

We Were Dangerous, a film about the abuse of girls by the New Zealand state

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We Were Dangerous was perhaps the most critically acclaimed New Zealand film released in 2024. It won a Special Jury Award at the SXSW Film Festival, and has been universally hailed in the New Zealand media and a handful of international publications. The film recently became available to watch on various online platforms.

Written by Maddie Dai and directed by Josephine Stewart-Te Whitu—their first feature-length film—the story centres on a group of teenage girls taken into the care of the state during the 1950s, and the abuse that they suffer and witness, including forced sterilisation.

The film’s release in August nearly coincided with the final report from the long-running Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, which documented the systematic brutalisation, including rapes and beatings, of hundreds of thousands of children over a period of nearly 70 years.

Successive governments covered up the abuse and shielded known perpetrators. In an attempt to contain the widespread shock and anger produced by the report, the National Party-led coalition government and the opposition Labour Party recently delivered empty apologies—even as children continue to regularly suffer abuse in juvenile prisons and other facilities.

In this context, the weakness of *We Were Dangerous* stands out. The filmmakers conducted research and spoke with survivors of abuse, but the film shies away from depicting the extent of the brutality that occurred in such facilities and the lifelong trauma inflicted on the young people. Instead, it tells a simplistic story that conforms with the requirements of identity politics; it is a fantasy about a group of heroic and “empowered” girls who stand up for themselves and overcome the odds stacked against them.

The story focuses on three girls who are institutionalised for different reasons at a “school for incorrigible and delinquent girls.”

Daisy (Manaia Hall) and Nellie (Erana James), who are both Māori and from working-class backgrounds, are arrested for petty theft. Daisy, we are told, had been in the care of seven different foster families by the age of 12 and tried to escape from all of them. Louisa (Nathalie Hall) is from a wealthy white family. She is sent away as a “sex delinquent” in an attempt to “cure” her of homosexuality.

The “school” is really a prison, located on a small and otherwise uninhabited island. The girls’ education consists of mind-numbing Bible study and absurd “etiquette” classes, where they are taught how to make polite conversation and how to sit properly and “to be dainty.”

The girls are frequently slapped and hit, especially for speaking or singing in Māori, and for dancing and other “disrespectful” behaviour. The Matron (Rima Te Wiata), who runs the school, is an unhinged and violent religious fanatic. “A few years ago,” she screams at the girls, “you would have been lobotomized, but now you’re fed and clothed!”

Despite being Māori herself, she has absorbed a deeply racist outlook, declaring at one point that “Māori people find it harder to lead Christian lives because we learned about the word of God so late.”

Soon, Louisa, Nellie and Daisy discover that some of the girls on the island are being forced to undergo sterilisation as part of an experimental eugenics program. Compulsory sterilisation was never legalised in New Zealand but did occur in some isolated instances.

“Our studies show that stupid women love to procreate,” a bureaucrat tells the Matron, pointing to the Mazengarb Report issued by the government in 1954. This infamous report on “juvenile delinquency” and “promiscuity” was mailed to every household in New Zealand, urging a return to Christian values, censorship of “immoral” books, comics and films, and stricter parenting.

Apart from this brief scene, the broader context of New Zealand society during the 1950s is mostly absent from *We Were Dangerous*, which is narrowly focused on the girls' conflict with the Matron. This was a period of conformism and extreme reaction, especially following the brutal 1951 lockout of waterfront workers and the anti-communist hysteria surrounding the Korean War.

The oppressive system of girls' and boys' homes, boarding schools and other institutions, and the eugenicist and racist conceptions that accompanied them, were connected with deep fears in ruling circles about the real danger posed to the stability of capitalist rule by the working class, which was becoming more racially integrated as Māori migrated to the cities.

The film becomes totally unrealistic when Louisa, Nellie and Daisy come up with a plan to put a stop to the medical experiments. The girls display unwavering solidarity, courage and quick-wittedness, which culminates in a jarringly upbeat and optimistic ending that turns the whole film into a sort of feminist fairytale.

Whatever the filmmakers' intentions, the effect is to downplay the horrific and ongoing harm done to children and young people who were taken by the state. The light-hearted tone and "uplifting" message align with the desperate attempts by the ruling elite to convince the population that things are getting better, that the horrors documented in the Royal Commission are a thing of the past and the country has "moved on."

Speaking to the *Spinoff* website, director Stewart-Te Whitu said that "it was never our intention to make a film about abuse in care. We wanted to make a film about young women being their whole selves." At one screening she told the audience she wanted to tell a story of "resilience and joy... about rebelling, girlhood, seeing ourselves onscreen."

This approach has been applauded in corporate media reviews of *We Were Dangerous*. The *Post* praised "the necessary lightness and humour" injected into the film. The *New Zealand Herald* hailed the emphasis on "joy" and resilience and the decision not to show too much "violence and trauma."

The reviewers would rather not be reminded of the trauma that occurred—and still occurs—in state-run institutions. They prefer "light," "joyful" fare, which does not seriously undermine the nationalist mythology of New Zealand as a kinder, gentler society.

The reality is that children who endured the sort of abuse documented in the Royal Commission were never able to be "their whole selves." They were robbed of the

opportunity to lead full lives. Many developed severe mental illness, attempted suicide or turned to alcohol and drug abuse.

There is no hint of this psychological damage in any of the characters in *We Were Dangerous*. On the contrary, Daisy, despite being illiterate and (it is implied) having been abused in various foster homes, is relatively happy-go-lucky, serene and talkative. Louisa and Nellie are resilient, altruistic, courageous; they are idealised and lacking in human complexity.

None of the girls ever engage in bullying or behave unkindly towards each other—in contrast to what was documented by the Royal Commission, which emphasised that peer-on-peer bullying was common at girls' and boys' institutions, and was deliberately encouraged by the staff.

The filmmakers want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to show girls who are oppressed, who suffer abuse and witness horrifying crimes, and yet able to emerge not only unscathed but even stronger and more empowered, because of their innate heroism and female solidarity. It is simply not convincing.

We Were Dangerous feels like a missed opportunity. Despite the monstrous actions of the Matron, one does not gain a sense of the immense criminality of successive governments and of New Zealand capitalism itself.

For contrast, this reviewer recommends *The Magdalene Sisters* (Ireland, 2003) and *Sami Blood* (Sweden, 2016), two films which address the abuse of girls by the church and the state with far greater psychological perceptiveness and social-historical realism. Both films leave the viewer outraged and with more understanding about what society does to its most vulnerable members.



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