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Melina Rozzisi

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Review: *The Kid With A Bike*

By: Melina Rozzisi

With strawberry blonde hair, a red shirt, and tireless energy, eleven-year-old Cyril is reminiscent of Annie. And he has a similar story.

Annie's future was anything but certain before she met Daddy Warbucks. Dropped off at an orphanage at birth, she spent her entire life there, awaiting her parents' return. She runs away in hopes of finding them on her own, but is found by the police and returned to the orphanage. When an unexpected wealthy man agrees to foster her for a week, Annie's future changes for good.

Like Annie, Cyril's father abandoned him a month ago. Since then, he has been living in a group home in Belgium. Like Annie, Cyril is convinced his father will return to get him. *The Kid With A Bike* opens with Cyril calling his father's old phone line, which is disconnected. Cyril does not believe that his father left for good because if he had, Cyril knows his dad would have brought him his bike.

Refusing to accept his abandonment, the next day Cyril sets off to find his father. He literally runs into a stranger, knocking her to the ground. The audience later comes to know this woman as Samantha, a hair salon owner in the neighborhood who agrees to foster Cyril on the weekends.

Annie and Cyril share the same desire to escape the desolate existence of a foster care group home. However, *The Kid With A Bike*, unlike *Annie*, is not a detailed story about Cyril's experience. The film merely identifies and introduces some of the challenges and experiences that a child in foster care might face, and does so without exaggeration or musical numbers, and often without detail or explanation. In *Annie*, the audience gets Annie's full back-story, but in *The Kid with a Bike*, the audience is never introduced to or hears of Cyril's mother. The reason behind what instigated his fathers' abandonment is left intentionally unclear. Cyril meets Samantha who later agrees to take care of him but yet again, the film does not delve into why Samantha, a complete stranger, so quickly decides to help

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him or why she remains unwavering in her dedication to him. One critic recognized that, "a mainstream film would have distracted us with a spurious back-story about Samantha's own deprived childhood" and explains that in this scenario, the audience is given what is necessary: that Samantha and Cyril have connected.

The film also avoids introducing the legal processes that Cyril would be subjected to as a foster child. Such processes would include identifying Cyril's caregiver at any given time, as well as determining how Cyril is functioning and whether or not any services are needed to facilitate his development. And, while it is not clear which stage of the child welfare process Cyril is at during the time frame of his life that the film covers, in order to be placed in a group home in the United States, a judge would have needed to declare Cyril a ward of the state. After that, the state would be Cyril's legal guardian until he is returned to his birth parents or legally adopted. In that instance, Cyril's father's parental rights would still be intact, however, if Cyril's father wanted to regain custody of Cyril he would have to successfully complete court-ordered services. The legal proceedings are significant in that they determine the future for the child, yet the film declines to touch on that aspect of Cyril's life at all.

The detail, however, is purposefully lacking. The result is a strikingly powerful film that successfully uses its central character as a universal figure for all children who have been abandoned by their parents. Therefore, without imposing too much on the viewer, the film inspires the audience to think about the issues a child may face when his biological parents are not present. The film accomplishes this successfully by maintaining a broad focus and providing the audience with just enough detail about Cyril's life to genuinely empathize with him.

Therefore, the glimpse of Cyril's life that the audience sees is focused entirely on his relationships outside the legal process. Through Cyril, the film is successful in identifying some of the risks children in foster care encounter. The struggle to develop relationships and the search for someone to rely on are prominent issues and the film does an excellent job of giving the audience a sense of how those issues affect one particular child. Additionally,

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the film clearly captures the struggle a child endures in understanding or accepting the abuse, neglect, or abandonment by his parents. Cyril fervently searches for his father, visiting several stores and asking if anyone knows where his father might have moved. He rides his bike aggressively all over the town, focused on feeling anything other than alone. Cyril's desire to reunite with his father despite the harmful and unsupportive behavior is a common urge for foster children and many children may struggle for years to understand why they feel that urge.

The film also identifies a foster child's search for acceptance and belonging. The film begins with Cyril in a foster care group home, from which he is constantly trying to escape. In the United States, laws and policies exist that require children to be placed in the "least restrictive setting that can meet their needs." For children Cyril's age, though, it is challenging to find foster homes that are willing to accept the risks that come along with fostering an older child who has experienced maltreatment or abandonment. Consequently, these children often land in foster care group homes like Cyril. In addition, many children with various physical or behavioral needs require attentive structure and services and are thus placed in residential facilities that can provide such assistance.

