

Lion



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Directed by Garth Davis. Produced by Angie Fielder, Emile Sherman and Iain Canning. Screenplay by Luke Davies. Based on *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley and Larry Buttrose. Cinematography by Greig Fraser. Original Music by Hauschka and Dustin O'Halloran. Edited by Alexandra de Franceschi. Costumes by Coppi Ireland.

Note: So many executive producers and associate producers were involved that they cannot all be named. With all the different locales many other filmmakers cannot be named for reasons of space.

Cinematic length: 118 minutes. Distributed by The Weinstein Company and Transmission Films. Producing Companies: See-Saw Films, Screen Australia, Aquarius Films, Sunstar Entertainment, Narrative Capital, and The Weinstein Company. Cinematic release: September 2016 at The Toronto Film Festival. Check for ratings. Rating 90%.

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Written Without Prejudice

Cast

Dev Patel as Saroo Brierley

Sunny Pawar as Young Saroo

Nicole Kidman as Sue Brierley, Saroo's adopting mother

David Wenham as John Brierley, Saroo's adopting father

Rooney Mara as Lucy

Abhishek Bharate as Guddu

Divian Ladwa as Mantosh Brierley

Priyanka Bose as Kamla Saroo's mother

Deepti Naval as Mrs Sood

Tannishtha Chatterjee as Noor

Nawazuddin Siddiqui as Rama

Keshav Jadhav as Young Mantosh

Riddhi Sen as the young man in the Café

Review

When watching it this film has so much going for it, the problems come later, with reflection. The story goes outside the usual Hollywood formula and avoids clichés. The lives examined in India have rarely been observed by western cinema and deserve attention; the closest to *Lion*, which is about an orphan stranded in India having much to do with westerners, was *Kim*, which was filmed in 1950. That film had a very different plot. *Lion* also has many points in common with *Heaven and Earth* (1994). Here the Vietnamese heroine starts out as a dispossessed peasant girl, becomes a Vietcong and then a prostitute for Americans, suffers much and through family ties with Westerners, ends up residing in her Beverley Hills mansion.

With *Lion* all aspects of filmmaking are of a high quality. Director Garth Davis knows to show us the story, not tell us and wisely does not make all aspects of the story clear immediately. AS In reality, like the central character, the orphan boy Saroo (Sunny Pawar) we initially do not know why Saroo's brother vanishes, why the big empty train that holds Saroo is travelling halfway across India or why he cannot find his home, but the explanations come eventually. Some information does not need to be known. Why Saroo's adopted brother Mantosh (Divian Ladwa) is maladjusted or why Saroo is adopted. Davis wisely does not over use his big name stars to dominate the film and he does not use them just for star power in the film either. All the characters are rounded, creditable and contribute to the story's development. They are not there for plot contrivances or obvious didactic purposes. All other filmmaking aspects work together for success – which has come bigtime.

After an initial showing at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2016 other film festivals quickly got it for showings. The film's commercial release quickly gained it well over three times its twelve million dollar cost, as well as six academy award nominations, various other awards and critical accolades. No sign that its popularity has peaked emerges yet, even while not winning any of those academy award nominations. On one level the film works as a sincere tribute to human generosity, perseverance and resilience. Popular with the public and an almost universally praised film with the critics, *Lion* gained just a few dissenting voices who mention slow pacing and manipulating audiences. The pacing works

fine, not every film should go with Hollywood pacing. Films are by their very nature manipulating: they choose what images to use to tell their story.

So what is wrong with such a fine film? A good deal more that is extremely subtle, that leads the audience into a worldview, goes on in this film. Ultimately, after reflecting, this reviewer reluctantly agrees with the critics and adds more. Like most feel good movies, the makers of *Lion* ask us to feel, rather than to think. Why think? We do not need to think in an assessing way, we should just accept because *Lion* is a true story, about the triumph of goodness, right? The way true images and stories can be true in themselves, but selectively used, should be borne in mind. This film is almost certain to be used by people unconnected with its making for their own purposes. Those purposes are about money, seizing opportunities and power, not the triumph of the human spirit.

