

Little Children

Five years ago, a journeyman actor named Todd Fields launched his first feature as a director with *In the Bedroom* (2001), a film that received much critical acclaim and was nominated for several Academy Awards. Based on an intricate story by Andre Dubus, Field's film traced—beautifully—the dramatic arc of a solid, middle-class New England family torn apart by the death of a child. It was a glory to watch. Now, he has finally come up with his second movie, *Little Children*, and, though it has parallels with his first, it is distinct in tone and tenor. What the new film does is match *In the Bedroom* for its intelligence of writing, its handling of actors, and its creation of a believable milieu. It was worth waiting for.

Little Children is also set in New England (though shot in New York state), in the community of East Wyndham, Massachusetts, where we follow the restless (if not exactly desperate) housewife Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet) and a handsome but drifting stay-at-home dad Brad Adamson (Patrick Wilson), who share three-year old kids, lazy mornings in the park, and eventually a budding friendship. Sarah feels her husband Richard (Gregg Edelman) is drifting away from her, obsessed with work and on-line porn, while Brad's wife Kathy (Jennifer Connolly), a PBS documentary producer, is too wrapped up in the studio to notice her marriage is crumbling. Sarah and Brad slide into an affair, and they are both troubled and thrilled by it.

Within the same community, a man coming off a conviction for indecent exposure, Ronnie McGorvey (Jackie Earle Haley), is released back home to live with his elderly mother, May (Phyllis Somerville). Ronnie's presence (Fields has called him the town's "troll under the bridge") is unsettling to the whole neighborhood and triggers a strenuous campaign against him from a truculent ex-cop, Larry Hedges (Noah Emmerich). Brad and Larry's lives intersect when the former takes up the latter's game of touch football with his fellow policemen—when he is supposed to be studying for a law exam. All these characters, and a number of others, tumble together in a mix of soft satire and psychological drama. Most of them, myopic or befuddled as they are, constitute the true "little children" of the title.

The bald summary of such a plot may sound banal, just standard suburban adultery material—haven't John Cheever and John Updike and so many others been here over the years? The film is, indeed, based on a novel (written by Tom Perrotta, who co-wrote the screenplay), but it also achieves something very rare in American movies these days: a true novelistic complexity.

The story opens with a comedic bent, as Sarah, a literary type, muses on the petty chat of a clique of mommies with kids. Brad, too, is portrayed as a decent but distracted father who is uncertain about what to do next, one of those guys who went to law school to go to law school. The satiric tone is richly emphasized by the god-like overvoice narration of the character's actions by none other than Will Lyman, the orotund, authoritative voice of the PBS "Frontline" TV series.

So what makes *Little Children* work so well for this reviewer? It is its utter plausibility, created with carefully crafted increments of action rightly motivated and telling dialogue beautifully delivered, all lovingly photographed by cinematographer Antonio Calvache (whom Fields also used on his previous film). The plot lines are intricate but clear, and, better yet, you can't predict their direction, a quality uncommon in American filmmaking compared to the standard Hollywood fare that telegraphs every emotion and action. It is a picture that organically unfolds and catches you watching these people like they are your own neighbors. It's sophisticated but hardly obscure, a smart film much more than an "art" film.

Be aware that *Children* is also a film for adults. Besides its humorous, even tossed-off, elements, it dips into darkness, too, with open sexuality, troubling themes, and a couple of shocking scenes as part of its make-up (it carries a definite "R" rating).

The cast is definitive. Even small roles seem considered and complete, offering a rounded look at a whole community. A local DC favorite, Helen Carey, does a lovely job as Jean, a good friend to Sarah and one of the more level heads in the picture. Jane Adams has a bravura, and heart-breaking, cameo as a shy woman who just wants to be normal.

Jackie Earle Haley, who has been hiding out for years after his successes as a juvenile actor in *Breaking Away* and *The Bad News Bears*, is strong as the troubled sex offender, struggling to find some kind of ordinary life. Rather than being simply a monster, Ronnie exhibits odd nuances (with a touch of the menacing) and even sympathies, much of this revealed in his relationship with his mom, played by Somerville in a tremendous performance. Noah Emmerich, well remembered as Jim Carrey's congenial friend in *The Truman Show*, is very convincing here as a fellow who is hair-trigger scary but finally capable of empathy, too. The gorgeous Jennifer Connolly and Gregg Edelman nicely round out their featured roles as the betrayed and the betrayer spouses.

The leads shine. Patrick Wilson, a Broadway fixture who broke through to wider audiences as a complex Mormon character in HBO's "Angels in America," is just right as one of those handsome American devils for whom things probably came too easily as a young man and who is now reluctant to grow up. He is one of those "children" of the title as much as anyone in the film. Then there is Kate Winslet, a wonder as Sarah, a woman adrift, probably more intelligent than those around her, but evidencing no preening superiority. Sarah manifests both intellectual and emotional intelligence, though hardly all the choices she makes are sound. She seems to be an indifferent mother, a damaged wife, but probably would be a great friend. Hey, she's complicated, like most people! This is a performance to treasure.

Allow me to get semi-biblical: Suffer these *Little Children* to come onto you and check this movie out.

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