

Hunt for the Wilderpeople

Summary

Ricky Baker is a troubled kid in the foster care system, who has spent much of his life bouncing between homes. By almost every conventional metric, he is a bad and a lost kid with no hope for redemption. When he is sent to the rural home of Uncle Hector and Aunt Bella, Bella welcomes him with open arms, and Ricky is disarmed by the feeling of family for the first time in his life.

Initially, Ricky acts as he normally does: he is aloof and oftentimes rude, running away in the middle of the night and rebelling in small ways. When Bella takes the time to connect with him and throws him a birthday party and sing a funny song, Ricky feels like he has finally found a home that will make him feel safe. Unfortunately, Aunt Bella dies suddenly, and Child Services wants to take Ricky back into custody, and probably send him to "juvie."

Trying to avoid this dark fate, Ricky fakes his own suicide (accidentally burning down Hector's barn in the process) and runs away into the bush. Hector, known as Hec, follows him and finds him soon enough, before promptly fracturing his foot. They decide that they have to stay in the bush for at least a few weeks while Hec's foot heals.

When Child Services and the cops find Hec's barn burned down, the head of Child Services, Paula, determines that Hec probably kidnapped Ricky. Then, when Ricky and Hec run into a group of hunters who recognize them from a "Wanted" poster, Ricky says something that makes it sound like Hec has been molesting him. A rumor spreads, and Hec and Ricky become "wanted" criminals.

Ricky and Hec start to run through the wilderness. They bond in their journey, encountering many obstacles and learning to live in the wild. Eventually, they are apprehended by the authorities. Ricky gets placed in a new home and Hec gets sent to prison. When Hec has done his time, Ricky goes and finds him, and they go back to having adventures in the bush.

Ricky Baker

Ricky Baker is a kid with a checkered past, having bounced around in the New Zealand foster-care system for his entire childhood, unable to find a family he could connect with. He fancies himself a "gangster," someone who is tough, cool, and resilient, even though he is actually a chubby and oftentimes dorky young man. When he is placed in Uncle Hec and Aunt Bella's home, Ricky feels belonging and a sense of family for the first time.

One of the humorous elements of Ricky's personality is both how dorky and awkward he is, as well as how annoying he is to the more serious Hec. Where Hec is stoic and competent, Ricky is unwieldy and clumsy, which creates a humorous contrast. For all his ridiculousness and posturing as a "gangster," Ricky is a sensitive and thoughtful child, who often expresses his feelings through haikus. He is the big-hearted protagonist of the film, the chubby misfit with whom the audience feels most aligned, and who we just want to see end up in a happy home.

Uncle Hector ("Hec")

Affectionately called "Uncle Hec" by Ricky Baker, Uncle Hec serves not only as Ricky's mentor, but as the co-protagonist of the story. An older and somewhat gruff man, Hec is initially mean to Ricky, unsure of how to relate to the unwieldy boy. That quickly changes, however, as the two become close friends in the wilderness. In fact, Uncle Hec starts to reveal his sensitive side to Ricky during

the duo's adventures, including the fact that he is illiterate. Ricky helps Hec open up about his lack of education, and by the end of the film, Hec is teaching himself to read and writing haikus just like Ricky. He teaches Ricky how to survive in the wilderness, just as Ricky teaches him to show his feelings and to connect, after years of self-isolation.

Paula

Paula is the dedicated and militant child welfare worker who is first tasked with putting Ricky into a good foster home. She is presented as someone who is committed to maintaining order and discipline above all else, often to villainous and humorous extremes. While she purports to have Ricky's best interests in mind, she is actually the least tender and sensitive adult in his life, and seems to like working for Child Services primarily for the rush of power and control it gives her. She and Ricky share an overblown and comic sense of their own importance.

Bella Faulkner

Bella Faulkner is Hec's wife and Ricky's foster mother. She connects with Ricky in sensitive ways, even though he is exceedingly antisocial when he first arrives at her house. She listens to him and teaches him to hunt and connect with nature, which leads him to open up and feel loved in a way that he never has before. Bella is quirky, playful, tough, and very loving.

