

## Hearts in Atlantis

Author Stephen King is well known for his works of chills and terror, of horror in tranquil New England spaces and unexplainable rages from machinery and madmen. There is another consistent subtheme in his writing: how children and adolescents discover their world, often the grim side of it. This side of his work is probably best remembered through the film *Stand By Me*, which was based on a King story. Now another version of King's macabre outside world filtered through the understanding of a boy comes to the screen with *Hearts in Atlantis*.

Though it sports contemporary bookends, *Hearts in Atlantis* (based on a set of King's stories) is essentially one long flashback to a placid summer of 1960, in a small Connecticut town and the limited world of 11-year-old Bobby Garfield (Anton Yelchin). Living penuriously with his widowed, self-centered mother Liz (Hope Davis in a thankless role), Bobby's narrow life ("nothing happens on this street," he laments) revolves around his buddies Sully (Will Rothhaar) and Carol Gerber (the sweet Mika Boorem). Then an intriguing lodger, Ted Brautigan (Anthony Hopkins), comes to live upstairs in the Garfield's boarding house. Though mom is suspicious of the inscrutable newcomer, Brautigan--whose eyes are failing--hires Bobby to read the newspaper to him. He is a learned man but also one with quirks (reluctance to be touched, staring spells), and he harbors a secret, recruiting Bobby as an ally to watch out for the low men, "fellows who are ruthless and dangerous to know" who might be looking for him.

The film tells of the bonding of the boy and the man, punctuated with scenes of his affectionate relationship with Carol and his distancing from his sour mother. Part of that bonding is discovering the man's seeming telepathic powers, powers that Bobby himself comes to feel. Eventually, signs of the low men do come to town, and Bobby knows he has to warn Brautigan of their presence. These shadowy figures are never solidly identified, though it is suggested that they are G-Men of some kind who need Brautigan's powers for nefarious purposes. Ted is eventually taken, and Bobby's life irrevocably changed. The lost city of Atlantis, invoked by Brautigan earlier on a dulcet summer evening, is a symbol of a treasured, special world that is fated to disappear.

For filmgoers who don't need knuckle-headed comedies or action blow-'em-ups in these more sober days, *Hearts in Atlantis* will serve as a good antidote. Unobtrusively directed by Aussie Scott Hicks (*Shine, Snow Falling on Cedars*) and ably scripted by William Goldman (*Misery, Absolute Power*), the film is in part a nostalgia fest for moviegoers of a certain age, with Summer of '60 headlines being read to Ted by Bobby and a soundtrack full of tunes of the times (the Platters, Fats Domino, Chuck Berry). It also has its ominous side and touches of violence (its rating is PG-13), but it is at bottom a two-character study, illumined by its two principal performances.

The grand veteran Anthony Hopkins is compelling as Ted Brautigan, the kind of fascinating but slightly dangerous fellow that would both entice and scare the fatherless Bobby. Hopkins himself has characterized Brautigan as "a bit like Shane" in the classic western of the same name. You can't quite get ahold of him and what he's about (I wondered, for example, what's with the British accent from a man who has been in the United States for decades?), but he's full of lore and great stories--one about the old footballer Bronko Nagurski is a spellbinder. Hopkins is a master at portraying wary

reserve and unstated depths: these skills serve him extremely well in *Hearts in Atlantis*.

The real revelation of the movie is young Anton Yelchin as Bobby Garfield. Although by now already a film pro (seven pictures in the last two years), Anton has not yet lost the look and manner of a plain kid, struggling with growing up, testing his loyalty and courage. The youngster plays off Sir Anthony splendidly; you can see his big eyes (and his mind) open to the wider world Brautigan is offering him. You are taking the film in through him, discovering what happens as he does, in a totally believable performance.

(October 2001)