

# *Captain Fantastic*: An anti-establishment superhero?

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30 July 2016

*Written and directed by Matt Ross*

Writer-director Matt Ross' *Captain Fantastic* is a semi-anarchistic tale about a family's "off-the-grid" existence in the Pacific Northwest.

Ben (Viggo Mortensen), father of six children aged between eight and 18, more or less, is bent on raising his family away from mainstream society and all its toxicity. In pristine and mountainous woods, the family undergoes rigorous physical exercise by day and vigorous intellectual training by night. They grow their own vegetables, respectfully kill their sources of protein and sleep in a communal teepee.

The brood's father, a former professor, and his wife Leslie (Trin Miller), a former lawyer, believe they are recreating Plato's Republic and that their children are destined to be philosopher-kings and -queens. They shun Christmas but mark the anniversary of Noam Chomsky's birth, celebrating, in their view, a great humanitarian.

The eldest son, Bodevan (George MacKay), chastises his father for using the term "Trotskyite"—a Stalinist-type insult—not "Trotskyist." The family's usual call-and-response is: "Power to the people ... Stick it to the man." "Fascist capitalist" is an epithet freely bandied about.

But the family's seclusion is interrupted when Leslie, who suffers from acute mental illness, must reenter civilization for treatment. Concerning this traumatic event, Ben and his children have the following, fairly typical exchange:

Kielyr (Samantha Isler) "But you said hospitals are only a great place to go if you're a healthy person and you want to die."

Zaja (Shree Crooks): "You said Americans are undereducated and over-medicated."

Kielyr: "And you said the AMA [American Medical

Association] are avaricious whores only too willing to spread their fat legs for Big Pharma."

Ben: "All those things are true. But mom does not have enough of the neurotransmitter serotonin to conduct electrical signals in her brain."

When Leslie tragically kills herself, Ben and the kids decide to attend the funeral, in another state, traveling in their ramshackle bus named "Steve." But Leslie's wealthy parents, Jack and Abigail (Frank Langella and Ann Dowd) have taken over and are organizing a traditional Christian service and interment.

In fact, Jack blames Ben for Leslie's premature death, and orders his son-in-law to stay away. But, although "the powerful control the lives of the powerless," the family decides to rescue Leslie's body from the "Christians." They intend to honor a mother who had become a Buddhist, despised organized religion and stated in her will she wanted to be cremated.

Interacting with the outside world involves a clash of values for Ben and his children, in the first place with Jack and Abigail, who at one point threaten to file for custody of their grandchildren. Ben and his budding geniuses also find themselves at odds with his sister, Harper (Kathryn Hahn), and brother-in-law, Dave (Steve Zahn). The more conventional couple's computer game-addicted sons are witless compared to one of Ben's youngest, who is able to explain the Bill of Rights, as well as the significance of *Citizens United*—the 2010 Supreme Court decision that abolished restrictions on big business political spending.

The superiority of the education Ben's offspring have received is further underscored by their ability to speak several languages fluently. Bodevan has been accepted by a slew of Ivy League universities.

*Captain Fantastic*, whose title obviously spoofs

comic book action movies, puts forward its own conception of a hero. Along the same lines, it may be that Ben initially believes he possesses the formula for creating a new race of “super-beings.” However, by the movie’s end it is an open question whether he will continue to espouse his radical views.

Mortensen comfortably and intelligently inhabits the role of Ben, and the actors who play his children are striking and appealing. Langella is convincing as a wealthy man not averse to siccing goons on his grieving son-in-law; Dowd renders an emotionally poignant performance.

Ross, who has been best known until now as a talented actor in series like *Big Love* (2006-11), seems to have certain good intentions and critical thoughts. Although the politics here is generally not good (indicated by the 1988 Jesse Jackson for president t-shirt that Ben wears at one point), some of the impulses may be. The director is clearly hostile to certain aspects of official American life, including a terribly deficient education system and a generally miserable cultural level.

In an interview, Ross elaborated on his hostility toward the theocratic element in present-day American politics, noting that we “live in a country where no one can be elected president of the United States without talking about their deep and abiding faith in Jesus Christ, and yet we are supposed to have a separation of church and state.”

Unfortunately, *Captain Fantastic* suffers from serious flaws, associated in part with the character and outlook of the middle class radicalism promoted by the film. In this day and age, the notion that running off to the woods embodies “Power to the people” and “Sticking it to the man” seems extraordinarily threadbare. One would have thought that a little ideological water had flowed under the bridge since 1967 or so.

It is simply wrongheaded to identify living in complete isolation with opposition to the status quo, as though withdrawing has ever generated change. As Ross himself observes in an interview, this sort of individualism and semi-anarchism has as much—or more—of a right-wing pedigree (libertarianism, survivalism) as it does a left-wing one, Ben’s admiration for a “left” anti-establishment figure like Chomsky notwithstanding.

Moreover, outside of Ben and his children, the rest of

humanity—in their eyes—are either overweight, brain-dead or dictatorial. In general, the family’s sympathies seem reserved not primarily for suffering humanity but for themselves.

A chief difficulty is that figures like Ross are sincerely dissatisfied with the existing state of things, but cut off from any sense of how it might be altered. Not seeing any objective source for change, the writer-director creates a largely fantastic or artificial one. Ironically, his American individualist outlook is closer to that of the comic book moviemakers than he would like to think.

Like other Hollywood liberals and radicals, Ross is far removed at this point from wider layers of the American population, which seethe with anger and discontent. This restive mass of people is the genuine agent of change. But the director’s antennae are not pointed in that direction.

Unable or unwilling to base himself on real life, Ross is obliged to flesh out and dramatize stale conceptions about some latter-day hippie alternative to inhuman capitalism. And along the way, he tends to blame the population for its troubles. Nevertheless, *Captain Fantastic* contains a dose of healthy disgust, and that is something, despite the rather childish prescriptions.



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