

Medicine on the big and small screen: Addiction and the American family

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Beautiful Boy

Starring Steve Carrell, Timothée Chalamet, Maura Tierney, Amy Ryan.

Directed by Felix Van Groeningen. Film release October 2018; DVD release May 2019. Rated R. Running time 120 minutes.

Ben is Back

Starring Julia Roberts, Lucas Hedges, Courtney B. Vance, Kathryn Newton, Rachel Bay Jones.

Directed by Peter Hedges. Film release December 2018; DVD release March 2019. Rated R. Running time 103 minutes.

Since the 1940s, Hollywood has provided audiences with graphic and unforgettable portrayals of addiction and substance abuse. The 1945 film, *Lost Weekend*, was groundbreaking in its unflinching dramatization of a desperate alcoholic on a four-day binge. Director Billy Wilder sparked controversy when his main character, played by Ray Milland, succumbs to his addiction and spirals down into degradation and despair. The film went on to sweep the Oscars, winning Best Picture, Best Director, Best Actor and Best Screenplay.

Ten years later, in 1955, *The Man With the Golden Arm*, starring Frank Sinatra, casts a bright light on the grim reality of heroin addiction in the same way that *Lost Weekend* sparked a more informed cultural conversation around alcoholism. Both films depict the powerlessness of the person over the disease, and neither film is morally judgmental about it.

Two more recent and notable films include Darren Aronofsky's, *Requiem For a Dream*, released in 2000, and *Flight* in 2012. *Requiem* is also groundbreaking as a cinematic tour de force with its powerful and repetitive soundtrack, close-ups, split screens, body camera shots, and fast-cutting (the average film has 700 cuts; *Requiem* has 2,000). Viewers not only experience the characters' panic as they search relentlessly for money and drugs but also become habituated to the ritual of scoring, getting high, and feeling right—for a moment.

Flight with Denzel Washington introduces both a person of color and a functional addict. In spite of the reality that alcohol and drugs have cost him his marriage, the respect of his son, and eventually his career as a pilot, the

character remains defiant about his ability to perform his job. This film explores in a realistic and nuanced way the false premise that impairment doesn't really matter as long as you show up for work, dress the part, and don't damage anyone but yourself.

With the opioid crisis making daily headlines, it is no surprise that the industry released two major films on substance abuse in 2018: *Beautiful Boy* based on the writings of father, David Sheff,¹ and son, Nic Sheff,² and *Ben is Back*. What distinguishes both films from many others about addiction is the terrible toll that it takes on an entire family.



Beautiful Boy, 2018, starring Timothée Chalamet (left) and Steve Carell. Moviestore Collection Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Beautiful Boy

Beautiful Boy opens with successful journalist, David Sheff (Steve Carell), interviewing a psychiatrist, not for the *New York Times Magazine* as the physician assumes, but to get answers about his son's addiction to methamphetamines: "There are moments when I look at [him], and I wonder who he is," Sheff asks.

The father's poignant attempt to understand and stop what is happening to his son, to him, to their family, and to the picture-perfect life they have built in the quiet woods of Marin County, California, structures the narrative of the film. Flashbacks to sweeter and brighter moments of father and son surfing together, celebrating milestones, and just hanging out are juxtaposed with harrowing moments of recognizing how debilitated Nic (Timothée Chalamet) has become, and confrontational scenes filled with accusation and apology.

Nic is indeed a beautiful boy: a talented writer, a loving brother to his younger half-siblings, and on track to attend an Ivy-league university. But, he has also been using alcohol, cannabis, and other substances since he was

Movie Review: Addiction and the American family

12-years-old and when he tries his first line of crystal meth, his whole world changes. “There was a feeling like...this is what I’ve been missing my entire life. It completed me. I felt whole for the first time,” Nic explained.

In his book, David Sheff acknowledges that he, like many parents, becomes addicted to his son’s addiction. His attempts to pull Nic away from the brink again and again with increasingly futility and fear are coupled with a kind of magical thinking—that somehow a loving father can fix his son, that somehow a privileged family should not be shattered by addiction. “This isn’t who we are,” he says at one point in the film. But those viewers who have experienced substance abuse in their own families know better.



Ben is Back, 2018, with Julia Roberts and Lucas Hedges.
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Ben is Back

Whereas *Beautiful Boy* is about a father and son, *Ben is Back* is very much about a mother, Holly (Julia Roberts), and son, Ben (Lucas Hedges). Another obvious difference between the two films is chronological structure: *Beautiful Boy* shifts, sometimes inexplicably, between past and present, while *Ben is Back* takes place in a single day.

However, both films center on what appears to be, on the surface, perfect families. Sprawling, comfortable homes away from the city; healthy, happy, young children, the result of solid second marriages; good old dogs. But, beneath the surface are the unmistakable signs of the damage caused by drugs—in this instance, 19-year-old Ben’s opioid addiction. His unexpected and unwise return home for Christmas after a mere 77 days in rehab is met with a range of emotions. His younger half-siblings are thrilled; his teenage sister is suspicious and hostile; and his stepfather (Courtney B. Vance) is unwilling to give Ben another chance especially since a second mortgage is paying for his latest round of treatment.

But it is Holly who is most torn between wanting to welcome Ben home for the holiday and being unable to trust him. After warmly embracing him, she hurries upstairs to hide her jewelry and empty the medicine cabinet. The tension of supporting and protecting Ben without endangering and alienating her family is evident in the set of her jaw and the brittleness of her speech.

In contrast to Steve Carrell’s performance in *Beautiful Boy*, which can be best described as a kind of forlorn helplessness, Julia Roberts is a combination of a deer in the headlights and a mother bear, alternately suppressing her terror that Ben will relapse and guarding him so fiercely that he simply doesn’t have the opportunity. The tension between wanting to believe Ben and not knowing if he is lying is contagious, putting viewers on edge as well.

Ben is Back has many of the narrative elements of what is, sadly, becoming a familiar story for American families: an initial prescription for painkillers by a local physician—in this case, more clueless than negligent—that becomes the gateway to heroin; the testimony of grieving parents who have lost their children to the darkness of addiction or to death; the ruthless dealers, sexual predators and strung-out teens whose faces are prematurely old and hollow; and the desperate search for adequate and effective care.

What both films dramatize so well is the heartbreaking isolation of substance abuse disorder for parents and children. At the end of the film, Holly and Ben are tragically alone in a cold and abandoned house. It recalls another ending, that of Eugene O’Neill’s greatest artistic and personal achievement—the autobiographical play, *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (1956). What he described as a work of “old sorrow, written in tears and blood” is not only an unflinching and harsh portrait of a deeply troubled family, but also an insightful and compassionate absolution for the damage they have done to one another and themselves.

The final image is also a tableau: parents and sons at a table, barely illuminated in a small circle of light and extraordinarily separated from the world and one another because of loss and addiction but inescapably bound to one another by suffering and dependency.

References

1. Sheff D. *Beautiful Boy: A Father’s Journey Through His Son’s Addiction*. New York: Houghton Mifflin. 2008.
2. Sheff N. *Tweak: Growing Up on Methamphetamines*. New York: Atheneum Books. 2008.

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