

From Book to Movie: A Review of *Room*

Rated R

Runtime: 1 hr, 58 min

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Caution: this film is often a distressing, harrowing viewing experience. Among other things, it contains off-screen rape, as well as a child in danger.

Room is a 2015 drama directed by Lenny Abrahamson (*Frank*) and written for the screen by Emma Donahue. It is adapted from Donahue's own book of the same name, released in 2010. The film stars Brie Larson as "Ma" and Jacob Tremblay as her son Jack. Ma has been trapped in a small room for seven years, and has been raising Jack, who is five years old. During the first half of the film, the audience gradually learns how they got to be in this situation.

As *Room* opens, Jack greets the objects in the room good morning as if they are his friends. "Good morning, Plant. Good morning, Sink." We come to learn, through Jack's narration, that this room is his whole world, and Ma has fostered this idea within him; there is a small television set with bad reception in Room, and Ma has told Jack that the people they see on the television are not real and that there is no reality outside of Room. Jack even believes that "Old Nick," the frightening man who visits Ma while Jack is supposed to be asleep, is from the imaginary world of the television, and that he brings them food and medicine from time to time by way of magic.

After a particularly harrowing visit from Old Nick, Ma decides that they can't live like this anymore. She tries to explain to Jack that seven years ago, she was "stolen" from her old life and family by Old Nick, that there is a whole world outside of Room, and that in order to trick Old Nick and escape, she will need Jack's help.

Though the movie starts in a claustrophobic space both physically and emotionally, and though it contains one of the most anxiety-inducing escape attempts I've ever seen in a film, this is not primarily a thriller. It is not exploitative in its depiction of a horrifying kidnapping, which was loosely inspired from several real-life cases. Instead of focusing on the pain and suffering and violence, it is ultimately an extremely powerful story about the bond between parent and child.

Despite the bleak subject matter, the film has an innocence to it; like the novel it's based on, it plays out largely from little Jack's point of view. As a child who has no frame of reference, he's oblivious to the fact that he was born a prisoner to an evil man. He's completely unaware of how dangerous their situation is, and how much trauma her mother has had to endure. She has managed to raise a relatively healthy and well-adjusted kid.

Brie Larson (*Captain Marvel*) is fantastic as Ma, and young Jacob Tremblay (*Wonder*) is perhaps even more so. Tremblay, who was eight at the time of filming as he played a five-year-old, gives a great performance, child actor or not. He is asked to run the emotional gamut in this movie, from angry, frightened, and miserable to full of wonder at what the world has to offer. Larson and Tremblay have tremendous chemistry as well.

The director Abrahamson does a nice, subtle job here. The film never dips into cheap exploitation or sticky sentiment; he keeps a light touch and guides a story that could ring false if not done very carefully. I have yet to read Donahue's book, but her script is excellent, intelligent and moving throughout. The cinematography by Danny Cohen (*The King's Speech*) the score by Stephen Rennicks, who collaborated with Abrahamson on *Frank*, both add to the emotion and intensity to the film. The sometimes-shaky camera is used with purpose here; rather than the gratuitous shaky-cam techniques deployed in many modern films, here it's used to illustrate Jack's child-like point of view.

One minor complaint I had with the film is the mechanics of how Ma and Jack make their escape. Though the sequence that follows is amazing, the setup is a bit far-fetched, especially in a movie that is so grounded in subtle realism. There are also some minor characters who show up later in the movie, one of whom is played by William H. Macy (*Shameless*) who are a bit underdeveloped. Overall, this is a great movie that will stay with me for awhile.

This film is available to borrow for free using Hoopla. It can also be found on Netflix, and can be checked out on DVD from Marshall District Library.