



Straining to Love

Boys will be boys?

WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN:

Directed by Lynne Ramsay. Written by Ramsay and Rory Kinnear, based on the novel by Lionel Shriver. Cinematographer, Seamus McGarvey. Music, Johnny Greenwood. Editor, Joe Bini. Starring Tilda Swinton, John C. Reilly and Ezra Miller. Oscilloscope Pictures, 2012. R. 112 minutes. ★★☆☆☆

Kevin, the sullen-faced first child of wealthy parents, is a piece of work. As a baby, he screams so fiercely that his mother finds a jackhammer soothing; as a toddler, he's resistant to everything; as a teen, he's destructive and aggressively surly. There's nothing redeeming about the kid, but his father, Franklin (John C. Reilly), sees nothing wrong. It's just how boys are, right?

Franklin, a warm but absent father, is a malign presence simply because he doesn't do anything. Tilda Swinton's Eva, a former travel writer now settled in the suburbs, carries the film and the family. She strains to love Kevin, but no bond exists between mother and child. Something else fills that space — something sharp and acidic.

Kevin, beautifully shot by Seamus McGarvey and scored with eerie perfection by Radiohead's Johnny Greenwood, is a creepy, often affecting film, unsparing in its look at a broken family playing at being whole. Director Lynne Ramsay (*Ratcatcher*), who wrote the screenplay with her husband, knows her way around moral ambiguity, and has a compelling sense for fascinating characters who are far from traditionally likeable. In *Morvern Callar*, Samantha Morton did terrible things, but Ramsay showed them to us with a straightforwardness that began to look like sympathy, wrapping *Morvern's* story in sound and sun in a way that put her flaws on glorious display.

Morvern Callar is an ambiguous film; *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, based on Lionel Shriver's novel, works at being ambiguous, but its lack of judgment feels programmed, the story plotted to divide

the audience with questions: If Kevin is a monster, was he born that way, or did lacking his mother's love make him so? If Eva couldn't love her son, is she the monster? And then, as a secondary question: Why is it all about Eva? What about absent, smiling Franklin?

All the questions are valid and answerless, even as they feel too surface-level, basic questions directed at the relatively taboo topic of imperfect mothers who don't place children above all other worldly concerns. (See also: Ayelet Waldman saying she loves her husband more than her kids; the scorn and skepticism directed at women who don't wish to procreate.)

Kevin frustrates because it gets close to something dark and difficult, then amps the stakes in a way that undercuts the film's effectiveness. Kevin isn't just a difficult, distant child; he's cruel and violent (why anyone would let this kid take up archery as a hobby is a whole other matter). Eva isn't just a mother struggling to love her son; she's a woman who used to freely travel the globe and write bestsellers, now chafing at familiar ties. The specifics are so overwrought, they shrink the film's scope, clouding the bigger questions: What kind of society teaches "Boys will be boys?" Why isn't the father equally responsible? Why are women still expected to be the ones who give up their previous lives for their children? Somewhere in *Kevin*, there's an argument, intentional or not, for not expecting all women to be mothers. (Some will also see it as highly effective birth control.)

But as it is, the film often plays out like an exercise in determining culpability, and in seeing what the after-film discussion reveals about your friends. Who hates Eva? Who fully blames Kevin? How is it that Tilda Swinton is so astonishing that anything she's in is worth watching? That last question might be the least answerable of the bunch. **EW**

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	5:00 7:30	TILDA SWINTON JOHN C. REILLY WE NEED TO TALK ABOUT KEVIN	5:45 8:15	3:00 5:45 8:15	3:00 5:45 8:15	5:45 8:15	5:45 8:15	5:45 8:15	5:45 8:15
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