

# The Holdovers

**David Hemingson discovers  
the heart within a grouchy tutor**

**By David Somerset**



**Current Cinema**



David  
Hemingson

Given that he's been working as a writer and producer since 1995, it's a little surprising that David Hemingson's first produced feature credit is *The Holdovers*. But what a credit it is: one that saw him working in close collaboration with respected director Alexander Payne (*Sideways*, *The Descendants*). And even though this is Hemingson's film screenwriting debut, he's been very much in demand in the TV sphere, with credits on the likes of *Just Shoot Me*, *Family Guy*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Black-ish* and *The Catch* and as the creator of series including *Kitchen Confidential* and *Whiskey Cavalier*. Indeed, it was a potential small-screen project that put Hemingson on Payne's radar in the first place. He had written a pilot for a series called *Stonehaven*, drawn heavily from the writer's own life. Set in a New England prep school in 1980, it was the tale of a blue-collar, lower-middle-class kid who attends a prep school to bond with his estranged father, who works there.



It was a project Hemingson's longtime agent—who these days is the writer's manager—loved but had little idea of where to set up, so he maneuvered it into the hands of another client, who knew Payne from film school and was aware he'd been looking to develop a school project. Seems Payne was interested in the subject because he was partly inspired by Marcel Pagnol's obscure 1935 French comedy drama *Merlusse*, about a strict, smelly teacher with a glass eye who has to care for a group of pupils staying at school over Christmas vacation. When Payne called a bleary-eyed Hemingson, the writer had just arrived on a flight back to Los Angeles from the Prague location of *Whiskey Cavalier* and picked up a good-news-bad-news message: Payne liked Hemingson's pilot but didn't want to make it. Instead, he asked if Hemingson would be interested in writing a different movie—about an ocularly challenged, odiferous teacher stuck looking after students at a prep school during winter break. The answer, as *The Holdovers* suggests, was an enthusiastic yes, bringing to life the story of the grouchy but principled Paul Hunham (Paul Giamatti) at Barton Academy, who is tasked with watching over the titular students whose families don't bring them home over Christmas 1970. Prime among the young men is the brainy, rebellious Angus Tully (newcomer Dominic Sessa), who resents having to spend more time around his least favorite teacher—and the feeling, at least at first, is mutual.





The movie did not happen right away, though, as Payne had other movies in the works (which either didn't come to fruition or ended up helmed by other filmmakers, such as the recent Jamie Foxx/Tommy Lee Jones drama *The Burial*). Part of the development process involved Hemingson spending lots of time in discussion with Payne about what he wanted in the script. And though the writer, who began his career in entertainment law before transitioning to screenwriting, is a self-described nerd who honed his outlining skills as a showrunner, his traditional method of approaching a script had to bend to his new collaborator. "Alexander is a phenomenal filmmaker. He's most interested in thoughts and feelings and what he calls 'the emotional brake fluid,' which is what stops and starts characters. That doesn't translate as effectively to outlines," says Hemingson. "He didn't want to see outlines—he wanted scenes. That put the pressure on me to go, *Okay, I need to know the story as best I can*, and so what I would do initially was send him short stories I would write. And he's very midwestern—very polite, very sweet. He'd say, 'There's a lot to like here,' even when he didn't like something. I got the dynamic, and eventually I broke a story. Then I would do these incredibly detailed outlines [for myself] because that's how I write. But I never showed them to him."







Hemingson can pinpoint around 50 drafts of the script where changes were made, though only 20-25 of those represented what he calls “tectonic shifts” in the story. While Paul and Angus were already present in basic form in Payne’s pitch, it was Hemingson who contributed the character of Mary Lamb (*Dolemite Is My Name*’s Da’Vine Joy Randolph), the head cook of the school, whose only child, Curtis, a recent graduate of Barton, was killed in Vietnam. She’s inspired by her own mother, a nurse who worked all hours to provide for her son after divorcing his father.

With Angus drawn from Hemingson’s own emotional truth, he was a character the writer absolutely needed to get right. And he is quick to recall the scene that let him know when he had it dialed in: It’s the moment that cracks everyone up in the trailer, when Angus, flouting Hunham’s warnings, runs across the school gym, leaps over some equipment and injures himself in the process. “Up until then, we know him as a pugnacious, brilliant but difficult creature. He’s a Holden Caulfield type,” Hemingson says, in a nod to the protagonist of the J.D. Salinger novel *Catcher in the Rye*. “But I was trying to find something that would do two things—reset [the audience] and drive them closer. And the idea of him dislocating his shoulder and then lying about who he was at the local hospital to help Paul stay out of trouble drew Paul into his lie, and so now they’re complicit in a secret. That drives greater intimacy [cinematically]. When you have a secret with somebody, that changes you, and it’s the two of you against the world. He goes from wiseass 16- or-17-year-old to hurt little boy, and we were able to strip away all of his snarkiness, posturing and attitude that we see early on and get down to this busted kid, which is what opened the character up for me.”



A key scene that enabled him to lock into the Paul Hunham character—even before Giamatti, who worked with Payne on the five-time Oscar-nominated (including one win) *Sideways*, had agreed to play the role—takes place over a trip to Boston. Angus begs to go, and Mary convinces Hunham to bring him along under the guise of an educational field trip. It ends up an emotional watershed in terms of the pair’s burgeoning friendship—or at least détente—as it strips away some of Hunham’s layers. He and Angus encounter an old classmate of the teacher’s, and Hunham, despite his insistence on truth, flagrantly lies to cover the lack of progress in his personal and professional life. Angus plays along but confronts him soon after in a convenience store (a “package store” in Hemingson’s Connecticut vernacular), where Paul is buying some gin.

The result is a story of Hunham’s younger days, when a school roommate cheated off him but accused him of plagiarism, and the incident ended with Hunham hitting him...with his car. It’s both funny and illuminating—and precisely Hemingson’s intent. “At that point, Hunham says, ‘Okay, you want to know the truth? Here’s the truth.’ That scene was just them walking around looking for booze to keep it active and interesting, but I think in the character’s mind, his attitude is, *Fuck it*, and he opens up,” the writer says. “And that’s why when Angus takes off in the movie theater afterward, Paul is so shattered. He runs up and says, ‘You conniving little shit. Have you been waiting for this? Have I revealed everything to you for no reason? Because you were working me this entire time?’ That issue of trust and disclosure and betrayal going through the movie was important to me.”

