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The New Boy

Abstract

This is a film review of *The New Boy* (2023), directed by Warwick Thornton.

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Author Notes

Sherry Coman is the Director of the Centre for Spirituality and Media at Martin Luther University College in Waterloo, Ontario, where she also teaches courses in film, media and spirituality and also in gender justice. An ordained deacon in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, she is also a writer, educator and story editor with more than thirty years experience in theatre and film. She works privately as a development consultant with writers and artists in film, fiction and digital media and is the curator and creator of online devotional projects.



***The New Boy* (2023), dir. Warwick Thornton**
Trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ15NBAVot0>

In the opening sequence of *The New Boy*, an Aboriginal child is seen being carried across the Australian outback of the 1940s, having once already run away and eluded his captors. Transported in a burlap bag, he is ultimately delivered like a sack of potatoes on the porch of a remote monastery, where Sister Eileen (played by Cate Blanchett) and a cook and a groundskeeper are the only adults, in charge of seven or eight orphaned boys. The nun's first encounter with the boy is both empathic and bored. Chastising the delivering officer for his treatment of him, she nonetheless scuttles him off to his dormitory bed without a backward glance.

From this familiar kind of beginning, however, emerges a very non-typical story. Although we know that convent and monastery schools (or residential schools as they are often called in North America) brought untold harm on Indigenous children, this story, directed by Maori filmmaker Warwick Thornton, doesn't want us to get caught up in predictable narratives. As the new boy meets the other orphans, all of whom have European ancestry, he makes his uneasy way.

Where we expect him to be brutally negated, put down and ‘civilized,’ instead he is allowed to be himself: he walks around shirtless in the same shorts he arrived in for much of the film, eating with his hands while the others use cutlery, and going barefoot. It’s as if Thornton wants to thwart our narrative expectations by allowing the boy kindness and room when we expect cruelty and confinement.

The colonial intention of his residence in the monastery, however, is not avoidable. Though we never really see his schooling, we see signs that the boy (who is never named) is schooled in Catholicism. Sister Eileen takes special interest in him and all three adults begin to awaken to his potential when he appears to have Christ-like gifts. He heals a boy from snakebite after the adults have failed. When he is goaded into a fist fight he doesn’t want with another boarder, he stands beside his opponent and befriends him, healing his hands after they have been caned by the head boy.

Throughout these events, Sister Eileen becomes increasingly drawn to his power. Believing him to be divinely gifted, she wrestles with her own demons, mainly the lie she has been perpetuating for a year that the Dom of the community, who died some time ago, is still alive. She signs for goods in his name and tells people he is “out” when they come to call. She is trying to survive and prevent the abbey from closing. In this way, Thornton wants us to see that power is too compelling to resist, even within good intentions. When the boy gets into some of the wine that keeps her going, his drunkenness scares her instead of enraging her. She sees in him a reflection of her own perceived decline. He sometimes finds her talking to an empty chair leaned up against the side of a barn, where she is confessing to the absent Dom and receiving absolution. The boy is fascinated, drawn to her emotion more than the activity.

The film's critical turning point comes when an enormous crate is brought up the gravel drive to the monastery. Inside is a larger-than-life-sized Crucifix which is dragged into the chapel and raised against the wall, completely out of proportion to the space. Almost immediately, its presence fixates the child. Feeling a spiritual presence he cannot understand, he brings an offering to the statue of a handful of snakes he has easily captured. As they writhe around on the ground, the boy is bewildered when Sister Eileen reacts in horror and he and the snakes are banished.

The Crucifix becomes an axial point, a kind of attracting and repelling of forces that wears on the boy like the gravity of magnets. We see the face of Jesus move and half-smile. The face is both iconic and real, preventing us from getting comfortable with a young boy's fantasy. Stigmata begin to appear on the boy's hands. He is one with the statue, in love with its spiritual presence and one day climbs up to embrace it. Sister Eileen finds him this way, clinging in an embrace of the statue body, seemingly comforting it. Immediately she pulls him down, telling him he might damage it. She has failed to see the meeting place of two powerful spiritual figures.

Thornton's use of camera is both careful and dramatic. The rough barren desert landscape stretches impossibly before us, seeming to outstretch the width of the frame. At the same time, the tight space under the boy's bed, where he practices a ritual of his own, never feels claustrophobic. Rubbing his fingers together, a magical flame alights from them. Whether the Holy Spirit, or an ancestor, or an imaginary light, it seems to defy all of these. The little flame is the key to his gifts and cannot be extinguished—or so we think. In the end, it is the most ordinary of religious rituals that leads irrevocably to a change in his gifts. Soon he is wearing shoes and a blazer, his hair combed. We know the rest.

In the press kit for the film, Thornton tells us that the story is loosely based on his own experiences as a child in a Christian boarding school in Australia, run by Spanish monks. Here he

developed a love for Christian traditions that did not require him to denounce his own spiritual practices. To this day he is an adherent of both, and finds his Christianity to be compatible with his Aboriginal spirituality. Many Aboriginal communities in Australia embrace Christianity, he says, and can hold it side by side with their own. His critique is that Christians cannot do the same, leading to devastating colonial practices. In Thornton's world, the new boy is the spark in all of us that "opens our minds to what is right and wrong."

Thornton's film offers us an invaluable gift: it seeks a union of spiritualities. No one is evil and no one is a savior. All of the desire for spirituality instead breathes and rolls its way through the characters equally, and lives between the chapel and the snake-filled fields. The snakes are powers of good in this landscape; we are challenged to think outside our cliché boxes, and to stare into what it really means to honor the rituals and beliefs of one another.