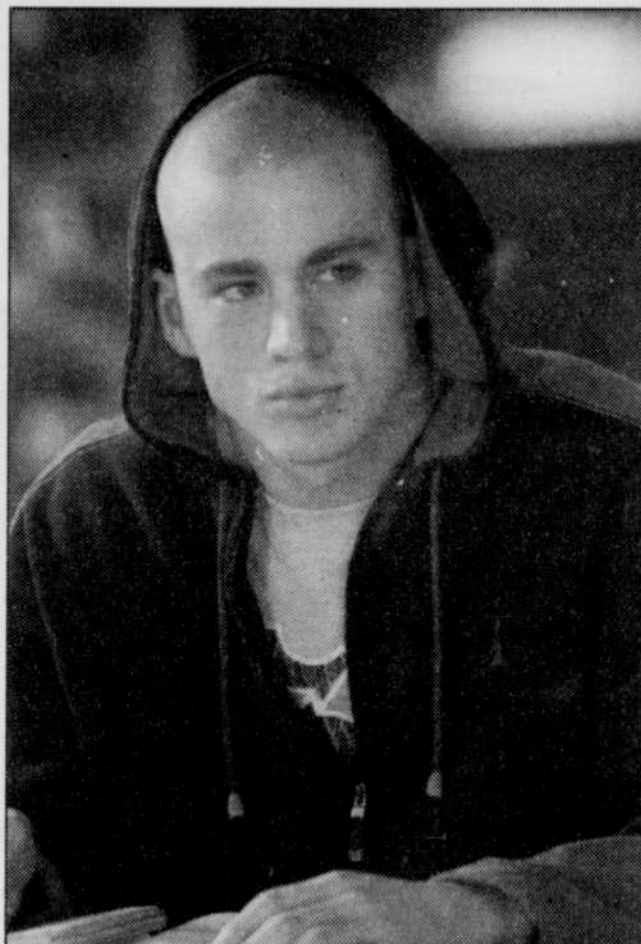




Abercrombie & Fitch model Channing Tatum makes his big-screen debut in *Coach Carter*

## Coach Carter

Despite recycled conventions from *Hoop Dreams* and *Lean on Me*, only the most cynical moviegoer could watch this inspirational and life-affirming tale without being moved to tears. Based on the true story of Ken Carter (the commanding Samuel L. Jackson), the film follows the high school basketball coach as he whips into shape an angry and undisciplined team from a California ghetto. With a fine cast of newcomers (including Abercrombie & Fitch model Channing Tatum and rapper Ashanti), *Coach* moves in unexpected directions, even

taking a bold pro-choice stance. A feel-good slam dunk. **A**

—Floyd Sklaver

## Fear and Trembling

A Belgian woman signs a one-year contract to work as an interpreter in Japan, where she lived until the age of 5. Little does she know what's in store for her at Yumimoto Corporation—a strong anti-foreigner atmosphere (sample line: “Your odious pragmatism is like a Westerner!”), an abusive chain of command and a supervisor whose degradation borders on sadism. Based on the too-good-to-be-true story of Amélie Nothomb, this insightful film belongs in the company of *In the Company of Men*, *Office Space*, *Haiku Tunnel* and *Working Girl* as another dysfunctional-workplace masterpiece. **A**

—Jim Radosta

## In Good Company

Who knew that the folks behind *American Pie* and *That '70s Show* would be responsible for 2004's best film? Writer/director Paul Weitz cements Topher Grace's transformation from TV to movie star in a challenging role: After a Murdoch-esque magazine takeover, a shallow twentysomething suddenly is bossing around a man old enough to be his father (Dennis Quaid)—and winds up dating the guy's daughter (Scarlett Johansson). Weitz establishes a strong moral code that is reminiscent of *Good Will Hunting* and *Jerry Maguire*, but I'm hesitant

to draw any comparisons—because this film belongs in a class all by itself. **A+**

—JR

## Meet the Fockers

If you still titter at how “Focker” sounds like “fucker,” if you never tire of jokes about boobies, poopies and male nurses, then you STILL won't enjoy this disastrous sequel to *Meet the Parents* starring Ben Stiller and Robert De Niro. All the elements of comedy are in place—including the dream team of Dustin Hoffman and Barbra Streisand as the titular couple—but the laughs are MIA. Sure, it's not every day that you see Tootsie on the toilet or Yentl's breasts covered in whipping cream...and let's keep it that way. **D-**

—JR

## Virgin

Move over, Mary. There's a new immaculate conception in town.

*Virgin*, a low-budget independent film written and directed by Deborah Kampmeier, is the engrossing and often frustrating tale of a teen-age girl named Jessie (Elisabeth Moss of *The West Wing*). A stray sheep in a family of Christian fanatics, Jessie drinks Jack Daniels, shoplifts and throws crucifixes across her bedroom. She may seem beyond redemption, but she's the only one in town who's kind enough to listen to the mysterious prophecies of a weird itinerant woman who would fit right into a David Lynch film.

One night she gets wasted at a school dance, and she ends up alone in the woods with a horny male classmate. She passes out, and the fellow decides to have sex with her anyway. Weeks later, Jessie hears God telling her that she's carrying the Christ child. She truly believes that she is a virgin, for she has no recollection of the drunken encounter in the woods.

Though it's not saturated with queer content, *Virgin* does have a compelling lesbian twist. Jessie befriends Frances, a sensual older woman who puts the moves on Jessie while they're out driving one night. Compared to the earlier sex scene in which Jessie is basically raped, this contact is tender and fulfilling for both women. The Sapphic subplot is not developed further, but it does represent a rare moment of clarity and happiness for Jessie.

The theme of love and solidarity between women also emerges in a scene where Jessie cheers up her despondent mother (Robin Wright Penn) by kissing her and dancing with her.

Many of the unknown actors have a wood-en style that limits the impact of this provocative material. But Moss—an Independent Spirit Award nominee for Best Actress—has a captivating screen presence, bringing to life an off-kilter character who would seem absurd in less talented hands.

The filmmaking has an amateurish quality at times, especially when the camera shakes like the cinematographer is on uppers. These faults aside, *Virgin* is a challenging, worthwhile film about religious conviction and its consequences. **B**

—Stephen Blair

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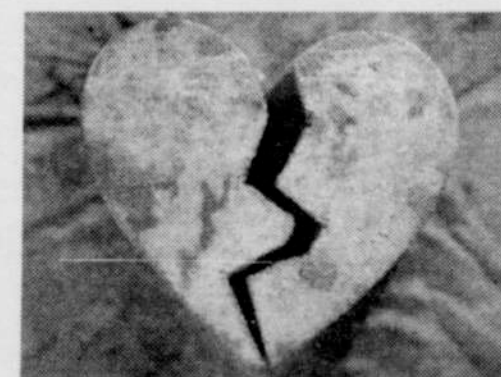


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