

## Crime, Fatherhood Intersect in ‘The Place Beyond the Pines’

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Rating: **4.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – Derek Cianfrance’s masterful “The Place Beyond the Pines” is a complex, epic piece of storytelling about the ripple effect of crime through families and across generations. Drastic action does not exist in a vacuum. It influences generations below and those impacted by their parent’s decisions. When motorcycle stuntman Luke Glanton (Ryan Gosling) meets the child he didn’t know he had after a fling with the lovely Romina (Eva Mendes), it sets in motion a sequence of events that has the Shakespearian feel of the inevitable. More thematically dense and ambitious than any crime film you’ll see this year and with an incredible ensemble, “The Place Beyond the Pines” is the kind of daring, adult drama that critics bemoan doesn’t get made nearly enough.

Luke and Romina slept together the last time he was coming through Schenectady on his carnival road show. Romina has a man (Mahershala Ali) now, a waitress job, and a son by Luke, but she doesn’t need or want anything from him. Nonetheless, Luke feels something pulling inside him to stay, to take care of his boy and maybe even build a family with Romina. He gets a crap job as a mechanic with a ripped t-shirt redneck named Robin (Ben Mendelsohn) and lives in a trailer behind the guy’s shed but there’s just not enough cash to get Romina back. When Robin mentions that he’s robbed four banks in his life and that it’s incredibly easy if you don’t get too greedy and don’t try to do it too often, Luke becomes a criminal.



The Place Beyond the Pines  
Photo credit: Focus Features

If you think at this point that “The Place Beyond the Pines” is going to be about the fall and eventual rehabilitation of a bank robber not unlike “The Town,” Cianfrance is about to throw you for a loop. I wouldn’t spoil the way “Pines” unfolds but it’s likely not the movie you think it’s going to be going in or even after the first hour (or the second). The decision that Luke makes to rob one bank and then another one and then another one will send shockwaves through the lives of a rookie cop named Avery Cross (Bradley Cooper), his wife Jennifer (Rose Byrne), his father Al (Harris Yulin), his shady colleague Deluca (Ray Liotta), and two teenagers about to learn devastating truths about their past (Emory Cohen & Dane DeHaan).

Without hammering them too directly, Cianfrance and his co-writers (Ben Coccio & Darius Marder) are playing with themes of fate and the sometimes confounding and illogical decisions we make in the hope that we are doing the right things for our children. If Romina doesn’t get pregnant, Luke is probably still on the road somewhere sleeping with groupies. If Avery doesn’t have a son, he doesn’t respond to the most important day of his life with nearly the same gravity. As he did with “Blue Valentine,” Cianfrance has a keen interest in the way the very existence of children can change the relationship dynamic between adults. While that excellent film was a more straightforward marriage drama, this one feels more sprawling and ambitious (it runs well over two hours, although doesn’t feel anywhere near its length).

The technical elements are nearly flawless. Most notably, the incredible cinematographer Sean Bobbitt (“Shame,” “Hunger”) works with Cianfrance to create a palette that feels both realistic and lyrical. We often follow characters down roads or into the woods, so perfectly captured as to be both foreboding and full of secrets. And Cianfrance tapped the great Mike Patton of Faith No More to create a brilliant score that underscores moments without feeling too oppressive.



The Place Beyond the Pines  
Photo credit: Focus Features

While Bobbitt’s camera and Patton’s score can’t be undervalued, “Pines” is primarily a character piece. Gosling’s work in “Blue Valentine” was my favorite lead actor performance of that year and Cianfrance proves here that his skill with actors on that film was no fluke. Gosling is great, playing so many moments internally where other actors would have gone for the big emotion (Mendes often does go a little too big while we’re on the subject). However, believe it or not with an ensemble this pedigree, Cooper steals the piece, doing the best work of his career by some stretch (and, yes, that includes “Silver Linings Playbook”). Avery is the most complex character he’s yet been given and he nails it. DeHaan adds another piece of evidence to the case that he’s going to be one of the most interesting actors of his generation (he’s even better in the upcoming “Kill Your Darlings”) and even small roles like those played by Ali, Liotta, and Mendelsohn are memorable.

Some have claimed that “The Place Beyond the Pines” is over-written – too many movies in one and a final act that feels forced. Yes, there are times when “Pines” gets so plot heavy that character motivation can get lost in the storytelling. However, I found the performances and writing strong enough to fill in the gaps. Cianfrance doesn’t give easy answers as to why some of these people do what they do and that could frustrate viewers but the characters and world they inhabit feels so genuine that I took the lack of easy explanation as simply more depth to the overall piece instead of dots that needed to be connected. Not every “I” is dotted and not every “T” is crossed but the same can be said about some of our greatest fiction. And that’s what “The Place Beyond the Pines” feels like — a great American novel that just made it to the big screen first.

*“The Place Beyond the Pines” stars Ryan Gosling, Bradley Cooper, Dane DeHaan, Eva Mendes, Mahershala Ali, Ben Mendelsohn, Rose*

*Byrne, Harris Yulin, Bruce Greenwood, Ray Liotta, and Emory Cohen. It was directed by Derek Cianfrance. It is now playing in some markets and opens Friday, April 5, 2013 in Chicago.*



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