

# 'Into the West' tugs at heartstrings

## Ending unnerves in Culkin thriller

By Gerri Pare  
Catholic News Service

NEW YORK — Two young boys, living precariously with their alcoholic father in a Dublin slum, take off for the wild west of Ireland on the back of a magnificent white horse in *Into the West* (Miramax).

Directed by Mike Newell (*Enchanted April*), this grand movie is a tribute to the power of myth and fantasy to fire a child's imagination and make life an adventure when it had been a misery.

Tito (Ruaidhri Conroy) and little Easy (Ciaran Fitzgerald) are brothers whose grief-stricken father (Gabriel Byrne) has abandoned the Travellers, a clan of roving tinkers, after his wife died in childbirth. Moving his sad family into shabby government housing where they are scorned by the neighbors, dad pays more attention to the bottle than the boys.

One evening when the boy's grandfather (David Kelly) returns from his wanderings followed by a glorious white stallion, he tells them the tale of Tir na nOg, a magical white horse from the land beneath the sea. Wide-eyed and believing, the two children bond with the large animal and secret it into their tiny apartment.

The police soon remove the horse but a shady businessman snatches it — until the youngsters liberate it, riding off as cowboys headed West — in this case into the stark West of Ireland.

Meanwhile, the stern police set out to capture the pint-sized horsenappers, and dad returns to the tinkers for help in tracking his sons, who are magically being led by Tir na nOg back to their unresolved gypsy past.

With an assist from Jim ("My Left Foot") Sheridan's lyrical screenplay, the director deftly blends the gritty realism of Dublin's slum life with the mythical freedom that the West represents, whether it be the American West of cowboy movies or the Irish West that the gypsies proudly roam.

Knitting these unlikely opposites together are whimsical comic touches that delight in unexpected ways. It is

hard not to be amused by these resourceful children, who find food and lodging overnight in a local cinema or the next morning grab breakfast on the run by galloping through someone's kitchen.

There is lots of local color, both in terms of the characterizations and scenery. The stallion as well as a truly noble-looking animal whose leaps do border on the fantastic. Most of all, the two boys handily steal the show, masking their vulnerability with feigned bravado that comforts each other and will tug viewers' heartstrings.

The movie's subtext involves the misunderstood Travellers and how they are spurned by Ireland's "settled" people as no-good, thieving gypsies. This rather exotic element is clumsily inserted and Ellen Barkin's role as an independent gypsy with eyes for the boys' dad is largely wasted.

Tighter editing could have trimmed a few slow scenes, but the movie excels in visualizing in human terms the clash between Ireland's harsh urban landscape and its mystical landscape of lore and legend. It's a nice family film.

Because of fleeting violence, a child in jeopardy and a few profanities, the USCC classification is A-II — adults and adolescents. The MPAA rating is PG — parental guidance suggested.

### 'The Good Son'

*Home Alone* child star Macaulay Culkin abandons comedy for a totally different role in the dark drama *The Good Son* (20th Century Fox).

Distraught after his mom's death, Mark (Elijah Wood) is sent from the Southwest to live with relatives on the coast of Maine for a few weeks when his worried father (David Morse) can't postpone a business trip.

His sympathetic aunt (Wendy Crewson) and uncle (Daniel Hugh Kelly) think that playing with their 12-year-old Henry (Culkin) and kid sister Connie (Quinn Culkin) will be good medicine for the troubled boy.

Henry's mom is still grieving over the drowning death of her baby boy and so Mark feels she understands what he is going through.

Henry, however, turns out to have a

very sinister side, playing pranks with Mark that quickly escalate to killing a dog and causing a multicausal pile-up.

But no one believes Mark when he claims his cousin is dangerous. Clever Henry has made it look like Mark is the emotionally disturbed one.

Worse, Mark knows Henry is bent on killing his kid sister — just like he killed his baby brother.

There is little that is original in director Joseph Ruben's thriller, yet it is involving by virtue of the convincing performances and the clever way in which Henry continually manipulates all those around him.

John Lindley's stunning cinematography captures the natural beauty of Mark's Arizona homestead and the craggy seacoast home of his relatives as the drama unfolds among the woods and cliffs that surround them.

What is lacking in this movie, though, is a plausible motive. Henry is just the bad seed, apparently evil from the get-go with no discernible reason which would lend some interesting



Miramax Films  
Ciaran Fitzgerald and Ruaidhri Conroy in Mike Newell's *Into the West*.



