

Reviews/Film

A Family and a Movie, Both in Need of Therapy

By JANET MASLIN

If ever an entire film deserved therapeutic attention, it is "Crooked Hearts," the story of the dysfunctional Warrens and their raft of unsolvable, uninteresting family problems. Everything about the Warrens is indicative of trouble, especially the pained, halting manner in which their story is presented. One family member falls asleep at strange moments. Another carries around a list of personal guidelines (one such rule: wear white at night). A third winds up setting fire to the family homestead, which in another context might be seen as a crime. Here, it's one more cry for help.

Masking all this torment is a veneer of forced gaiety, since Edward Warren (Peter Coyote), the patriarch, traditionally welcomes each new family failure in ceremonial fashion. For instance, there are lights, streamers, a cake and a conga line to herald the news that the middle son (Pete Berg) has dropped out of college. At this particular party, there is even a banner with a fortune-cookie slogan ("You must know home to be a traveler"). To give "Crooked Hearts" the benefit of the doubt, it's at least possible that such moments worked better in Robert Boswell's 1987 novel than they could on screen.

As written and directed by Michael Bortman, who wrote a similarly strained screenplay for "The Good Mother," this film's excessive use of voice-overs and its flat, aimless dialogue turn literariness into a real liability. ("His moods had a way of surprising you," the story's narrator observes in typically unsurprising fashion. "Sometimes good, sometimes bad, and you never knew which was coming.") The narrator's ex-girlfriend, in sending him a note to explain her present situation, points out that "Everything has an explanation."

Mr. Bortman has also directed the actors to wring every conceivable bit of angst and indecision out of the film's dilatory plot. The actors who play Warrens — Vincent D'Onofrio as a rakish and irresponsible older brother, Noah Wyle as a wide-eyed younger one, Cindy Pickett as the plucky mother and Juliette Lewis as the teen-age daughter who keeps falling asleep — do such unanimous fretting and stalling that it's difficult to separate their contributions from Mr. Bortman's overview. Only rarely is there a burst of real emotion, and it is not always helpful. "This family is a drug and we're all junkies," Mr. D'Onofrio's character proclaims — twice.

In its search for visual novelty, the film, which opens today at Loews

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MGM/Jack Roward

Peter Coyote

Directed and written by Michael Bortman, based on the novel by Robert Boswell; director of photography, Tak Fujimoto; edited by Richard Francis-Bruce; music by Mark Isham; production designer, David Brisbin; produced by Rick Stevenson, Dale Pollock and Gil Friesen; released by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures Inc. At Loews New York Twin, Second Avenue and 66th Street, Manhattan. Running time: 112 minutes. This film is rated R.

Charley..... Vincent D'Onofrio
Marriet..... Jennifer Jason Leigh
Tom..... Pete Berg
Edward..... Peter Coyote
Ask..... Noah Wyle
Jill..... Cindy Pickett
Cassie..... Juliette Lewis
Jenetta..... Marg Helgenberger

New York Twin, sets one scene beside the beluga whale tank at an aquarium (with Jennifer Jason Leigh as a Warren brother's date who's just crazy enough to join the family); there is also a bathtub scene in which the actors have their clothes on and an argument in a bakery that is underscored by the throwing of fresh croissants. Mr. Bortman relies on abrupt and unwarranted overhead shots whenever he is otherwise at a loss.

Tak Fujimoto's crisp cinematography and Mark Isham's lulling (though overused) music make the film look and sound better than might have been expected.

"Crooked Hearts" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian). It includes profanity, very brief nudity and sexual references.