

CRITIC'S PICK

A Real Pain' Review: Mourning as an Act of Survival

Jesse Eisenberg directs and stars in a melancholic yet funny exploration of Jewish loss and belonging, with an outstanding Kieran Culkin.



Listen to this article · 5:41 min [Learn more](#)



By **Manohla Dargis**

Oct. 31, 2024

A Real Pain · NYT Critic's Pick · Directed by Jesse Eisenberg · Comedy, Drama · R · 1h 30m

American movies about grief tend to end with sniffles and pasted-on smiles that reassure audiences that whatever horrors have come before — however brutal the tragedy, no matter how severe the torment — everything is going to be OK. It's a crock, but that's the Hollywood way, even in indies. No matter how distinct their subjects, their scale and scope, they insist on drying the tears that they've pumped. The pursuit of happiness was an inalienable right for the founding fathers, one that our movies have made a maddeningly enduring article of faith.

Jesse Eisenberg races straight into life's stubborn untidiness in "A Real Pain," a finely tuned, melancholic and at times startlingly funny exploration of loss and belonging that he wrote and directed. He plays David, a fidgety, outwardly ordinary guy who, with his very complicated cousin, Benji (Kieran Culkin), sets off on a so-called heritage tour of Poland. Their grandmother survived the Holocaust because of "a thousand miracles," as David puts it, and they've decided to visit the house where she grew up. Theirs is an unexpectedly emotionally fraught journey, and a piercing, tragicomic lament from the Jewish diaspora.

The journey begins and ends in the United States, but mostly unfolds during a compressed road trip through Poland that they set off on with a British tour guide, James (Will Sharpe), and five other travelers. Together, the group tours Warsaw, crosses pastoral countryside, peers into picturesque corners and makes a relatively brief, heart-heavy visit to the Majdanek concentration camp a few miles from the medieval city of Lublin. Eisenberg doesn't delve into the history of the camp (also known as Lublin), but it became a killing center and was instrumental in a 1941 Nazi plan to murder the Jewish population of German-occupied Poland. An estimated 1.7 million Polish Jews were killed during this operation alone.

That's a profound history for any movie to grapple with intelligently, especially one that's as modest and laugh-laced as "A Real Pain." Eisenberg, though, deftly handles its weight, in part because it is a given for his characters. The Holocaust doesn't need to be summarized for David, Benji and the rest of the tour group; they're in Poland specifically because, in one attenuated way or another, it has been with them all their lives. It's history, but for David and Benji it is, fundamentally, a history that's inseparable from the existential reality of their

grandmother, from the woman and the mother she became, and from the family that she had. It is, as this gentle movie plaintively suggests, an anguished generational bequest.

Eisenberg brings you right into the story with a burst of jump cuts and the sight of an agitated David, who's in a car en route to the airport in New York, leaving one anxious message after another for Benji. Eisenberg excels at playing live wires, characters who can seem so tightly wound you wonder if or when they will break. Like him, they tend to be fast talkers — Eisenberg's clipped enunciation means that their words generally jab rather than flow — and David is no exception. He's still leaving messages by the time he rushes into the terminal, where a widely smiling Benji is waiting. They embrace, Benji all but throwing himself at David, and by the time they've settled in their plane seats, it feels like you already know them.

This sense of awareness, that these are guys you like and maybe even know, is crucial to the movie and how it uses intimacy to fortify its realism. "A Real Pain" is a fluidly blended amalgam of pleasing, approachable subgenres, including an odd-couple buddy flick, a consciousness-raising road movie and a charged family melodrama. These story forms add to the overall sense of familiarity as does the focus on David and Benji, who emerge more through the complexities of their relationship than through individual quirks of personality. We are who we are, Eisenberg says, because of the people in our lives, a truism that becomes more stark and affecting as his characters travel through a country haunted by Jewish ghosts.

A REAL PAIN | Official Teaser | Searchlight Pictures



Once as tight as brothers, David and Benji have recently drifted apart for the usual reasons, because of family, work, life itself. David has a wife and a young child, as well as a demanding tech job in New York; he seems to have it together, more or less, though he needs meds to maintain what looks like normal life. Benji lives upstate and seems unmoored by the death of their grandmother as well as a personal crisis that he hasn't recovered from and perhaps never will. The depth of that crisis emerges as the tour continues — the other travelers are played by the nicely balanced Jennifer Grey, Kurt Egyiawan, Liza Sadoy and Daniel Oreskes — amid revelations and conversations that slip into light and heavy philosophizing.

In time, Benji and David peel away from the group, and the movie's focus settles on these two restless, searching men. Culkin is an actor of emotional sensitivity who doesn't grovel for the audience's love, and he's shockingly great here. He articulates Benji's inner turmoil — he's a pain, he is in pain — through a transparently readable, sometimes viscerally destabilizing performance. Throughout, Benji swings between unnerving calm (as if he'd crawled deep

inside himself) and a frenetic exuberance that draws people to him when it doesn't overwhelm them. When Benji tells David that “nobody wants to be alone,” it isn't a throwaway line. It is a passionate appeal that speaks as much to these characters — to their shared past, to the grandmother who survived and the millions who did not — as it does to a broken world.

A Real Pain

Rated R for adult language and cannabis. Running time: 1 hour 29 minutes. In theaters.

A Real Pain NYT Critic's Pick

Director Jesse Eisenberg

Writer Jesse Eisenberg

Stars Kieran Culkin, Jesse Eisenberg, Olha Bosova, Banner Eisenberg, Jakub Gasowski

Rating R

Running Time 1h 30m

Genres Comedy, Drama

Manohla Dargis is the chief film critic for The Times. [More about Manohla Dargis](#)

A version of this article appears in print on , Section C, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Haunted by Jewish Ghosts