

Wildlife

Based on a Richard Ford novel, "Wildlife" is a domestic drama of lower middle-class lives thwarted both by fate and personality, of a family struggling to stay together in small town Montana in 1960. It is narrated by a teenage boy who observes his parents drift apart while he is powerless to affect their dissolution. The American character actor Paul Dano directs for the first time, and he gives it the weight and complexity it deserves.

The Brinson family has recently moved to Great Falls, where husband Jerry (Jake Gyllenhaal) works at a local golf course. His wife Jeanette (Carey Mulligan) is a housewife and former substitute teacher. Their only child is Joe (Ed Oxenbould) a withdrawn 14-year-old who serves (as in the novel) as our wide-eyed witness to his family's foibles. When Dad loses his job at the course ("I'm too well liked," is his excuse), he decides precipitously to take a job fighting forest fires in the western part of the state, leaving Mom and Joe to fend for themselves. Jeanette laments: "Why did he have to bring us out here to such a lonely place?"

Mom gets a job at a car dealership but finds herself lonely enough to take up with the owner Warren Miller (Bill Camp), who has the nicest house in town. One night, Joe gets a preview of grown-up life when he and Jeanette are invited to Miller's house for dinner, an evening where he sees mom succumb to drink and some folderol with their host. He can only hope that his father soon returns. And Jerry does, flush with tales of the fires and faced with a disillusioned wife who wants to move to out. Joe can only wonder what his future role is in this fractured family.

Dano, who works from an adaptation written by another actor of his generation Zoe Kazan (Emily in "The Big Sick"), uses a very studied style for his first feature, avoiding a moving camera and presenting scenes with mostly static set-ups within which his subjects move in and out. He uses only limited close-ups to emphasize significant dialogue (such as a telling heart-to-heart between Joe and Warren that is both riveting and unsettling). The apparent placidity of the shots belies the unseen turmoil within each principal's mind.

This is not the first time British actress Carey Mulligan has played an American ("Mudbound," "The Great Gatsby"), but it is clearly a new kind of role for her: a hard-to-read woman pursuing an ambition she cannot really define. She's unpredictable, a little cruel, and possessed of an inchoate independent streak: a hard person to like. Jake Gyllenhaal's Jerry is more open but needy and feckless, foundering to make sense of his life. Both actors nail the natures of these limited souls.

The adult in the room is Ed Oxenbould as Joe. While mainly seen taking things in, wide-eyed, he is the one character who delivers the occasional sensible line, who is silently critiquing what his parents are going through. Young Ed, an Australian actor, made his breakthrough film in "Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day" where he was the put-upon Alexander. He has graduated to a "no good, very bad" family but is its only reason for hope.

(This film is rated "PG-13" and runs 104 mins.)