



# fugitive pieces

Autumn  
Season  
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## Review by Wally Hammond, Time Out:

This adaptation of Anne Michaels's 1996 poetic novel about survival, death, memory, inheritance and the role of art and learning is far more than honourable. Director Jeremy Podeswa's Holocaust movie plays, pleasingly, more like a meditative mood piece than the usual literary memorial. In many ways, it is the film's suffusion of genuine emotion and lack of histrionics which win a victory over the director's conventional style – the warm but trite honey and mahogany tones of old remembered interiors, even the holiday-ad picaresque of the film's more buoyant, Greece-set later stages.

In a film of multiple flashbacks and flash-forwards, Podeswa focuses more on the first of the novel's two protagonists: Jakob is a man 'living with ghosts' since the rest of his family were rounded up by the Nazis, never to be seen again. He's played by two actors: Robert Kay as the traumatised Polish-Jewish boy of the 1940s and Stephen Dillane as the abstracted adult Toronto writer from the '60s to the '80s. Both performances, man and boy, are highly internalised but still sympathetic and engaging. Both, too, are upstaged by the fine Serbian actor Rade Serbedzija, who is highly moving as the stoic archaeologist who saves the boy in Poland and takes him to safety in Greece and later Canada.



Podeswa is to be congratulated, too, for his restraint in the film's (many) moments of pathos, as is composer Nikos Kypourgos for his nurturing, understated score, which helps make this 'conversation with the past' one of the most delicate, approachable and rewarding Holocaust movies of recent years.

## Review by Leo Goldsmith, indieWIRE:

Nostalgic, deeply felt, and refreshingly astute, *Fugitive Pieces* is something of a rare bird these days—a big-budget, transnational historical drama that actually justifies its scope and subject matter with more than visual opulence. On the surface, it looks like the kind of mainstream art-house fare that marries historical romance with a superficial exoticism; with its meandering sense of space and time and its rich sensual engagement, Anne Michaels's novel has drawn comparisons to Ondaatje's *The English Patient*, and similarly Podeswa's adaptation will draw comparisons to Minghella's film. But what might have been an overly sentimental romance for uptown crowds is saved by its clear intelligence and its readiness to tackle the history and representation of the Holocaust in ways that are not at all facile.

*Fugitive Pieces* begins with trauma and separation: Born to a Jewish family in occupied Poland, Jakob Beer barely escapes as Nazis kill his father and abduct his mother and sister. Miraculously, he flees into the archaeological dig of Athos Roussos, a visiting scholar who adopts him and smuggles him back to his (also occupied) Greek isle and later to Canada, where Athos is to teach at a university. Much later, as a writer bouncing between Greece and Canada, Beer remains haunted by his family's mysterious (but likely horrific) fate and thus attempts to reconstruct what he does not know, to act as archaeologist of those events of his life that he himself did not witness.



Pirouetting through Beer's life, the film employs voiceover not as expository score-keeping, but as a poetic and, I dare say, even scholarly counterpoint to what's onscreen. To be sure, the film delivers jaw-dropping seascapes and enviably languid Mediterranean afternoons—oscillating between the grey, watery dimness of Toronto and Poland, and the gold-blond light of Zakynthos—but it balances these with a surprising seriousness about history and memory, companionship and love. The film recalls the recent work of Terrence Malick, even if Podeswa's use of voiceover narration is slightly more conventional, adopting a confessional, and less purely evocative, air.

This is to say that *Fugitive Pieces* is satisfying and deeply engaging where it might have stopped at being simply florid.

Much of this is thanks to Podeswa's assured tone, which manages to relate Anne Michaels's source material in a way that only occasionally seems bookish or expurgated. Translating the debut novel of an accomplished poet to cinema can be no easy task, but the film manages to give enough attention to its many characters, like Jakob's neighbours, themselves survivors of the Holocaust who seem doomed not to outlive the bitterness of their experience.

As Athos Roussos, a warm, but no less conflicted father figure, the mesmerizing Rade Serbedzija offers a nice 180 from his turn as the oily Mr. Milich from *Eyes Wide Shut*, and Ayelet Zurer's *Michaela* provides a maternal sensuality that eventually awakens Jakob from his writerly (but admittedly quite cushy) exile. Most importantly, Stephen Dillane is smartly cast as Jakob—the actor's mix of intelligence and vulnerability sustains a voiceover that could easily have become monotonous or maudlin. His boyish looks allow one to overlook his otherwise anomalous Irish brogue and keep even a late-breaking sex scene (complete with succulent apricots and toe-sniffing) from seeming too overblown.

In some ways, the film is a Holocaust story without the Holocaust, like Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* though of course with an entirely different intent. What Jakob, like Lanzmann, attempts is to unearth his family's experience indirectly, through records and the testimony of others, and through ghostly hallucinations and reconstructed memories. But Jakob's project is one fated to irresolution, and as his life and work progress it becomes clear that he will never satisfactorily learn the fate of his mother and sister. Unlike a lot of films about the experience of the author (Julian Schnabel's *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* being only the most recent), Podeswa's film effectively demonstrates the emotional mechanics of writing, how Jakob's work functions to mitigate the scars of his early trauma and help him move on. In this way, what's most daring about *Fugitive Pieces* is that it broaches not only how to remember the Holocaust but also how to forget it, or at least how to invoke its ghosts without becoming one.