

Oppenheimer is an unrelenting stream of bombastic vignettes in need of a narrative chain reaction

Out of all this summer's blockbusters that have had film buffs chomping at the bit, few (really just one, actually) have elicited hype as visceral and sustained as Universal's *Oppenheimer* biopic from director Christopher Nolan. With its sizable fleet of A-listers doing mid-20th-century accent work, a complicated historical figure at its center, and a respected auteur steering the ship, *Oppenheimer* has all the making of a summer blockbuster destined to continue dominating this year's film discourse for months to come.

But for all of its explosive moments of grandeur and unsurprisingly powerful individual performances, *Oppenheimer*, as a whole, plays like a chaotic assortment of frantic vignettes coming from a storyteller who's far too focused on the performance of sage profundity rather than sussing out the real thing.

Inspired by Kai Bird and Martin J. Sherwin's seminal 2005 *Oppenheimer* biography, *American Prometheus: The Triumph and Tragedy of J. Robert Oppenheimer*, *Oppenheimer* is an account of the events that led to its eponymous theoretical physicist becoming one of the most lauded, hated, and infamous men in human history for his role in developing the atomic bomb. *Oppenheimer* commits most of its energy to chronicling the US's race to develop nuclear weapons during World War II and the subsequent political fallout Oppenheimer weathered afterward

as he began to advocate for nuclear nonproliferation.

Like *American Prometheus*, though, Nolan's new film also understands the importance of illustrating what kind of idiosyncratic, sexually frustrated, and politically engaged person Oppenheimer was in his pre-fame days – a time when he was still learning just how much of an influence he and his intellect could have over others. Long before he was being grilled by the Gray Board, gracing the covers of *Time* magazine, or directing the Manhattan Project laboratory in Los Alamos, New Mexico, Oppenheimer (Cillian Murphy) was an exceedingly brilliant but profoundly awkward young man looking for meaning in the arts and sciences.

Equal parts ensemble drama and stealth thriller, *Oppenheimer* frames its famed subject as a kind of human catalyst who – both in spite and because of his eccentric mind – innately radiates a kind of animating energy that compels most everyone around him into various kinds of action. It's that energy that first pulls people like acerbic botanist and high-functioning alcoholic Katherine "Kitty" Puening (Emily Blunt) – Oppenheimer's eventual wife – and depressive psychiatrist Jean Tatlock (Florence Pugh) – his eventual longtime mistress – into his orbit. That energy's also what makes so many of his peers gravitate toward him during his years coming up through academia and an important part of what puts him on the radar of Major General Leslie Groves (Matt Damon) as he begins building the brain trust destined to power the Manhattan Project.

But there's a chaos to its overall narrative structure that makes the film play like an assortment of overengineered individual scenes that only coalesce into something concrete occasionally before the movie shifts its focus and attempts to repeat the process to varying degrees of success.

At the same time the movie's trying to illustrate how Oppenheimer's left-wing political sensibilities and youthful

experiences with labor organization informed his adult worldview, it's also digging into his love life and the professional jealousies of Oppenheimer's peers that made him both a threat and someone to look up to. All of that is deeply important context for the film's quick-fire scenes set during the mid-'50s as United States Atomic Energy Commission commissioner Lewis Strauss (Robert Downey Jr.) heads up hearings designed to strip Oppenheimer of his security clearance and deeply discredit him in the public eye.