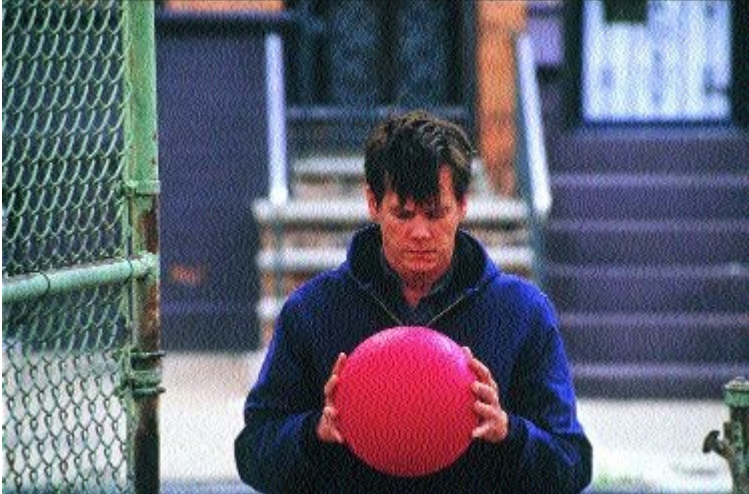


Dark secret

By [Steve A. Vineberg](#) in the [February 8, 2005](#) issue



In *The Woodsman*, Kevin Bacon plays Walter Rossworth, a pedophile who, having served a 12-year prison sentence, tries to settle down to a normal life. His sister has disowned him, but his brother-in-law (Benjamin Bratt) remains friendly. He has a tough but tender co-worker, Vicki (played by Bacon's real-life wife, Kyra Sedgwick), who is drawn to him and doesn't recoil when he reveals his past.

The boss's secretary looks him up on a sex-offender Web site and alerts the other employees. Lucas (Mos Def), a cop who keeps coming around to taunt Walter, is sure that he'll eventually return to his old ways. In fact, Walter struggles continually against temptation.

The director, first-timer Nicole Kassell—who adapted the script, with Steven Fechter, from Fechter's play—maintains a measured pace and style that work effectively with the hushed, unsettled mood, and she does a fine job with the actors; even Def registers well in a poorly written version of the deeply affected cop role Chris Meloni has perfected on TV's *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*.

But the film is so desperate to keep us on Walter's side that the point of view becomes increasingly bizarre. The filmmakers make sure to inform us that the behavior with prepubescent girls that got Walter incarcerated always stopped short of doing them physical harm. His romance with Vicki establishes not only that he's

able to have an adult sexual relationship but also that he's worthy of being rescued; her mission becomes to convince him he's a good man inside.

Walter's concern about the carnal feelings he suspects his brother-in-law harbors for his own daughter compels Walter to confront him, nearly destroying their friendship.

Meanwhile, across the street from his apartment is a schoolyard, which rivets his attention. There he sees a man he nicknames Candy (Kevin Rice) tempt a boy into his car with sweets. When they return that evening, Walter swings into action, breaking Candy's jaw. Since the beating winds up getting this man off the streets permanently, the movie seems to come out in favor of this eruption of violence. In the movie's terms, Walter not only symbolically slugs his own pedophilic urges senseless; he also takes on the role of Little Red Riding Hood's woodsman—Lucas's metaphor—who appears at the 11th hour to save menaced children. (To hammer home this idea, the filmmakers give Walter a job at a lumber yard.)

The dramaturgy required to set up Walter's redemption is terribly clumsy. Presumably he has to register as a sex offender—so what is he doing living across the street from an elementary school? In these watchful days, how is it that no parent or teacher has spotted a man who hangs around the schoolyard offering candy to little boys?

The movie is too rigged to be either credible or morally sound. In the long-forgotten 1977 movie *Short Eyes*, set in the New York penitentiary known as the Tombs, Bruce Davison, phenomenal in the role of incarcerated molester, delivers a shocking monologue about his sexual responses to children. Kassell couldn't get away with anything similar in 2004; merely humanizing a pedophile makes her liable to the fury of viewers. Sketching in feelings for Walter beyond self-loathing and a longing for normalcy would almost certainly invoke cries of outrage.

What she's come up with as a result of her earnestness and caution is essentially false. Or it would be without Bacon, who, in the scenes with the little girl, almost subverts Kassell's attempts to sanitize his character. Bacon even manages to bring something to the misbegotten scenes between Walter and his therapist (Michael Shannon), a sense that he's tamping down more in himself than he can bear.

The Woodsman is a project Bacon initiated himself, and despite its limitations, you can see why Walter Rossworth was a role he wanted to try. He makes enough of the character to justify the movie's existence.