

profiles



In *The Young Poisoner's Handbook*, director Benjamin Ross carefully uncorks one of Britain's most inventive killers.

Like Graham, the antihero and humble narrator of the *The Young Poisoner's Handbook*, 31-year-old director Benjamin Ross is unassuming, polite, good-natured, perhaps even a bit dull compared to his Hollywood counterparts. But that's where the analogy ends.

In his deliciously ghoulish film, which opens this month, the neatly-dressed, cadaver-white Graham (Hugh O'Connor) slowly poisons to death his admittedly cloying mother and abusive uncle.

It's a black comedy with the anal O'Connor doing a subtle homage to Bud Cort's deadpan turn in *Harold and Maude*. An advance review in *Variety* suggested the film was so successful in presenting the killer's frame of mind that more timid audiences might be turned off. The fact that it is based on a true story is perhaps the only reason viewers won't dismiss a fantastic turn of events: the government imprisons Graham for his crimes, then "rehabilitates" him (*à la* *A Clockwork Orange*), and finally sets him up in a factory job where he can lay his hands on his favorite poison.

"That isn't a story you'd make up," avers the Oxford grad, while adding in Graham's defense, "It's not that he's without love or energy or even virtue—it's that it's so misdirected. He thinks he wants a normal life, but what does that mean? It's a duff, nine-to-five job in a factory, and evenings at the local pub. And if that's the price of normalcy, maybe becoming a famous poisoner is a better option."

Mind you, Ross has never gotten away with murder himself, but, despite a passel of cautious producers, he claims that the more delicate scenes in *Handbook* managed to thwart the cutting room floor. "I didn't lose any vomit shots," Ross says brightly. "I was keen to keep as much of it as possible." —Michael Giltz

PRIVATE
benjamin

19
17
22
16