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Coming Home in the Dark

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Coming Home in the Dark

Abstract

This is a film review of *Coming Home in the Dark* (2021), directed by James Ashcroft.

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Author Notes

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Coming Home in the Dark (2021), dir. James Ashcroft

It is difficult to discuss this film in the way in which I wish to, without giving away the plot. Set in New Zealand, a family on a day trip is accosted by two men. Their two teen children are quickly murdered, and the couple is placed in a car. The majority of the film is spent in the car, and the desolate New Zealand highways are almost another character in the story.

In watching this film, I was initially wondering if the narrative was going to be like that of *Funny Games*, or similar films, in which a family is seemingly tortured for “no reason,” or “because they were home.” It was likely the director was familiar with this convention, and used it to build suspense. The film also had a theatre-like quality, unsurprising as the director was the artistic director of an Indigenous Māori theatre company.

Ultimately, though, this film had more in common with *Calvary* (2013) than the torture-porn, slasher horror genre. The question central to the film, I suppose, is what happens when people

in power ignore abuses? Should they be held responsible, even if they do not play an active role? And, what happens to children raised in abusive, cruel environments? Although it is easy to see this film as a “revenge fantasy,” it is much more complicated than that in the New Zealand context. It is important to note that this fictional film comes after the public inquiry into New Zealand’s state-run homes, the results of which showed that over 250,000 children were abused in that system from 1950-1999, with Māori children and other marginalised children overrepresented.

I have noticed that a genre of film about the abuse of young men has seemed to emerge since the 1990s, with the increasing awareness of the abuse of boys in some North American Catholic churches, orphanages, and schools. There are also other locations in which this is represented, such as Canada in *The Boys of St. Vincent* (1992), Ireland in *Calvary* (2013), and now New Zealand with *Coming Home in the Dark*. The discussion of these crimes and their fallout has become more common in mainstream media; and thankfully, now less from a voyeuristic approach like earlier treatments of the subject, but rather from the adult male victim’s perspective.