

Beautiful Boy: Part of the truth about drug addiction

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Directed by Felix Van Groeningen; screenplay by Luke Davies and Van Groeningen, based on the memoirs of David and Nic Sheff

Directed by Belgian-born Felix Van Groeningen, *Beautiful Boy* is based on the memoirs of David Sheff and his son, Nic Sheff. The movie deals with the subject of drug addiction—a national public health emergency in the US, and a source of immense suffering.

In contrast to the vicious law-and-order campaign organized by both the Democrats and Republicans, which has destroyed countless lives and resulted in the jailing of untold numbers of people, *Beautiful Boy* opts for a humane approach to the problem. It is the story of a drug-addicted teenage boy who makes numerous efforts at sobriety, but his repeated relapses place enormous strains on his supportive family and put his own life at risk.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, in upscale Marin County, California, across the Golden Gate Bridge from San Francisco, Nic Sheff (Timothée Chalamet) enjoys a close relationship with his father David (Steve Carell), a *New York Times* journalist. Flashbacks confirm the intense bond between them.

Nic's parents are divorced, but his mother Vicki (Amy Ryan) and stepmother Karen (Maura Tierney) are decent, caring people determined to help him through his calamities. In fact, family and surroundings could not be more ideal and Nic could not be more “beautiful” and talented. But his drug problem seems intractable.

In a moment of raw truthfulness, Nic explains to his father that he uses “anything—pot, alcohol, Exstasy, cocaine, LSD.” Apparently under the influence of the works of poet and short story writer Charles Bukowski (“This man saved my life multiple times”), Nic fools

himself into believing that “when I started using drugs, my world went from black-and-white to Technicolor.”

In reality, the young man, who at one point has to revive his girlfriend from an overdose, is living in a state of what David calls “psychological terror.” A psychiatrist (Timothy Hutton) explains something about the cycle of addiction to David: “So, crystal meth gives the user a feeling of instant euphoria ... at least, when he takes it. You know, but when it wears off, with a depletion of as much as 60 percent of the dopamine, the user has to up the doses. He has to double it, triple it just to feel something, causing even more nerve damage, which increases the compulsion to use.”

The movie's post-script states that drugs are the leading cause of death in the US for people under 50 years old.

Beautiful Boy is vividly filmed by cinematographer Ruben Impens. John Lennon's song “Beautiful Boy (Darling Boy)” serves as the inspiration for the movie's title. And Chalamet as Nic is indeed gorgeous and endearing. Carell, however, strains in his role and that seems to have something to do with dramatic material that only narrowly and superficially tackles the issue of drug addiction. He is trying to make too much out of too little.

Revealing the pain of such situations, and their all too often tragic results, is valuable and necessary. In any case, the dimensions of the epidemic make its artistic representation inevitable.

Between 1999 and 2017, more than 700,000 people in the US died from a drug overdose. In 2018, some 70,000 deaths were caused by such overdoses.

Multiplying each individual victim by the number of family members, partners and friends who surrounded him or her, it seems safe to argue that overdoses have

damaged or ruined millions, if not tens of millions, of lives in the past two decades.

“Americans are more likely to die from accidental opioid overdoses today than from car crashes,” the National Safety Council reported in a recent study. On average, 130 Americans die *each day* after overdosing on opioids, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The immensity of the dilemma cannot be the product of “lifestyle choices” or individual human failings—unless one believes in the Fall of Man and Original Sin. Everything points to a socially produced crisis.

The link between the devastating loss of jobs and fall in living standards in both former industrial cities and semi-rural areas, on the one hand, and the drug scourge, on the other, is obvious and direct. A staggering one in ten people in Baltimore, Maryland (60,000 out of a population of 645,000)—a city that lost 75 percent of its industrial employment between 1950 and 1995—is addicted to heroin, according to the Drug Enforcement Administration.

In March 2018, a Centers for Disease Control study revealed that opioid overdoses in the major metropolitan areas of 16 states, a portion of the country that includes Chicago, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Cleveland and Columbus, Ohio, increased *from July 2016 through September 2017 alone* by 54 percent.

In largely rural Montana (population 1.05 million), a recent report observes, “the substance abuse problem is well past epidemic proportions. According to Jennifer Owen, Executive Director of the Billings Head Start program, ‘Substance abuse is reaching catastrophic levels in Billings [the largest city in Montana]. Many of the three- and four-year-olds we serve in Billings deal with substance abuse in their daily lives.’”

In the case of upper middle class young people like Nic, the correlation between the general social and political situation and drug use is somewhat more complex.

One would have to be blind, however, not to see there is a strain of hopelessness among a section of the more affluent, vulnerable young that speaks, in another fashion, to the dead end of American capitalist society: it is a confused and despairing response to the malignant social inequality and the thieving of the very wealthy, to the endless wars and universal spying in the

spurious name of “national security,” to the official brutality and a degraded cultural environment.

Meanwhile, a vile, corrupt political system headed by a Trump, a Pelosi and a Schumer only fills wide layers of the population with revulsion. A portion of young people in particular, even those with economic means, clearly feel there is not a great deal to live for. The momentary euphoria of narcotics and the dulling of one’s psychic pain, tragically, seem a preferable alternative.

Unfortunately, *Beautiful Boy* avoids all of this.

In the film’s production notes, director Groeningen asserts: “Their family [the Sheffs] believes in unconditional love, and yet they had to come to terms with the fact that there are no easy answers and dealing with addiction is impossibly irrational.” But it is not impossible to understand, if one has a social and historical compass.

Overall, there is a good deal of personal sensitivity in *Beautiful Boy*, perhaps even an overabundance, but there is very little *social* sensitivity. And because it does not extend itself very far into the world, the film tends to fall back on itself, generating a somewhat precious, self-absorbed tone.



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