telephone, appears briefly on the porch. When Fin can no longer hear her voice, he walks onto the porch and calls out to ask her if she is okay. Extremely irritated, Olivia orders Fin to go away, saying that she is not his mother and not his girlfriend and that she wants him off her porch.

A very hurt Fin goes to the Mill Lane Tavern in an effort to drown out his pain. As he drinks shot after shot, he starts to imagine that people are staring at him. When Chris sends over a beer, Fin explodes and shatters his shot glass across the bar. In a drunken rage, he stands atop the bar and yells, "Here I am! Take a look!" He almost falls to the floor, but is rescued by one of the bar's patrons.

After his outburst, Fin staggers from the tavern and begins walking along the train tracks. After a while, he stumbles and ends up flat on his back. Out of nowhere, he hears a train. Slowly, he rolls over and sees the bright light of the train approaching him. He smiles into the light and the scene fades.

The next morning, Fin awakens in front of the depot. His watch is broken, but he is okay. In fact, Fin is better than okay. Fin's meeting with the train signals the film's denouement. From this point, Fin seems able to honestly see himself as he is: not just as a dwarf, but as a complete, whole and complex person. With his newfound strength, he boldly returns to Olivia's place and discovers her crumpled on the kitchen floor near an empty pill bottle. Olivia is distraught because someone close to her is having a baby, which reminds her how much she wants her own child, Sam, back. Fin embraces her and comforts her as she cries.

The next scene opens with a shot of train tracks advancing as though someone is walking forward along them. In the next short clips, Fin sits alone while Olivia is seen in a hospital talking to a staff member. Afterward, Cleo and Fin sit silently outside the depot as a train passes. Later, Fin cleans Olivia's house. While there, he phones Joe. He and Joe retrieve Olivia from the hospital and drive her back to her home.

By this point, Fin has changed his mind about speaking to Cleo's class. The moment he enters the schoolroom, Cleo gives him a big thumbs-up sign. Fin begins to read his speech about trains, but is interrupted by a boy who rudely asks how tall he is and then observes, "I'm taller than you." As the teacher removes the offending boy from class, Cleo calls the boy a jerk. The other children seem uninterested in Fin's height and begin to question him about blimps instead. Unfortunately, Fin possesses little knowledge of blimps, but he handles the situation with dignity and delivers a great presentation.

In the final scene, the three friends sit on Olivia's porch after a meal. Joe suggests dessert, but everyone is stuffed. Fin asks if anyone knows when blimps were invented.

Joe suggests that Fin visit the library and ask the little hottie who works there. Then, in characteristic fashion, Joe shares a librarian fantasy involving glasses falling off, hair tumbling down and books flying everywhere. When Fin comments that Emily does not wear glasses, Olivia tells him to buy her some because it will be worth it. They all laugh and the film ends with the friends sitting in comfortable silence.



Characters

Finbar McBride (Fin), played by Peter Dinklage

Description

Fin is a four-foot-five, scholarly gentleman who works in a train shop, the Golden Spike, with his friend and boss, Henry. At the beginning of the movie, Fin lives in a small apartment adjacent to his place of employment. Quiet by nature, he not only works on trains, but is extremely partial to them. He seems to seek out trains for companionship, almost as though they were human.

When his boss dies and leaves him an inheritance of one half acre of land in the small town of Newfoundland, New Jersey, Fin moves there and takes up residence in an abandoned train station on the property. Having just lost a person he considered his best friend, Fin keeps to himself and signals to those he encounters that he is not interested in forging any friendships. Despite his repeated efforts to preserve his solitude, he consistently finds himself surrounded by several intriguing, persistent individuals. As the days pass, Finn develops unique relationships with each of them. Over time, Fin's character and self-perception change as a result of these new friendships.

Analysis

Presumably, Fin has been gawked at and laughed at throughout his entire life. In the interest of self-preservation, he has surrounded himself with a protective wall of indifference. By attempting to live as a sort of hermit, Fin endeavors to keep that wall from developing any cracks or vulnerabilities. Fin's friendship with Henry, with whom he felt connected by an unusual fondness for trains, was obviously an exceptional case; however, following the painful loss of his friend, Fin's sense of isolation has grown significantly. When Henry's lawyer hints that the property Fin has inherited in Newfoundland is essentially a deserted wasteland, Fin is likely quite pleased because of his compelling desire to be alone.

