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Bird at Cannes Film Festival is a take on today's youth in Britain

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The hallmark of a good director, or a great director, is the ability to tell vastly different kinds of stories, and Andrea Arnold, whose career graph I have been following, has this in her. In her 2006 film *Red Road*, a CCTV camera plays a character through which a creepy tale is woven. One night, Jackie, watching the camera, is shocked to see a face she had hoped she never would. While *American Honey* (2016) is a narrative that unfolds on long, lonely roads with a teenager in focus, *Fish Tank*, which opened in 2009, enumerates the angst of a 15-year-old girl when her mother brings home a lover. Arnold's latest, *Bird*, which competed at the recent Cannes Film Festival, swirls around a single father and his two children, who give him a real hard time.

As one reviewer aptly put it, *Bird* is a take on today's youth in Britain, who remain sunk in distress, desperation and disappointment. Although Arnold has been a Cannes frequenter and, in fact, a darling of the festival, she is not quite at ease grappling with this latest work. Despite a few rising movie stars,

her latest outing is not in the same league as her earlier tryst with cinema.

Bug (played compellingly by Barry Keoghan) is a young dad of two kids but has no sense of responsibility, spending time tattooing his body with creatures like snakes and spiders.

One of the two children is Bailey (Nykiya Adams), just 12 but far wiser for her age. Yet she is always morose and stubborn—a classic example of a broken home.

Her mother lives in another part of the city with her boyfriend. Bailey's half-brother, Hunter, is a local bully who, along with his gang of mischief-makers, terrorises the townsfolk.

One of them says, while confronting a man, "chop off his head". Adding to this mess and misery is Bug's decision to get married to his girlfriend of three months, and Bailey hates this idea.

It is then that Bailey's life begins to metamorphose into something magical. Walking across the fields one day, she meets a strange man. His name is Bird, essayed by Franz Rogowski, the German actor whose performance in Ira Sachs' *Passages* as a sociopath gave the movie an unforgettable zing. The



film begins to take on a fairytale feel here, but despite this, Arnold's latest drama lacks the pep of her earlier works. Shot in Kent, in the United Kingdom, where Arnold grew up, *Bird's* sudden transformation from a landscape of beer cans, cigarette butts and domestic abuse into one of an ethereal atmosphere is a bit too jerky and gave me the feeling of it being neither here nor there.

This kind of magical realism (which our own director Buddhadeb

Dasgupta often spoke about and even made movies out of) did not quite seem to gel with Arnold's drama.

However, *Bird*, despite its gloom and darkness (with an elaborate canvas showing the travails of Britain's working class, although Mike Leigh created something far more convincing), snaps out of them into something positively joyful.

The writer is a senior film critic who has been covering the Cannes Film Festival for three decades.



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