Judy Blume's *Tiger Eyes* brought to the screen: An understated examination of grief

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Written and directed by Lawrence Blume, based on the novel by Judy Blume

In limited theatrical release and available online at Amazon.com and iTunes, *Tiger Eyes* marks the first full-length treatment of a book by Judy Blume (this one published in 1981), the author of many popular novels for children and young adults.

Co-written by Blume and her son Lawrence Blume (*Martin & Orloff*), who also directs, the film follows 17-year-old Davey (Willa Holland— *Arrow*, *Gossip Girl*) as her family moves from Atlantic City to Los Alamos, New Mexico in the aftermath of her father's sudden death.

Here is a story sensitively told and depicted with an understated strength. Holland is impressive in her portrayal of Davey, who holds her grief and anger very tightly inside, her feelings too raw to let out. Holland has an expressive face for a performer so young and knows just how far to take her expressiveness.

After her father's funeral in Atlantic City, Davey and her family experience a harrowing night at home, and her mother (Amy Jo Johnson— *Flashpoint*) decides to accept the offer of relatives to leave the area for a respite. As Davey packs, she takes a paper bag from the corner of her closet. It takes up a considerable amount of space in her suitcase. The contents are not revealed, but it is clearly connected to her father. She gives it a similar place in her closet in New Mexico.

The aunt and uncle who bring Davey's family to stay with them in Los Alamos are controlling, each in his or her own way. Her childless and overprotective aunt Bitsy (Cynthia Stevenson— *Life Unexpected*, *The World According to Jim*) treats Davey's brother, Jason, as if he were her own son and attempts to impose herself on Davey in the same manner. Uncle Walter (Forrest Fyre— *Wildfire*, *3:10 to Yuma*), who works at the labs in Los Alamos—developing bombs, an occupation that appalls Davey, but which her uncle describes as "keeping people safe"—is disapproving of Davey, and not shy about saying so. Sometimes to the point of cruelty.

After Davey's mother slips into a grief-induced semi-catatonic state, her aunt enrolls the kids in school. Davey is incensed, as they only planned to stay a few weeks, but becomes subject, as children are, to the decisions of the adults.

The scenery of New Mexico plays a role in this film and is integrated very well. The shots of the landscape give a sense of warmth, but also solitude.

In an effort to get away from her family, none of whom seem to accept her grief as legitimate (or, in the case of her mother, able to see beyond their own), Davey spends a good deal of time alone, riding her bike into the hills and climbing on the rocks. On one such excursion she meets Wolf (Tatanka Means— *The Host*, and the son of Russell Means). Having slipped down a hill, Davey sits, calling out to her father. Her voice echoes back to her—it is a lonely moment, and Davey's vulnerability is palpable.

Wolf finds her and, after some convincing (she is rightfully wary of a stranger in the wild), helps her back to the top of the bluff. The scene is treated well. There is no "magical native" element; these are simply two humans on the terrain, one offering help to the other. She raises an eyebrow at his name and asks whether it's his first or last. "Either, both," he answers. When he asks her name, she tells him he can call her "Tiger" and that it could also be either or both.

Their relationship progresses slowly, and the trust they develop in one another, the understanding that each has a great sadness he or she is not ready to name, is touching. They're friends, and unlike many films aimed at this age group, they don't rush to a boyfriend-girlfriend conclusion.

Their grief is not romanticized, neither is that of the

other characters in this film. The effects of tragedy—sudden or expected—on people and how they cope or don't is largely given a realistic and tender treatment.

Throughout the school year, Davey's relationships with Wolf, his father (Russell Means) and her friend Jane (Elise Eberle— *Lemonade Mouth*) eventually bring her through the intense pain of her father's death.

The pain is certainly not gone by the film's end; rather it becomes something with which she understands she has to live, but not allow to dominate her life. Her symbolic act in unpacking and burying the contents of the paper bag near the conclusion is quite moving.

The film is not problem-free, and certain areas might have been better handled. The recovery of Davey's mother is given scant attention, for instance, and seems a bit abrupt. Likewise, Jane's drinking problem, which figured more prominently in the novel, could be better explored. Why she drinks is not explained here and, except for a scene near the end, is not directly confronted. When this does happen, and Jane argues that Davey is also in denial, it is powerful, but it could have been more so had the issue been more consistently addressed in the course of the film.

While these are important gaps, they do not, ultimately, detract from the whole, and the main story—that of Davey's own process—is developed well and with a realistic logic.

Judy Blume has never been afraid to state what is, and her work has a well-deserved reputation for being true to life in its look at human emotions—especially those of young people in difficult situations. This is something which has provoked censorship (almost all of her young adult books, including *Tiger Eyes*, have been challenged at one time or another), but which has won generations of loyal readers.

Bringing out such a story as *Tiger Eyes*, with its respect and understanding for the protagonist's strong and complex feelings, and, through her, those of the book's readers, is an important service. This film is a fine continuation.