Undoubtedly, Fin's Newfoundland plans did not include an encounter with a presence like Joe's. The two men emphatically contrast one another: Fin is shy and introverted and Joe is loudly extroverted. Yet as Fin repeatedly attempts to persuade Joe of his indifference, it seems clear that, despite his best efforts to the contrary, he still finds Joe's naïve perseverance somewhat amusing. It becomes evident that, even as he insists on refusal, Fin desperately wants to accede to Joe's offers of friendship and fun. However, Fin is constrained by his fear of how others will react to his dwarfism. Fin has experienced so many unpleasant human interactions in the past that he is unwilling to risk being hurt again. In time, he will discover that it is not his size that truly prevents him from fitting in, but rather his inability to fight his powerful fear of rejection or ridicule.



Joe Oramas, played by Bobby Cannavale

Description

Joe Oramas is an outgoing, thirty-year-old Cuban man with a talent for cooking and a gift for gab. In his father's absence, which is due to illness, Joe has been managing the family's mobile hot dog wagon for the past six weeks. Although he seems to sell more coffee than would seem possible given his desolate Newfoundland surroundings, Joe never appears to sell any hot dogs. A product of big city culture, Joe is bored out of his skull in his small, remote town. When salvation is delivered in the form of an interesting new neighbor, Fin, who virtually lands on his doorstep, Joe considers Fin's presence an enormous blessing.

Analysis

Although Joe sometimes tries to act the part of a shallow, cavalier playboy, his actions reveal that he is a sensitive, caring person. Since he abhors solitude, he finds it unimaginable that anyone, even Fin, would not similarly treasure his company.

As mentioned earlier, Joe resembles the proverbial book cover that fails to accurately reflect the book's contents. Although he is prone to make sexually suggestive comments, Joe still believes in idealistic, happy, even romantic endings. He demonstrates this by cleverly arranging for Fin and Olivia to have a private dinner at his "lounge."

Joe is also a childlike optimist who seizes each opportunity to live a full and pleasurable life, often enjoying a joint here and a beer there. He refrains from judging others until given due cause. Fin may be a rather unusual stranger in town, but Joe sees him only as the friend he has yet to meet. Joe never truly sways from either his desire or his hope to win Fin's friendship. Even before cementing his relationship with Fin, Joe extends himself to stop others from making derogatory comments about Fin. It is not until Fin yells at Joe on the train that Joe finally steps back a little. Even then, Joe does not leave of his own volition. He walks away only because Fin orders him to do so.

Olivia Harris, played by Patricia Clarkson

Description

Olivia Harris is a forty-year-old artist who has separated from her husband after her young son's accidental death. She has left behind her old life in Princeton, New Jersey and taken up residence in her vacation home in the town of Newfoundland. Aside from running a few errands from time to time, she maintains something of a hermitlike existence herself, barely exchanging words with her fellow townspeople.



Analysis

Olivia left Princeton because she was tired of people waiting and watching for her to have a breakdown. Others' repeated condolences had also begun to strain and unravel her nerves. Olivia chose to come to Newfoundland because of its isolation from the rest of the world. Her purpose in relocating there was not to make new friends, but rather to ensure her own survival. She does this by avoiding conversations or encounters as much as possible, even ignoring the telephone. In fact, even the stubbornly loquacious Joe tells Fin that he has barely gotten two words out of Olivia in six weeks. He has managed to discover her favorite coffee drink, but nothing else about her other than the location of her house. Because of this lack of communication, Joe believes that Olivia does not like him, but this is an inaccurate assessment. In reality, Olivia is simply so blinded by grief that she is not only unwilling to interact with others, but also virtually incapable of doing so. She even fabricates nonexistent errands to avoid speaking to a visiting friend and possibly stirring up memories.

When she almost injures Fin while driving, Olivia is forced from her self-imposed exile. Although she initially encounters Fin by accident (literally), she then recognizes her own pain in Fin's soul and finds herself compelled to emerge from seclusion. After overcoming some initial distrust, the pair seem to mutually acknowledge that they are each engaged in battling their own personal demons and, therefore, share a powerful bond. Just as it seems that Olivia, Fin and Joe are developing authentic and healthy relationships, Olivia's estranged husband, David, appears on the scene and forces her to revisit the past. Unfortunately, this is a battle she is not yet prepared to fight. Depression overtakes her and she attempts to take her own life. In the end, she is saved by the person she hurt the most: Fin.

Cleo, played by Raven Goodwin

Description

Cleo is an extremely intelligent and inquisitive young African American girl who befriends Fin and shares his high regard for trains. She takes such a liking to Fin that she even invites him to speak to her class about trains.

