

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
November 2015

Room (dir. Lenny Abrahamson, 2015)

On Camera

Jack Jacob Tremblay: Voice in *Smurfs 2* (13), upcoming horror *Before I Wake* (15)
Joy / Ma Brie Larson: *21 Jump Street* (12), *Short Term 12* (13), *Trainwreck* (15)
Old Nick Sean Bridgers: *Dark Places* (15), from the author of *Gone Girl*
Grandma Joan Allen: *Nixon* (95), *The Crucible* (96), the Steppenwolf Ensemble
Grandpa William H. Macy: *Fargo* (96), *Pleasantville* (98), “Shameless” (TV)
Leo Tom McCamus: *The Sweet Hereafter* (97), “Orphan Black” (TV)

Off Camera

Director Lenny Abrahamson: *Adam & Paul* (04), *What Richard Did* (12), *Frank* (14)
Cinematography Danny Cohen: *The King’s Speech* (10), *Les Misérables* (12)
Art Direction Ethan Tobman: the Daniel Radcliffe rom-com *What If* (13)
Original Score Stephen Rennicks: Abrahamson’s other movies, upcoming *Viva* (15)

Previous features from writer-director Lenny Abrahamson

Adam & Paul (2004) – Comedy-drama about two drug addicts making their way through Dublin
Garage (2007) – Tragicomedy about overly industrious gas-station attendant in rural Ireland
What Richard Did (2012) – Complex drama about moral compromise of a high-school leader
Frank (2014) – Odd drama with Michael Fassbender as rock musician who won’t show his face

If you liked *Room*...

Nell (1994) – Very different tone from *Room*, and unmistakably a studio product, but revealing as another case of filmmakers interested in isolated children and their hurdles in assimilating
Life Is Beautiful (1997) – Another story of a parent trying to make an unbearable situation bearable for a child by providing alternate explanations for conditions that entrap them
Beasts of the Southern Wild (2012) – Another feat of adaptation filtered through the mind of a child, this time a young black girl taking an imaginative view of impoverished Louisiana
Short Term 12 (2013) – Also starring Brie Larson, an indie breakout about a halfway house for troubled adolescents and the young staff who monitor them, nursing their own wounds
The Babadook (2014) – Only if you have a strong stomach for scary movies; critically revered psychological horror about a widow and young son living in dangerous isolation from others
The Wolfpack (2015) – This year’s winner of the top prize for documentary at the Sundance Film Festival, about five movie-loving brothers raised inside a NYC apartment they rarely left

Contexts about *Room* you may appreciate...

Originated as a novel by the Irish writer Emma Donoghue who, like *Gone Girl*'s Gillian Flynn, secured a rare invitation to adapt the screenplay of her own book. Donoghue has reported that *Room* attracted so many movie offers that the e-mails crashed her agent's computer.

Donoghue has said many times that no specific abduction case provided the template for *Room*, although the infamous Fritzl case from Austria, revealed in 2008, has some key overlaps. Her biggest creative challenge to herself was imagining the story as one of successful parenting, rather than emphasizing the horrors of the situation or putting the child through a wringer.

Abrahamson and Donoghue are Irish. Many of the other actors and key personnel are Canadian, reflecting a friendly tax deal between those countries that made *Room* feasible on a budget. These ties to Canada may have greased the wheels a bit for that People's Choice Award in Toronto, since festival audiences often show some partiality for homegrown productions. But they have also been sympathetic in the past to stories about children overcoming adversity in unusual contexts (*Whale Rider*, *Slumdog Millionaire*) and stories where young people both practically escape and imaginatively remove themselves from awful conditions (*Precious*).

The principal set for "Room" was constructed with four removable walls and a raisable ceiling, though Abrahamson elected as often as possible to keep the claustrophobic space intact, so that his actors would absorb the experience of constraint, and the images had to be inventive.

Tremblay, seven years old during filming, got the role in *Room* after the producers looked at footage of nearly 2,000 other child actors. The movie was filmed in sequence with the story (which is very rare), so that he would not have the additional complication of playing scenes out of order and trying to make sense of the character's evolution in a scattershot way.

Brie Larson lived in isolation for one month and kept out of the sun for six as preparation. Larson and Tremblay also spend time in the Room set for almost three weeks before filming.

Joan Allen and William H. Macy made the move from theater into film at almost exactly the same time, reaped Oscar nominations and household-name status at nearly the same time, and appeared together memorably in *Pleasantville*, all of which might add to the emotional resonance of their relationship in *Room*.

Room was distributed by A24, a somewhat boutique mini-studio that has made a tony name for itself in recent years by handpicking ambitious, tricky-to-market projects, forming enticing ad campaigns around them, and supporting quality over quantity in their releases. You might also know A24 from last year's abortion-themed comedy *Obvious Child*, last spring's sci-fi thriller *Ex Machina* (with Oscar Isaac), this summer's *Amy* (the Amy Winehouse doc) and *The End of the Tour* (the David Foster Wallace picture), and past film group selections *While We're Young* and *A Most Violent Year*. *Room* is unusual, however, in that A24 not only released the film but actually developed the project and paid for its production. They are now at work on their second in-house production, *Moonlight*, by African-American filmmaker Barry Jenkins, adapted from a play by Steppenwolf Ensemble member Tarell Alvin McCraney. They will also release the colonial horror film *The Witch* in 2016.

Pre-circulated questions about *Room*...

