

Ben is Back (2018)



Ben, sitting in church between his mother and stepfather, enjoys watching his sister and half-brother in their Christmas Eve pageant. (c) Roadside Attractions

For most families the Christmas Eve return of a teenage son would be good news, but the Burns are not a typical family. When Holly (Julia Roberts) drives her children home from a church pageant practice and sees the hooded Ben (Lucas Hedges, son of director Peter Hedges) sitting on the front steps, she is conflicted—torn between joy and fear. Ben has been away for 77 days at a rug rehab center and not yet scheduled for a home visit. Her two children by her second husband, Lacey (Mia Fowley) and Liam (Jakari Fraser), are overjoyed to welcome him back. They are too young to understand the possible dangers of his coming back too soon.

However, his full sibling, teenage Ivy (Kathryn Newton), is aware of the danger, staying in the car and sending out an emergency call on her phone to her stepfather Neal (Courtney B. Vance).

Ben assures his mother that his sponsor had OK'd his return. The maternal side of Holly tells Ivy and Ben that he may stay

for Christmas before going back to rehab, but—. It is a big BUT uttered from Holly's tough love side. You—Ben— will immediately submit to a drug test! With the bathroom door opened— despite his protest. And not leave my sight for a moment while you are with us! “You are mine,” she orders him, terms which he meekly accepts. She rushes into their house, hastily gathering up and hiding the family's prescription drugs and her jewelry.

We can see it will be an intense Holiday visit. Indeed, how intense we cannot even begin to imagine at this point. Not since his first film about a divided family, the delightful *Pieces of April*, has Peter Hedges, dealt with such familial pain, this time, far darker—and more relevant to the headlines. The earlier film was also set during a Holiday—Thanksgiving—whereas this one takes place over a 24-hour Christmas Eve.

Like April, Ben is the black sheep of the family, but far more disruptive. This is the second of the now-showing movies, to deal with the toxic effect of drug addiction on a family, calling to mind the parable about a disrupted family in Luke 15—this time the “far country” being that of drug addiction. For the other prodigal son story see the review of [Beautiful Boy](#) elsewhere in this issue.

Ben soon feels the hunger for the one thing that has brought him a sense of well-being, triggered by so many places where he had had drug encounters. When he and Ivy hunt for a box of Christmas ornaments in the attic, there is a still a hidden small envelope of cocaine left over from the cache he kept there. At the mall where Ben had insisted he needs to buy some family presents, a former classmate is surprised to see him, saying inappropriately, “It's been a long time. I thought you were dead.” While eating with his mother he spots one of his former drug cronies. And Holly, seeing the now demented doctor who, when Ben had suffered a sports injury, had carelessly prescribed the drugs that have caused so much family damage,

goes over to his table where he is eating. While his caretaker is gone for a minute, she spews out her resentment, cursing the old man for his negligence.

Fighting his desire for a hit, Ben insists that they find and attend a Narcotics Anonymous meeting, where, with his mother staying close, he confesses his addiction and damage he has inflicted on everyone he knows. He also meets a young female addict who will figure in later. All through the events of the day Holly and her family fear that they cannot trust what Ben says. Their fears are well-grounded, with Ben at one point admitting that his sponsor had not agreed with his leaving the clinic.

After the Christmas Eve pageant, the film morphs from a family drama into a thriller when they return home and find it has been broken into and their beloved pet dog has been kidnapped. Ben, saying he can find who stole the dog, wants to set out alone on the quest, but Holly insists she is going too. As they drive through the area and Ben points to the houses he has burglarized or sold drugs to an inhabitant, the mother realizes she did not really know her son. This feeling will grow as Ben reveals that he has been in debt to his ruthless drug supplier, who is holding their pet as ransom.

Although some have decried the last section of the film, it is still a powerful parable of the devastating effects the addiction of one member of a family can have on the others, over-riding all other issues. At one time, with Holly already having two children, the blending of parents and their new mixed-race children into a new family would have been the story—remember TV's *The Brady Bunch*? Or, during the period when racism began to be explored by movie makers, the mere fact that white Holly and African American Neal have entered a mixed marriage would make for a tense story—remember *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*? Or in the far better 2016 film set during the Jim Crow era when Virginia law decreed such marriages a crime, [Loving](#). The only time this film makes a

commentary on race is when Neal says, "If you were a black boy, you would be in jail now," meaning, rather than an expensive drug rehab facility for the children of well-off parents. It is the corrosive effects of drug addiction, specially the destruction of trust that constantly lying brings on, that is central to writer/director Peter Hedges' film.

Along with *Beautiful Boy* this domestic drama reminds us that we are all part of a web of relationships so that when one person brings havoc upon himself, it affects everyone with whom he is in contact. In Ben's case, this includes, of course, his mother, step-father and siblings, as well as friends, fellow church members, and strangers who have benefited from his drug habit. That so much anguish and pain is set during the beautiful Christmas season—the church pageant scene in which Ivy is the lead singer of a carol and Liam is a lamb with a scratchy wool coat is charming—heightens the sadness of Ben's plight. The film tries to end on a hopeful note, but the awful facts of drug addiction weigh against this.

We can hope that Holly, who is similar to David Sheff in *Beautiful Boy*, will emulate the waiting father in Jesus Parable of the Prodigal Son. Sooner or later Ben will have to stop lying to himself and to her if he is ever to emerge from the hell he has created for himself and all who love him. She will have to be able to say "No" when she wants to say "Yes," because only by letting go of her son will she ever be able to hold on to him. Julia Roberts and Lucas Hedges by their exquisite thespian skills make us feel their love and their anguish. This is a film you will not soon forget.

This review will be in the January issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store.