Analysis

In a sense, Cleo and Fin are both outsiders. Cleo appears to be the only African American child in the entire town and Fin is most certainly the town's only dwarf. Through this similarity, their friendship is strengthened. Mature for her age, Cleo is unwilling to sit back idly when Fin not only refuses to speak to her class, but also fails to supply a valid reason for declining her request. She reprimands him as though she is the elder of the two, forcing him to conduct some needed self-reflection. In this way, she is a minor catalyst in Fin's life.



Emily, played by Michelle Williams

Description

Emily is a young librarian who still lives at home with her family and is keeping her pregnancy a secret from both her family and her "bad boy" boyfriend, Chris. When Emily meets Fin, she is immediately attracted to him; however, she cannot freely act upon her feelings in her current situation. After Fin attempts to stop Chris from hurting her outside the Mill Lane Tavern, Emily visits Fin at the depot to apologize for Chris's behavior and to escape her family. The two kiss and spend a platonic night together.

Analysis

Although Emily is a nice person, she seems to have made a very poor choice of a partner in Chris. It also appears as though she is incapable of being alone. She still lives at home, despite complications there and has obviously found it difficult to leave an abusive boyfriend. In Fin, she finds someone sympathetic to whom she can unburden herself.

Henry Styles, played by Paul Benjamin

Description

Henry Styles is Fin's best friend, boss and father figure. He and Fin live in the same apartment building, which Henry owns. They also work together in Henry's train store, the Golden Spike. Although he is quiet, Henry is more animated than Fin and also extremely protective of him.

Analysis

Henry's affection for trains runs just as deep as Fin's. His life seems to revolve around his model train shop and his cigars. His fondness for Fin is reminiscent of a father's love for his son. As evidence, he leaves Fin an inheritance of land, including an abandoned train depot, in the town of Newfoundland. The most valuable aspect of Henry's gift is not the property itself, but rather the opportunity that the move affords Fin.

Chris, played by Jayce Bartok

Description

Chris is Emily's loud, unruly boyfriend, who seems to habitually break promises and offend others.



Analysis

Chris's immaturity often prevents him from differentiating between right and wrong. When Fin reasonably attempts to protect Emily from Chris's rough treatment, Chris's illogical response is to wonder what Fin's problem is. In contrast, Chris reveals a different side to his personality in the final tavern scene, in which he sends a beer over to Fin. Chris does not intend this as a malicious gesture, although Fin interprets it as such.

David, played by John Slattery

Description

David is Olivia's husband, from whom she has separated. He obviously still cares for her and phones her often, even though she does not accept his calls. After trying to reach her several times, but to no avail, he shows up unannounced at their home in Newfoundland. Finding her with two unknown men, he begins to wonder seriously about her behavior and emotional and mental condition. Although he has also lost a son, he is continuing to live his life, unlike Olivia.

Analysis

Danny, played by Joe Lo Truglio

Description

Danny is Chris's friend who makes rude jokes about Fin outside of Joe's food wagon. He is also the person who delivers the beer from Chris to Fin at the Mill Lane Tavern.

Analysis

Patty at the "Good to Go", played by Lynn Cohen

Description

Patty is the clerk at the convenience store in Newfoundland. Although she is a mature woman, she lacks the wisdom of most children. The first time Fin enters the store, she rudely takes his picture, implying that he is a freak of nature.



Analysis

Janice, played by Marla Sucharetza

Description

Janice is a concerned friend who visits Olivia after failing to hear from her for a while. She is left standing alone and confused when Olivia abruptly rushes from the house to conduct her fictional errands.

Analysis

Carl, played by Josh Pais

Description

Carl is a member of the train club to which Henry and Fin belong. At the club meeting, he narrates his own train-chasing movie, amusing Henry and Fin with his love of words.

Analysis

Louis Tiboni, played by Richard Kind

Description

Louis is Henry's attorney. He provides Fin with the details of his inheritance.

Analysis

Cashier, played by Paula Garcés

Description

Because of Fin's diminutive height, the cashier is unable to see him as he stands before her in the checkout aisle. Instead, she tries to assist the customer behind Fin. When she realizes her error, she apologizes sincerely, but the damage has already been done.



Analysis

Store Customer, played by Jase Blankfort

Description

When the cashier fails to see Fin at the grocery store checkout counter, the store customer politely makes Fin's presence known.

Analysis

Waitress in Tavern, played by Maile Flanagan

Description

Perhaps frightened by the anger evident in Fin's eyes, the tavern waitress continues to serve him drinks even though he has clearly consumed enough.