During his search for acceptance and belonging—in his eyes, a hunt for his father—Cyril enters a fortunate setup with the potential to improve his situation, but one that is entirely unrealistic in the United States foster care system. Cyril meets Samantha, a complete stranger, who agrees to foster him on the weekends. In the various foster care systems in the United States, non-relative adults must be trained, assessed, and licensed or certified or both to provide this type of care. The foster care agency would be involved in any outside visitation arrangement, which would first need to be approved by the court. Therefore, while in reality this setup is legally impractical, for Cyril, it seems promising.

The next turn the film takes is to introduce the audience to the vulnerabilities that foster children experience and the risky behavior they often exhibit as a result of their abandonment and transition into and through foster care. At this point, Cyril meets Wes, a gang leader in the area. Cyril's newfound friendship with Wes threatens to

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unravel the positive relationship between Cyril and Samantha. Gang involvement or other delinquent behaviors are common in foster children due to the child's exposure to an unstable or weak family structure. Studies show that foster children are significantly more likely to have a delinquency petition compared with the children who had never entered care—23 percent vs. 11 percent for males, and 8 percent vs. 3 percent for females. Foster children are also at an increased risk for mental health and behavioral issues such as depression, post-traumatic stress, dissociation, social problems, suicidal behavior, attention-deficit or hyperactivity disorder, and conduct disorders, and they are less likely to be engaged in school and more likely to be held back or drop out. Each of those risk factors puts foster children at an increased risk for gang involvement.

Samantha tries to prevent Cyril from hanging out with Wes; she lectures him and physically tries to stop him from leaving the house. Yet Cyril is determined to earn Wes' appreciation, and he violently jabs Samantha in her shoulder with a pair of scissors to break free. Minutes later, Cyril succumbs to the acceptance that Wes offers to him, and proves his dedication by committing a violent crime.

Fortunately, Cyril is not hardened by his crime and instead feels remorse and finally understands what is best for him. When Cyril returns to Samantha's house immediately after, she accepts him back into her home and unconditionally forgives him for hurting her. The next day she sets up a mediation meeting with the man who Cyril mugged where she agrees to pay the damages. At this point, the audience recognizes a shift in the film, as the commitment between Cyril and Samantha seems solidified.

The idea of caregiver support is an important theme. Although the ending of the film is vague and open-ended, viewers leave the film acknowledging the importance of Samantha in Cyril's life. Samantha and Cyril's relationship identifies the potential for a nurturing caregiver to mitigate the risks surrounding a child in foster care; a relationship that research has found to be crucial in the successful outcome of children in foster care. Evidence-based studies have identified that family stability can counteract many of those risk factors and provide foster children with the opportunity to have a

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healthy well-being and a positive outcome. One developmental psychologist explained that “family stability is defined not as a specific family structure or condition, but rather as a family environment in which care giving practices provide children with the consistent, nurturing care they need to thrive.” The filmmakers acknowledge this idea. Cyril and Samantha’s relationship in the film is certainly not the nuclear family model, but eventually it could become a stable family environment.

The research is concrete. When a child maintains placement stability with a supportive and nurturing caregiver, the child will potentially have improved outcomes in all areas of developmental well-being. First, the child is likely to have fewer health issues, as stable families are more likely to have consistent access to health services and immunizations for their children. Also, children with a stable placement have higher educational advancement and achievement levels and are less likely to be held back or drop out of school. Finally, children in stable family environments have improved behavioral and emotional functioning. Therefore, because stability and caregiver support are crucial to a child’s healthy well-being and positive outcome, it is essential to support those who volunteer as a child’s caregiver by providing them the resources and legal rights to do so successfully.

The audience does not see Cyril’s outcome. Unlike in *Annie* where the loose ends are tied up as Annie and Daddy Warbucks’ sing “I Don’t Need Anything But You” in a final medley, with Cyril, his future seems less certain. The ending, of the film, while extremely fitting, happens abruptly. As Cyril and Samantha ride bikes together, the audience expects more to follow. As one critic noted, “If there’s a happy ending, it’s implied rather than delivered – let’s say the [filmmakers] make you work for it, or at least, imagine it for yourself.” This ending is successful in capturing and reminding the audience of the unfortunate reality that because foster children are intensely vulnerable to begin with, and increasingly more susceptible to the circumstances that being in the state welfare system brings, nothing is certain, even when things seem to be going smoothly. Undoubtedly, how one imagines Cyril’s ending will depend on her

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knowledge or experience of children who enter the foster care system.

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