

FATHERS AND SONS

The Place Beyond the Pines *stumbles* in its exploration of masculinity

THE PLACE BEYOND THE PINES: Directed by Derek Cianfrance. Written by Cianfrance, Ben Coccio and Darius Marder. Cinematography, Sean Bobbitt. Editing, Jim Helton and Ron Patane. Music, Mike Patton. Starring Ryan Gosling, Bradley Cooper and Eva Mendes. Focus Features, 2013. R. 140 minutes. ★ ★ ★ ☆ ☆

The *Place Beyond the Pines* is an ambitious, beautifully filmed follow-up to director/co-writer Derek Cianfrance's *Blue Valentine* (2010). That bleak bruise of an indie darling gave a stamp of greatness to the careers of Michelle Williams and Ryan Gosling, and it divided viewers, who thought it was a searing portrait of a dissolving marriage — or thought it had little to say.

His new film is likely to create a similar rift. A heavy-handed tale of fathers and sons, *The Place* begins with a long, taut tracking shot that follows tattooed Luke Glanton (Ryan Gosling) through a carnival to the steel globe in which he, with two other men, rides in tight, terrifying circles.

Luke, like Gosling's nameless character in *Drive*, says little, but clicks into gear when he learns he has an infant son, the product of a brief fling with Romina (Eva Mendes). Desperate to be a provider, Luke drops everything (which isn't much) to stay near the boy. He finds half a job and a place to stay with an oddball named Robin (Ben Mendelsohn), who suggests bank robbery as a quicker way

to make a chunk of cash.

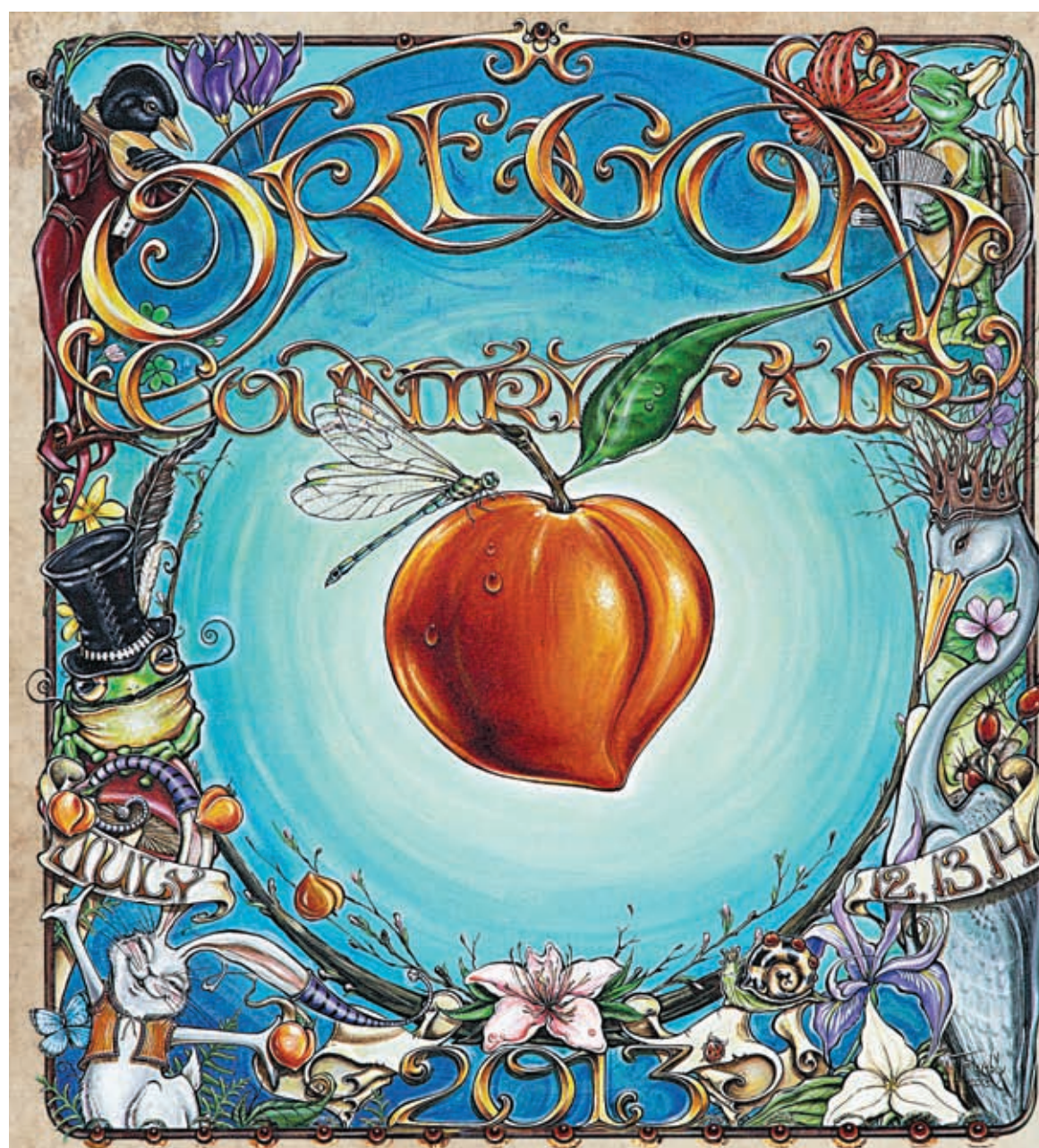
While it's slightly refreshing to see a man go baby-crazy, Cianfrance's narrow focus on fathers and sons oversimplifies his themes and characters. What might've been an intriguing consideration of how notions of masculinity shape different generations instead boils down to a muddled idea that sons are defined by their fathers, absent or present, for better or (more likely) for worse.

Gosling has a magnetic face, and his third of the movie is kinetic, full of speeding bikes, unflashy chases and awkward heists. Still, Bradley Cooper, as a cop whose life intersects violently with Luke's, is so quietly effective that it's a shame that Cianfrance rushes through his slapdash connecting segment, more interested in the tale of two teens that closes out the film. Fifteen years later, Avery (Cooper) has turned politician and is divorced from his wife (an underused Rose Byrne). His son, A.J. (Emory Cross), is a round-faced lout who scans his new high

school's lunchroom like a predator, honing in on a scrappy kid sitting alone.

Naturally, that scrappy kid is Jason (Dane DeHaan), Luke's son. The boys circle each other in a messy teen version of those men in the steel cage, Jason wary and quiet, A.J. brash and aggressive. They have the weight of their parents on their teen shoulders, but Cianfrance pushes down harder than that, making them carry his ideas about fathers and sons, secrets and lies, fate and class.

For portions of his overlong film, Cianfrance smartly tugs at the threads of his would-be timeless plot until they're tight and vibrating. When Mike Patton's score isn't working too hard, it's an eerie, pulsing swath of streaks and purrs, more organic than the story's manufactured close. It's possible to admire lots of things about *The Place* — Sean Bobbitt's cinematography; DeHaan's nervous, skittish teen; the vivid small-town setting — but still feel like the movie stumbles on its own ambition. ■



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