



Chris (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) meets Gary (Matthew Goode) in *The Lookout*

Damaged Goods

Gordon-Levitt shines in heist thriller

THE LOOKOUT: Written and directed by Scott Frank. Cinematography, Alar Kivilo. Music, James Newton Howard. Starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Jeff Daniels, Matthew Goode, Isla Fisher and Carla Gugino. Miramax Films, 2007. R. 99 minutes. ★★☆☆

Once known just as that kid from *3rd Rock From the Sun*, Joseph Gordon-Levitt has, over the last few years, built a name for himself with unexpected, affecting roles: a teen hustler in Gregg Araki's *Mysterious Skin*; a high school gumshoe tracking down his ex-girlfriend's murderer in Rian Johnson's debut feature, the sure-handed teen noir *Brick*. Now, in the directorial debut of screenwriter Scott Frank (*Out of Sight*, *Minority Report*), the versatile and engaging actor has a part that calls to mind Guy Pearce's tense turn as Leonard in *Memento*: a memory-challenged, wounded young man trying to piece together a life from what's left in his scarred head.

But memory issues aside, *The Lookout*'s Chris is a far cry from anyone in *Memento*. A former star athlete, Chris got his head injury in a terrible car crash which killed two friends and seriously injured his girlfriend. Chris, who was driving, now can't remember things; he jots down dates and times and facts on a small notepad. He can remember how to drive, but not how to make coffee, a fact which some may see as an inconsistency — but memory is a notoriously tricky thing, impossible to clearly define, which allows for a bit of leeway in the film's depiction of Chris' condition.

Chris' life is not what it used to be: He lives in a small apartment with Lewis (Jeff Daniels), a blind musician. He works as the night janitor at a small bank, pushing his trolley of cleaning tools and ticking off chores from a to-do list written on a piece of cardboard. He goes to class to work on his event sequencing; he goes home and tries to make dinner, but finding the can opener is beyond him. It's a painfully limited life, and when Chris meets Gary

(Matthew Goode, of *Match Point*) at a local bar, the slightly older man's open nature and sly charm are a lure for Chris, who misses a life of friends, girlfriends and normality. Of course, it doesn't hurt that Gary has a lovely lass tagging along, a former stripper (Isla Fisher) who goes by Luvlee Lemons and seems to have a thing for Chris. With bait this sweetly sexy, it isn't long before Chris is caught up in Gary's scheme, enlisted for his memory issues and his job.

The Lookout is light on the twists and turns and heavy on the atmosphere (a lushly depicted, seemingly half-empty small town supposedly in Kansas — though Manitoba stands in) and two captivating performances. Goode's Gary is a small-town would-be criminal whose motivations are somewhat foggy — except that he's got one thing figured out: "Whoever has the money," he tells Chris, "has the power." Manipulative, selfish and conniving, Gary seems depressingly familiar. But of course it's Chris we root for even as he repeatedly stumbles and screws up. Gordon-Levitt's dimpled face, expressive and kind, makes Chris a sympathetic character even in the middle of an embarrassing outburst or failed pick-up attempt. He's a young man stuck wanting to be the child he was before his life changed, before the rest of the world (including his wealthy parents) dismissed him as hopelessly damaged.

Frank's film is both heist thriller and character-driven drama, a sharply written, elegantly crafted piece of work that, though it has a few worn spots (the uncertain departure of Luvlee, for one), is one of the best things to hit theaters this year. Tense, smart and graceful, with a delicious emphasis on the capabilities of a solid story, *The Lookout* is more than a showcase for another stellar performance by Gordon-Levitt — but even if that were all it was, it would be worth it.

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