

It's always enlightening when you go to see a film at your local cinema and depart better-informed, with a greater awareness of what is happening in the world, and feeling as though you now possess a fuller and more rounded picture of current affairs. It's all the more remarkable when the movie in question is a feature cartoon, aimed at a school-age audience. 'The Breadwinner' (2017) represents one such occasion - many viewers, young and old, will have exited screenings of Nora Twomey's adaptation of the children's novel by Deborah Ellis feeling as though they've experienced a relevant, contemporary story, not to mention one that simply isn't being conveyed by western news media.

The book was the first of a quartet of linked works written by Ellis after she had spent time in Pakistan during the late 1990s, interviewing Afghan refugees and hearing details of their lives under the Taliban. Deborah has since brought the tale of her young fictional heroine Parvana to thousands of receptive readers, commencing with 'The Breadwinner', published in 2001, and followed by 'Parvana's Journey', 'Mud City', and 'My Name is Parvana'. The author has also penned further works pertaining to the situation in Afghanistan as well as examining the plight of children in other troubled areas of the world. Deborah has donated most of the royalties from her books to various related charities and has continued her activism in support of her favoured causes.

The film version of 'The Breadwinner' was produced at Cartoon Saloon in Kilkenny, Ireland, already acclaimed for their earlier 'The Secret of Kells' (2009, co-directed by Twomey) and 'Song of the Sea' (2014), both of which won awards worldwide and received Oscar nominations. 'The Breadwinner' was a co-production between Ireland, Luxembourg and Canada, and was given an A-list boost when American star and fellow activist Angelina Jolie was brought on board by Twomey, via Egyptian filmmakers Jehane Noujaim and Karim Amer who were mutual acquaintances. Twomey acknowledges that Angelina was far more than a big-name 'front' to promote the movie; Angelina took an executive producer role and gave plenty of advice about casting voice actors and structuring the storyline, as well as notes on Afghanistan culture and the local issues being explored within the film.

'The Breadwinner' handles its drama in an effective matter-of-fact manner, emphasizing that there is nothing special or particularly unusual about the experiences depicted, but that this is everyday life for many. The treatment of females within the family unit and in the general community becomes a focus but Twomey rarely pushes the point, preferring to let everything play out before our eyes, and allowing us to make our own judgments and condemnations from the safety of our cinema seats. The subtle, quiet, non-hectoring method of relating these events not only shows great restraint on the filmmaker's part, but helps us to get inside these characters and better understand the oppression they routinely face - we may wish to shout and protest at what we see, and in internalizing these feelings, we come to

realize that much of the population of Kabul has no means of public expression or dissent, at risk of censure, imprisonment, or death.

The stylised design of the families, street traders, armed patrolmen and so on offers a marked contrast to the hyper-realistic backgrounds against which this story is told. Twomey even opts for a near photo-real look at times, again reminding us that this fiction is nevertheless close to the regular pattern of life for many in that part of the world. An additional visual distinction is made, following in the footsteps of much classic animation - Parvana's parents are respectively a writer and a teacher, so she has grown up in a household where imagination and storytelling are encouraged, and 'The Breadwinner' develops this by having her relate ancient fables, depicted in a more colourful and vividly 'fantastic' style, with flow and movement clashing against the more angular and austere real-world happenings. One staggering early sequence parades before us the various despots and tyrants who have attacked the region over the centuries - all are depicted in identical fashion, charging from right-frame on horseback, in profile with their prominent left eye glaring wildly. Inevitably, the embroidered regal or lordly garments they sport eventually give way to a modern, military, Western khaki...

There are animated precedents to 'The Breadwinner', in terms of war stories centred upon children and their attempts to struggle for survival in a situation not of their making; Studio Ghibli's relentless, unbearably grim and sad 'Grave of the Fireflies' (1988) stands as the benchmark, while Afghanistan's own Siddiq Barmak's archly-titled 'Osama' (2003) relates a highly similar plotline to Deborah Ellis' novel, with its near-identical story concerning a young girl attempting to pass as male in order to aid her family under Taliban rule.

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Darrell is a cult film historian and editor of the books 'The Shrieking Sixties: British Horror Films 1960-1969' (nominated for a British Fantasy Society award in 2011) and 'Dead Or Alive: British Horror Films 1980-1989'. He is a freelance film journalist and lecturer, has written reviews and in-depth articles for publications including Samhain, Shivers, and Giallo Pages, and is co-author of the screenplay for 2018 feature film Oujageist.