Macaulay Culkin is Henry Evans in *The Good Son*.  
Twentieth Century Fox

texture to the film. Mark, too, is simplistically angelic with no shadings of gray between the good and evil sons. Their contrasts are well-played, however, while Culkin's little sister (in real life, too) pronounces her lines poorly.

The storyline is lean and most interesting in the way it is shot from the shifting perspectives of Mark and

Henry as they grapple with taking or saving a life. Mark is thoroughly terrified when the kids are left home alone. Viewers, be prepared that the *Sophie's Choice*-type ending is most unnerving.

Due to brief violence, menace to children and an instance of rough language, the USCC classification is A-III — adults. The MPAA rating is R — restricted.

# Playful book prods readers to look deeply into selves

*Holy Fools and Mad Hatters: A Handbook for Hobbyhorse Holiness*, by Edward Hays; Forest of Peace Books Inc. (Leavenworth, Kan., 1993); 165 pages; \$10.95.

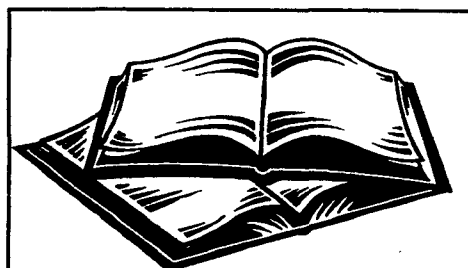
By David and Julianne Palma  
Guest contributors

Have you ever read a spirituality book dedicated to the Marx Brothers? Edward Hays' new book is dedicated, not only to the Marx Brothers and other comedians, but to "all those who have made me laugh, helping to awaken the holy fool within me."

It is also dedicated to the reader who is "daring enough to read it." It does indeed take daring to hear Hays' challenging message about spirituality.

The book opens with Hays' narrator sitting by a river, waiting for a certain spiritual master to pass by so that he might become his disciple. Contrary to expectations, the master arrives strangely dressed and riding a hobbyhorse. He introduces himself first as Window Sill and then as Cellar Door.

He christens the narrator "Nipper" after the RCA dog and leaves him with *A Handbook for Hobbyhorse Holiness*. In the end, he returns to award Nipper a



## BOOK REVIEW

Fool's License "to appear foolish ... by taking God's words seriously and loving all people as yourself."

In between these meetings, the book is loaded with gems for reflection. Hays fills it with parables, spiritual exercises, devastating social commentary, fascinating word studies and a truly bizarre collection of illustrations. Although *Holy Fools and Mad Hatters* could be read in one long sitting, the sheer number of ideas presented begs the reader to savor the book slowly, a few pages at a time.

At the heart of Hays' silly narrative

is the provoking thought that "those who hear God's word and live it out will appear to be as stupid as an ass" (p.162). The gospel message, he reminds us, flies in the face of the world's values by making believers appear foolish in the eyes of others. The book encourages the reader to cultivate this zany behavior by imitating St. Paul's words: Let us be fools for Christ's sake.

According to Hays' reflections, anecdotes and parables, the world's fools are in good company. He cites the religious traditions of Native Americans, Buddhists, Hasidic Jews, and Sufis, as well as numerous Christian figures, to illustrate the practices of the prophetic clown, the apostle of laughter. St. Francis of Assisi is one of his favorites.

Not only does Hays encourage us to throw caution to the wind and be a Gospel people, but he provides suggestions for how to live a disciple's life. Despite their lighthearted titles, exercises titled "Creating the Miraculous," "Blest Are Those Who Are Fully Awake" and "An Exorcism for the Demon of 'What Will the Neighbors Say'" are actually very practical meth-

ods for enriching one's life.

"Those fools, however, who love God with all their hearts, see what is really of value in a world where what is valued is really trash" (p.161). Hays doesn't mince words when criticizing our society. One of the most unified chapters, "Zombies and Zanies," reveals the truth behind horror-movie zombies and recounts an anecdote about a man who came under voodoo control. He then applies both descriptions to holiday shoppers in the local mall. He does admit, however, that "Spiritual zombies can be just as self-absorbed in their religious tasks as shopping mall zombies" (p.73). No one is safe from Hays' probing irreverence.

*Holy Fools and Mad Hatters* is a wonderfully playful book that gently prods you to take a deeper look at yourself and at the world around you. Being mindful, the author maintains, is the only way to encounter God who is "present only in the eternal present moment" (p.74).

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