Popularity: A24, *Room*'s tiny distributor was not necessarily expecting such a huge audience response or "crowdpleasing" reputation for what is frankly a dark story. Whether or not you loved the film personally, what is your best guess about why festival audiences and crowds all over the US and Europe are responding so enthusiastically? What's the "hook" here?

Perspective: The novel on which *Room* is based derives entirely from the perspective of Jack, the son. Now, Emma Donoghue has altered her book's point of view, so that we pass in and out of Jack's narrating consciousness and sometimes witness events from a more neutral or "objective" perspective, and sometimes witness events to which he isn't privy at all. Whether or not you know the book, what did you think about how the film managed its point of view? When did Jack's sensibility seem most obvious, and when did the film most retreat? What else besides the literal voiceover suggested Jack's childlike or imaginative take on events?

Space: Anyone directing a film like this has to worry about the audience feeling suffocated by a small set, even if it's key that we feel the characters' discomfort. *Room*'s challenge is extra difficult because (as per the last question) the filmmaking inside *Room* has to suggest both a literal sense of claustrophobia and the more expansive, mentally "free" perspective that Jack brings to his surroundings. Furthermore, even when we leave *Room*, there remains an open question about whether the two protagonists feel like they're still inside of it, and metaphoric possibilities for reading *Room* as a figure for anything that makes one feel entrapped or confined. How did you feel when we were inside *Room*, given the movie's visual and sonic cues? How did *Room* continue to linger a metaphoric presence, even in later scenes?

Parenting: Some early debates have concerned whether the film honors a mother who shepherds her son through an excruciatingly bad situation, keeping his mentality remarkably intact, and despite the impossibility of protecting herself nearly as much. Others have countered that the mother winds up "using" her child as the crutch that will get her through her own life, relying on him to "save" her, and perpetuating clichés about mother-child bonds as co-dependent. Did you leave the movie feeling optimistic or concerned about how life would continue afterward for the major characters? What details in the *filmmaking* influenced you here?

Specific filmmaking touches worth considering...

Opening: The filmmaking in *Room* is never more disjointed than in the beginning, which starts with heavy breathing in darkness, then flash-cuts to several images in *Room* that are often hard to read clearly, because of the camera angles and the lack of context. "Go back to sleep" we eventually hear Joy say to Jack. You could think about *Room* as transitioning from the total disorder of the opening to the hard-won (but precarious?) order of the end. You might also notice how quickly *Room* introduces us to Jack's subjective POV instead of a clearly trackable reality. For a frame of comparison, when a movie like *Precious* used this kind of disorienting montage, it tended to do so at moments of greatest trauma (as in her flashbacks to being raped by her father). *Room* uses it to suggest the "plasticity" of Jack's mind.

Symbol: How do you read the gesture of Joy giving Jack her decayed tooth as a keepsake? She does so at the same time and with the same gesture as feeding him apple slices for lunch—that is, she is simultaneously supplying him with representations of nourishment and rot.

Art Direction: What do details of the shed tell us not just about Joy and Jack but about Nick? For example, who goes to the trouble of setting floral-patterned tile around the tub in a cell where he will keep an abducted woman, but also gives up on the tiles after one or two rows?

Perspective: The movie denies us a clear view of Old Nick for quite a while, helping us to “see” him in the limited way Jack would. The decisive break in that pattern comes when he tells Joy he has been out of work for six months: the film not only cuts to its first full-on close-up of Nick’s face, but re-positions the camera, opposite from Jack’s vantage in *Wardrobe*. Why depart from Jack’s POV here? In general, what did you make of the film’s fitful depictions of Nick, including the total absence of any scene where he is apprehended or killed by cops?

Intertexts: How did specific stories and folktales included in *Room*’s script influence your read on the story and characters: *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, and “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” a 19th-century American folk song with a variety of lyrics, all based on the tale of a wandering hobo dreaming of a land of excessive abundance?

Motivations: Readers of the novel may have different information, but the film implies several reasons why Joy picks *this* moment for Jack’s escape: because he has turned five; because Nick has cut off the power, scaring her with his increasing capacities for vengefulness, but also inspiring her to imagine Jack getting very sick. How did you understand Joy’s sudden fervor for freeing Jack? How long did you think she had been preparing herself for this moment?

Symbol: Similar to the toxic gift of the bad tooth, the act of sneaking Jack out by rolling him up in the carpet is a literal image of smothering him, and of having to “kill” him to save him.

Camera Movement: There is no iron-clad reason why Nick would agree to take the rug far from the house, or to run this errand in broad daylight, and he even pauses for a moment on the way to his truck. Why do you think he elects to proceed? He almost seems to react to the film’s own will, *pushing* him forward with a camera movement that approaches from behind.

Music: I admit that I mostly dislike the music in *Room*; I feel it often uses swells of music to dictate our emotional response to scenes that might otherwise have more complex or unclear effects on us. The one aspect of the music I appreciated is that it completely varies across the film—not only is there no single theme recurring across the film, but it oscillates among acoustic guitar, heavy strings, woodwind, and percussion, rarely all at once. What might it tell us about the story that it never settles into one musical idiom, but keeps looking for one?

Art Direction: Some of our earliest glimpses of life outside of *Room* suggest an even bumpier transition for Jack than the one we see: the hospital room is the coldest, most clinical one imaginable, and Grandma’s house is full of metal railings that imply jail bars all around. To what extent do these characters leave one trap for another? What did you make of the film’s decision *not* to emphasize Jack’s struggles to adjust, while underlining some of Joy’s?