

Reese Witherspoon Takes a Tedious Trip Into the 'Wild'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on December 4, 2014 - 11:33pm

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Rating: **2.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – At times “Wild” resembles the hallucinatory fever dream of a dehydrated and delirious hiker (played by Reese Witherspoon), alone in the world. I only wish her fever dreams were more interesting for the rest of us.

Based on the book by Cheryl Strayed, it struck me a bit as the Sierra Club version of “Eat, Pray, Love.” It’s a selfish woman’s journey of self-empowerment disguised as a travelogue. After her mother’s death, she turns to sex and heroin to numb her pain. This leads her to bottom out in her personal life and the breakup of her marriage. So she sets off on the Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada to find herself.



Reese Witherspoon Carries the Weight in 'Wild'

Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Nicholas Hornby’s adaptation really gives the audience the feeling of a lonely traveler on a quest. Hornby and director Jean-Marc Vallée tell the story as half remembered images and flashbacks as Witherspoon trudges on and thinks about the people and the life she’s left behind. The tedium and the drudgery are all there, along with the wandering thoughts of a lonely woman trying to find her way. The film rests squarely on her shoulders, like the overstuffed backpack she carries around for much of it. But her character remains opaque, and she becomes a hard character to root for or even take much interest in.

Witherspoon gamely presses on through rain, rivers, snow, and mountains – but there's a distance in her performance. Her performance feels mannered rather than lived-in. I know that Witherspoon was okay with not looking her best, but I can't say I ever got a sense of who her character really was. I know she was grieving, but I guess we're supposed to applaud her selfishness and her bad choices. She seems to say as much – suggesting that drugs were in fact her way out of grief – just the same way this hike will lead her to a better place.

But there's only so much gravitas she can give to the frustrations of putting up a tent. Highs and lows that are supposed to take on some deeper meaning instead succumb to the overwhelming tedium of the journey. Laura Dern fares much better playing her mother. Even though Dern has just a fraction of the screen time, she makes the most of it, creating a spirit that regularly outshines the actual star of the picture.



Reese Witherspoon Hits the Dusty Trail in 'Wild'
 Photo credit: Fox Searchlight Pictures

Director Vallée never quite gets a handle on the material either. He seems comfortable with stillness, but can't quite figure out how to make the story come alive. And his depictions of travelers along the way range from condescending to simplistic.

Vallée has neither the frenetic visual gifts Danny Boyle displayed in "127 Hours," nor the storytelling acumen of Robert Zemeckis in "Cast Away." Those are two other one-man shows that still managed to grab your attention and not let go. But "Wild" just kind of trudges along, without giving its audience a compelling reason to follow it.

"Wild" has a limited release, including Chicago, on December 5th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Reese Witherspoon, Laura Dern, Gabby Hoffmann, Thomas Sadoski, Brian Van Holt and W. Earl Brown. Screenplay adapted by Nick Hornby, from the memoir by Cheryl Strayed. Directed by Jean-Marc Vallée. Rated "R"



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