

Toronto Film Festival: How I Live Now, review

Meg Roskoff's teenage apocalypse thriller is faithfully brought to the screen by Kevin Macdonald, says Tim Robey

★★★★★



Effortless: Saoirse Ronan in How I Live Now

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Dir: Kevin Macdonald stars: Saoirse Ronan, George MacKay, Harley Bird, Tom Holland, Anna Chancellor

Daisy is a tough, sullen New York teenager with a scowling attitude and voices in her head — whether they're being pumped through her headphones or whispered internally. She is the main character in Meg Rosoff's hit young-adult novel from 2004, which Kevin Macdonald brings to life on a modest budget and with Saoirse Ronan in effortless form as its star.

Landing in England for a holiday with her cousins, she's soon smitten with the eldest, Edmond (George MacKay), which is no real surprise: in our first microsecond of a glimpse, he's standing next to a tree in cuddly knitwear, looking introspective, and endowed with that hottest of accessories — a hawk in his left hand. Edmond, it turns out, is good with all animals — it only takes one gentle stroke of a cow's back, and a whisper in its ear, to get the entire herd obligingly moving down a field.

The love story between these two is interrupted by the pesky nuclear bombing of London, which sends ash snowing down on the countryside and a whole group of kids scurrying for cover inside their barn. Barely there at the best of times, the adults technically looking after them are blown out of the picture, leaving these tearaways to fend for themselves.

Though contemporary in its setting, this sporadically ambitious film feels like the result of splicing an Enid Blyton novel with Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* — a self-sufficient teen idyll blasted by apocalypse. Whether or not you are satisfied by the story, the location shooting's splendid, and the production design for the cousins' rambling home casually perfect: I felt I recognised it.

But the child's-eye-view of terrible events unfolding never lets Macdonald build a convincing context for this disaster. This could be an asset, given how forcefully suspicion of adults pervades the film, but it's simplistic to make nuclear war feel like just another botched thing the grown-ups have done. It might just have worked if the main characters weren't themselves such stock creations. Ronan and MacKay are never less than capable, but the script draws Daisy like virtually every spunky, nose-pierced teen with an unloving Dad you've ever seen and Edmond's such a strong, silent dreamboat you suspect he might float up to the clouds at any moment.

The book's fans may cherish this interpretation, but does writing for the teen readership constitute an excuse for such wispy characterisation? It would be patronising to explain the film's loose grip on plausibility as something unlikely to bother the target demographic. The moments of horror and awe here, such as the late discovery of a major character in a body bag, feel like token injections of bleakness into a pleasant enough teen romance; that sting of anarchic dread revealed in something like *Lord of the Flies* is far too harsh for the film to contemplate.

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