



The Boys Are Back

(Australia - U.K.) A Miramax Films (in U.S./U.K.) release presented in association with BBC Films (U.K.)/Screen Australia, South Australian Film Corp., Hopscotch Prods. (Australia), of a Tiger Aspect Pictures (U.K.) production, in association with Southern Light Films. (International sales: HanWay Films, London.) Produced by Greg Brenman, Tim White. Executive producers, Peter Bennett-Jones, Clive Owen, David Thompson, Jane Wright. Co-producer, Bella Wright. Directed by Scott Hicks. Screenplay, Allan Cubitt, based on the memoir "The Boys Are Back in Town" by Simon Carr.

Joe Warr - Clive Owen
Laura - Emma Booth
Katy - Laura Fraser
Harry - George MacKay
Artie - Nicholas McAnulty

By [JUSTIN CHANG](#)

The pain of divorce and the tragedy of a parent's death supply the raw emotional materials of "The Boys Are Back," making it all the more impressive that director Scott Hicks steers clear of the maudlin and the manipulative in his sensitively wrought adaptation of Simon Carr's 2001 memoir. The story of a man suddenly forced to be a better dad after his wife's untimely death, this is polished yet authentically moving, widely accessible arthouse fare whose marketers would do well to target family audiences along with the usual prestige-picture crowd. Miramax release opens Stateside Sept. 25.

Carr's onscreen alter ego is British expat Joe Warr (Clive Owen), now working as a sports journalist in Australia. A lovely opening sequence -- in which Joe drives along the beach with his 6-year-old son, Artie (Nicholas McAnulty), perched dangerously on the car's hood -- reps just one example of Joe's more permissive parenting policy ever since his wife's passing.

What follows is a lengthy flashback that fills in the details of Joe's marriage to beloved second wife Katy

(Laura Fraser), cut sadly short when she succumbs to cancer. But the mourning period is all too brief, as Joe quickly learns that the business of life -- work, groceries, dishes, laundry and other mundane obligations -- tends to chug on even when time seems to have stopped.

Overly familiar narrative devices -- including Joe's voiceover and visions of Katy hovering over his shoulder, offering maternal advice from the beyond -- prove initially worrisome. But Hicks and scribe Allan Cubitt wisely keep these devices to a minimum and focus instead on the central relationship, which is complicated by workaholic Joe's uneasiness with full-time fatherhood, plus the fact that Artie is too young to grasp the full import of his mother's death and often acts out as a result.

Joe's solution is to instate what Carr's memoir describes as "free-range" parenting -- a radical rethink of conventional child-rearing methods that enforces as few rules as possible, instead stressing the father's role as an encourager of risk. The stakes increase, as does Joe's failure rate, when Harry (George MacKay, "Defiance"), his teenage son from his first marriage, comes to Australia for an extended visit. Joe views this with some apprehension at first, and indeed, Harry's arrival brings an entirely different set of father-son issues to the surface.

Having recently helmed tony literary adaptations ("Hearts in Atlantis," "Snow Falling on Cedars") and a foodie romance ("No Reservations"), Hicks here delivers an intimately scaled character piece that many will consider his finest work since 1996's "Shine." Besides an intuitive feel for contempo parent-child dynamics, embracing the sweet, still moments as well as the raucous ones, the filmmaker evinces an adroit sense of dramatic balance, generously coaxing emotion from the material without pushing too hard.

Avoiding histrionics yet revealing the full measure of Joe's grief at quiet, wrenching intervals, Owen brings his leading-man charisma to bear on a warmer role than he usually takes on. His rapport with McAnulty is well played and observed, while MacKay makes Harry a vital addition to both the family and the film itself, especially in the deeply consoling final passages.

The distaff side of the equation is well handled by Fraser; Julia Blake as Katy's mother, whose relationship with her son-in-law is both supportive and contentious; and Emma Booth as the requisite attractive single mom who catches Joe's eye.

The Warrs' cluttered abode reps a distinctively homey piece of production design, set against a sprawling Outback landscape (the pic was primarily lensed on South Australia's Fleurieu Peninsula), bathed in warm, summery light and granted a stunning widescreen showcase by d.p. Greig Fraser. An interlude set and shot in Blighty gets cooler, grayer treatment.

A selection of tracks by popular Icelandic band Sigur Ros adds emotional ballast and nicely complements Hal Lindes' score.

Camera (color, Panavision widescreen), Greig Fraser; editor, Scott Gray; music, Hal Lindes; music supervisors, Ian Neil, Chris Gough; songs, Sigur Ros; production designer, Melinda Doring; art directors, Janie Parker, Paul Inglis; senior set designer, Brian Nickless; set designer, Jennifer Hitchcock; set decorator, Glen W. Johnson; costume designer, Emily Seresin; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS), Ben Osmo; supervising sound editor, Adrian Rhodes; re-recording mixers, Rhodes, Doug Cooper; visual effects supervisor, Marty Pepper; line producers, Paul Ranford (Australia), Jacque Glanville (U.K.); associate producer, Jessica Beiler; assistant directors, Chris Webb (Australia), Josh Robertson (U.K.); casting, Nikki Barrett, Nina Gold. Reviewed at Toronto Film Festival (Special Presentations), Sept. 14, 2009. MPAA Rating: PG-13.