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'Manchester' lets the other Affleck brother shine

"Manchester by the Sea" is a love story, a dark comedy and a requiem. Written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan, the movie follows Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck), who has moved from the fishing town where he was raised to the Boston suburb of Quincy (think Berwyn), where he works as a janitor and lives in the basement room of one of the apartment buildings he services.

Lee is conscious stricken over his conduct in the titular town. He can't beat his demons.

He has to face them anyway, when he returns to Manchester-by-the-Sea, Mass., after his brother Joe (Kyle Chandler) dies, naming Lee as guardian of his nephew Patrick (Lucas Hedges). Lee has been living in self-imposed isolation, the rules of which apparently require that he deny himself every kind of pleasure and opportunity for connection. He punishes himself — no one else will do it to his satisfaction.

Although the residents of Manchester whisper and stir when Lee is around, they have essentially moved on, or at least have learned to avert their eyes.

So we agree with Lee when he protests that he can't accept the responsibility. He's obviously not up to the task, and it's not fair to toss the teenager into Lee's abyss.

But with his father dead and his mother (Gretchen Mol) a wreck, Patrick has nobody else.

Besides, the 16-year-old boy can't help but move forward. He is too busy trying on manhood and is sustained by his earnest



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girlfriends (plural), his irreverent hockey teammates and his basement rock band.

Even in grief Patrick doesn't put that life on hold. Vulnerable as he may be, he's the kind of teenager whose respect must be earned, and Lee has to thaw enough to get on board, or else he won't have influence over Patrick at all.

The movie is buoyed by the sarcastic banter between man and boy. Lonergan's fluent and frequent use of flashbacks showing the family members' happier

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connections keeps the film from drowning in melancholy. We see that Lee's life was once full of trash talk with friends, teasing banter with his brother and nephew (wear your life jacket so you'll go down easy when the sharks eat you) and winking

battle-ax exchanges with his ex-wife (Michelle Williams).

Casey Affleck's performance unequivocally merits a second Oscar nomination for him. Lee is a mostly silent character who lives in his head and expresses himself through his anguished face, his spare physicality, his ability to handle himself in a fight and his compulsion to start them. It is a tribute to Affleck's ability as an actor that he clearly communicates all we need to know about this quiet antihero in a virtually silent performance.

Affleck's large, expressive eyes tell much of the story and seem to change color with shifts in the movie's mood — from clear gray to the same brackish green of the waves, to an Earth-as-seen-from-space blue. (Now we understand what Norma Desmond meant in "Sunset Boulevard" when she said of silent pictures, "We didn't need dialogue. We had faces!")

Because of his familial ties, we overlook and underestimate Casey Affleck. He still resides in our minds as the wisecracking little brother riding behind Ben Affleck and Matt Damon, looking for trouble in "Good Will Hunting," notwithstanding more than 30 other film credits. Yet he belongs in the fraternity of smoldering, undetonated dynamite along with Christian Bale and Colin Farrell, even Brando.

The end-of-year timing of the movie's release telegraphs an industry expectation of award eligibility for "Manchester By the Sea."

When that nod comes, Casey will be driving the train.