

Captain Fantastic (2016)

Note: there are plot spoilers in the last half of this review, so beware.

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour 58 min. Our content ratings:

Violence 3; Language 3; Sex 4/Nudity 1.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Listen, children, to a father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight; for I give you
good precepts:

do not forsake my teaching.

...

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not
stray.

Proverbs 4:1-2 & 22:6

Contrary to the implication of the title, director/writer Matt Ross's movie is not about a soldier or a superhero. Viggo Mortensen's Ben Cash is the titular father, raising his six children in an Eden-like forest in the state of Washington. (Thus making this the 2nd wilderness-set film I've seen within a week, the other being *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*—though, come to think of it, there also is *Pete's Dragon*.) Years ago Ben and his wife Leslie (Trin Miller), a former lawyer, had turned against what they considered a fascist, materialistic society and set up their homestead in a forest of the Pacific Northwest so they could raise their children untainted by the American society. The parents had home schooled them and taught them survival techniques, their meat obtained either with a bow and arrow, or in the opening scene, by actually

tackling an elk and killing it with a knife. What little money they need for buying things that they cannot make or raise themselves Ben obtains by selling or trading at a general store items they makes such as an attractive birdhouse. Besides hunting, a typical day for the children includes training in the martial arts, classes, individual reading (including Dostoevsky), sometimes extreme cliff climbing, and, at the end of the day, singing and playing their instruments around a campfire.

Leslie is absent, a patient in a New Mexico hospital when the film opens. Sending her there to obtain treatment for her suicidal depression is Ben's concession to his disapproving father-in-law Jack (Frank Langella). She has been suffering from bipolar depression since the birth of their oldest son Bodevan "Bo" (George MacKay), so she and Ben had agreed to Jack's paying for and watching over her care close to his home. However, when the family goes down the mountain to to the store for supplies and to call about her condition, Jack tells Ben that she has taken her own life—and that if he dares show up at the funeral, he will have him arrested for child abuse. When Ben tells the children what has happened, he intends to stay home, but the children do not agree. He realizes they need the closure of the funeral, so soon they are packing up their large school bus converted to family use and heading down the highway.

Their venture into the culture the parents have despised brings many a shock to the brood—they remark on the obesity of so many mall shoppers, and after the children at a diner ask questions about unfamiliar menu items, Ben stands up, telling them they must go, that there is no real food here. They stop over at the home of Ben's sister Kathryn and her husband Steve (Kathryn Hahn, Steve Zahn) where their two boy cousins pay more attention to their electronic gadgets and games than the guests. One of the daughters ask who killed the two chickens on the platter, and the surprised aunt haltingly explains that

the chickens were dead when they bought them.

When his disturbed sister challenges Ben's homeschooling practice, the latter puts the question of what is the Bill of Rights to his two nephews and his youngest son. Neither of the brothers can give a coherent answer, but Nai can both quote and explain the Constitutional amendments.

Just how much Ben has rejected society we see in the scene in which he hands out presents for his substitution for Christmas, the celebration of activist Noam Chomsky's birthday. Also there is the darker incident in which at a store where everyone has picked up numerous food items. Ben falls to the floor as he fakes a stroke. The children yell to call for 911. Amidst the chaos, the kids, still carrying their food choices, stroll out to the bus, after which Ben gets up, saying that he is now okay. He leaves with the store manager almost apologizing. Apparently we are supposed to admire the cleverness of this caper.

At a trailer camp Bo, who has had none of the social intercourse one experiences at high school, proves inept when he kisses his first girl at night. Her mother calls the girl in before they can do more. The next morning Bo, thinking the kiss was a proposal, asks her to marry him.

The family, dressed in garish hippy and wilderness-style attire, arrive late at the Catholic church, creating quite a stir as they find seats. Jack and his wife are both upset but keep silent. The priest, admitting he did not know Leslie, awkwardly tries to personalize his homily, but is quickly interrupted by Ben. The husband reveals that she had been a Buddhist, who, like him, had no use for organized religion. Waving a copy of her will about, he says that she had wanted to be cremated rather than buried. The angry Jack secures four ushers who force Ben out of the sanctuary.

At his mansion Jack angrily tells Ben that he is suing for the

custody of his grandchildren, and that he has plenty of grounds for the action. There ensues more action that leads Ben to question his child-rearing practices. This includes one of the daughters coming very close to injuring her spine. Son Rellian (Nicholas Hamilton) angrily blames his father for their mother's death, revealing that he had heard them arguing one night about the family. Also Ben discovers that Bo had received acceptance letters from a number of top colleges. He regards this as a betrayal, but he is taken back when Bo reveals that Leslie had encouraged and helped him in the process.

Ben reaches what amounts to a reconciliation with his father-in-law, saying that he will leave the children with him after all. At this point, when he drives away alone in the bus, I thought this would be a story of a father making a great sacrifice for the benefit of his loved ones, and that he perhaps would visit them on rare occasions. However, the film does not end at this point. Director/writer Matt Ross apparently does not want to leave us with the mixed feelings generated by such a conclusion, so they add a short last act in which the family carries out Leslie's stipulations in her will. No consequences of their acts are shown, the family presumably returning to take up their idyllic life in the wilderness. Thus my feelings were even more jumbled by what seems like a tacked on ending that ignores reality.

Up to the last act the film is a joy to watch for its many dramatic and humorous moments, but for me it was marred by the filmmakers' desire for a happy ending. Despite this, I will gladly watch the film again. Although it is the skillful Viggo Mortensen's performance that dominates the film, every one of the young actors playing the six children is outstanding. Never cutesy, they convince us that these are children we would be proud to claim as our own—though in the case of the store scam we might wish that one of them would have raised the question of the morality of their scheme. After all, in

several scenes Ben is shown urging the children to think for themselves, but they all go along with it.

Those desiring to discuss child rearing/nurturing techniques will find plenty of issues, as well as Ben's Marxist-influenced view that society is too materialistic and commercial. An examination of the family's life style might bring to mind Richard Niebuhr's famous book *Christ and Culture*. Ben, despising "organized religion," is no Christian, but his living apart from the world is an example of what the theologian called "Christ Against Culture." I suspect many of us have been tempted to follow Ben and Leslie's decision to "drop out" (to use the old hippy phrase). The film certainly shows the attractive side of this life style. But it also shows a dark side: some of what Ben puts his children through (an example being the family climbing a sheer cliff) would indeed be considered child abuse in many states. (Another strength of the film is that Jack is not played by Frank Langella as just the hateful father-in-law. He and his wife genuinely love the grandchildren and strongly believe that they're living away from society is bad for them.) And even Ben must deal with outside world for items, such as parts for the bus, that the family cannot make.

A disturbing part of the plot is the lack of any pursuit by Jack in the last act. What will he do when he discovers the grandchildren have fled; and what is the future of the family? Either the filmmakers just ignore this, or, hopefully, they intend to leave it to us viewers to decide in our own minds and hearts. I hope it is the latter.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the September issue of VP.

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