

Unreliable memories

by [Matthew Prins](#) in the [June 6, 2001](#) issue

Leonard (Guy Pierce) is running, but he can't remember if he is being chased or if he is the chaser. Leonard spits in a drink; just minutes later, he gulps it down, not remembering his expectionation. Leonard has some problems. Since being hit on the head during an attack on his wife, Leonard can only remember events from two time periods: before the attack, and within the past five to ten minutes.

In *Memento*, director Christopher Nolan presents Leonard's experience to the audience in those same five- to ten-minute segments, with one twist: the segments are in reverse chronological order. The film's inverted path manages to put viewers as close to Leonard's predicament as possible without confusing them. When the film starts and Leonard sees a note telling him to kill Teddy, we have exactly the same information that Leonard has: we know Leonard wrote a note to himself that told him to kill Teddy, and that's all we know. There is constant excitement in watching Leonard do as much as possible before he forgets why he's doing it.

Memento would be an impressive instance of film storytelling even if it had nothing important to say, but it does. While many films in the past few years have played with chronology, *Memento*'s triumph is to use the nonlinear structure to embellish the theme--which is the clash between our need to trust ourselves and our inclination to tell ourselves only what we want to believe.

Early in the film, we see a Polaroid that Leonard has taken of a woman. The Polaroid has two sentences written on it, and one has been crossed off. Is the readable sentence, "She will help you out of pity," true? What is the crossed-off message, and why is Leonard keeping himself from reading it? If Leonard doesn't trust a previous opinion he had of her, can he trust this current one, or will it, too, be crossed off? And most important: does everyone mentally keep little Polaroids of people with pithy statements underneath? Like Leonard, we can bend our memory of events and truths to protect ourselves--an ability that may save us from mental anguish but is likely to hurt those who care about us.

The final scene especially is a stunner: it brings up questions about the lengths we go (up to killing) to recover from tragedy. *Memento* shows how the healing process can cripple as much as it cures.

Anyone clamoring for *Ally McBeal: The Movie* might settle for *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Here is another charmingly insecure woman near age 30 looking for love and sex (order TBD) while wackiness erupts around her. Men with normal lives and normal girlfriends drop normality to be with her and her lovable neuroses. And like *Ally McBeal*, when the heroine has an emotion, the soundtrack ensures that it is not lost on less astute viewers. When Bridget (Renee Zellweger) is sad because she's all by herself, she naturally sings "All by Myself."

Zellweger has been at the center of talk about *Diary* not as much for her performance as for her ability to gain 20 pounds for the role (and to lose 30 afterwards). But her English accent is right on--and she doesn't overplay it--and her neuroses are more charming than Ally McBeal's. If Zellweger doesn't quite project the intelligence that is revealed in Bridget's diary, the humanity she shows in her relationships with her suitors (Colin Firth and Hugh Grant) and her father (Jim Broadbent) more than makes up for it. Grant, Firth and Broadbent acquit themselves nicely; Firth is particularly good playing a character inspired by his own performance in the 1995 film of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Unfortunately, the humor quickly wears thin. The film uses the material of nearly every TV comedy: pitfalls, misunderstandings, and most important, humiliation. Bridget's humiliations are never private: they are always in front of those she cares most about. She answers the phone call from her mother with "Sex goddess." She slides down a fireman's pole and shows her butt on live television. The problem with all this is that Bridget starts seeming pitiful. And that's not funny.