

‘The Book of Henry’ Generates a Different Story Vibe

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Rating: **3.5/5.0**

CHICAGO – There are some total exasperations in “The Book of Henry”... numerous ones that are almost deal breakers. But somehow, some way, the strange twists and ideas take over, and the film becomes fable-like, examining a different line of story elements that switched from one character to another. Director Colin Trevorrow (“Jurassic Park” reboot) reveals a love in what he is doing in this film, and that also counts for something.

The early part of the tale, the part with the title character in it, is the most exasperating part. The notion of a 12 year-old boy handling family finances and spouting philosophical existentialism to a bunch of public school six graders is too precious to sit through, and there are many squirms in the front end. At some point that character becomes more ethereal, and hovers over the proceedings like an avenging angel. That switch brings the Naomi Watts character to the front, and she handles the unlikeliness of the scenario with perfect aplomb. It’s not so much two different movies, but two different feelings about the movie.

Henry (Jaeden Lieberer) is a genius, but he prefers the term “precocious.” He is clearly above and beyond his classmates, and in his spare time plays the stock market so his single Mom Susan (Naomi Watts) won’t have to work – she’s a waitress who likes to play video games to relax. Henry’s brother Peter (Jacob Tremblay of “Room”) is his soul mate, and they entertain each other with Henry’s inventions, either in their bedroom or elaborate tree fort.



Henry (Jaeden Lieberer) and Peter (Jacob Tremblay) in ‘The Book of Henry’

Photo credit: Focus Features

Henry witnesses an event from their neighbor Glenn (Dean Norris), and the action is so heinous that the genius boy begins to plot a kind of revenge. At the same time he is suffering from tremendous headaches that eventually leads to a seizure. The story that occurs post his stay in the hospital is the switch-up in the plot, and it's up to his mother Susan to deliver it from there.

Genius children tend to be misrepresented in the movies, and in "The Book of Henry" this trend continues. This always calls into question nature versus nurture... it's one thing to be born with a mind that absorbs stimuli at a higher level than average, but it's another thing to get the right environment to nurture that beautiful mind. The luck of the draw in birth origins, education opportunities, socio-economic status and just plain encouragement are harder factors to get right than a big brain. Henry has only one factor, encouragement, but the lame excuse of "socialization" as a reason for him not to be in college is one of the many frustrations with the character.

However, the rest of the film is sort of a mystery thriller, as the movements of Henry before his seizure has some kind of purpose, but they don't become apparent until after his hospital stay. This is where Naomi Watts takes over, and the way she carries the film thereafter, like a runner grabbing the baton and winning the race, is just one of the remarkable conceits at this point in the rest of the film. The switch is to a kind of a faux Alfred Hitchcock thriller, but at the same time it acknowledges its extreme fiction, producing a fairy tale or fable-like atmosphere. All of this coming together makes the film work.



Family Portrait with Mama Susan (Naomi Watts) in 'The Book of Henry'

Photo credit: Focus Features

Casting was key to the whole thing, although the use of Jacob Tremblay, who was so amazing in "Room," reduces him to the little brother supporting role. The neighbor Glenn is properly untrustworthy, and Dean Norris does more with that sort of character than expected. Lee Pace is a doctor at the hospital who gets sucked into the Henry universe, and responds with an interestingly low key presence in the situation. Sarah Silverman portrays Susan's waitress friend, a tattooed tough girl with the heart of gold, and like Norris did more with the role than what was drawn on the surface.

But just because the film is different didn't make it perfect. It can be argued that the flaws in it is part of the subterfuge that the director was trying to invent, but I won't make that argument. My wish is for Henry to emerge as my stockbroker, because he was able to bank – as Bobby Moynihan's diner owner exclaimed – 640K, and that was just the checking account. Ka-ching!

"The Book of Henry" opens nationwide on June 16th. Featuring Naomi Watts, Jacob Tremblay, Sarah Silverman, Bobby Moynihan, Jaeden Lieberher, Lee Pace and Dean Norris. Written by Gregg Hurwitz. Directed by Colin Trevorrow. Rated "PG-13"



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