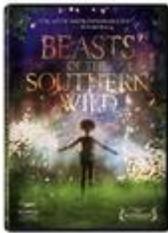


Facing Our Monsters

A review of the film



Beasts of the Southern Wild

(2012)

Benh Zeitlin (Director)



Reviewed by

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One of the two authors of this review was significantly more excited about seeing *Beasts of the Southern Wild* than the other. Jacqueline greatly anticipated seeing a movie that depicted this very unique part of America. Having grown up in southern Louisiana where the movie was filmed, she claims that this swampland estuary at the mouth of the Mississippi River is still home, where the “cah-bins” (Cajun for home) exist in a locale that is at the mercy of river floods from the north and gulf storms from the south. Modernity has brought massive levees, locks, and pumping systems in a less-than-perfect attempt to protect the two major cities in the area, Baton Rouge and New Orleans, from devastating floods.

Before the levees, though, the culture was shaped by adapting rather than controlling the capriciousness of the weather. The swamps came to be home to an untouchable people. Settled by exiles from Canada’s French Acadian provinces, southern Louisiana became a melting pot of Acadians (Cajuns) and creoles—persons of ethnic/racial mixtures that include French, Spanish, African, and/or Native American ancestries.

Although Cajuns have been at the mercies of the water, they also have been its beneficiaries. The swamp and adjacent gulf abound with all manner of wildlife, especially edible crustaceans and fresh-water and salt-water fish. Except during times of floods and storms, living has been easy; food was and is always in abundance. Unsurprisingly, considering their history and surroundings, Cajuns have become known for their friendly independence, carefree manner, and good cooking. Modern Cajuns take pride in their individuality and reputation for enjoying life. It is a seductive way of life, at least in its mildest version.

The more extreme version of Cajun life occurs for those who live “back of the levee” (areas unprotected by the levee system; such a lifestyle has been depicted in the History Channel’s *Swamp People* reality television series). These often-isolated folks, just like their ancestors, still fend for themselves when storms arise and floods descend. But the deprivations brought by weather are outweighed by an abundance of good food and a relatively easy life.

More than a depiction of a unique way of life, *Beasts* is the story of a six-year-old girl, Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), who grows wise beyond her years on the wrong side of the levees in a tiny, waterlogged community called the Bathtub. Hushpuppy usually fends for herself, since her mother enigmatically “swam away” soon after she was born, and her father, Wink (Dwight Henry), is often inexplicably absent. When he is around, his displays of affection are few compared with the normally benign neglect and occasional abuse he visits upon his daughter. Wink makes Hushpuppy sleep in a separate shack and calls her to meals by ringing a bell and bellowing, “Feed-up time is coming!” Mostly Hushpuppy’s companions are animals, both domesticated and undomesticated. She has few friends in the isolated community of about 20 residents that includes a dilapidated store, a bar, and a one-room school.

The movie is filled with overt fantasy and magic, but the most enchanting aspect of *Beasts* is Hushpuppy’s undeterred sense of wonder and joy, maintained in spite of the physical and psychological deprivations she endures. Hushpuppy’s automatic response to seeing a living animal is to hold its body up to her ear and listen to its heartbeat. She even does this to critters right before she prepares them to be eaten. When she does this, there is magic in her eyes, reflecting excitement and wonder as she listens. This simple, spontaneous act reassures the viewer that in spite of her hardships she loves listening, observing, and learning about life.

Child Resiliency

Hushpuppy joins a tradition in popular literature and film of resilient children. Mark Twain’s title character in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) finds adventure on the Mississippi River after he

runs away from an alcoholic and abusive father; likewise, Charles Dickens's title character in *Oliver Twist* (1838) finds redemption after being drawn into a band of pickpockets exploiting London's orphans; and the contemporary *Slumdog Millionaire* (Colson & Boyle, 2008) is an Academy Award-winning film showing three homeless street children surviving riots, villains, and utter deprivation in the slums of Mumbai, India.

Child resiliency is equally a popular subject in child development research. According to Luthar, Cicchetti, and Becker (2000), the first studies about child resiliency investigated children whose mothers were schizophrenic. Evidence that many of these children thrived in spite of their circumstances led researchers to study other children in situations of risk, examining their ability to endure and the variation in their ability to thrive. This resiliency research included children exposed to poor socioeconomic conditions, urban poverty, community violence, catastrophic life events, neglect, and sexual and physical maltreatment. The primary emphases explored ameliorating factors that might account for the variation in children's ability to cope with adverse or at-risk situations.

Questions investigated in resiliency research mirror psychology's big question: Are human behavior and mental processes products of nature or nurture? Is variation in child resilience primarily explained by internal or external attributes? Resiliency researchers identify three factors determining a child's ability to overcome obstacles and hostile environments (Condly, 2006). The first is internal attributes of the child: native intelligence and temperament. The second is external: the amount and quality of support of the child's family in helping to cope with challenges. The third is also external: support for both the child and the family from others including friends, as well as interactions with schools, churches, and social service agencies.

