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# How I Live Now: Toronto 2013 - first look review

Kevin Macdonald has teenagers in the crosshairs with this post-nuclear puppy love story

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**Henry Barnes**theguardian.com, Wednesday 11 September 2013 15.13 BST

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Daisy unchained ... Saoirse Ronan in *How I Live Now*

When the voices in Daisy's head aren't calling her a fucking loser, they're reciting hackneyed pop wisdom ("If you don't give up, you can't fail") or ticking her off about skin care and hydration. Daisy (Saoirse Ronan) is your catalogue order troubled teen, re-located from California to spend a summer with her cousins in their charming English farmhouse. The cousins are cheeky Isaac (Tom Holland), sweet-natured Piper (Harley Bird) and big, brooding Edmond (George MacKay), a cow-whispering hottie with mud on his boots and sex on the brain. Daisy's aunt (Anna Chancellor) is too preoccupied with work to pay their rough and tumble much attention. So the kids play tag, fly hawks, go swimming. Daisy sits moodily to one side, addled by inner demons.

Still, nothing clears the mind like armageddon. World war three hits the Blyton-esque brood just after sandwiches. A terrorist group detonates a nuclear bomb in London. Auntie - who was busy working on the projected death toll - nips off to Geneva. Daisy

and Piper are separated from the boys, left to fend for themselves as insurrectionists march through the trees and fallout creeps into the water.

Based on the award-winning young adult novel by Meg Rosoff, *How I Live Now* makes a wobbly trade-off between the atmospherics of a survival horror and the idealism of a romantic weepy. It's best when it plays as a teeny-bopper take on *When the Wind Blows*. The moment after the bomb drops is the highlight. The wind whips up before director Kevin Macdonald sucks the light from the frame, drops the soundtrack to a whine. It's confusing and terrifying - as if you're really stuck in the aftermath of all that destructive power.

You want to stay in that moment. But there's a hero to be made and a hunk to go home to. Crisis gives Daisy purpose and the purpose is Edmond. So she wades back through the woods (and plenty of so-so action sequences) towards the farm, where her prince will surely be waiting. Saoirse Ronan would have made a great Katniss Everdeen. She has the grit and determination, but there's nowhere near enough fire underneath *How I Live Now*'s plot to give the character much more motivation than a crush will allow.

The production design looks tired and despondent. The opportunity to show England on the curdle is wasted. There's a lack of imagination at play - it's OK if a broken society looks drab, but it shouldn't look boring. Military trucks thunder past abandoned service stations. You want them to stop and check if a survival story more exciting than Daisy's is going on in there.

Daisy was flipped out of self-indulgence by the ultimate threat. *How I Live Now* forgets that its audience might go for a dose of the same. It softballs the action. Gets lost in the looming. A gooey love story is pitted against the end of the world. No wonder the romance comes up wanting.

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