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FILM

Child and Adult

Javier Marías

A High Wind in Jamaica, directed by Alexander Mackendrick, 1965.

I WOULD NEVER say it's the best movie I've ever seen nor that it's my absolute favorite (that's *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir*, about which I've already written). I don't even like the leading actor, poor Anthony Quinn, who never exactly hit the heights and then sank lower and lower. Nevertheless, it's the movie that most successfully brings together my movie tastes as child and adult; it's also based on a novel I adore (*A High Wind in Jamaica* by Richard Hughes), and is very nearly as good as the book. All these factors mean that I'm very fond indeed of Alexander Mackendrick's movie.

It's about the sea and ships and pirates and children, but it's a very grown-up movie. More than that, it's possibly one of the cruelest, wisest tales ever seen on the big screen. It's subtly

cruel and muted, unlike the more famous novel by William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (made into a movie by Peter Brook), although there are similarities. In *A High Wind in Jamaica*, a group of English children living in Jamaica are sent to England in order to become less like savages, less insensitive. The sailing ship they're traveling on is boarded by pirates under the command of Quinn, James Coburn, and the unforgettable Benito Carruthers, who, very reluctantly, end up taking charge of the children. The movie shows how these pirates-with-scruples (although they're still far from being big softies) and the harder-hearted, more treacherous children rub along together and mutually influence each other. One of the children, played by a young Martin Amis, dies in an accident, and later on one of the girls, Emily, lying in her cabin with a fever during an attack by another ship, kills the Dutch captain of the other boat, who, if I remember rightly, has been

taken prisoner, but she does so out of sheer terror. The pirates are tried for both crimes, and the children abandon them to their fate; in fact, the children lay the blame squarely on the pirates, but only because they're manipulated into doing so by the forces of law and order, by their parents and by the judges. The look that Anthony Quinn gives young Emily when he hears the sentence condemning him and his comrades to be hanged is one of the most bitter and yet most compassionate ever seen in the cinema, as if he were acknowledging that there was no other possible outcome and thinking to himself: "What else could she have done?"

There is no moral in *A High Wind in Jamaica*, but there is a tenuous, underlying lesson: you should not cease being the person you are, not even for an instant, because the likelihood is that no one will follow your example. The pirates stop behaving like pirates, but the children, on the other hand, remain children regardless of the circumstances, which means they will adapt to whatever might befall them, will care only about their own survival, and will be totally amoral; more than that, they have very short memories, and so will feel no compassion, no remorse, no loyalty. □

(Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa)

