

SCATHING REVIEWS. BITCHY PEOPLE.



Children of Men

The Boys Are Back / Daniel Carlson

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Scott Hicks' *The Boys Are Back* might not be a great film, but it is a good and true one, full of the frantic and crushing moments of real life. Hicks is obviously able to put a lot of personal energy into the film about a single dad with two sons — Hicks and his wife have a pair of boys, and they live in Australia just like the story's central characters — but the script by Allan Cubitt, drawn from Simon Carr's memoir *The Boys Are Back in Town* has enough emotional resonance all on its own. It would have been so easy for a story like this one, rooted in tragedy and yearning for triumph, to have become small and clichéd and too easily predictable. But though the movie tweaks some names and ages, it remains true to the spirit of a father struggling to raise two boys in his own way, all while learning to help them live without the mother he thought they'd always have. The film isn't without its rough patches, and some of the scenes toward the end feel stitched together rather than organically spawned of each other, but for what it gets right, it's worthy of praise.

Joe Warr (Clive Owen) is a British expat working as a sports writer in Australia and living a busy but contented life with his wife, Katie (Laura Fraser), and their 6-year-old son, Artie (Nicholas McAnulty). Taking a cue from the memoir, Joe's narration flows over certain sections of the film, but it's frequent and tonally consistent enough to feel at home. Early on, he says in voice-over, "And we all lived happily ever after. ... Of course we didn't." One night at a party, Katie collapses and is rushed to the hospital, where she's diagnosed with a cancer that's worming through her "like Russian vines," Joe says. She dies soon after, and Owen is heartbreakingly real with Joe's pain, veering from tears to rage. Hicks is forcing us to watch an emotionally graphic depiction of one of life's more brutal moments, but the way he balances the need to observe it with a desire to play it honestly makes it that much more affective.

Katie's death sets in motion the story proper, which is of Joe's attempts to raise Artie after years of heavy traveling and not having the first clue how to run a house. He adopts "Just say yes" as his credo, reasoning that if he allows Artie to do potentially unwise things that have a negative result, then Artie will have learned not to do them in the future. Predictably, the house soon turns into a well-meaning sty, with cereal boxes and milk cartons scattered through the kitchen and dirty clothes hanging on the line outside. But after a brief montage of the beginning of their new life, it becomes clear the real story won't be about Joe and Artie but about Joe's broader family and his attempt to grow up before hitting middle age. Joe's got a son from a previous marriage, the

teenaged Harry (George MacKay), who comes to live with Joe for a while, and you can feel the family unit click into place when the three men start to live under one roof.

There's a genuine, well-earned tenderness to some of the parenting scenes — featuring easygoing scoring by guitarist Hal Lindes — but *The Boys Are Back* never veers into false sentimentality, and that's thanks to the honest screenplay and fantastic casting. Joe's life is never less than a struggle, especially when he has to juggle a demanding job and two sons, but his battles on both fronts aren't cartoonish or trite; this actually feels like an overwhelmed man figuring out how to be a parent, learning who his sons are, and constantly talking to the memory of a woman he can't forget. The boys are blessedly real, too. They are not wise beyond their years, or precocious to the point of demanding cheap laughs; they are not Huxtable kids. McAnulty and MaxKay are wonderful in their roles precisely because they feel instantly relatable and completely human. Artie is weird and chatty and prone to mood swings, from listless mourning to confused anger at a changing home dynamic. Harry is quiet and hopeful, possessed of a young man's defensive humor as well as his ability to be heartbroken. Certain scenes recall 2007's *Grace Is Gone*, which in addition to being just annihilatingly sad also featured a pair of young girls whose authentic nature gave the film even more weight. By refusing to make the kids into caricatures, the film is better able to explore its themes of loss and life rather than being *about* exploring those themes.

If Hicks is guilty of anything, it's of allowing a book's naturally more wandering structure to bleed over into the film, particularly in the final third, when a tangible end is in sight but the film bounces back and forth just one too many times between plot strands and locations. But though it briefly loses steam before crossing the finish, Hicks' movie never loses its sense of place or its grasp on the hearts and minds of its characters. This is one of the most sincere, open performances Owen's ever given, and he's charming and wounded throughout. He creates a man genuinely wracked with grief who learns to keep moving, who fights with loved ones without ever forgetting the importance of family. If the film lacks the certain stereotypically quasi-epic feel of other films about overcoming loss, perhaps that's because life is rarely epic and never as easy to sort out as some movies would have us wish. It's quiet, funny, tragic, and sometimes downright heartbreaking. I was moved by the film when I saw it, but days later, I find it's grown on me even more.

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