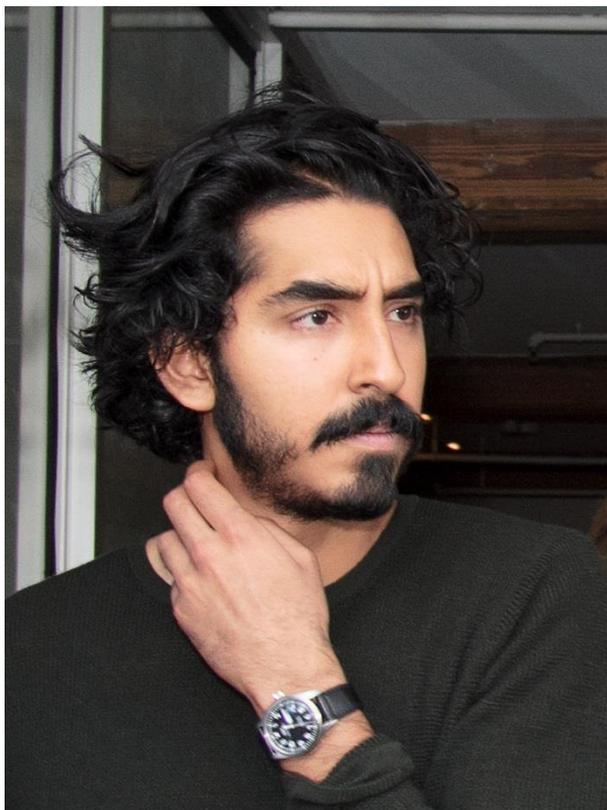
Suspicion began with puzzlement about why we had the first shots. These were of unidentified, uninhabited, astoundingly beautiful landscapes, lush forests, beaches and rocky coasts. The next landscape looks very dry, far from beautiful and has a child running through it.

That last shot shows us rural India in 1986 and the runner is Saroo, an Indian village boy who aged about six or eight, already earns his living by working. He hauls rocks with his mother and with his older brother Guddu (Abhishek Bharate) risks this life to pilfer coal from trains, so that they can bring what they consider luxuries to their mother, (Priyanka Bose). Luxuries are a mango or enough milk to fill two cups. With their sister the two boys and their mother subsist in a dilapidated hut smaller than most Australian bedrooms. Apart from the stony walls, the roof, a bedframe with ropes and straw on the floor, nothing else exists. That includes sheets, windows, and chairs, running water, toilets, refrigerators or lights. Yet they do not live in misery, for they have each other, appreciate their shared little luxuries and they all have an optimistic spirit. This is the way that so much of the world's population live and so few films focus on. It is a credit to the filmmakers that they have depicted it with sympathy and honesty.

When Guddu finds night work hauling bales near a train station, Saroo successfully pleads with him to work there as well, so he waits on a station bench and waits and waits. Finally he seeks refuge in an empty train which suddenly takes off and he finds all windows barred, all doors locked and it does not stop until reaching the main station at Kolkata (formerly Calcutta). The plot

development now resembles *Oliver Twist*, *Jane Eyre*, *Ben Hur*, *The Ten Commandments* and *Heaven and Earth*.

Once again the innocent young hero finds themselves alone, separated from home and family, in danger and cast into the depths of a human hell without any clear way out. Saroo becomes a street kid in the horror that is Kolkata for those without money. Dirty, dingy, polluted, overcrowded, sprawling, filled with rubbish, he sleeps on cardboard in the streets. Twice he seems saved. He meets Noor, who seems a kindly woman, speaking affectionately and soothingly, she promises him to help him find his mother. Noor takes him to her shabby tenement home and gives him a meal and a bottle of fizzy drink, emphasizing her generosity by asking him how he likes the flavour. It was then that I began to be suspicious, this looked like another case of gaining control over somebody by giving them food. Sure enough “a nice man” Rama, turns up and gives Saroo a physical inspection, with his body coming in too close to the boy and he tells Noor that “he is perfect.” For what? Sexual exploitation? Slave labour? Body parts sales? Whatever, Saroo is a wake up, doesn’t drink Noor’s proffered second bottle of fizzy drink and flees.