Of the three factors, the most careful research indicates that internal attributes describe most of the variation in children's ability to adapt to hostile environments. Intelligent children are more capable of identifying what is happening to them, differentiating controllable from uncontrollable events, and developing strategies to manage their situation. An even or controlled temperament also seems to help by allowing the child to regulate his or her own emotional reactions to severe circumstances. Also, it is theorized, an easygoing temperament in a child lowers negative reactions of an abusive adult in a stressful situation and elicits more positive responses in potential caregivers. In a hostile environment, an intelligent child finds better solutions, and an easygoing child stays calmer and gets more help from surrounding adults.

Other research has investigated protective factors for abused and neglected children in families, friends, schools, and communities. Positive relationships with peers, siblings, and adults outside the abusive environment may function as a lifeline to victims of maltreatment. Even pets and toys can provide support to a neglected child (Doyle, 1997). Schools and community resources like churches can provide critical stability and refuge from abusive homes.

A Child's Spirit and Wisdom

“The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece . . . the whole universe will get busted,” says Hushpuppy at the opening of *Beasts*. Will her native intelligence, happy temperament, and positive spirit save Hushpuppy when the pieces of her world break and stop fitting? A critical piece of Hushpuppy's life is her severe, insensitive father. Wink's disciplining of Hushpuppy is overly harsh, and he rarely shows her open affection, but he is not overtly cruel toward her.

Wink appears to care about Hushpuppy but seems incompetent in many critical aspects of raising a child. His care is shown in his desperate attempts to teach Hushpuppy how to become self-sufficient and fend for herself. He shows her the notorious skill of noodling for catfish (catching the fish by hand) and the difficult task of opening crab shells bare-handed. Almost brutally, he forces Hushpuppy to face up to the most distasteful aspects of learning such tasks—like killing a landed fish by crushing its skull. The reason for Wink's desperation in teaching her life skills soon becomes apparent. He is dying from a long-term illness. He knows he will not be able to care for Hushpuppy until she comes of age. He tells her, “I've got to teach you to take care of yourself.”

Wink's desperation for ensuring Hushpuppy's future is compounded by a Katrina-like storm that is brewing in the Gulf of Mexico. Almost everyone in the Bathtub is planning to evacuate. Wink refuses to leave and tries to convince others to stay and ride out the storm—to face it directly. Wink's stubborn determination highlights the Cajun culture of independence and closeness to nature. Objectively, it seems wrong for Wink to subject his child to such a threat, but for Hushpuppy, riding out the storm in The Bathtub forces her to face both her father's and her own mortality. The pieces of Hushpuppy's precarious universe are busting apart, and she must find courage from within to face the worst life has to offer.

Hushpuppy's precocious wisdom and intelligence are shown by her ability to relate her existence to the rest of the world on two different levels. The first level is metaphysical: the relationship between animal size and food. To her, it is only natural that bigger animals eat smaller animals—smaller animals are simply sources of food for larger animals. Once when her father leaves her without anything to eat, she wonders aloud and without emotion whether she will be forced to eat her pets. Hushpuppy knows the food cycle firsthand and sees herself as part of it. “If it wasn't for Daddy, I'd just be breakfast,” she contends, referring to a bigger animal eating her.

Hushpuppy is also able to relate her life to societal changes. She is self-conscious about the precariousness of her life in the Bathtub. With pride, she says, “In a million years, when kids go to school, they gonna' know: Once there was a Hushpuppy, and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub.” Hushpuppy sees her life on the swamp threatened and ready to be flooded away by modernity. The levees protect the big cities but guarantee the extinction of

her way of life on the swamp. The waters that the levees hold back away from the cities will completely submerge and finally destroy the Bathtub.

Theme of Extinction

The theme of extinction and the end of a kind is cleverly drawn out by the movie's use of fantasy, as seen through Hushpuppy's imagination. Hushpuppy has learned about aurochs, an extinct breed of bovines, and the cavemen who hunted them from her teacher at the school in the Bathtub. During the height of the storm, the teacher's story evokes a flight of fancy in Hushpuppy's mind. Miraculously, the storm has broken away a large piece of glacier from the Antarctic. Frozen inside the iceberg is an ancient herd of aurochs. As the ice is blown into the swamp by the storm, it melts and releases the gigantic creatures with huge tusks and piglike tails. They stampede and consume everything in their path as they head toward the Bathtub.

In the movie's climatic scene, two grand species—one extinct but has come back to life as giant beasts; the other a small child who most assuredly sees her own looming extinction—face each other eye to eye. Hushpuppy does not quake in fear or run away; she stands her ground and says with quiet assurance, “You're my friend, kind of.” Life and all of its huge, devouring beasts, real and imagined, can only do one thing before such a spirit. No, we will not spoil *Beasts* by telling what happens, but suffice it to say that it is worth the price of admission.

Beasts reminds us how important individual strengths are in the face of life's difficulties. Everyday challenges can overwhelm us, sap our courage, and defeat the best within us. The film teaches us that facing these challenges with courage and confidence is the only avenue to facing our monsters and having a successful life.

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