

Boy A: An antidote to the “law and order” mania

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Directed by John Crowley, written by Mark O’Rowe, based on the novel by Jonathan Trigell

Boy A is opening this week in New York and Los Angeles. This comment on the film was originally posted as part of the coverage of the 2007 Toronto film festival.

British director John Crowley’s film *Boy A*, based on the 2004 novel by Jonathan Trigell, is inspired by the notorious Jamie Bulger case. In 1993, in Merseyside, England, two 10-year-olds were convicted of murdering Jamie Bulger, aged 2, without any consideration of the social and psychological traumas that produced the boys’ offense. During the course of the trial and afterward, the British media spared no effort in portraying the pair as savages who were inherently and irredeemably evil.

Boy A explores, in the words of director Crowley, “why people demonized these children.” The film opens with Terry, a social worker (Peter Mullan), sitting across the table from “Boy A” (in this manner the British courts conceal the identity of child defendants), who, at age 24, has spent most of his life in juvenile detention. Terry is encouraging Boy A to choose a name as part of establishing a new identity. To help launch his second life, Terry gives the newly named “Jack Burridge” (Andrew Garfield) a pair of “Escape” brand sneakers. Escaping, in all manner, the glare of a vindictive world, will be Jack’s mode of existence.

This reality is reinforced by the vicious newspaper headline, “Evil comes of Age,” announcing Boy A’s release from incarceration. With his life dependent on a successful reinvention, Jack, nervous and awkward, begins a job. Entering into society has its hazards: the closer he gets to people, the greater the threat of exposure.

The terrible strain of this burden becomes clear when pent-up anxieties, unleashed by the drug “Ecstasy,” explode during Jack’s first social outing. He lets loose in a frantic, jarring spasm of dance; and later, in a violent subduing of a friend’s attackers. Shielding himself from a societal war against him has created a terrible war within.

Flashbacks reveal that the young perpetrators suffered childhoods of poverty, sexual abuse and gross neglect. The social and psychological impulses responsible for Boy A and Boy B (Eric, at the time, and Phil, respectively), the latter now deceased, joining forces at age 12 are firmly established. Their union offsets a cruel isolation and leads to the “perfect storm” moment that results in the murder of a female classmate. “Jack” is now haunted by Phil’s death. The official finding of suicide does not quell his suspicion that his friend was found out and assassinated. Phil’s fate and the hellish challenges facing Jack are sensitively brought into relief with every excursion into the past.

In one flashback, Phil recounts with a terrifying coldness how he kept his sanity during repeated sexual assaults by his brother. Another, a courtroom scene featuring a self-righteous, vindictive prosecutor and two bewildered, child defendants whose short legs dangle above the floor, is particularly effective. Far away from these events, Jack finds love with a workmate, Michelle (Katie Lyons), and rescues the victim of a car accident to become a local hero. Terry proudly views him as his “most successful achievement.”

Tensions escalate until Terry’s jealous and disoriented son (James Young) hits back at Jack in a devastating fashion.

Boy A skillfully tackles the reactionary notion that there exists a “bad seed,” that is to say, a human being

with an unalterably wicked character. (During the Bulger trial, one policeman involved in the case was widely quoted as saying: “I believe nature spouts out freaks. These two boys were freaks who just found each other.”)

In a question-and-answer session after one of the movie’s screenings at the Toronto film festival last fall, John Crowley pointed to the undemocratic, and irrational, nature of putting children on trial: “The law mandates that a person be tried by a jury of one’s peers. If that’s the case, then these boys should have had a jury of 12-year-olds.... The thing about children is that they have no boundaries. Kids don’t seem to have a compass that can pull them back. And the murder is an example of how the personal and social can tragically intersect. These were essentially kids that had no childhood. That was even the case with Terry’s son.”

Crowley’s film is a compassionate antidote to the British (and global) ruling elite’s “law-and-order” mania—a socially regressive preoccupation with containing the population and desensitizing it in the process. Its appearance also reflects a shift in popular mood against this drive.

About the Bulger case, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote in June 2001: “The essential aim of the efforts to demonize Thompson and Venables [the two boys convicted of Jamie Bulger’s murder] was in order to forward an agenda for the destruction of social reforms. To justify this, it was necessary to repudiate any attempt to understand the broader social, economic and cultural processes that could give rise to aberrant behavior by children or any other social problem. Any attempt to do so was rubbish as an expression of ‘wet liberal do-gooding’ and blamed for rising lawlessness. Public discourse was brutalized in anticipation of the further brutalization of society itself.”

Boy A’s most serious weakness lies in its treatment of Terry and his son. First, it strains credibility that Terry would inform the unstable youth about Jack’s terrible secret. He insists on one cardinal rule to Jack: never tell anyone. “Never! Never!” Furthermore, that Terry’s son is angry and irrational enough to set off a chain of events with possibly deadly consequences has simply not been prepared by the drama up to this point. This development feels contrived and artificial.

Moreover, there is a certain diluting of the social argument. The film seems to be hinting that even individuals as humane and self-sacrificing as Terry are perhaps fatally flawed. The director says: “Terry is supportive of Jack, but is a failure as a parent.” It’s not a secret: everyone has weaknesses. But does that prevent human beings from helping each other and making the world a better place? There’s a certain concession here to retrograde moods.

Overall, the film is very strong and compassionate. The festival catalogue cites an oft-quoted Faulkner observation in its notes on *Boy A*: “The past is never dead. It’s not even the past.” The movie rightly sets its sights on the atrocious social reasons, and social forces (courts and media), why this is so destructively true for Boy A and Boy B and many others. It does so in a truthful and moving manner.



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