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Fishbrain: The Things We Leave to Rot

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There is something particularly cruel about a person who can leave a mess behind and never have to look at it again. In Max Vanderspuy's Fishbrain, that person is a grandfather, his refuge is an armchair in front of the television, and the mess is quite literally rotting beneath his feet.

His granddaughter, meanwhile, is left to live with everything he refuses to confront. By the time the sea finds its way into their home, the damage has been there for generations.
Ori (Chloe Lea) is nineteen and has returned to care for her grandfather Jeb (John Henshaw) following the disappearance of her grandmother Imogen (Karren Winchester), who walked into the sea. Her days are spent moving between a grey stretch of British coastline and an equally dreary house, where Jeb expects to be looked after but offers remarkably little in return.

There is no real gratitude, barely any conversation and an almost suffocating sense that Ori is expected to accept this arrangement without question. Her resentment feels older than the circumstances we are shown, as though Jeb represents a history she has been made to live with but never allowed to understand. Vanderspuy is careful not to explain that history. The film trusts us to recognise the kind of silence that can settle into a family, where the past is understood by everyone and discussed by no one. Whatever happened between Jeb and Imogen, its consequences have not disappeared with her.

They have simply been passed on to someone else. Ori is left carrying the weight of a family history she did not create, while Jeb sits in front of the television, seemingly content to let the world carry on without him. There is, however, more to Jeb than the rather unpleasant old man we initially encounter. The house and the town belonged to Imogen. She was the one who brought him there, and with her disappearance he is left in a place that may never have felt entirely his own. There is a particular sadness in watching someone become so deeply attached to the little territory they have left, especially when it is clear that the person who once gave it meaning is no longer there.

Henshaw captures something of this insecurity, but there is little comfort to be found in it. Jeb seems to have settled into the role of the wronged man, a position that allows him to avoid considering what he might have done to bring him there. His loneliness may explain some of his behaviour, but it does not excuse it.
Outside, dead fish begin washing up along the shore. Their bodies are a disturbing presence against the

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already bleak coastline, and their appearance gradually gives the film its own grotesque logic.

For Ori, they offer more than another sign that something is terribly wrong. They become a possible way out. In one of the film's cruellest reversals, the act of preparing food for her grandfather becomes part of her attempt to escape him. The person expected to provide care begins to turn that expectation against the person demanding it.
When Ori finally confronts Jeb, the argument feels less like a sudden eruption than something that has been waiting years to happen. What has been swept under the house cannot remain hidden forever.

The rot is already there, putrid and impossible to ignore, and Jeb's response is to push Ori further into the very mess he has spent so long refusing to acknowledge. The film's body horror makes that dynamic brutally literal. What has been festering within the family begins to take physical form, until the distinction between the house's decay and the damage inflicted on Ori becomes increasingly difficult to make.

Ori survives, but not without being transformed. Her loss of voice is particularly unsettling. Having spent so much of the film living with things she cannot say and a history she cannot fully access, she is now quite literally unable to speak. Lea carries much of what follows through her physical performance, and particularly through her eyes. There is something deeply affecting about watching a character who has been denied the space to express herself become increasingly monstrous in appearance, while remaining recognisably human in her desperation.

The horror does not end there. In another attempt to get away from Jeb, Ori is overpowered with a fork, and he tears her apart. Yet even after everything that has happened, he seems unable to recognise his own part in it. He remains the injured party in his own mind, a man whose circumstances have supposedly left him with no other choice. It is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the film: not simply the violence itself, but the ease with which Jeb returns to his familiar sense of victimhood.

And then there is the television. With his remote no longer within reach and his granddaughter's blood covering him, Jeb is finally forced to move. He could step around her body, retrieve the remote and return to the comfort of his chair. Instead, he gets up and drives away. There is no meaningful reckoning, no attempt to repair what he has done. He simply leaves.
He wins, if that is what we can call it, in the way people who cause harm so often seem to. They walk away, while someone else is left to live with the consequences. Ori remains trapped in the house, surrounded by the very history that has consumed her. Jeb, meanwhile, gets to leave it behind.

The environmental decay running alongside the family's collapse gives this final image an even wider

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reach. The fish continue to die, the fishing trade is under threat, and warnings about what is happening appear on the television, largely unnoticed. The world outside is deteriorating in much the same way as the world inside the house. Although Vanderspuy has discussed the environmental concerns surrounding the film, the sea never stays outside. It enters the home, and soon the decay in the water becomes difficult to distinguish from the decay within the family. Both have been left unattended for too long.

Much of the film's unease comes from how convincingly its world is assembled. The creature design, drawing on real marine life, gives the horror an unsettling physicality, while the combination of practical and digital effects keeps its more grotesque moments grounded in the film's otherwise recognisable setting. The house itself feels as though it has been quietly surrendering for years. There is just as much work being done by the sound design, with the presence of the ocean never entirely disappearing, even when the characters are indoors.

It recalls the creeping domestic horror of Relic (2020), where a family's unresolved history also finds a way to inhabit the physical spaces around it. In Fishbrain, however, the threat feels particularly inseparable from the people who have allowed it to grow.
Vanderspuy leaves us with more questions than answers. What really happened between Imogen and Jeb? What drove her to walk into the sea? And what has Ori been forced to witness, or endure, long before we meet her? These gaps do not feel like omissions so much as an understanding that family histories are rarely handed down in a complete or honest form. Sometimes all that remains is the damage, and the responsibility of making sense of it falls to the next generation.

It is also why the prospect of a feature-length expansion feels like the right next step. There is more to explore in the mythology surrounding the fish, the town and the family, and the short leaves enough unanswered to make that world worth returning to. I would be particularly interested to see how Vanderspuy develops the relationship between the environmental horror and the more intimate, deeply personal violence at the centre of the story.

Of all the shorts I saw at this year's BFI London Film Festival, Fishbrain was my favourite. Not because it offers easy answers or a particularly comforting resolution, but because it understands something deeply unsettling about the way harm can move through a family. Love can become resentment, silence can become its own inheritance, and the people who have done the most damage are not always the ones left to face it. Sometimes they simply get up, leave the room and drive away, while everyone else is left to live among the things they have allowed to rot.

Bericht online lesen:
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