Dev Patel as Saroo as an adult



David Wenham as John Brierley, Saroo's adopting father

Nicole Kidman as Sue Brierley, Saroo's adopting mother



The next saviour is more genuine, taking him to the police, who do try to find his home village, but with the vastness of India and apparently with the little information he can give, they cannot return him because the village name he gives does not show up anywhere. They place him in an orphanage which as another boy tells him “is a very bad place.” The main difference from Kolkata’s streets being that the orphanage has walls, beds and a roof. As in the previously mentioned texts, deliverance into the world of wealth suddenly appears with a benefactor. Here she is Mrs Sood (Deepthi Naval). She arranges for him to be adopted by a couple in Hobart, Tasmania. Suddenly Saroo finds himself in an immaculate, spacious, quiet world of abundance and beauty. Just as with the earlier scenes where we the viewers could feel his panic on the train, his foreboding with Rama and his despair in the slums, we can share his stunned bewilderment at his new surroundings.

However it was at this point that my suspicions were aroused again, only to be briefly reassured. This is not a fairy tale or a contrived happy solution like in *Oliver Twist* and the other mentioned examples, right? This is because *Lion* is a true story as the filmmakers have made clear twice already, once with the words “Based on A True Story” by themselves on a black screen and then with the crediting of the story to Saroo’s book in the title credits. This doubt has been smoothly answered before it arises. When the film’s end credits come this is emphasised again with pictures of the real life participants.

Suspicions soon arouse again with the depictions of Australian life. At first it was a relief to escape from the usual depictions of Australians as loud, racist, profane, beer-swilling football obsessives. Saroo’s adoptive parents Sue Brierley (Nicole Kidman) and John Brierley (David Wenham) are as decent, caring and generous as anybody could possibly be. Their house by the seaside in Hobart has a nearby beach surrounded by other luxurious houses where they play cricket without disturbing anybody because nobody appears on the beach – *in a capital city in Australia??!* Maybe, just maybe, this could be true. It turns out that in reality this beach is near shark inhabited areas and that scene shows life in 1987, before the mass migrations hit and Hobart did not get much of this. The beach remains in that same state in 2007 when Saroo emerges from windsurfing. Possible, but try finding another deserted beach in any other Australian capital city in 2017. *Lion* is a true story, right? But what is it *typical* of? Anything? Find that empty beach!

