

Elizabeth Daugherty
Film Review *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*

“Majestical.”

A blend of *Where the Red Fern Grows*, *The Karate Kid*, and *Life of Pi*, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* will make you laugh just as hard as it'll make you want to cry.

Many will be eager to watch this movie when they see the director's name. Taika Waititi is vastly talented writer and director. *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* lived up to every expectation. Of course, the man himself makes a cameo as is a calling card of a Taika Waititi movie, playing a bit role that caters to his style.

And while the film pays homage to the writer and director, it actually draws from the fiction book *Wild Pork and Watercress* by Barry Crump. Much of the book made its way into the film, it seems, but of course many avid readers are critical of movie adaptations perhaps especially when there is a large name and/or budget behind it. Take, for instance, *The Hunger Games* franchise which turned a trilogy of novels making note of how young people must navigate a classist society into four generic action flicks.

However, to expect something so one-dimensional from Waititi would be a misnomer at best. The experiences that he took from the book served the lessons of the overarching story's themes of family bonds, grief, and the “majestical” nature of the world.

Hunt for the Wilderpeople follows the story of Ricky Baker and his “uncle” Hector. Hector and his wife, Bella, are “bad egg” Ricky's last stop in the foster system, and despite the rocky start to the small family unit, things even out... until it falls apart completely. Before long, Ricky and Hector find each other in the bush, the colloquial term for the untamed wilderness of New Zealand's forests. But not without a trace, of course. Soon, the entire country is invested in their safe return to society, speculating about the nature of their disappearance – kidnapping? A child left behind? – over the nearly half a year that they survive off the land and off of each other.

Much like *The Karate Kid*, where the old mentor and the young ward butt heads at first and continuously, Hector and Ricky come to understand each other and even value the presence of the other person despite how they protest about their independence. Grief visits them continually, much like *Where the Red Fern Grows*. Sweeping, wide views of the New Zealand wilderness showcases the beauty of nature in a similar fashion, as well, and the vibrancy of the world reminds us how precious it is as time passes and it continues to cover. Nature itself gives way to loss and pain, as the cycle of life is indiscriminate much like in the infamous classic. Nature is a hungry and vicious thing, as is man who lives alongside it. In *Life of Pi* our protagonist struggles with himself and his beliefs, much the same way as Ricky and Hector must come to realize who they really are with all of nature, man, and solitary survival breathing down their necks.

In the end, survival becomes irreversibly entwined in family. Humanity draws us close together, even when trying to hide away, alone, in the wilderness.

The cast is colorful in every sense of the word, with big names on the screen such as Taika Waiti, Julian Dennison, and Rhys Darby, and more people of color than white actors. As well, the children are well represented as such and not forced into more “mature” roles or appearances, particularly the young girl that plays a small “romantic interest” for Ricky, Kahu played by Tioreore Ngatai-Melbourne.

I believe that the character, Ricky, could surmise this film in a fitting haiku. It would probably go something like this:

You should go and see

Hunt for the Wilderpeople

It is a good film.