

# THE G.B. WEEKLY

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## At the Movies: Review – The Map Reader

Followers of New Zealand films may want to catch the likeable coming-of-age drama *The Map Reader* this month at the Village Theatre.

Written, directed and edited by Howard Brodie, an American living in New Zealand, and based on his own childhood fascination with maps, it's a low-key, low-budget production with some weaknesses but some very real strengths, much like the good old 50-cent lolly mix with a fat chocolate fish hiding one or two lemon sours underneath.

Sixteen-year-old Michael's (Jordan Selwyn) world revolves around his schoolmates, his single mum (Rebecca Gibney), and his beloved map collection. An obsession since infancy, Michael's maps have provided him with a connection to his long-departed father—possibly a pilot—charting his imaginary flights across the globe. Introverted but a good kid at heart, Michael now encounters the milestones and realities of young adulthood, as human relationships start to pull him from his maps and into the world.

It's a deliberately unspectacular plot. "I think films should try to achieve a simplicity that reveals character, which is the most complex thing of all," said Brodie, himself the father of a teenage daughter. The visual storytelling, however, is strong. When the dialogue comes, much of it is very naturalistic, and there are some surprisingly vibrant performances, particularly by 16-year-old Mikaila Hutchinson as Michael's friend Alison, and Bonnie Soper as Mary. The whole thing is solidly held together by Selwyn, now training overseas, and the nephew of the late Kiwi icon Don Selwyn. These young performers are sure of work in future productions, and are further evidence that New Zealand acting standards, which until the last decade lagged behind (OK, shoot me), have reached the competitive mark.

The great score was recorded live over two days by musician Paul Ubana Jones, and Swiss-born cinematographer Renaud Maire overcame the limitations of the entire \$225,000 budget by the effective use of light, great visual sequences, and scenery on Auckland's North Shore and on the Kaipara Heads.

*The Map Reader* follows an unusual chronology, flipping from present to past to develop character and story, and in one late, metaphorical scene combines past and present together. It worked for me, but not for another viewer I asked: "It provided me with a lot of insights, but it was sort of flighty."

Flight is a strong motif. Also represented in the teens' lives are family violence, sex (both largely inferred) and the ever-ubiquitous alcohol—the first poorly resolved, the second accepted as a natural part of maturity, and the latter definitely not condoned. Nor is the crass behaviour of Michael's mates. The good kid clearly gets the rewards in this tale, a message not lost on one pre-teen who also watched and understood it.

There's a certain timelessness about *The Map Reader* that makes it hard to date, but increases its relevance to a wider audience. There's plenty in it for teens, who'll find much relate to. Those slightly over the hill can roll another jaffa down the aisle and reminisce about what it was to grow up Kiwi.

Maria Polglase

THE MAP READER (M) Next screening at the Village Theatre, Sunday 12 April at 4.30pm.

Wednesday 01 April 2009

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