

The Guardian

The Bookshop review - boldly sombre drama puts Britain to rights



Emily Mortimer plays the quietly heroic shop owner at the heart of this fascinating Penelope Fitzgerald adaptation

By [Peter Bradshaw](#), June 29, 2018



Quietly polite heroine ... Emily Mortimer in The Bookshop. Photograph: Allstar/Zephyr Films

The Spanish film-maker Isabel Coixet brings an interesting, unsentimental detachment to this odd tragicomedy of provincial life. She refuses the familiar grace notes of comedy and sugary romance in favour of something more awkward and angular. Coixet has herself adapted this from the semi-autobiographical novel by [Penelope Fitzgerald](#) about an amiable young widow who comes to a remote coastal Suffolk town in the late 1950s, buys a dilapidated property there and enterprisingly converts it

into a bookshop. She makes a success of it, largely by stocking Nabokov's *Lolita* – thus incurring the envious displeasure of a local grande dame who had herself wanted the property for a self-aggrandising “arts centre”.

Emily Mortimer plays Florence Green, the woman of quietly polite heroism at the story's centre, [Patricia Clarkson](#) sports an expression of unfathomably queenly displeasure as her enemy, Mrs Gamart, and [Bill Nighy](#) plays the bibliophile recluse, Mr Brundish, who admires Florence's courage and takes her side in this battle. He has an alarming habit of setting fire to the dustjackets of his books and so is predictably a very big fan of [Ray Bradbury's Fahrenheit 451](#). The prominence of that book gives something ominous to the movie's narrative direction.

It is a strange, subdued, rather miserable film, interestingly perceptive on conformism and philistinism as a way of life, and on the disconcerting wiles the inhabitants use in order to thwart Florence's entirely reasonable plans. She is as baffled and dismayed as Kingsley Amis's Jim Dixon is by the politics of university life. James Lance is unsettling and amusing as the oleaginous BBC producer Milo North who is a louche presence in the town, flirtatious towards Florence in an asexual and unappetising way.

Perhaps only a non-British film-maker could have brought out the strangeness of this story; it concludes by suggesting that everything has been about the glory involved in fighting for books and literary culture – and there is finally a rather pious invocation of John Berger. But this isn't quite what the story has been about. It's more to do with postwar Britain's cold war of generation and class.