

**Eagle vs Shark A film review by Rev Dr Steve Taylor
(Originally written for New Zealand, Methodist Touchstone. Reprinted with permission.)**

At first glance, *Eagle vs Shark* suggests a quirky and upbeat evening out. In reality, moments of genuinely comic humour are placed between 134-minutes of grinding teeth.

Lily the fast food worker (Loren Horsley) lives, lonely, with her brother Duncan (Aaron Cortesi). She falls in love with Jarrod the video shop nerd (Jemaine Clement), who is returning home on a revenge mission, seeking atonement from a playground bully. Lily lovingly follows, only to uncover a legacy of deceit and a family unable to live beyond their history.

The film has a number of endearing moments. The original soundtrack, by Phoenix Foundation, is superb. This is the first full length feature film by young New Zealand director Taika Waititi and his clever use of visual metaphors and repeated animation gifts creative fluency to the plot. There are some delightfully intelligent moments of humour, including Taika behind the camera directing himself as the heroic dead brother, Gordon.

Eagle vs Shark is the type of film that could easily develop a theme cult following, complete with animal costumes, home grown haircuts, mirror moles. Party games will include outdoor chase in red and blue sleeping bags and late night quiz competitions on the quirkily excellent film website www.eaglevsshark.net.

Eagle vs Shark is also the type of film that showcases the contemporary Kiwi film industry. While Tourism New Zealand goes to enormous expense to spin New Zealand as a clean green tourist destination, *Eagle vs Shark* has earned critical acclaim, with Official Selections at Sundance and SXSW Film Festival's and Best Screenplay at the US Comedy Arts Festival. It is an irony worth pondering. Will tourists now flock to clean and green New Zealand expecting to avoid black sheep and be served burgers, fries and video gadgetry by a nation of simple Lily's and self-absorbed Jarrod's?

Film has become a star media, with movies scrambling over themselves to cash in on the fame of Hollywood A-listers. In contrast, any success of *Eagle vs Shark* will be based on the non-star anonymity of the main characters. This has a curious impact. In real life I do not know many film stars. But I do know real people just like Lily and Gordon. Thus the non-star casting allows *Eagle vs Shark* to probe real life.

Hence the movie made my teeth grind. What does it mean to be human today? And we all know that when real people desperate for love met self-absorption, relationships of abuse are only a bag of popcorn away. And abuse, as we know, is simply not OK.

So where is redemption in *Eagle vs Shark*? As the closing credits roll, we realise that unconditional love does win. And that the self-absorbed can count horses, can choose to participate in other people's worlds. But such relationships are risky. Or is that the heart of unconditional love?

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