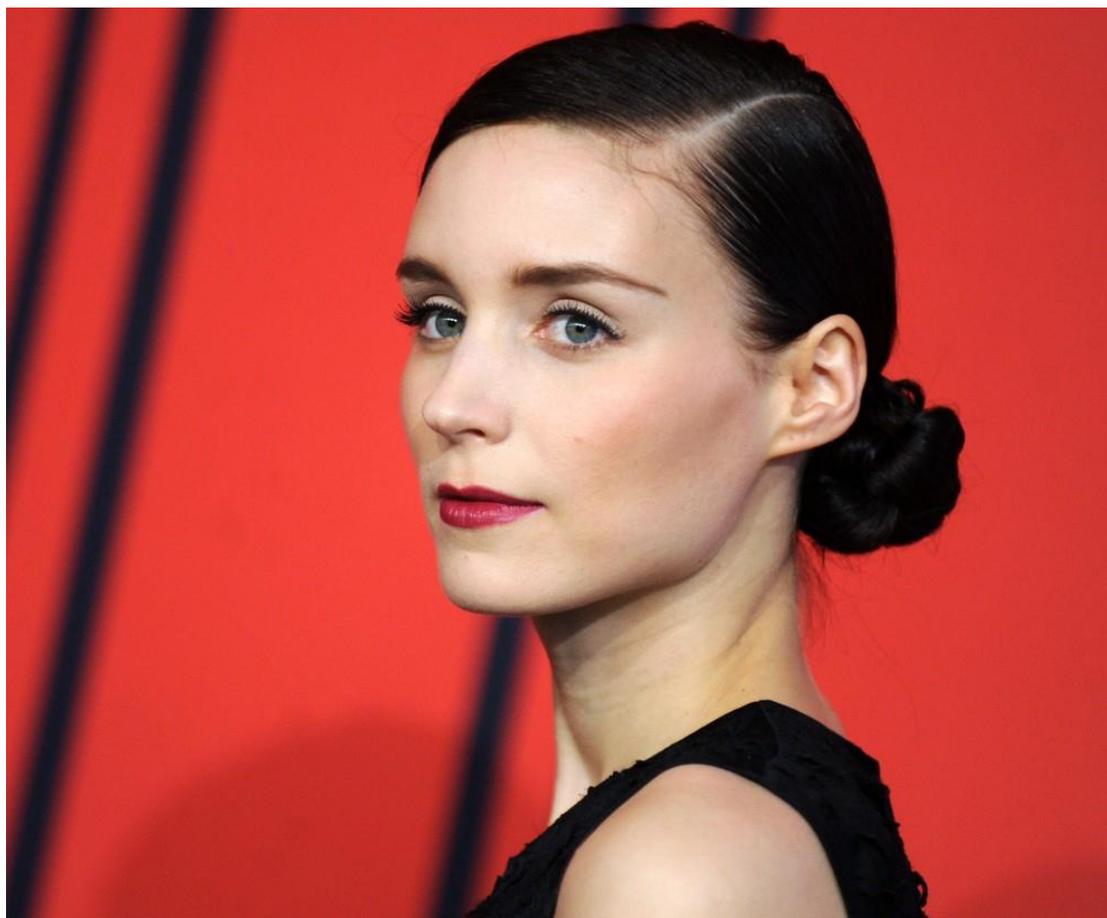
The film gives an impression that Australians live in luxurious houses by uncrowded beaches in capital cities. In reality even those that live on the coast

usually live in extremely expensive high rise apartments. Very few native born Australians can live that way now and those that can would be either very rich or inherited their houses before prices went insane. I have even heard real estate agents complain. One could not afford to buy in his remote coastal town. Millionaires, in particular those from China, have pushed Sydney prices up and also made Singapore the world's most costly city. *

Sydney is now the second most expensive city on the planet to live in and Melbourne comes in fourth. Even Australian professionals such as police and teachers can no longer afford to live there. Local teachers are considering strike action against the high prices and the papers report almost daily about the housing crisis. According to today's *Sydney Morning Herald* *th May 2017 ninety per cent of Australians believe that the next generation will not be able to afford their own home and a quarter of those on mortgages state that a 2% interest rate rise will make them homeless. Even advocates for mass migration to Australia are talking of Australia's housing crisis and the fading dream of Australians owning their own home. *Lion* will help Hobart be part of the housing bubble, for prices in Tasmania still have some relation to sanity. Even apartments in massive high rise beachside tenements on the Australian mainland go for several hundred thousand, even in remote areas. The median price for an Australian house is now \$780,000 and rising. That price includes rusty tin sheds on radiated desert lands lowering the averages. A house in Sydney now averages 1.1 million dollars and once again that includes sub-standard housing and most Sydney houses are a long way from the beach. Nothing of this appears in this film, but *Lion* is a true story, right? But true about what? Is it a typical or exceptional story of Australians or of migrants?

