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The Notebook Survival In A War-Torn World

Sophia Stein · Wednesday, September 3rd, 2014

The Notebook (Le Grand Cahier) is a visually arresting fable of war. It is a portrait of insidious mistrust, corrosive violence, and inescapable corruption in a world gone mad, as experienced from the point of view of children peripheral to the central action, yet cursed to live in “significant times.”

Based upon the international bestseller, *Le Grand Cahier*, by Agota Kristof, *The Notebook* tells the story of twin brothers who are rather unexpectedly uprooted by their mother and deposited into the care of the grandmother they have never before met. The mother’s intention is to protect her sons during the occupation of Hungary by Nazi Germany during the Second World War by removing them from the city and relocating them to a remote village; however, when she leaves them with her own mother from whom she has been estranged for some twenty years, it is questionable whether they are safe at all. The “bastards,” as they are referred to by their witchy grandmother, must learn to survive their mother’s abandonment, the deprivation and impoverished conditions of their new home, and callous and sadistic treatment in the hands of their embittered grandmother.

Survive they do, subjecting themselves to a rigorous training regimen to build their strength and desensitize themselves to all suffering. Their soldier father has tasked the boys with recording the details of all they witness during the period of enforced separation in a notebook that he has gifted them, and the boys diligently comply with his directive. We witness as they mature and develop their idiosyncratic, indelibly warped, personal moral code.

Director János Szász apparently discovered the pair of rough and tumble young actors that he cast as “the bastards,” László and András Gyémánt, in a rural village not too dissimilar to the actual setting of the story. Like the characters they play, the true-life twins were apparently living in poverty, in a bad family situation, and had experienced their own share of suffering. The two boys resemble a pair of spellbinding, feral cats, with a presence that is both menacing and provocative.

In *The Notebook*, appearances are universally deceiving. Beauty conceals ugliness, persons in positions of threatening authority harbor unexpected gentleness, and far from saviors, “liberators” prove to be the most disappointing perpetrators of unspeakable war crimes. This is a film that in no way glamorizes war. In *The Notebook*, war unleashes terror beyond containment.

The Notebook is such a disturbing film, at each turn, you pray for the inhumanity to stop, and yet, prurient curiosity compels you forward. The filmmaker dares you to continue watching, and you do, in the hopes to make sense of it all – which never quite happens. The ending leaves as many questions as it answers. While the opening of the film recalled for me *The Tin Drum*, as *The*

Notebook continued, I realized its sensibility was closer to Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*.

The Notebook was Hungary's entry as Best Foreign Language Film for the 86th Academy Awards. The imagery may strike you to the very core, while you struggle to assemble the puzzle, yet are left with many missing pieces.



László Gyémánt (*Egyik Iker*) and András Gyémánt (*Masik Iker*), "*The Notebook*."
Photo by Christian Berger, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.



László Gyémánt (*Egyik Iker*) and András Gyémánt (*Masik Iker*), "*The Notebook*."
Photo by Christian Berger, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.



Ulrich Thomsen (*Tiszt*), László Gyémánt (*Egyik Iker*), and András Gyémánt (*Masik Iker*), "*The Notebook*." Photo by Christian Berger, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

Top Image: László Gyémánt (Egyik Iker), Gyöngyver Bognar (Anyá), and András Gyémánt (Masik Iker), "The Notebook." Photo by Christian Berger, Courtesy of Sony Pictures Classics.

"The Notebook" Official Website

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