Kahu

Kahu is a Maori girl who Ricky encounters when he goes to get help for a dying man he and Hec find in a cabin. She is tough and talkative, and she becomes an adolescent romantic interest for Ricky. She rides horseback and is exceedingly straightforward and blunt in her communication style.

Hunt for the Wilderpeople Themes

Family

Prior to being placed in Hec and Bella's care, Ricky is an orphan. None of his foster parents wanted to adopt him, and he could never truly make any friends. He was essentially alone. As a result, he is antisocial and out-of-touch, considered a delinquent by the authorities. When he first gets paired with Hec and Bella, he is unable to really integrate himself in their family, and tries to run away a few times. However, Bella shows Ricky some understanding and kindness, and he acclimates to family life.

When Bella dies and it looks like Ricky will have to go back to Child Services, he attempts to run away, but Hec follows him. In the bush, Hec and Ricky form an unlikely friendship, and the disgruntled Hec comes to feel fondly towards the feckless orphan. Their relationship is companionable and familial, and we see the ways that Ricky's attitude is improved by his sense that he belongs in a family. Thus, the theme of family, no matter how nontraditional or dysfunctional, is central to the film.

Survival and Self-Reliance

Another important theme in the film is survival. After Hec and Ricky enter the forest, they have no one else to rely on to survive but themselves, and Hec teaches the young boy a lot about survivalism. They must find shelter, food, entertainment, and just about everything else by themselves. A

recurring joke throughout the film is the fact that Ricky is an overweight and exceedingly clumsy young man, who often gets himself into a lot of trouble.

Throughout the film, Hec and Ricky must not only survive in the bush itself, but also survive in their fight against the authorities. They seek not only to make a sustainable home in the forest, but also to evade the people who are looking for them. In the process of trying to avoid getting taken in by the authorities, Ricky and Hec learn that they quite like relying on themselves and their wits to get by.

Loss

A powerful theme in the film is dealing with loss. In the film, Hec and Ricky deal with the very unexpected loss of the lovable matriarch Bella. Both Ricky and Hec are heartbroken, and even though the funeral is presented in a humorous fashion, we understand that they feel completely lost and aggrieved because of her absence. In many ways, the film is about how the two of them pick themselves up and carry on in the wake of such a devastating loss. The two companions work through their grief by bonding with each other in the bush, a place that Bella held very dear.

Toughness

One of the more humorous elements of Ricky's personality is the fact that he thinks of himself as quite tough, even though he is a pudgy and uncoordinated boy who is basically completely harmless and non-intimidating. The people he looks up to are people like Tupac and other "gangsters," as he calls them. Thus, a humorous motif becomes the discrepancy between Ricky's self-image and his actual personality. By contrast, his foster father, Hec, is genuinely very tough and able to survive by his wits in the wilderness. The two make an unlikely pair, but eventually they become an unstoppable unit. The final sequence of the film is particularly funny—while simultaneously being incredibly suspenseful—because it is the fulfillment of Ricky's fantasies of "gangster" glory, complete with guns and a car chase. Ricky gets to feel like a character in *The Fast and the Furious*, which seems to be his greatest desire.

Growing Up

More than anything, the film is a coming-of-age story for Ricky. It tells the story of a young boy, neglected by the system, who learns to grow up and feel more responsible for his own destiny. In the beginning, he is completely powerless and ineffectual, but by the end, he has matured a bit and found a sense of place and belonging in the world. With the help of Bella and then Hec, he develops confidence and maturity.

Nature

The title itself alludes to this important theme in the film. Nature plays a huge role in the narrative. When Ricky arrives at Bella and Hec's, he sees how connected they both are to the land on which they live, and admires their ingenuity in the natural world. Bella teaches him to hunt and tells him that she wants to be buried in the bush. Hec is a survivalist who knows exactly what to do to stay alive for long periods in the bush. Through them, Ricky learns the ways of nature and begins to consider himself a "wilderperson," or someone who belongs in the wilderness. By the end of the film, even after all they have been through, Ricky and Hec find great fulfillment going into the bush and connecting with nature, particularly when they discover the huia, a bird that was previously thought to be extinct.