Weightless Adventure

Moonrise Kingdom sweet but stalls

MOONRISE KINGDOM: Directed by Wes Anderson. Written by Anderson and Roman Coppola. Cinematography, Robert D. Yeoman. Editor, Andrew Weisblum. Music, Alexandre Deesplat. Starring Kara Hayward, Jared Gilman, Frances McDormand, Edward Norton, Bruce Willis and Bill Murray. Focus Features, 2012. PG-13. 94 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ½ ☆

Moonrise Kingdom is so charming, so quaintly and perfectly designed, like a pretty diorama in which Wes Anderson carefully places his actor-dolls, that it feels curmudgeonly to dislike it. And I don't dislike it, exactly; I'm just not sure I feel much of anything about it. Everything is in its right place; the shots are beautiful, the sets just so. Two kids set out separately across a New England island, toting impossibly stylish bags, outfitted in dashing Khaki Scout uniforms and white socks. Via charming letters — which we hear snippets of, in overlapping narration, in one of the film's best sequences — they've planned to run away together. The bare bones of their plot is borrowed from any number of kids' novels of years gone by, but those kids never slept together in their underwear or said things like, "I love you, but you have no idea what you're talking about."

Are these kids, or miniature adults? Are the adults any more mature? Khaki Scout Master Ward (Edward Norton) means well, but it's on his watch that Sam (Jared Gilman) escapes. The Bishops (Frances McDormand and Bill Murray) mutter at each other and yell at their kids through a megaphone; their daughter Suzy (Kara Hayward) escapes their lovely waterfront house — to which we're introduced via a long march of a shot past endless perfectly set-decorated rooms — toting her little brother's record player. The lovelorn sheriff (Bruce Willis) is in love with Mrs. Bishop, and Social Services (Tilda Swinton, briefly swanning in from her home planet) doesn't have a name. In asides, Bob Balaban appears, elaborating on the island's history or the state of the oncoming storm.

All the pieces are in place for a movie that pushes all the right buttons, but something stalls. Anderson has cited as influences all the same classic kids' fantasy novels that I loved — *A Wrinkle in Time*; Susan Cooper's Dark is Rising series — but despite the fact that his characters are trying to live in their own fantasy world, both the magic and the weight of the best adventure stories are missing. The kids, particularly Suzy, are so wry, so precocious, that it's sometimes hard to see how much their adventure means to them. Sam has a sweet openness, but neither of them show anything approaching enthusiasm or youthful passion. Nostalgic and worldly, *Moonrise Kingdom* is a very adult memory of a particular kind of adventure story, one that leaves out real fear and real heart.

The exceptions to this twee solemnity are slightly unexpected. As usual, Frances McDormand brings an earthy urgency to her role, and Bruce Willis, of all people, has such a laid-back, slightly aching presence that he too cracks the film's layer of emotional lacquer. Norton's scoutmaster has an earnestness that we too rarely see from him, and Bill Murray, in The Bill Murray Role, gets some of the best lines (of course).

Moonrise Kingdom is ever so Andersonian — the attention to detail, the hip references, the cool distance, the wise-beyond-their-years kids struggling against the bland, normal world of adults. The pieces are all neatly aligned, the players perfectly cast, the story laid out just so, the camera right up in the pretty young faces of the stars. But as much as the film presses immediacy, it never pulls you in by the heart; it's something to admire, a pristine and carefully groomed garden, not a blooming, growing thing you can love. It's what Anderson does best, and full points to him for that: You'd never mistake *Moonrise Kingdom* for anyone else's work. You just might not care either way. EW

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