



FILM: **BELFAST**

FDG RATING: 4.1

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

Kenneth Branagh: *director*  
Jude Hill: *actor, Buddy*  
Caitriona Balfe: *actress, Ma*  
Jaime Dornan: *actor, Pa*

DATE: December 19, 2021

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **BELFAST**

In Kenneth Branagh's semi-autobiographical film, *Belfast*, he shares his powerful childhood memories of living in the midst of the religious tumult, historically referred to as The Troubles between the Catholics and Protestants in the 1960s in the Northern Ireland. (He moved with his family to Reading, England when he was 9 years old, just as the riots were escalating. The conflict actually began during a campaign by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association to end discrimination against the Catholic/nationalist minority by the Protestant/unionist government and local authorities. The government attempted to suppress the protests.)

Jude Hill is terrific as the young boy, Buddy, living with his mother, father, and grandparents, in a small, crowded, rented row house on a street housing both Protestant and Catholic families. Buddy's father travels to England each week for his job, earning a meager salary. His parents and grandparents are the center of his world. We see everything through Buddy's eyes beginning when the 9-year-old rounds the corner to see a mob of anti-nationalist Protestants gathering at the end of his street. They've come to torch the Catholic houses and Buddy stands frozen in their way, holding a garbage pail lid as a makeshift shield. Barricades go up and the local bully-boy tries to draw Buddy's Protestant family into his campaign to "cleanse the community" of its Catholic residents. Pa's attitude is that there should be no divide. "There is no our side and their side on our street."

But rather than focus on the issues and violence, the film is centered on the boy's emotional confusion about what is happening and the thought that he and his family are feeling unsafe and considering leaving their home to move to England. A published critic noted that the idea of one's roots is at the core of *Belfast*'s narrative. When Buddy confides in his grandfather that he is worried no one will understand his accent in England, his grandpa says: "If they can't understand you, they're not listening." Auntie Violet offers her wisdom: "The Irish were born for leaving, otherwise the rest of the world would have no pubs."

One discussion participant described the film as a sentimental memoir but says he fell for it hook, line, and sinker. Nostalgic, sentimental scenes are suffused with some of Van Morrison's warmest songs. Snippets of television news play in the background, so we know that the situation is worsening, but to a boy, the perils are not reality. And he has a major crush on one of the Catholic girls in his class. A favorite scene is his grandfather giving him advice on his young girlfriend. Judi Dench plays Buddy's grandmother, who had a huge influence on his childhood.

Another resident reviewer noted the virtues and disadvantages of telling the story through the eyes of a child. Some scenes seem too simplified and idealized so the drama of the situation is missed. Branagh purposely avoided any preachiness which makes the child's view the perfect vessel. Children don't want to take sides but are caught in the crossfire. The film skirts the big issues to focus on the human side such as Buddy's family who are not politically invested. The theme becomes displacement and detachment. This was a missed opportunity according to one discussion participant who grew up in Ireland and explained that the film could have shed more light on what historically happened; it could have had a bigger story; there is very little about Irish history in major films. This film offers little beyond what is happening on Buddy's block.

We praised the use of black and white cinematography plus unique camera angles such as from the grave looking up, aerial shots looking down, and striking, framed shots of people and rooms.

One discussion participant described the film as a love letter to Belfast which resonates in Branagh's dedication at the end: "For the ones who stayed. For the ones who left. And for all the ones who were lost." The family loved where they lived and the ease of knowing everybody. The performances were outstanding, great music, tender humor, and exceptional cinematography. We echoed Branagh's nostalgia for Belfast, giving it a warmly wistful score of 4.1 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best.)



See you at the movies!

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