

# Wildlife: American dreams and discouragement

## And *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*

Joanne Laurier  
13 December 2018

Set in 1960, *Wildlife* is a relatively somber look at postwar America. Directed by actor-filmmaker Paul Dano, and co-written by Dano and Zoe Kazan, the work is based on the 1990 novel of the same title by Richard Ford.

Jerry Brinson (Jake Gyllenhaal) has moved his wife, Jeanette (Carey Mulligan), and teenage son, Joe (Ed Oxenbould), to the arid terrain of Great Falls in northern Montana, hoping for a better future. Nearby, close to the Canadian border, a wildfire is raging.

The Brinsons try to emulate, like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, an imaginary ideal of family life. Jerry, once a golf pro, now tends the grounds at a golf club. He pushes Joe into high school football, a sport the boy is not interested in playing. Meanwhile, Jeanette, a former substitute teacher turned homemaker, tries hard to hold things together and maintain the illusion that all is well.

Fired from his job for being too solicitous to club members, Jerry is given two weeks' severance pay: "\$80—what's a man entitled to?" His skin-deep optimism vanishes, and paralysis and despondency set in. In an effort to boost his self-worth, he signs up to help fight the fire for \$1.00 an hour. (His wife: "You won't take a job at a grocery store, but you'll go out with a bunch of deadbeats and risk getting killed.")

Suddenly, the rug is pulled out from under the Brinsons. A placid surface gives way to something more explosive. Jeanette becomes angry: "What kind of man leaves his wife and child in such a lonely place?"

Probing close-ups of Joe reveal his pain at witnessing the apparent disintegration of his parents' relationship. Having taken an after-school job working for a photographer, he now shoots portraits of ordinary people whose strained smiles mask a bleaker reality.

Jeanette finds an older, richer man, Warren Miller (Bill Camp), the owner of a car dealership and other businesses, and a veteran of two wars. ("You worked for your success—Jerry's always wanted to take shortcuts.") But she is simultaneously seductive and resentful. When Warren boasts that he has "gotten rich off peoples' incompetence," and that "money begets money," Jeanette remarks: "That's how the rich stay

rich and the poor stay poor."

When Jerry finally returns, Jeanette moves out and Joe is figuratively cast out into the cold.

*Wildlife* does an effective job of dramatizing the conflict between the heavily promoted notion that America in that period, or any period, is the land of unlimited opportunity and universal prosperity, and the actual conditions—including the psychic ones—for the mass of the population. In the US, everyone is told he or she should be happy in the greatest country on earth. Reality and unfulfilled expectations on the economic front may lead to emotional distress.

The film cuts repeatedly to shots of the grim, dreary center of Great Falls (or wherever *Wildlife* was shot), leaving the impression that prospects have dried up or never existed. Gyllenhaal, Mulligan and Australian newcomer Oxenbould as Joe are convincing as a lower-middle class family whose hopes and aspirations evaporate, leaving the trio to reconcile themselves to "surviving" rather than "living," to merely getting by instead of finding some fulfillment in life.

Dano (born 1984) apparently understands something about the manipulated dreams through which American society operates. "Jerry," says the director in an interview, "is someone who has always put his life out on the horizon. Someone who thinks the next job is going to make things great. ... The American Dream can take you out of the present. Jerry is suddenly presented with a reality check and he can't handle it. For me, it was a coming of age story for a family. It's not just the kid, the parents have to grow up as well."

The filmmaker succeeds in "peeling back the layers," as he puts it, of the quasi-idyllic image and revealing what lies beneath.

Furthermore, in an interview with the *Independent*, the director observes rather sensitively: "There's also something about the mystery of who our parents are that felt really haunting to me. That they have past lives, and they have their own problems."

Interestingly, Dano (an actor in *Little Miss Sunshine*, *There Will Be Blood*, *Love & Mercy* and other films), who was deeply affected by the Richard Ford novel, does not find celebrity

alluring: “For me it was the opposite. It was almost repellent.” As a thoughtful artist going against the Hollywood grain, Dano has created a compassionate, disturbing and insightful movie.

Ford (born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1944), the author of *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Canada* (2012), among other works, is an interesting writer. He also has a short story, “Communist,” in the collection *Rock Springs* (2010), about a teenager whose mother has a boy-friend who “was a labor man as well as a Communist, and liked to say that the country was poisoned by the rich.”

In *Wildlife*, Ford offers an intriguing and clear-sighted picture of life in a small town. The understated approach, influenced by Ernest Hemingway among others, generally holds up. At times, when the content declines in substance, the tone increases in self-consciousness and can even become a little precious.

“Clear-sighted,” but also somewhat discouraged. One has the impression that the sentiment is as much attached to the time Ford wrote the book, 1990, as it is to the period in which the novel is set.

But there are many nicely constructed passages, like this one: “This was in Great Falls, Montana, at the time of the Gypsy Basin oil boom, and my father had brought us there in the spring of that year from Lewiston, Idaho, in the belief that people—small people like him—were making money in Montana or soon would be, and he wanted a piece of that good luck before all of it collapsed and was gone in the wind.”

And this: “From the bridge I could see the silver oil refinery tanks and the light towers at the baseball field where the Great Falls team played. I could see the fairgrounds and the smelter stack and the hot-rod course in Black Eagle, and the three white elevators Warren Miller owned or at least had an interest in, and where my mother said she wanted to work or had already worked or soon would if any of that was a true story. And beyond were the open prairies, flat and treeless as far away as I could see, all the way to Minneapolis and St. Paul, my father had told me.”

And this concluding one: “And then at the end of March, in 1961, just as it was beginning to be spring, my mother came back from wherever she had been. In a while she and my father found a way to settle the difficulties that had been between them. And though they may both have felt that something had died between them, something they may not even have been aware of until it was gone and disappeared from their lives forever, they must’ve felt—both of them—that there was something of themselves, something important, that could not live at all in any other way but by their being together, much as they had been before. I do not know exactly what that something was. But that is how our life resumed after then, for the little time that I was at home. And for many years after that. They lived together—that was their life—and alone. Though God knows there is still much to it that I myself, their only son, cannot fully claim to understand.”

### ***Can You Ever Forgive Me?***

Melissa McCarthy stars in *Can You Ever Forgive Me?*, an odd, sad story about the life of Leonore Carol “Lee” Israel (1939-2014), a biographer and journalist. Israel was eventually convicted of forging letters that she claimed were written by famous literary figures, such as Noel Coward and Dorothy Parker.

Set in New York City in 1991 and based on Israel’s 2008 memoir of the same name, the movie is directed by Marielle Heller, with a screenplay by Nicole Holofcener and Jeff Whitty.

Israel began her career as a biographer of female celebrities, such as actresses Katharine Hepburn, Tallulah Bankhead and cosmetic mogul Estée Lauder. As the movie opens, the caustic, irascible Lee (McCarthy does a fine job), a gay woman who loves cats more than people, becomes penniless, and discovers that her forgery skills (“I’m a better Dorothy Parker than Dorothy Parker”) can pay the bills. Her partner in crime is the flamboyant Jack Hock (a charming Richard E. Grant), a gay homeless man.

She is ultimately exposed when explicit references to Coward’s sexual orientation in her forgeries attract the attention of some of her more discerning buyers.

Within a three-year period, she forges more than 400 letters, going so far as to steal and copy from library archives.

The movie ends with her arrest and conviction. Israel would go on to work as a copy editor for Scholastic magazines, authoring her fourth and final book, the memoir upon which the film is based. “I still consider the letters to be my best work,” she writes in her autobiography.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**