2017 FILM ESSAYS

What’s Normal Anyway?: Searching for Balance in ‘Captain Fantastic’

BY JAMIERIGHETTI ON JANUARY 11, 2017 • ( LEAVE A COMMENT )
In Matt Ross' *Captain Fantastic*, viewers are introduced to a band of outliers: a family living in isolation within the forests of the Pacific Northwest, hunting their meals, residing in hand-crafted cabins and reading about quantum entanglement by moonlight. It is a world simultaneously modern — governed entirely by thought and reason — and quaintly antiquated, free of cell phones and television. Yet, Ben's (Viggo Mortensen) quest to immerse his children in knowledge — holding back no information and building no boundaries — also results in him inadvertently sheltering them from the reality of the world around them, one which they are forced into with the unexpected death of their mother. Through this conflict comes direct confrontations with questions of normalcy: what is the correct way to raise a child, and what is the “right way” to grieve?

Right from the start, it seems the idyllic paradise Ben and his children are living in will soon be forever altered. Despite the misgivings that viewers may have about the family's unusual lifestyle, there is a sense of contentment and comfort as each child cozies up to a large campfire, nose-deep in a variety of different books. But a hint of things to come can be lifted here, as Rellian (Nicholas Hamilton) quietly reads Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, highlighting his own future role as the sullen Smerdyavok, the illegitimate child who forever alters his brothers view of their shared patriarch. When Ben and eldest son Bo (George MacKay) head into the nearest town, Ben checks in on the status of his wife, Leslie (Trin Miller), who left the encampment to receive treatment for her bipolar disorder. Instead of discovering when she will be returning, Ben learns that Leslie has committed suicide.
Upon their return, Ben tells the children the unflinching truth, "She finally did it, your mother is dead." The scene is both uncomfortable and heart-wrenching, as the children gape in shock and explode into a chorus of choked sobs. Immediately, viewers are forced to reconcile their own convictions with Ben’s no-holds barred approach. As a parent who has never deemed a topic too controversial or taboo, how could Ben hide or even obscure the truth regarding Leslie’s death? Later on, this comes into direct conflict with the approach taken by Ben’s sister, Harper (Kathryn Hahn), and her husband, Dave (Steve Zahn), who mask the truth, finding the details and its discussion inappropriate for children. Is Ben’s blunt but truthful acknowledgement somehow worse than whispers behind closed doors? Perhaps it is easier to confront and accept a difficult truth, or to have one hidden from you for most of your life.

Just as *The Brothers Karamazov* provides a hint of things to come, Kiely (Samatha Isler) and Ben’s discussion of Vladimir Nabakov’s *Lolita* demonstrates how perspective can warp and manipulate viewer sympathies by inadvertently contextualizing the family’s outlandish behavior (stealing from the supermarket, receiving weapons as presents and sending the children on “missions”) as simply another side of the coin to be considered. When Ben is confronted by Harper and his father-in-law, Jack (Frank Langella), their concern for the children represents a disruption. It is only when Rellian finally utters the words “dad is dangerous” that the spell is finally broken. When Bo takes the opportunity to confront his father about his college acceptance letters, Ben’s behavior seems limiting, harmful and even possessive, returning to the skepticism depicted at the start of the film.
One of *Captain Fantastic*’s strengths is how director Ross continuously inverts this concept, vacillating the audience in being with and against Ben during his quest to honor Leslie’s last wishes. But even as viewers may cringe at him disrupting the funeral or sending Vespyr (Annalise Basso) on a disastrous “mission” to rescue Rellian, one must recognize that his actions are rooted deeply not only in his love for his wife, but in his grief as well. As Ben glances back at the empty seats once occupied by his children (who are now entrusted to his in-laws for their own safety), viewers can sense how deeply his world — the one he forged alongside Leslie — has been shattered. It wasn’t simply a world they created, but one his children literally embodied. As Thomas Wolfe once learned the hard way, you can’t go back home again and neither can Ben. Of course, with the discovery of his children (who have snuck back onto the bus), Ben is able to recapture some of his loss, but a corner has been turned and the family must now capitulate to re-evaluating their lifestyle and finding a happy medium between their old life and what as been deemed necessary and “normal.”

Before the family can do this, they embark on one last mission: to honor their mother’s last wishes. The family sneaks into the cemetery and abscend with her coffin in the middle of the night, leaving it open in the middle of their school bus so that the children can gather around and say goodbye to their mother. It’s a strange scene that could feel as if the sanctity of the dead is being violated, but it forces viewers to re-examine their understanding of grief, as the children are simply taking back the final goodbye; a moment that had been taken from them by Leslie’s suicide and their grandparents’ closed-coffin funeral. Within this context, piggy-backed by a beautiful sequence where the family dances around Leslie’s burning funeral pyre while singing her favorite song, the grief presented may be non-traditional, but it’s no less poignant.
Captain Fantastic doesn't provide definitive answers to the lingering questions of normalcy and grief, but instead it encourages viewers to find the necessary balance to live life on their own terms. Perhaps this is the lasting message to be lifted from a film that is as equally tender as it is strange: to live a life filled with love, hope and wonder, free from the constraints of whatever normal is.

Jamie Righetti (@JamieRighetti [http://twitter.com/jamierighetti]) is a freelance tv and film critic from New York City whose work can be seen on Film School Rejects, IndieWire, BitchFlicks and more. She is the host of The Scream Squad, a horror podcast that dives into the larger issues at play in the genre. Learn more about Jamie and her debut novel, BEECHWOOD PARK, at jamierighetti.com [http://jamierighetti.com].