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## Fairyland

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## Fairyland

### Abstract

This is a film review of *Fairyland* (2023), directed by Andrew Durham.

### Keywords

AIDS, LGBTQ, Parenting, Memoir

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### Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



**Fairyland (2023), dir. Andrew Durham**

*Fairyland* is a powerfully wrought memoir of growing up in San Francisco during the 1970s and 80s from the point of view of a young girl whose mother had died in a tragic car accident and whose father was gay and, like many of his friends, suffered and died from AIDS. There are many aspects to the story which only become clear to the narrator as she grows up, not least the assumption that her father was only interested in men because her mother was the only love of his life and after she died her father had told her he could never love another woman. The truth, as we see, is not quite that romantic.

There is a strong undercurrent of nostalgia as we are privy to the musical tastes of the era which the teenage version of Alysia, played by Emilia Jones, becomes interested in—cue lots of British references to the likes of Depeche Mode, Duran Duran and OMD. Together with the political backdrop, as we learn about Harvey Milk and the way HIV treatment was not a top priority

for the Reagan administration, we are afforded a personalized and poignant child's eye view of the great challenges of the era.

Alysia's father, Steve (Scoot McNairy), is quite neglectful, even to the point of telling the primary school age Alysia to take the bus from school by a journey across San Francisco which it doesn't feel responsible to expect a child to make. Steve argues that he is doing it to make her more independent, but Alysia picks up on how the real reason is likely that it is simply more convenient for him not to be around. As a parent, he may have been pretty hands off and reckless, but when Steve contracts AIDS and needs help he asks Alysia to break off her university studies while she is on a Year Abroad in Paris in order to look after him in his final months.

The character and period evocation is extraordinarily detailed, and while this film turns into an effective (and shamelessly manipulative) tearjerker what stands out is the way in which love and family dynamics can take a multitude of forms, and Alysia may have been given a bohemian and quite alternative childhood, but the care between father and daughter is never doubted, even if she really needed someone who was around more for her. It is the personal touches that make this film, as a child becomes a more grounded adult than her father ever was, and we see them grow closer as sickness and various rites of passages bring them together. In many ways it is a counterpart to the acclaimed British drama *Aftersun*, where the relationship between a struggling father and his precocious daughter is reflected on from the perspective many years later of the girl, now a woman, who perhaps realizes that her father was in many ways an enigma, someone who may be hiding all manner of secrets about his identity and health and which can only start to be unpacked, and even appreciated, after a gap of many years.