Although *Lion* shows the desperate poor sleeping on cardboard in dingy walkways at Kolkata Railway Station being moved on by police, the scene could have as easily been filmed at Sydney Railway Station or Melbourne's central. Hundreds of homeless were forcibly removed from the latter site recently. The only difference would have been the skin colour of the poor and the uniforms of the police. No images suggesting that Australia is anything less than a paradise emerge in *Lion*, just as almost no images of India being anything else but a poverty stricken land emerges. Mrs Sood's expensive dress and the man in the tailored suit in a coffee bar are the only hints of another, richer India. The reality is that around two hundred million to a quarter of a billion Indians are middle class; rivalling and perhaps exceeding the Americans for the world's largest number of well off people in any nation. Even Kolkata has middle class suburbs, but you would not know these facts by watching this film. After decades where films focused on India's rulers or the rich and the poor where at best minor characters, the emphasis has

reversed. Another reality we see nothing of is that Australians are being dispossessed of their land, their jobs, government benefits and their living standards. While figures are incomplete and not easy to verify 30% of Queenslanders are below the poverty line and one estimate is that general living standards have dropped 8% in the fourteen months to late 2016. According to The Smith Family charity 662, 000 Australian schoolchildren need such basics as shoes, hats lunches and school clothes. That is out of a population of under 25 million. Recently a social worker talked of rural Australian school children thinking they had been given a luxury – their very own toothbrush!



Rooney Mara

Such facts raises the question of why carefully contrived and selected images give us an India depicted as totally poor and Australia as totally rich. The reality of just Tasmania is also very different to what is depicted. No massive cancer rates, faltering economy, high unemployment rate, environmentalists verses developers battles, devastated forests, falling living standards, or the massive crystal meth epidemic rates in Tasmania interfere with the image of paradise. It



Beautiful Tasmania. True enough for now



turns out that those first landscape and coastal shots are of Tasmania, a true paradise, right? Wrong. The beautiful forest depicted has not been hacked to pieces by Tasmania's notorious loggers, yet.¹ The beautiful coasts have not been "developed" yet. Who will build the upcoming high rise blocks and fast food shops and hotels? Suddenly an alternative interpretation of those beautiful Tasmanian images hit. Many of us see them as images of breathtaking beauty: investors both foreign and domestic see them as glorious opportunities to make money – and they will.

Yes, Tasmania encourages foreign investment and whatever the makers intended, *Lion* could easily be used to encourage such a migration. Since the first version of this review we had an extremely interesting news report on SBS nightly news on April 11th 2017. This story concerned the Australian Prime Minister's meeting with the Indian Prime Minister, who was considering buying Australia's coal and raw materials to meet India's energy needs, but he wanted more Indians to migrate to Australia to be part of its workforce. Apparently they will send a good deal of money home. A second recent SBS show informed us of India's orphaned geniuses, three million of them with Iqs over 130, these geniuses (who also look cute and poignant) are homeless and are wanting a home. Should Australians adopt a genius? Given the way Indians look after aged parents and the way Australian pensions and benefits are being cut and reduced every year while costs rise, adopt a genius might be a wise survival tactic for old age. It will certainly help India's economy if orphanages can be closed. After all look at the orphanage in *Lion*.

In history classes we are told to ask the following questions:

Who made the document/image/text?

When was it made?

Why was it made?

Who is the intended audience?

What is it?

What image/idea/concept is being presented?

How are the audience meant to perceive it?

¹ As of May 2017.

How do the audience perceive it?

How can it be interpreted?

What way does the bias lean?

Forget about sitting back and enjoying the film or developing empathy with the characters and apply these questions to *Lion*. Assess it in terms of the above questions. Suddenly the film appears very differently.

As the film ends with events in 2012, some of the conditions in Australia were not as badly developed as they have become. However the film gives the impression that their depiction of life up to then still applies now. Who is the target audience? Who is it made for? The film's appeal diversifies. People who enjoy different or well made films or Nicole Kidman's fans are a large proportion, surely obvious. Those who are curious about India or Tasmania, (including investors) are obvious. Others include people touched by those frequent images of cute refugee children who always appear on television and who wish to know more about them. Perhaps not intended as a target audience, but one that will certainly flock to it are those millions of young men in the developing world who tell us that they want a better life. Ignore the impression given by the way photojournalists usually focus in on suffering children and distressed young women in media coverage of refugees. Assess on facts. According to a report in *The London Times* in September 2015, about 70% of refugees at that time were in this young male category. Given that sixty-five million refugees are in the world and an unknown number which must be at least in the hundreds of millions more wish to migrate, that makes for an extremely large potential audience. It also raises implicitly the question of how can places like Tasmania satisfy the desires of hundreds of millions for a "better life"- meaning a western upper middle class life.

