

Ben Is Back, Beautiful Boy, and Hollywood's New Obsession With Drug Abuse

When we say that a movie or a book “romanticizes” a harmful activity, we usually mean that it irresponsibly makes drug use or violence seem like something that the viewer might also like to do. *Trainspotting* or *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, for example, show booze and drugs as interesting and cool (*Leaving Las Vegas*, less so). But romanticization also has another meaning. The word comes from the Old French, and before it became about love or sublimity, a *romance* was a story in verse (*romanstill* means novel in French).

Storytelling and romanticism are closely linked—sisters in narrative, if you will. Art that is about suffering is always at risk of romanticizing that suffering, because the act of telling a story imposes beginnings and middles and ends, not to mention stirring soundtracks, upon experiences that in real life have no such punctuation. To make a movie about drugs almost guarantees that you romanticize them, because otherwise there would be no narrative at all—just long nights, empty bank accounts, and a feeling like cold hunger.

Two new movies about white teenagers addicted to drugs, as well as the parents who struggle to keep them upright, labor to overcome this inherent tension. *Ben Is Back* stars Julia Roberts as mom Holly, whose son Ben returns home for Christmas on an ill-advised visit from rehab for his opioid addiction. The movie follows one wild Christmas Eve, as the consequences of Ben's previous actions come back to haunt him. Holly has to chase him across town as he makes a series of very bad

decisions.

Beautiful Boy is also about a son and a parent. Timothée Chalamet is Nic, and Steve Carell is his father David. Where *Ben Is Back* is set in cold New York state, *Beautiful Boy* is a story of sunny, Californian addiction. One features a mom, the other a dad. But the movies follow the same basic arc: white son wrenches away from a loving family and into serious addiction. What can a parent do in the face of this affliction? And where do they draw the painful lines in the sand when the children go too far? The sons just keep screwing up, and nobody knows what to do.

Beautiful Boy is a much easier movie to watch, but *Ben Is Back* is much the better film. The former is drenched in golden sunshine, lily-white in its cast. It depicts Nic as a baby for whom hope is never quite lost. The latter is about a coddled white teenager, but at least his stepfather (the capable Courtney B. Vance) gets to say that, if Ben were black, he'd have been incarcerated long ago.

The movie's real achievement lies in Roberts's performance, which is possibly her best. Holly is incandescent with worry. She's good and kind and intimate, but with the oppressive weight of, well, a mother. The movie does an excellent job of evoking the texture of home: the familiarity, the remains of old versions of yourself, the heavy love that can feel like mustard gas.

If there's a valuable message to these movies—apart from the fact that addiction sucks, and it's very hard to get out of, but there's a reason people do drugs—it's in that depiction of home. Both these boys are loved fiercely by their families,

but for some people being loved just doesn't feel good.

The movie industry has taken other approaches to this issue. The 2017 documentary *Heroin(e)* follows three women—a firefighter, a judge, a volunteer—battling the scourge of opioid addiction in West Virginia. And in the internet age, audiences have other means of seeing what drug abuse looks like. Last week, *The New York Times* ran [a piece](#) about opioid addicts who have been filmed overdosing in public and put on YouTube or the news. One woman nicknamed the “Dollar Store Junkie” was filmed unconscious beside her frantic two year-old daughter. She said, “I know what I did, and I can't change it. ... I live with that guilt every single day.”

Both the documentary and the piece raise our awareness of how we perceive addiction. One conclusion a lot of people have reached is that this country has suddenly started to care about drug addiction because opioid abuse in America largely affects white people—people who begin with a legitimate percocet prescription and end up dead from heroin overdose. As an *American Journal of Public Health* article puts it, the authorities' reaction to this new crisis couldn't be more different from their responses to drug issues in other communities: “In the context of public concern that White Americans are turning to heroin, policymakers are calling for reduced sentencing for nonviolent illicit drug offenses and the expansion of access to addiction treatment. At the same time, in Black and Latino communities, many drug-addicted individuals continue to be incarcerated rather than treated for their addiction.”

The relevant critique of the entertainment industry makes itself. We didn't get this kind of sensitive, detailed portrayal of crack cocaine addiction in black communities in the 1990s, even as (or maybe because) the Clintons fueled white nightmares with visions of drug-addled superpredators. We got *Crackheads Gone Wild* and *Cops*. *Beautiful Boy* and *Ben Is Back* would never have been made if white Americans didn't all of a sudden care about substance abuse—because it affects them now.

That critique doesn't just have to be a political call-out; it's also a way into reading these movies as pieces of art. It goes back to the idea of what it means to romanticize something. It doesn't just mean that the subject matter goes from bad to good. To romanticize drug abuse can be as straightforward as applying traditional moviemaking narrative structures to the topic.

Both movies struggle with the fact that sobriety and relapse go in circles, which is bad for storytelling. *Ben Is Back* gets around the problem by setting its action in one night; *Beautiful Boy* settles for a flashback-riddled exploration of family dynamics. But turning a drug addict into a handsome young man with good skin and a ton of potential to waste—that's easy. All you do is cast a pretty guy and let him cry onscreen in his mother's arms, maybe give him some poetry to read aloud. (Nic does Bukowski, and I'm not even joking.) Sprinkle a little hope on him at the end and you've got yourself a tragic hero.

That's a problem, because being addicted to drugs in 2018 means bystanders filming you passed out in a dollar store. Of course there are plenty of beloved, middle-class people who have the struggles of Ben and Nic, and their suffering cannot

be denied. But in defense of sheer reality, there are a lot more addicts who can't afford dentistry and look unattractive because of it. These are people whom you might cross the street to avoid. Homelessness isn't Thimothée Chalamet draped handsomely across a diner; it's contemptuous glances and shame. The women and men of *Heroin(e)* have universally bad skin and radiate that specific narcotic waxiness that comes from long-term abuse, because that's what it looks like. In short, drug addiction is usually a story about poverty, inflected by race, and these movies are looking in the totally opposite direction.

There's no story to addiction—no beginning and no end, unless you count birth and death. If you have substance abuse problems then you know that the problem does not exist externally to your personality: it is coextensive with your interpretation of the world. To be addicted to a substance is to feel a sensation as boring, all-consuming, and impossible to describe as thirst. That's all. And how can you make a movie about that? It's difficult, so directors are using drugs as a starting point to make cinema about families, social politics, and love—not exactly groundbreaking.

Neither *Ben Is Back* nor *Beautiful Boy* can truly claim to be movies about drugs. They're just regular old romantic exile plots that happen to feature drugs in a supporting role. If Hollywood is going to start hacking out these tales of white pain, then filmmakers need to develop some much sharper tools.

(Source: www.Newrepublic.com)