

One of the boys

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [October 5, 2004](#) issue

Jacob Aaron Estes's debut feature is being marketed as a Columbine-era fable about a bully who gets his comeuppance. But the film works on levels far more precipitous and challenging.

Mean Creek begins abruptly with 13 year-old Sam (Rory Culkin) taking a schoolyard beating from George (Josh Peck). No one comes to Sam's aid, so he is left to limp home and lick his wounds. But his older brother, Rocky (Trevor Morgan), won't let it go at that. Remembering his own experience with playground injustice, Rocky enlists a couple of his pals—soft-spoken Clyde (Ryan Kelley) and short-fused Marty (Scott Mechlowicz)—to help teach George a lesson. Sam, still feeling the sting of humiliation, agrees to join in an elaborate prank, to be staged on a boat ride, though part of him knows that this is not a good thing to do.

That hesitation, that ethical struggle, is at the heart of the film. The drama is driven by the teenagers' struggle to decide between the "best" thing and the "right" thing to do.

As writer and director, Estes, an American Film Institute graduate, exhibits a remarkable understanding of the teenage mind. He ups the emotional ante by showing that George is a screwed-up kid with a learning disability, who longs to be accepted and lashes out when he's not. Once Sam, Rocky and Clyde see this, along with Sam's gentle girlfriend, Millie (Carly Schroeder), who knows nothing about the plan, they decide to call off the prank.

But there is a joker in the deck: it's poor George himself, who can't help acting like a foul-mouthed bully when he senses that people are starting to dislike him. (He also knows just enough about everyone's personal life to make his nasty comments hurt.) As a result, enough animosity lingers among the boys to keep the desire for vengeance alive, especially in Marty, who never wanted to abandon the plan in the first place.

As the story of Sam and George plays out, the film offers a study in the way boys and young men often relate to each other, and how teasing, cruelty and violence—masked as camaraderie—drive the actions of the group.

The clearest example is Marty. He is the strongest (and dumbest) of the gang, and the others are sometimes forced to go along with him out of fear. But Marty himself, we discover, is just trying to survive the chain of violence in his own family, including an older brother who kicks him around for sport, and an abusive father who committed suicide years earlier.

The motivations in *Mean Creek* go far beyond standard-issue peer pressures. The film presses the idea that the phrase “boys will be boys” can, and often does, lead to serious consequences. Estes wisely juxtaposes the thoughtful Millie with Sam, who is torn between his desire to look “cool” for the older guys and his knowledge that Millie wouldn’t want any part of a boy who could be cruel and sadistic. (The question “Doesn’t that make us just as bad as George?” is heard throughout the film.)

Following the tenets of classical tragedy, the prank goes terribly wrong. Estes presents a moving sequence of the kids—suddenly seeming younger and more vulnerable—heading to their homes after sunset. Everything looks the same, their faces seem to be saying, except that everything is different.

The cast of mostly unknown actors is convincing throughout. Especially strong are Culkin as the morally confused Sam; Morgan as the older brother who wants Sam to trust him, even though he hasn’t earned that trust; and Schroeder as Millie, who is the voice of reason in a chaotic world.

But it’s Peck’s multilayered portrayal of George that drives the tragedy home. His anguish, conveyed through the video camera that he carries around with him, is both infuriating and tragic. It is George’s misplaced fury that turns out to be the horror in this journey up river.