



The Selfish Giant

Director: Clio Barnard

Country: UK

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A review by Robbie Collin for *The Daily Telegraph*:

The Selfish Giant, the second feature by the English filmmaker Clio Barnard, is a brilliant and soul-scouring fable about scrap men and scrap children; two outcast generations doomed to forever sift through life's rubbish dump.

The title is borrowed from a fairy tale by Oscar Wilde, in which a bad-tempered ogre chases children out of his walled garden, only for it to become locked in an eternal winter. Barnard takes Wilde's blossomy parable and strips it down for parts. Her film, which screened in the Cannes Film Festival's Directors' Fortnight programme, is about Arbor and Swifty, two 13-year-old boys from Bradford whose dire circumstances have effectively banished them from their own childhoods. The film is about them both trying to somehow scabble back into that lost state of grace.

Which is not easy to watch: particularly for the first 15 minutes of the film, in which the pair's miserable states of being are described in gut-wrenching detail. Arbor (Conner Chapman) is a hyperactive knot of twitches, thanks to a combination of ADHD and energy drinks. Swifty (Shaun Thomas) is a taciturn lump. Neither is thriving in school. Arbor's father is missing. Swifty's father (Steve Evets), a hopeless spiv who looks like he subsists on fag-ends and rainwater, probably should be, for the best.

In the opening sequence, the boys watch thieves stealing copper cable from the railway line. They are entranced, and when a quirk of fate leaves the cable in their hands, they take it to the nearest scrapyards: a dark, Satanic place with crackling fires and crunching claws that William Blake would have found all too familiar.

Kitten (Sean Gilder), sturdy and cruel with a head like a ham, is the master of this place, and he recruits the boys into his scrap-gathering business (later, he will also involve Swifty in a gypsy horse-racing ring). They scour the estates for discarded metal that might earn them money and respect.



The boys respond well to the alpha-male attention, and Arbor becomes obsessed with following in this giant's footsteps: "I'm a scrap man," he proudly tells a group of men, chuckling devilishly in the half-light of the yard. But as Kitten warms to Swifty, and finds his patience increasingly tried by Arbor, the boys' friendship strains to snapping point.

So hauntingly perfect is Barnard's film, and so skin-pricklingly alive does it make you feel to watch it, that at first you can hardly believe the sum of what you have seen: the astonishingly strong performances from her two young, untutored leads; Barnard's layered script; Mike Eley's snow-crisp cinematography that makes the streets of Bradford shine.

Unlike her first film, an abstract documentary called *The Arbor*, Barnard is working in a more straightforward social-realist style, but like Ken Loach's *Kes*, the film knells with myth: we get a keen sense of an older, purer England buried somewhere underneath all this junk, from the early wide shots of horses in meadows, idling belly-deep in morning mist, to the extraordinary, almost wordless final sequence that hints at redemption and reincarnation. *The Selfish Giant* is cinema that tells an unsure nation who we are

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