

FILM



George MacKay, Clive Owen and Nicholas McAnulty in *The Boys Are Back*

Just saying 'Yes'

I'll be back boys.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's iconic line has been given a twist in *The Boys Are Back* (rated M), the new feature from Scott Hicks. Hicks is the celebrated director of *Shine*, which in 1996 won Geoffrey Rush an Academy Award. While many readers may not see this new film, it is worth considering for the context and issues. There are some quite realistic portrayals, and yet also amateurish, and perhaps even mediocre and unnecessary elements and scenes. It is good production, especially with the complementary music of the wistful Icelandic band Sigur Rós and Hal Lindes, formerly of Dire Straits.

Based on a true story '*The Boys are Back in Town*' by political journalist Simon Carr, a father coming to grips with parenthood following the death of his wife, Clive Owen plays the lead Joe Warr, who in the film is an English sports writer now living in Australia, because as we find out he got too close to one of his interviewees and "got her pregnant", and then left his first wife and young son (Harry) to what he had hoped would be a long life with his new love Katy. We meet him devastated, and unprepared as he has always been on the road covering sporting events. Not only does he have a soon to be seven year old Artie, (there is a quintessential Australian boy birthday party scene), but he soon has his teenage son arrive, who has a break from his mother and new partner in England.

South Australian readers will be familiar with the areas in the Fleurieu Peninsula, and the locations, including the airport, Flinders Hospital,

Kangarilla, Hendon, Willunga and Glenelg. Hicks lived in Adelaide from his early teenage years, and now his family now have their own Vineyard. The setting is very noticeably South Australian with Katy's family vineyard actually a real-life working vineyard (Dog Ridge) at McLaren Vale.

There are many familiar actors, with Julia Blake and Chris Haywood playing the parents of Joe's deceased wife Katy. The wife (played by Laura Fraser) re-appears throughout the film, not as a ghost, but a type of affirming conscience to let him know he is doing okay.

The film has many aspects and this is one drawback as it could be seen as partly educational drama and social commentary, and even part farce.

Issues abound:

- The teenage son feeling abandoned by his father but giving it a second go.

- The supportive grandparents grieving for their daughter, but still with their own busy lives, unable to drop everything to care for the grandson, and yet the grandmother clearly believes she would do a better job raising Artie than Joe.

- The social dating scene of single parents and the pronounced desire to know what type of relationship one has – is it child helper and cleaner for hopeless messy males?

- The use of technology which allows Joe to write stories as if he was courtside at the Australian Open even though he is still at home with the boys.

- The depth of and problems created by a drinking culture in Australia.

The main area explored is that of practical parenting today. It is more unusual to have single fathers in film roles, and the idea follows the traditional one of the father coming to grips with parenting by simply fitting it into his lifestyle.

Warr has a philosophy of Just Say Yes (to your kids). This is outlined in those cute colour alphabet magnets that abound on fridges in houses with children.

Joe has one overall rule which is basically if he tells you something then you have to do it. One rule he announces is 'no swearing, but this is soon and obviously broken. The occasional coarse language and adult references are however mostly not gratuitous, as they are used to illustrate elements of Australian society. At the least, one can easily work out why a certain level of confusion could arise in this family. There are some extraordinary examples of a parent letting a child do something, including a driving car (albeit sitting on his father's lap). Overall I felt ambiguous about Joe Warr. In Australia we are supposed to love a larrikin, but there is a limit to the amount of selfishness even a larrikin can get away with.

I found this film tailored for a secular, and fairly Godless country which in terms of the statistics in rural South Australia is far from the truth. Where does Joe seek comfort?

Not in any form of faith, and certainly not a church. There is the help of friends and family, but they also provide complications, and often a point of rigid contrast with his freeing attitude. Joe is essentially by himself, or with a drink, or his boys, but they are too young to help a grown man accept his responsibilities. I think it would have created a more positive message if they had all gone to family counselling, and this may have also helped with all Joe and Artie's grief.

This film reminds me of the tendency in some parts of the church to consider pastoral care to be letting people get what they want and even helping them to do things which are not helpful.

Joe comes back and forth, and back again – and the boys do too. I will not say too much but I doubt if there will be surprises. This could have been a much more lyrical film, but its larrikin whimsicalness has an edge that for me provided unease.

Peter Bentley