

Mahnoor Shafqat History of Ideas

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Nell 1994



"Nell," the story of a present-day wild child who grows up in a forest wilderness in North Carolina, gives us a character who has learned to speak, but not in a language anyone has ever heard before. When she is first discovered, she has been living alone in an isolated cabin, where first her twin and then her mother had died. It is speculated that the twins developed a private language, based on English, before one died.

Despite its predictable philosophy, however, Nell is an effective film, and a moving one. That is largely because of the strange beauty of Jodie Foster's performance as Nell, and the warmth of the performance by Liam Neeson, as a doctor who finds himself somehow responsible for her. Along with Natasha Richardson, who has a somewhat thankless role as Neeson's partner in the case, they inhabit the characters so fully that it's only later, after withdrawing from the emotional experience, that we recognize the movie's fairly shaky premises. The movie takes place in a wilderness where Nell was living with her mother.

At first her language sounds like nonsense, but eventually a logic emerges, and finally Neeson is able to break down her reserve and win her confidence. The villain is a psychologist played by Richard Libertini, who, like all such movie shrinks, knows nothing of human nature and would solve all problems by institutionalizing the subject. But to be locked in an asylum would destroy Nell, and besides, she's not mentally ill, she simply marches to a different drummer. Neeson tries gingerly to introduce her to towns, but visits to a supermarket and a pool hall go badly, and he realizes she must develop on her own terms.

There were scenes in Nell I had trouble believing, but other scenes generated a true beauty and mystery. It was a very intriguing movie to watch, and very easy to enjoy. Jodie Foster was an amazing actress to portray the weird crazy Nell. Fascinating story line for its time. Can't imagine how difficult it was for Foster to master her "lines" for this movie.