Analysis

Mrs. Kahn, played by Ileen Getz

Description

Mrs. Kahn is Cleo's teacher. She quickly removes the disruptive boy from her class after he interrupts Fin's speech.

Analysis

Jacob, played by Jeremy Bergman

Description

Jacob is the boy from Cleo's class who questions Fin about his height and then compares it unflatteringly to his own.

Analysis

Themes

Isolation

Isolation is a prevalent theme in *The Station Agent*. In fact, it is a force that surrounds and besets the story's main characters, including Fin, Joe, Olivia, Emily and Cleo. Unlike the others, Olivia and Fin must travel a lonely road before they realize the comfort that companionship can bring. The isolation they impose upon themselves functions as a protective shield. In the end, both realize that the one thing they are most struggling to ward off is the one thing they most need and that is the love of others.

Joe's violent dislike of isolation impels him to thrust himself upon others. Cleo's isolated status as one of few, if any, young African American girls in Newfoundland compels her to seek out friendships with adults. The difference between the way isolation affects these two characters and the way it affects Olivia and Fin is a major catalyst that helps cause transformation in the lives of the film's main characters.

Acceptance

Acceptance is another major theme in this film. Foremost, Fin must accept that he is not responsible for the behavior of other people. His dwarfism may make him shorter than most others, but it does not make him an inferior person. Until he is able to fully accept himself, he will continue to exist in a sort of comatose state devoid of both love and laughter.

The same is true for Olivia, who must learn to forgive herself and accept that her child Sam's death was not her fault. While it was a terrible, unfortunate accident, she did not cause it. Her failure to accept this fact causes her immense pain and prevents her from moving forward with her life. In fact, by succumbing to her weakness, Olivia nearly gives up her own life as well. It only through Fin's eventual acceptance of himself and his potential that Olivia's life is saved.

Age and Maturity

Sometimes age does determine maturity and throughout *The Station Agent*, there are scenes in which this principle is quite evident. The young boys playing football insult Fin without regard or reason. In Cleo's classroom, Jacob makes fun of Fin's height.

At the same time, there are even more instances in the film in which age is not the determining factor of maturity. Cleo is a young girl, but she does not have an issue with Fin's size. She is merely curious about him. She recognizes that he is a kind person and that is good enough for her. It is also good enough for her other classmates, who are attentive and respectful to Fin as soon as they realize that he is someone who is willing to listen and speak to them.



On the other hand, *The Station Agent* also reveals that one can be an adult and still behave like a child. At Joe's food wagon, Chris and Danny could have been the boys in the street playing football for all the childish insults they slung, unprovoked, at Fin. Patty, the store clerk, behaves like a child at a zoo, greedily snapping an unannounced photo of Fin without any regard for his feelings.

Joe's complex, childish maturity stands in contrast to these negative examples. Although Joe is loud and outspoken, he is by no means immature or uncaring. He is a discerning person who just so happens to enjoy a good time.

Primarily, the film suggests that age does not determine maturity; rather, intelligence does.

Style and Cinematography

Director Thomas McCarthy neither wastes his time nor fills his screen with words. The dialogue in *The Station Agent* is brief, but powerful. Some of the most remarkable scenes of the movie are left to an enthralling silence, which carries the film along at a gentle, yet seductive pace.

Although the movie was made for less than five hundred thousand dollars, a relatively modest sum in the film world, it does not suffer in the least from its small budget. For the most part, the sets are sparse, but they serve to reflect the characters' personalities and mindsets. The best example of this is the train depot that becomes Fin's home. The fact that it is unpainted and barely furnished does not concern him. His interest lies not in its external appearance, but rather in the life that has flourished within the depot and continues to live through it.

McCarthy brilliantly uses light and color throughout the movie to illustrate change and reflection. Through the light of the train approaching him as he is collapsed on the tracks, we witness Fin's coming to terms with his own life and identity. Fin also dons a yellow shirt, in contrast to his standard white one, when he begins to truly open himself up to others. In this case, the yellow is used both to reveal Fin's desire to change and to represent the transformation that is already occurring inside of him.

In addition, the flashing white lights of the passing trains are used to represent personal reflection. Fin frequently reflects upon his new life and relationships, while Olivia does the opposite, attempting to avoid reflection because of the pain it causes her.



Motifs

Death

Although only one person actually dies during the movie, death plays a prominent role in *The Station Agent*. As long as Henry remained alive, Fin would have stayed safely ensconced within the refuge of the train shop. As it happens, Henry's unexpected death launches Fin's journey toward self-acceptance, serving as the impetus Fin needs to interact with others and with the world. As contradictory as it sounds, Henry's death forces Fin to live.

