



FILM: **A BAG OF MARBLES**

FDG RATING: 4.5 ☺☺☺☺☺

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

Christian Duguay: *director*
Dorian Le Clech: *actor, Jo*
Batyste Fleurial: *actor, Maurice*

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DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **A BAG OF MARBLES**

Historical dramas about the Holocaust are important educational experiences but it's understandable to be hesitant about seeing yet another one and wonder if anything new would be revealed. The 2017 French film, *A Bag of Marbles* is good reason to set aside any hesitation. The perspective is different as we see everything through the eyes of 10 year old Joseph (Jo) as he and his 12 year old brother Maurice, flee from their home in Paris in order to reach a "free zone" in Nice as the Nazi's overtake France.

It's 1942 so with the realization their whole family is threatened with deportation, their parents believe they can best protect the two young boys by sending them away from Paris to reach unoccupied Southern France, promising to join them there. The father tells Jo he must never admit he is Jewish, no matter what happens, he must remain strong to survive. He repeatedly slaps Jo on the side of his face taunting him as an interrogator might try to force him to admit his faith but Jo, holding back tears, maintains his resolve in this preparatory test. The two boys are given some money and instructions and then are left to fend for themselves in an arduous journey. It's a coming of age story in the 1940s as Jo begins as a rather innocent, childish young boy, who is forced to grow up quickly under harsh, terrifying conditions.

In an early scene we watch Jo mischievously, naively, cover part of the sign on his father's barber shop that said it was a Jewish owned business, allowing several German soldiers to unwittingly enter, causing palpable tension for his father, and the other barbers. He holds his blade, almost threateningly, ready to shave the soldier's neck, while keeping his hatred in check, as the soldier and his comrades make anti-Semitic small talk. Soon after, Jo's mother must sew a yellow Star of David inside Jo's jacket. He and his Algerian Christian school mate, Zérati, do not understand the significance and Jo quickly rips the star off giving it to Zérati when his friend offers Jo a bag of marbles for the star. When forced to flee Paris, Jo carries the bag with him at the beginning of his journey and when the bag drops spilling the marbles, Jo is able to grab one and holds it dearly in his pocket for the rest of his journey. It is his tiny tangible connection to his previous life.

The brothers hone their survival skills on the fly, resorting to clever trickery to evade Nazis and hide in plain sight in the midst of anti-Semites and collaborators, as the bond between the brothers grows stronger. They bicker and tease in typical sibling fashion but when Jo is having trouble walking and takes off his sock to reveal a bloody infected foot, Maurice carries Jo on his back until they get to a safe place to rest.

The encounters are gripping as they witness Nazi brutality and unapologetic collaborators, but they also find courage and unexpected compassion. Their grueling journey has moments of almost childish relief as they embrace any opportunity to distract themselves from the harsh reality of their plight, such as running in a sun-drenched field or teasing each other in playful, brotherly fashion. Discussion participants agreed we were completely invested in their tense physical and emotional struggles and momentary reprieves. It's a tale of survival. Jo and his brother face grueling hardships on every step of their journey. Unlike other Holocaust films, that focus on the horrors of concentration camps, *A Bag of Marbles* shows us the awful price paid by even those who evaded the camps, living in constant terror, separated from their families and the rare kindness of strangers.

The film touches on many important themes as each character is a mini study in human nature, the best and the worst. The most obvious French collaborator in the film is the book store owner and his son who hire Jo to work in the family bookstore under the false belief that Jo is an Algerian Christian. The bookstore owner is very open about his hatred towards Jews. His son mimics the father's beliefs and vows to help in the German effort to "exterminate those rats". Jo's relationship with this family is pivotal to the powerful climax at the end of the story.

The acting was outstanding as well as the cinematography. Discussion participants remembered many favorite, poignant scenes such as when their very stoic father, who has lived through the pogroms in Russia, turns away from the boys knowing he may never see them again, not wanting the boys to see he is overcome with emotion. Or when the doctor who lied to save the boys, willingly follows orders when he and others are rounded up, but tells Jo, "You live for me." Another memorable scene is the priest who pretends the boys are with him on the train as SS officers ask for their papers.

Only one resident reviewer thought the film was unbearably sentimental. Others thought the film was unexpectedly flawless. We were touched by the strong family bond, from the beginning were totally invested in the boys' survival. The twist at the end is especially impactful. Almost unanimously high marks all around, *A Bag Of Marbles* earned a well-deserved collective 4.5 (including several individual solid 5s) on our score of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

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