

# The New York Times

## Review: In ‘The Bookshop,’ Seeking Calm, Finding Conflict

Bill Nighy and Emily Mortimer in “The Bookshop,” a film directed by Isabel Coixet. Greenwich Entertainment

By [Jeannette Catsoulis](#), Aug. 23, 2018



The Spanish director Isabel Coixet might have been the best thing to happen to “The Bookshop,” a gently disruptive adaptation of [the 1978 novel by the English writer Penelope Fitzgerald](#). A more conventional filmmaker might have nudged this scathing attack on class entitlement in the romantic-comedy direction that early scenes seem to tease. Instead, Ms. Coixet highlights the undertow of subtle savagery in her genteel material, giving its picturesque setting — an

English coastal village in 1959 — a more sinister, cynical cast.

Because of this, the tale of Florence (Emily Mortimer), a young war widow who opens a bookshop in this deceptively peaceful location, becomes more urgent and far more touching than we expect. Almost immediately, old-money forces align against her in the form of Violet (Patricia Clarkson), a grande dame who wants the store’s historic premises for herself. And as Violet — every utterance a scalpel sheathed in velvet — schemes to evict her, Florence finds an unlikely ally in Mr. Brundish (Bill Nighy), a reclusive misanthrope and avid reader.

Few actors can convey entire landscapes of emotional pain like Mr. Nighy. In contrast to the parochial power-mongering, his character’s near-silent connection with Florence is an oasis of long, meticulously choreographed moments that are enormously affecting. Their relationship is emblematic of a movie whose greatest pleasures often seem to derive from what fails to happen, the showdowns and declarations that hang tantalizingly in the wind.

If the plot prominence of Ray Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451” and Nabokov’s

“Lolita” suggest a movie more adamant about the transformative power of fiction than this one, “The Bookshop” still grows on you. Wistful but never sentimental, it quietly turns the fortunes of one little store into a comment on the fate of many.

### The Bookshop

**Director** Isabel Coixet

**Writers** Isabel Coixet, Penelope Fitzgerald (novel)

**Stars** Emily Mortimer, Bill Nighy, Patricia Clarkson, Hunter Tremayne, Honor Kneafsey

**Rating** PG

**Running Time** 1h 53m

**Genre** Drama