Sam's death crushes Olivia emotionally and destroys her marriage. As a result, Olivia plunges into an uncontrollable downward spiral. She begins drinking heavily and tossing aside everyone who cares about her. The one person she cannot bring herself to discard completely, though not for lack of trying, is Fin. He, too, has experienced the pain and loss that accompanies the death of a loved one.

Train Watchers

The Station Agent suggests that there are two types of people in life, those who ride trains and those who watch them go by. The characters who live in Newfoundland, New Jersey, are generally train watchers. The town basically exists in stasis; most of its inhabitants appear to have no idea that different types of people and places exist outside of their small, secluded environment.

Fin is a huge fan of trains, but he never seems to have ridden on one. He loves trains, but has never chased one. He and Olivia wish to live in the world, but they also wish to have no contact with it.

Friendship

Friendships abound in *The Station Agent*. They are a major motif in the film, which hints that people who seem most unlikely to share a bond often discover that their lives are greatly enriched by one other. For instance, take a noisy, tall, attractive Cuban and a quiet dwarf who describes himself as boring: can they actually be friends? Toss in a reclusive artist who only wants to be left alone and that sounds like a combustible mix. However, as it turns out, these three "incompatible" people together arrive at the realization that their friendship can help make almost anything bearable.

Fin and Cleo's friendship is also characterized by an interesting dynamic. Fin recognizes that Cleo is a charming girl and takes to her immediately. Although Cleo is equally curious about Fin, she relates cautiously to him at first until she can confirm that he is a good person. After he passes her test, not even his refusal to visit her school can make her lose faith in him for long.

Emily and Fin's relationship represents another type of friendship in the film. Emily is drawn to Fin's kind and quiet personality. She recognizes that he is someone who listens without judgment and does not scheme to take advantage of her.

Significantly, all of these friendships occur because Fin consistently offers something different and valuable to each person involved in them, whether it is new experiences or knowledge, companionship, a concerned listener, or needed support.

Symbols

Trains

Trains are so omnipresent in the film that they seem to have their own dialogue. Primarily, they represent a connection between people. Henry and Fin were united by their love of trains, as were the members of the train club. Joe, Olivia and Cleo also grow interested in trains and their curiosity aids in the development of their friendships with Fin. In Fin's case, trains often represent an escape from the outside world. They have a present to observe and a past to discover and Fin can easily become immersed in their "lives" without ever having to deal with the future, or with anyone else.

Fin's Watch

Fin carries an old, gold pocket watch. While he uses it to track the passage of time and check for the passing trains he observes, the watch actually symbolizes the lack of change in his own life. Even when he worked with Henry, Fin always followed the same daily routine. He went to his job, smoked cigarettes, admired trains and occasionally hung out with Henry. He never tried to establish new friendships or experience different things. He was always a train watcher and never a rider. When Fin has a near-death experience and breaks his watch, it is as though he is finally able to stop accepting the patterns that have bound him for so long and make some needed alterations in his life.

The Mailbox

In *The Station Agent*, the mailbox on the front porch of the depot represents Fin's wavering resistance to the world and desire to be alone. If his primary objective in life is to be a recluse, then he would have little need of a mailbox, because recluses are not known for their efforts to facilitate contact with the outside world. After Fin establishes a relationship with Joe and Olivia, the camera reveals that he has finally succeeded in attaching the mailbox to the wall of the depot. Fin had attempted to place it there many times before, but it had never stayed in place.

The Yellow Shirt

The day after Olivia drops off the video camera, Fin comes outside wearing a yellow shirt. It is the first time he is shown wearing an article of clothing that is neither black nor white. The yellow shirt represents the fact that Fin is no longer viewing things in a regimented, "black and white" way. He is now willing to remain more open to new experiences and relationships.



Essay Questions

How does Fin's desire to be alone contrast with the idea that he lives in a train station depot?

Using examples from the film, explain how silence is its own form of dialogue.

Compare and contrast the friendships that both Joe and Cleo have with Fin.

How are Cleo and Fin alike?

Describe and discuss Olivia's various attempts to sever all ties to her past.

Although Joe often assumes the manner of someone who does nothing but play, give some examples of "the real Joe."

Discuss ways in which the town of Newfoundland, New Jersey, appears to be a relic of the past.

Fin is inseparable from his backpack. Beyond the obvious purpose of carrying things around, why does Fin always have it with him?

What purposes does the old train near the depot serve?

Explain why the beer that Chris sends over is the "last straw" that pushes Fin over the edge.