

The Map Reader
Written, edited, and directed by
Harold Brodie

Movie Meter: ***1/2 Cert: M

Reviewed by Sam Edwards

Well that was an interesting experience. Here is a film which will resonate with so many New Zealanders who are having, or who remember, their childhoods and adolescence. There are moments of sheer absorption as it delivers a New Zealand sensitivity and understanding which is at once a romance of boyhood and a small town idyll, but at the same time, carries with it that darker centre which is part of our culture and our art. That is something of a coup for Harold Brodie, who really carries the full weight of the film on his shoulders. Screenplays are not a strong point in New Zealand film. We lack a tradition of great writing which transfers to stage or screen, and our education, driven by people who are more taciturn than prolix, more practical than creative, and whose schools put less emphasis on language and communication than they do on sporting achievement, is hardly conducive to the production of memorable screenplays. But we do have an ability to observe, to see to the heart of things (to coin a cliché) and to strip away the dross of expectation and replace it with a raw truth which reveals a great deal about us as a society. In this case, the vehicle for that observation is a sixteen year old boy, Michael, played with a withdrawn and understated skill by Jordan Selwyn, whose passion is maps, whose world is limited by an alcoholic mother and a rural school where there is little to energise his creative mind. It is tempting to see the maps as a metaphor for the human landscape, because the young Michael has become adept at reading the people around him, but in fact this is a film about people, dark, because most of them are wounded in one way or another, but optimistic, because those fundamentals of human relationships, love, and loyalty, and understanding, keep growing out of the tragedy of an abusive father or a lonely childhood. The somewhat withdrawn Michael has reached a point where he is ready to leave home, to face a world where he does not have to cope with tragedy, and the film, through a series of carefully drawn flashbacks fills in the history which has led to his decision. Those sequences also serve to provide a fascinating piece of cultural history. This is a real teenager growing up, flying kites, passionate about places, clumsy, even gauche with young women, supplying the binoculars for his two friends to spy on a woman in a shower, coping with an over protective mother, coming to grips with the difficulties faced by an abused girl who is his friend. Some of those sequences are wee treasures, but the film is not perfect. The writing is a problem, and there are motifs which become overstated – Michael runs, and runs and runs – and it becomes noticeable rather than informative. There are dialogue moments which are less smooth than audiences have come to expect, as when Michael utters the “Do you like me?” line and at times the production lacks the slickness New Zealand audiences conditioned to the shallow but designer assembled entertainers from the US would expect. Put aside some of those preconditioned attitudes, however, and treat this film not as a critical exercise – which some critics have been wont to do – but as a New Zealand experience, and there is much to enjoy and value.