

The Squid and the Whale

The Squid and the Whale is a story that demonstrates that literary personages, though they may be “smart” in popular parlance, can be just as screwed up as any of the rest of us. It is also the tale of a family splitting apart irrevocably, of egos contending and children upended.

Written and directed by Noah Baumbach, the film is set in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in 1986, and early on shows us the cold shower of divorce as Bernard Berkman (Jeff Daniels) and his then wife Joan (Laura Linney) talk baldly to their boys, teenaged Walt (Jesse Eisenberg) and 12-year-old Frank (Owen Kline), about their ghastly custody arrangements. Bernard is a once-promising novelist who is mired in self-regard and marking time with creative writing classes, while Joan is a writer on the rise with her own book coming out.

Impressionable Walt invariably takes his father’s side, parroting his every word and opinion; young Frank distrusts dad and his views and clings to his mother. This domestic drama is as messy as most divorces probably are, with the kids torn apart, the parents trying to be civil while feeling resentment, and everybody on edge. Walt, desperate to be creative himself, passes off a Pink Floyd rock song as his own in a school performance; Frank is almost physically ill at leaving his only known home for a crummy rental with his dad. The film does not portray this situation as tragedy; it presents instead what such broken, confused lives often are, with warts and all. This is a film that, for many people, will cut very close to the bone.

Eisenberg—clearly standing in for the filmmaker—is at the befuddled center of the picture, and he captures nicely the poor fellow’s bumbling efforts to shore up his self-confidence. He prattles his father’s literary snobbisms to impress a lady friend, he dismisses his mother’s tennis bum boyfriend Ivan (William Baldwin), he tries to defend his purloining of other’s work by saying he “recreated” it. He may be a smart ass, but you still sympathize with his dilemma and sense his struggle to become an adult. His father, in turn, is nothing less than a smart ass, a narcissistic boaster of staggering unawareness who easily preys on the young, like one his students (Anna Pacquin). He is a contemporary version of the Norman Maine character in *A Star Is Born*, the figure whose light dims as his wife’s shines. Jeff Daniels plays this character absolutely straight on: he’s insufferable but he’s believable, too.

The usually fine Laura Linney has less to do as Joan, and her persona is less well-defined. The more sympathetic of the two parents, she still lives a life of some disorder, made physically manifest in the film by the mousy hair, dowdy wardrobe, and lack of makeup sported by Linney (who is usually radiant) and psychologically manifest by her taking up with a fellow who is hardly her intellectual equal. Young Kline (son of Kevin Kline and Phoebe Cates) is solid in his major feature debut; he imparts quite a range of emotion in a time of turmoil, much of it through a most expressive set of peepers.

Oh, and what’s with “the Squid and the Whale?” It’s a real diorama picturing these contending animals at the American Museum of Natural History in New York (actually shown at film’s end). It is an image which has long

impressed--and haunted--Jesse (and apparently Baumbach) and which can stand, loosely, as a symbol for what his parent's relationship has become. Such symbolism needn't be overstressed, however.

The Squid and the Whale does not resolve itself in some melodramatic turnabout; it stays true to its muddle-through nature showing one real-life family trying to cope.

(The film is rated "R" for mature themes and language.)

(November 2005)