

KES

*“I’ve met some lads in my time,
but I’ve never met one like you,
Casper!”*

**Youth employment officer
(Bernard Atha)**

Other Woodfall productions may be more famous, more award-laden, more influential and more ground-breaking, but none can touch Ken Loach’s *Kes* in terms of enduring popularity. For generations of British cinemagoers and television-viewers, the mere mention of its title is enough to prick the eye with tears, so heartbreaking is this simple fable of a downtrodden young boy from a mining community in Yorkshire, and the wild kestrel he trains.

Ranked at number seven in the BFI’s 1999 poll of Greatest UK Films, the millions it has touched down the decades include Krzysztof Kieślowski. The legendary Polish auteur once remarked “I saw *Kes* at film school and I knew then that I’d willingly make coffee for Ken Loach,” and he duly included it in his Sight and Sound all-time top ten.

Faithfully adapting his own 1968 novel *A Kestrel for a Knave*, which for decades has been taught in British schools, Barry Hines crafts a character-study at once sensitively delicate and grittily hard-knock, blending humour and pathos with the touch of a master. Billy Casper (David Bradley) lives in a cramped “council” house with his mother (Lynne Perrie) and significantly older, much tougher half-brother Jud (Freddie Fletcher), who—like nearly every able-bodied adult male in the area—works “down the pit.”

Billy has only weeks to go before leaving school for a similar fate, but it is immediately apparent that this lad deserves a much wider horizon. Cheeky and resourceful, resilient and curious, runtish Billy endures daily mockery from his fellow school-kids and a rough ride from his teachers, such as brimmingly ebullient PE teacher Mr Sugden (Brian Glover). The film’s extended centre-piece is a football match in which Sugden, who fancies himself as a soccer talent, is both player and referee, and in which Billy proves less than spectacular as a goalkeeper. The way Hines and Loach (the future dual Palme d’Or laureate, in only his second feature) play this sequence for laughs ill-prepares us for what follows, when Sugden’s impatience with Billy translates into cold-shower abuse.

Little wonder that Billy elects to escape into the countryside surrounding his town, where the eagle-eyed youth spots a kestrel nest and sets about learning how to train one of the predatory creatures. His bond with the (female) bird he names *Kes* is the emotional heart of the film, its lyrical beauty finding musical counterpart in the score by John Cameron which Pulp’s Jarvis Cocker described as “the sound of a long-lost childhood... the sound of a human soul in flight. A beautiful daydream antidote to an all too real South Yorkshire nightmare... This is the real thing. This is beauty so fragile it hurts.”

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Cameron's spare score largely consists of a repeated solo refrain by Harold McNair, the Jamaican-born jazz-flautist who died tragically young at 39 less than a year after the film went on release. Unfulfilled potential is ironically the underlying tragic theme of *Kes*, in which Billy Casper stands for generations of working-class children in the United Kingdom and far beyond, stunted in their development by economic and social factors laughably far beyond their control. But the superbly modulated, raw performance by David Bradley, who had no previous acting experience, ensures that Billy is always primarily a flesh-and-blood boy and no mere symbolic presence.

Bradley won a BAFTA for Best Newcomer—the film, direction and script were also nominated—while Colin Welland beat off some very strong competition to land Best Supporting Actor. Welland, who turns up in the second half of the film as blunt but sympathetic teacher Mr Farthing, who takes a genuine and supportive interest in Billy's welfare, is now best known as a TV character-actor and for winning the Oscar ("the British are coming!") for writing *Chariots of Fire*. On this evidence, however, he could in different circumstances have become a genuine film star, so quietly charismatic and forceful is his portrayal as the kind of educator every child deserves to encounter.

But for every moment of light, there is at least another of darkness. And the final reel, when the brutish Jud takes out his petty frustrations on Kes with fatal consequences, scars all those who see it: Bradley has admitted he finds it impossible to watch. Avoiding sentimentality and mawkishness, Hines and Loach handle the inexorable unfolding of personal catastrophe with restraint, tact and an indelible simplicity: it all comes down to just a boy, digging a grave for his dead bird with an axe. And then it is over.