

## The Way, Way Back

Coming-of-age stories are legion in many cultures, including ours, with an ample literary and filmic history. A recent entry, “The Way, Way Back” comes just in time for summer and is itself steeped in that season. It follows a shy, mildly despondent young man who must spend a seaside vacation where he does not want to be, yet, through the quirk of a summer job, discovers himself on the threshold of manhood. It’s a light-hearted pleasure to watch him grow.

Duncan (Liam James) is the young man, a teenager of separated parents who lives with his mom Pam (Toni Collette), though he longs to be with his dad. He is dragged along on a trip by his mom’s steady boyfriend, Trent (Steve Carrell) to the latter’s family cottage in New England. Trent thinks the trip will bond him to the sullen Duncan, and thus solidify relations with his mom, whom he looks to marry. But Trent utterly alienates the boy by crassly rating him as a “3 on a scale of one to 10” to the kid’s face.

Once at the cottage—one of those classic gray clapboards on the sand—Duncan encounters Trent’s daughter, Steph, a true teen-age pill, and long-time summer neighbors, Betty (Allison Janney), a super-charged divorcé with a girl Duncan’s age, Susanna (AnnaSophia Robb). This entourage is augmented by another get-happy couple of Trent’s long acquaintance, Kip (Rob Corddry) and Joan (Amanda Peet). Duncan is at sea among these facile revelers (reliving old shared lives), and he finally finds distraction of his own at an old-school water park near their place.

The Water Wizz park, after a few visits, offers not only a refuge, but a job, as Duncan is taken on by the jaunty and semi-efficient park manager Owen (Sam Rockwell), a fount of bad jokes but worlds away from anyone in Trent’s narcissistic circle. He keeps his employment hidden from his mother and the other adults, themselves too busy indulging themselves to notice, and he bonds with the other Water Wizz folks who take him under their wing: jolly Roddy (Nat Faxon), crabby Lewis (Jim Rash), and the patient Caitlin (Maya Rudolph). They become much more a family than any other he has, and even though the summer must end, Duncan earns the gumption to challenge the obtuse Trent and protect his mom.

As sometimes happens in coming-of-age cinema, the kids (Duncan and Susanna) turn out to be more adult than their elders. The beach house adults in the picture are in summer romp mode, too horny, too boozed up, too irresponsible to care. Carrell is a cold passive-aggressive fish, Collette is wimpish and inattentive, Peet is a vixen, Corddry a slob, and Janney seems high on something. They are manic, but not funny. The gang at the park, however, may be semi-functional but they are sweet, know how to have fun, and are, finally, accepting.

Filmmakers Nat Faxon and Jim Rash are long-time comic actors who hit pay dirt in 2011 by writing the screenplay (with Alexander Payne) of the critically-acclaimed “The Descendants,” which won them Academy Awards for Best Screenplay. With “The Way, Way Back,” they re-create some of the sweet-and-sour flavor of that earlier film as both writers and directors and bestow a charming entertainment which is a partly painful, partly exhilarating journey.

*(The film is rated PG-13 and runs 103 min.)*

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