

Room

The 2010 novel “Room” by Irish-Canadian writer Emma Donoghue was a critical and popular success in its grim narrative of an abducted woman and her young son, told entirely from the point of view of that boy. Just as unsettling, the film version of “Room,” whose screenplay Donoghue also wrote, overrides its bleakness through the stirring convictions of its lead actors.

The “room” of the title is a windowless 10-by-10-foot storage shed where Ma (Brie Larson) looks after 5-year-old son Jack (Jacob Tremblay), a spirited child whose mother dedicates herself to keeping him healthy and safe. However, they are prisoners, Ma having been kidnapped by Old Nick (Sean Bridgers) at 17 and having fathered Jack after being raped by her abductor. Ma (real name Joy) has created an entire universe for Jack within “Room” (her nickname for the space), and it is his whole world, except for glimpses of the outside on television. When Ma comes to suspect that Old Nick aims to get rid of them, she conceives a plan to sneak Jack out of “Room” through his feigning death.

Jack first, then his mother, do finally escape and, after a hospital stay and return to Joy’s family. There, the hideous pressures of her long captivity have riven the family: her father Robert (William H. Macy) and her mother Nancy (Joan Allen) have divorced and she lives with another man. Thus begins another kind of test for Joy and Jack, as she tries to re-connect with her previous life, and he must cope with the whole wide—and terrifying--world for the first time.

“Room” is directed by Irish director Lenny Abrahamson (“Frank”) who has mastered the material in two contrasting acts. The first is in the claustrophobic “Room” where the camera is as cramped as the room’s inhabitants, but where Ma’s diligence and concern shine and where young Jack blossoms with intelligence and playfulness. This first act ends in a marvelous suspense scene, where Jack, presumed dead, has been wrapped in a rug in Nick’s truck and must escape from his rolled-up cocoon and find help for Ma. Watching the kid try to unroll himself and elude Old Nick will put your heart in your throat, all the more forcefully for not being dependent on special effects or camera tricks.

The film’s second act offers a drastic change in tone. Joy and Jack are in a comfortable suburban environment yet very uncomfortable within it. Robert cannot get past Joy’s bearing of her child, and the more empathetic Nancy is thwarted trying to comprehend her daughter’s experience. Joy comes to resent her family while Jack, in his most troubled moments, even asks to go back to “Room,” his only harbor from strangeness. Now we are in an earnest family drama, played out in worried looks and quiet asides. It is a delicate balancing act, which “Room’s” creators pull off.

Brie Larson, at 26, has become one of our best, if not yet widely known, screen actors. She is a casual beauty, with a girl-next-door quality, but she can play with a natural demeanor that is riveting (see her in “Short Term 12”). Here her range goes from protective, hyper-alert Ma to wan, resentful Joy—and much else in between—but never any less than convincingly.

Then there is Tremblay, an eight-year-old playing Jack at five: he is a wonder.

While the film cannot replicate the original point-of-view of the novel, young Jacob's over-voicing fully establishes Jack's understandably naïve, yet perceptive, view of "Room," and his gradual awakening to the wider world is utterly persuasive, presented as naturally as breathing.

("Room" is rated "R" and runs 118 mins.)

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