

Adapting To Hollywood

An author of average America finds Hollywood hiring with each passing novel

I'm calling California to get a hold of Tom Perrotta. I mean, where else, right? After receiving an Oscar nomination for co-adapting the screenplay to his novel *Little Children* and the previous success of *Election* once it became a film, you'd think we'd be lucky to ever see him on the East Coast again. Probably part of his little plan from the start. But then I start to realize nobody in their right mind would have written a biting satire about a conspicuous high school election to get in with Hollywood—heck, they have a difficult time making money off “real” political films, or has everyone you know seen Rod Lurie's *The Contender*? Then I also vaguely recall, as I dial, that 415 is the area code for literary San Francisco, not love-it-or-leave-it Lala land. Finally, once I start chatting with the friendly Garwood, New Jersey-raised author, whose taking a much-needed break at the four-star Hotel Monaco, I'm fully convinced this whole movie thing has just been one big, albeit lucrative, accident.

“John Cheever was a major influence,” Perrotta reveals in a tone which seems to modestly downplay any of his own writing contributions. “But Sherwood Anderson's work is incredible. Their characters were unique but always had something each of us could relate to.” Perrotta proceeds to sound off on other admired page-turning greats, from Willa Cather to John Irving, and they all have another strange thing in common—ignore *The Cider House Rules* and they're about as successfully adaptable to the big screen as Napoleon's troops were to the Russian front, a far cry from where it appears Perrotta's career is heading. Still, it's the communities they illuminated, he says, that truly connects their work to his own. “You have to remember that Cheever had the world of Connecticut commuters and Cather had the farm people, so I learned that wherever you lived you could find funny and interesting stories.”

And that, just as if we had stepped off the New Jersey Transit, takes us to where Perrotta lived. A postman's son, he was a middle child of three, struggling to make his voice heard in a town whose population has yet to tip over 5,000. “Garwood was a working class town before more prosperous areas like Cranford and Westfield, and we even got bussed to Kenilworth,” he recalls. “An earlier book of mine, *Bad Haircut*, was all about my

experiences of trying to find my place growing up in New Jersey. The average kid named Buddy is me and he seemed to fit with an average town like Garwood.” Even querying Perrotta on the top memory of his hometown brings about something so average you’d almost think he just wrote it rather than lived it. “It seems weird,” he admits, “but it would have to be when we got our first McDonald’s. That’s when I felt we really went modern.”

Perrotta would be far from average in his schoolwork and bound for Yale, though his writing aspirations plummeted post-graduation, writing three books before one even saw the light of a publisher’s press. “It was 10 years of doing a fair amount of writing and not getting far—I had written *Bad Haircut* and *Election* and they just sat around. I honestly wasn’t sure I would even make a go of it at all.” Like numerous aspiring authors, he toiled as a writing teacher, but at least he could feel unappreciated from the lecterns of his alma mater Yale and, later, Harvard. Finally, *Haircut* did find a publisher, along with small success and, reading from another of his works at a writers conference, a scribe in the audience connected him with producers who ultimately saw a movie in *Election*. Matthew Broderick and some unknown named Reese later and Perrotta’s, well, not unappreciated anymore.

In fact, *Little Children* made the *New York Times* notables in 2004 and, now, his latest book, *The Abstinence Teacher*, has been released to soaring praise such as “extraordinary” from that aforementioned *Times* and “virtuoso” yielded by the *Washington Post*. From the opening pages of *Teacher*, it’s clear Perrotta hasn’t changed—happy to say—still examining small town life, this time in the form of whether/how much sex education should be taught in schools. Gallantly, the author refuses to cheat, looking at many stances on the issue, especially in the form of a sexy character who’s actually for the abstinence side of the fence. “For me, it’s not just about writing on culture war to tell us what we already know: that the red and blue states have different ideas of what’s right,” Perrotta says. “I wanted to create a situation that brought people from two sides of the divide together and make it about characters who unexpectedly find out they have a lot more in common than they realize. People need to talk to each other so they can learn they’re not the strangers they thought they were.”

And, it turns out, Perrotta is not the stranger to the East Coast one might think he is either. He informs me it’s soon back to his home in

Massachusetts and his wife, writer Mary Granfield, and his 13-year-old daughter Nina and 10-year-old son Luke.

As for *The Abstinence Teacher* becoming a movie—was there any doubt?—he’s adapting it right now for the directors of Oscar darling *Little Miss Sunshine*. “I would prefer to keep novels and screenwriting separate,” he offers, “but, I have to admit, it was *Election*’s success as a movie that gave my books the attention they deserved.”