Looking for Grace—a strangely cold story about a teenager leaving home

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9 May 2016

Written and directed by Sue Brooks

With a few honourable exceptions, the Australian film industry, which produces only a handful of features each year, has offered little in the way of thoughtful examinations of the social life of ordinary people in the past decade.

Looking for Grace, the latest offering from Sue Brooks, has been praised by several local critics who suggested that it brings something new and serious to Australian filmmaking. The movie was nominated for the Golden Lion at last year's 72nd Venice International Film Festival and recently won the Directors Guild of America's "Finders Award."

Brooks's film, which centres on the efforts of a lower middle-class couple in Western Australia to find Grace (Odessa Young), their runaway 16-year-old daughter and only child, is a largely aimless and frustrating work.

The 100-minute feature is divided into five chapters—each named after the story's principal characters and told from their standpoint. The first chapter is about Grace, the others deal with Denise and Dan (Grace's mother and father), Tom (a semi-retired detective) and Bruce (a long-distance truck driver).

The film opens with Grace and her friend Sappho (Kenya Pearson) on an interstate bus. Grace has stolen a large amount of money from her father and the two girls are travelling east across Australia to attend a rock concert in Ceduna, South Australia, thousands of kilometres away on the edge of the vast Nullarbor Plain.

On the bus the girls befriend Jamie (Harry Richardson) but when it becomes clear that he is only interested in Grace, Sappho decides to abandon the journey and go home. Grace spends the night with Jamie in a rather seedy hotel but awakes in the morning alone. Jamie has stolen her father's money and she is stranded in the tiny desert settlement, far from home.

Young's portrayal of Grace as an alienated and disconnected teenager attempting to break free of her stultifying home life and satisfy her sense of adventure and youthful optimism is sensitive and convincing.

The following chapters, notwithstanding occasional humorous moments and some striking shots of the Australian outback, are less interesting and as the movie progresses feel forced and artificial. The acting in these chapters is credible enough, but the film makes no real attempt to explore why Grace stole her father's money and ran away from home.

Dan and Denise eventually find Grace but they are preoccupied with their own personal questions. Everyone appears detached and confused, with little ability to convey their concerns.

Dan (Richard Roxburgh), who owns a small furniture shop, seems to be facing a mid-life crisis and what appear to be financial problems that he has never told his wife about. He is also struck with guilt about an unconsummated liaison with Sandra (Tasma Walton), his furniture store manager.

Denise (Radha Mitchell) is a home-mother, seemingly dominated by domestic issues and struggling to build a stronger relationship with her husband and daughter. She spends much of her time in the family's suburban home, to which Brooks gives a deliberately exaggerated blandness.

The quirky, semi-retired detective Tom (Terry Norris), who has been called in to assist Dan and Denise find Grace, becomes a sympathetic mediator to the troubles in the family. One of the film's lighter moments involves a late night discussion between Tom and Dan about the pros and cons of extra-marital affairs.

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Long-distance truck driver Bruce (Myles Pollard), who is crossing the Nullarbor Plain with his young son, is little more than a plot device in the overall structure of the film. His two appearances are brief, the last one used to bring the movie to a sudden and gratuitously harsh end.

Looking for Grace alludes to some important subjects—the social pressures on contemporary working families and their children and the general lack of social communication. These issues, however, are never seriously tackled or dramatically investigated.

In one interview director Sue Brooks explained that she was "fascinated by the idea that we all live our lives separately and inter-connectedly … As you are living your life one of the big questions is what is in front of you and you don't really know what that is. Would you be doing this like this, if you knew what was happening in front of you?"

Guided by this outlook, the film seems to be an exercise in absurdism. Every character is groping in the dark for a greater meaning, but confronts obstacles and events that render his or her efforts almost meaningless. After Grace has been found and the characters are slowly coming to terms with one another, the film ends on a sudden and tragic note. It is a rather bleak and pessimistic message about the ultimately futile search for any purpose in life.

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