It should not be surprising that those young men and those thinking of migrating are another likely audience group. Look at the depiction of Saroo's adult life; he seems about their age. No wars, terrorism or deprivation appears in Tasmania or during his stay in Melbourne. He has caring parents, lives in a nation with a strong welfare and medical system, can go windsurfing on an uncrowded beach, has abundant food, electricity, consumer goods and his own immaculate room in a mansion with a seaside view. He has a sports car where just like in the car selling ads, he drives through heartbreakingly beautiful scenery without another car in sight. How do the advertising companies manage that? Photoshop? Barriers on the roads before filming? His university course will give him a future career in

the lucrative field of hotel management. He also has a sympathetic beautiful lover. He has everything billions yearn for.

Now compare this to the young adult male refugees in reality: most of them have none of this. *Lion* will appeal to them because it feeds the fantasies of what they desperately want. Some come from countries with enforced death penalties for adultery; for others social penalties for sexual activity are quite severe and arranged marriages to brides they have never met are common. India's caste system means a straight-jacketed life with little for many. Others have endured years of imprisonment, or war's bombing and sniping. For such people Saroo's life goes beyond their most optimistic dreams – until they see the film and are told that this is a true story. This film's release timing comes at just as other events concerning Tasmania and Australia develop. Already news reports say that Asian migration to Tasmania and Asian investment there are picking up. The Chinese premier visited Tasmania not long before *Lion* was released and was encouraged to invest. The essential problem is fast buck Australians without a sense of true values. Goodbye wilderness! Goodbye to Australia's welfare system and the last affordable housing for Australians. A reluctant, sad and fearful hello to increasing racial hatred from sinister nativists based in envy and a sense of depravation. Already such dangerous and racist right-wing hate groups are growing.

One wonders if some of these refugees and migrants inspired by migrant's letters sent home and optimistic stories to become westbound refugees will end up bodies washed up on the tideline. In 2015 at least five thousand died that way. More likely fates include careers as desperate petty criminals competing in turf wars with western hoodlums for the back streets. Others will become refugees herded into crowded tents under guard. Some will end up in the capital cities, fourteen or more to a tenement room, pathetically grateful for back-breaking five dollar an hour jobs that are pushing Australian trade unionists into unemployment and making fortunes for employers, the real beneficiaries of mass migration. One recent case that got publicity involved a man working ten hours straight for five dollars an hour, then being sacked for going to the toilet without permission. That type of thing, rather than windsurfing on your own personal beach or riding round beautiful landscapes in a sports car is more likely. Many Asian students have been revealed to be working extremely long hours for half the award wage and are sacked on the slightest pretext. That type of thing is the real reason behind the west allowing migration from the developing world, that, their investment money going into Australian banks and pushing up the price of real estate; the more people are

crammed onto land the more valuable it becomes. Like the people smugglers, some Westerners are making fortunes out of migration and refugees, which is why the crisis will continue, despite the loss of living standards for the West's working class, despite the risk of rabid right wing governments in reaction.

Better help for the troubled developing world than taking many millions, which is still a very small proportion of that area's population as refugees, would be to build desalinization plants and to start renewable energy and soil development centres. The best idea of all would cut off the sale of weapons and ammunition to war torn nations. However the latter idea would mean a loss of profit somewhere, probably in the Western world.

A very small proportion of the refugees will end up living dream lives something like Saroo Brierley lives, but rather than refugees and would-be migrants marvelling at the way his story is true, they should ask how typical of the refugee/migrant story this film really is.

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