

## Blue Car

Coming of age kid's stories...yawn...haven't we seen enough of those? Perhaps, except coming of age is something we all do in our multifarious ways, something we can all identify with, and--if it's done right--this tired track can still lead to interesting drives. If you can get a lift in *Blue Car*, you'll find a kid worth knowing.

She is Meg (Agnes Bruckner), and we find her, adrift and uncertain of her future in Dayton, Ohio, just as her father has left her family in a clunky blue car. The household is otherwise troubled, with mom Diane (Margaret Colin) struggling to earn a living and little sister Lily (Regan Arnold) grappling with a reality which does not include her father. Her only anchor is her sensitive AP poetry teacher Mr. Auster (David Strathairn) who recognizes Meg's raw talent and encourages her to write about her pain. To her surprise, she wins the school poetry contest and, with it, a chance to compete in a national poetry competition in Florida.

Meg feels she must lie, even steal, to get to Florida to attend the contest, but her home life conspires against it. Mom cannot afford any trips and barely notices her daughter's pangs, while Lily is entering a kind of dream-world which ends in tragedy. Dad is a no-show in her life. Only Mr. Auster, with his steady encouragement, offers her any solace. After a stand-off with her mother, Meg does make it to Florida only to discover that her teacher, who has trials of his own, has an interest in her not wholly paternal. Her story ends in disappointment, if not yet despair, and it ends with her riding off--in a blue car.

In making *Blue Car*, first-time writer-director Karen Moncrieff's best act was her casting, especially the lead. She gets solid performances from novices, like the 12-year old Arnold, and from old pros like Colin (*Unfaithful*, *Independence Day*) and Strathairn (*Harrison's Flowers*, *Limbo*). Strathairn, with his dark-rimmed, doggie eyes, is particularly admirable as Auster, a civilized, thoughtful man who lacks tenderness in his life and is naturally drawn to the bright and needy Meg.

Yet it's Meg's story we follow and it's young Agnes Bruckner who leads us there. We believe that she is cowed by her frustrating home life, that she has the capacity to love, that she has the wit and mind to write, to capture her life. This modest, independent film might be compared to a major studio picture of last year, *White Oleander*, which also featured a young adolescent woman finding her way. To my mind, *Blue Car* is the clearly superior picture, principally because of the richness of Bruckner's work. She is also that very rare case of a young actress able to play older; she was fifteen when she began shooting the 18-year-old Meg. I can't wait to see what she can do when she is 18!

(*"Blue Car"* is rated "R" for sexual content and language.)

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