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Good One

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Good One* (2023), directed by India Donaldson.

Keywords

Coming of Age

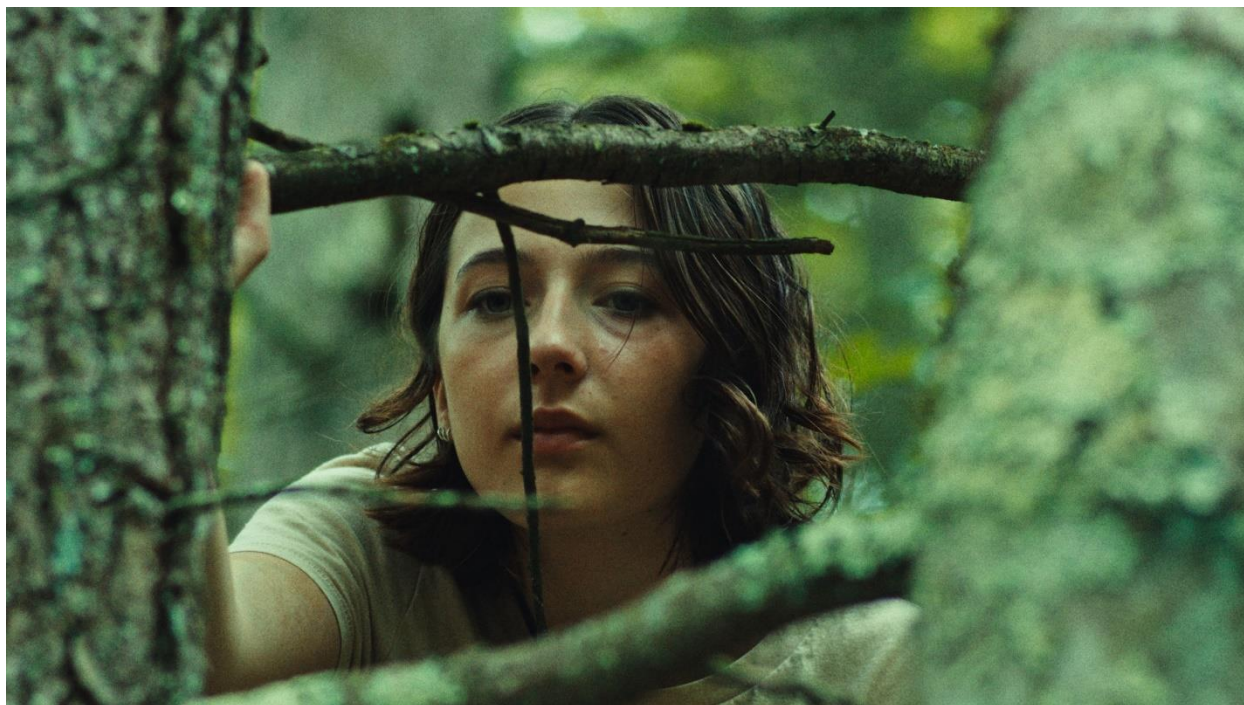
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Author Notes

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>



Good One (2023), dir. India Donaldson

Good One is a coming of age drama which does an impressive job of conveying the ways in which intergenerational relationships tend to require considerable dexterity in order to overcome the various obstacles that stand in the way. Everything is here condensed into three days spent on a camping trip in upstate New York involving 17-year old Sam (Lily Collias), her divorced father Chris (James Le Gros), and Chris' acerbic, somewhat wayward best friend Matt (Danny McCarthy). Sam sees it as her role to make peace between the different family factions, especially as Matt's son Dylan pulled out at the last minute. She is, from the outset, a mediating figure between the two older men—but her own sensibilities and dignity are affronted by a casual line uttered by Matt, who effectively makes a pass at her. Her father doesn't want to know about this, essentially putting his best friend ahead of the wellbeing of his teenage daughter.

For much of this slight story which shows us the adventure through the woods, Sam might as well be the one chaperoning the two middle aged men rather than the other way around, as she

supplies words of wisdom and proves herself a good judge of character. A more traditional Hollywood film would have gone the way of an action adventure, along the lines of 1994's *The River Wild*. In this film, the tenuous marriage between Meryl Streep and David Strathairn is tested and then resolved when they come into contact with an interloper, in the form of Kevin Bacon and his two pals, who abuse their trust and hospitality for their own heinous ends.

Here, another trio of outsiders is introduced, also on a camping expedition, but they are not the story's catalyst. Rather, it is the casually offensive remark from Matt which has the same effect as Kevin Bacon pulling a gun and causing Streep's family adventure to change course both geographically and metaphorically. *Good One* is far subtler, entailing a new sense of agency on the part of Sam who realizes that pleasing her dad will exact a heavy price for her; and as in *Stand By Me* (1986), a few days in the wilds away from home is the catalyst for growing up and a loss of innocence that can never be reinstituted.

The role reversal in this film is what stands out as the teen becomes a woman by seeing through the irresponsibility of the adults ostensibly in charge of her. She grows not because of but in spite of the questionable duty of care provided, and this is that rare film where the absence of anything tangible happening—the dialogue is perfectly naturalistic and often inconsequential, focusing on Matt's failure to bring a sleeping bag but remembering to bring a flask of booze—that makes the shift that happens especially jolting. Sam may have been the titular “good one” of the title, as she cooks for the two men and reinforces gender expectations, but we sense that this is a dynamic that has now been nudged in a different direction, and this three day trek is likely to be their last.