

Parental Rights Are Human Rights

A review of the film



Gone Baby Gone

(2007)

Ben Affleck (Director)



A warning to readers: This review discusses the surprise plotline of this movie. Given that this surprise is to a large degree the reason this movie is so profoundly effective, if you have not yet seen the movie, you may want to do so before reading further.

Reviewed by

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Let's begin with a real-life current events story. On October 30, 2007, members of a French humanitarian organization called Zoe's Ark were charged with child abduction in connection with the organization's procurement of over 100 African children to be placed in foster homes in France. While the group claimed that these children were starving orphans from war-torn Darfur, an investigation revealed that in reality many of these children were

Chadians who had been abducted from their families. Some of the children who were recovered told stories of how they had been lured into cars by the foreigners with offers of candy and gifts. In the aftermath of this plot, the charity workers were convicted of kidnapping and sentenced to eight years' imprisonment.

It is unlikely that you will find many who would support the actions of the members of Zoe's Ark in this situation. Kidnapping children from their biological families of origin in order to adopt them out to other families seems a heinous crime deserving of severe punishment. But before rushing to judgment, consider a similar situation portrayed in the recent film *Gone Baby Gone*. This film portrays the story of a girl from inner-city Boston, Amanda McCready, who is kidnapped by a local police captain to be raised by him and his wife. Instead of cheering the hero who saves the adorable young girl from her abductors, the theater audience in the affluent Raleigh neighborhood where I saw the film actually booed the protagonist, Patrick Kenzie (played by Casey Affleck), for his actions.

What makes this movie such a striking film is not just its superb acting, which garnered Oscar, Golden Globe, and Screen Actor's Guild nominations, but primarily its intricately woven storyline, which forces Kenzie and, by extension, the viewer, to take sides in a difficult ethical dilemma, one that the director and cowriter, Ben Affleck, touched upon in the screenplay he cowrote for the film *Good Will Hunting* (Bender, Damon, & Affleck, 1997). *Good Will Hunting* explores the great social divide between the haves and the have-nots in modern society; the main character, Will Hunting, struggles to bridge the chasm between the two groups.

Gone Baby Gone continues this theme as the narration in the beginning of the movie attests: "Things you don't choose make you who you are—city, family, neighborhood." The ambivalence found in *Good Will Hunting* demonstrated by the portrayal of the haves vacillating between negative and positive perspectives is not carried over into *Gone Baby Gone*. In *Gone Baby Gone*, Affleck has developed a more crystallized view: The haves, although they may superficially appear as moral, caring individuals, are instead corrupt and duplicitous at their core. While he does not go so far as to say that the opposite is true for the have-nots, Affleck attempts to illustrate that the lack of hypocrisy, the utter authenticity, found in the have-nots ultimately makes them better individuals.

At its heart, *Gone Baby Gone* is a morality play. As alluded to, the ultimate question posed is whether it is acceptable to steal children from poor families and give them to rich families. When the question is phrased in such simple terms, most people, I think, would consider the answer to be an obvious one. So why, then, did the audience in the theater where I saw the film disagree?

Let's play the devil's advocate for a moment and return to the example of those kidnapped children from Chad. According to the CIA's *World Factbook* (2008), Chad by any standard is a very poor country with a median annual household income of only approximately 143 euros. Twenty-eight percent of children 5 and younger are malnourished. Only one quarter of Chadian citizens 15 and older are literate. The average life expectancy is

44 years. These are fairly grim statistics. In France, the country where the children were being taken, we see a median household income of approximately 31,092 euros, an average life expectancy of 80 years, a literacy rate of 99 percent, and no reported childhood malnourishment. That's quite a contrast.

In recent years many studies have documented the permanent damage that childhood poverty wreaks upon its victims. Problems associated with impoverishment during childhood include structural brain dysfunction (e.g., Farah et al., 2006), neuropsychological deficits (e.g., Weatherholt, Harris, Burns, & Clement, 2006), and psychiatric symptoms (e.g., Costello, Compton, Keeler, & Angold, 2003). Not only does poverty lead to developmental difficulties for children, but growing up within an impoverished family greatly elevates the likelihood of abuse and neglect (Hildyard & Wolfe, 2002).

Faced with these stark findings, are we now so willing to agree that children should not be rescued, by abduction if necessary, from such a detrimental existence so that they might have a chance at a better life elsewhere? Perhaps the answer to the dilemma is not quite as simple as it initially appeared. Maybe the audience members who disagreed with the protagonist in *Gone Baby Gone* knew about the possibility of terrible psychological repercussions for little Amanda McCready if she were taken from the bucolic home of the apparently kindly and well-to-do police captain and his wife, who adored and doted upon the little girl, and returned her to her unemployed, uneducated, and substance-abusing mother who appeared to consider the needs of little Amanda only as an afterthought.

Or maybe the audience just didn't like little Amanda's mother and thought she didn't deserve to have her daughter returned. There's not much to like in the crass, vulgar, and self-centered character of the mother, especially when compared with the soft-spoken intelligent eloquence of the police captain. It seems clear that he would care more for Amanda than would her mother, and his social class would allow her opportunities rarely found in the squalor of inner-city urbanity—in the same way that those French foster families would likely offer so much more to those Chadian children than they could hope to attain within their impoverished home environments.

Suspending for a moment the moral issue involved in this debate, let us explore whether these abducted children would be really better off in the long run. Would their lives with the haves really be so rosy? In modern times, one case of mass transplantation of children from poor families into more affluent families is still having repercussions today. The practice of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families for foster placement with White families ostensibly for the well-being of the children was carried out by the Australian government agencies between 1869 and 1969 and affected approximately 100,000 children (Read, 1981). An investigation into the long-term effects upon the removed Aboriginal children indicated that, contrary to expectations, these individuals were less likely than those left behind to have completed secondary education and were significantly more likely to engage in criminal behavior and to abuse substances (Bereson, 1989).

This case illustrates that the dangers associated with this practice go beyond the obvious moral danger. But the moral danger remains a significant issue. It is a morally hazardous line of thought because it endows outsiders with the arbitrary power to decide whether parents are deserving of their offspring. Of course, in this country, state and federal laws are in place to protect children from abusive, neglectful, or exploitative environments. Parental rights may be legally terminated in extreme cases. We accept these laws as necessary and just.

However, it is simply not tenable to say that children may be permanently removed from their parents' home solely because of low economic status. To steal children from poverty-stricken families in order to place them in more affluent families violates a fundamental human right—the right to family and offspring. As is succinctly stated in Article 16 of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by the society and the State.”

In order to control the detrimental effects of poverty upon the development of children, societies must develop social programs to help poor families deal with such issues, such as the many we have in place in this country. In addition, communities, volunteers, and charitable organizations must pull together to help those in need. The answer is not an easy one, but the old maxim seems to hold true: It takes a village to raise a child. The answer to the dilemma is certainly not to further victimize poor families by stealing their children.

In *Gone Baby Gone*, Kenzie has a moral obligation to return little Amanda to her mother, and his conviction that he is doing the right thing never wavers despite opposition from everyone around him. He remains focused on his job, which he describes as finding “the people who started in the cracks and then fell through.” Instead of rejecting his efforts, we should emulate them. We are all morally obligated to help children in need.

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