



THE YEARLING (1946) was a 2014 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. It's available to check out from that library. Below is Kino Ken's review.

12 of a possible 20 points

***** of a possible *******

**United States 1946 color 128 minutes live action feature family drama
Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios Producers: Sidney Franklin and Clarence Brown**

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Clarence Brown**
- 1 Editing: Harold Kress**
- 1 Cinematography: Charles Rosher and Leonard Smith**
- 2 Lighting Technicolor Color Director: Natalie Kalmus***
Technicolor Color Associate: Henri Jaffa*
- 1 Screenplay: Paul Osborn, based on the Pulitzer Prize novel by
Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings**
- 1 Music: Herbert Stothart, using themes of Frederick Delius**
- 1 Art Direction: Cedric Gibbons and Paul Groesse**
Costume Design / Wardrobe: Irene Sharif, Fred Valles
- 2 Sound: Douglas Shearer**

1 Acting
1 Creativity
12 total points

Cast: Gregory Peck (Penny Baxter, dad), Jane Wyman (Ma Ora Baxter), Claude Jarman, Jr.* (j) (Jody Baxter, son of Penny and Ora), Clem Bevans (Pa Forrester), Margaret Wycherly (Ma Forrester), Forrest Tucker (Lem Forrester), Chill Wills (Buck Forrester), Donn Gift (j) (Fodderwing Forrester), Daniel White (Millwheel), Matt Willis (Gabby), George Mann (Pack), Arthur Hohl (Arch), June Lockhart (Twink Weatherby), Joan Wells (j) (Eulalie), Jeff York (Oliver), B. M. Chick York (Doc Wilson), Houseley Stevenson (Mr. Ranger), Jane Green (Mrs. Saunders), Victor Killian (Captain), Robert Porterfield (Mate), Frank Eldredge (Deckhand), Henry Travers (Mr. Boyles)

Plagued with production difficulties, including desertions of leading man Spencer Tracy and leading lady Claire Trevor, THE YEARLING eventually was helmed by Clarence Brown, forming a kind of family film follow-up to his horse story, NATIONAL VELVET. Mosquitoes and humidity drove off Tracy and Trevor, but didn't faze replacements Gregory Peck and Jane Wyman. Considering Peck received an Academy Award nomination and a Golden Globe for Best Actor as a result of his performance as Penny Baxter, one can only wonder what honors Tracy might have achieved had he remained in the cast.

Working under the relentless direction of Clarence Brown, each principal player had to submit to exhausting serial takes for nearly every scene. Since animals were frequently participants in shots, their balks and missteps further slowed production. A critical bear hunt scene had to be completely reshot because the original was marred by bruin unwillingness to accept urban dogs as serious scuffling partners. Only when author Rawlings obtained a second group of canines from a local hunter did the chase and battle sequences come alive with frightening intensity and energy.

Filmed on location in Florida's midsection where the authoress had lived and written, THE YEARLING benefits enormously from utilizing authentic area sites

and sounds. Drowsy atmosphere of placidly warm spring afternoon and lashing, grey-black howling hurricane are communicated to viewers with optimal color and sound recording, plunging them directly into landscapes where the Baxter family lived, worked, and suffered.

Twelve-year-old Jody Baxter, a dreamy boy with no partiality for work, is obsessed with obtaining a wild animal for pet and companion. His mother Ora is just as resolutely opposed to such a pairing. She sees ahead to the regrettable conclusion of that sort of alliance, something her accommodating spouse chooses to sidestep. The story design is almost modelled on Greek tragedy. Doting parent, dad Penny, repeatedly facilitates a bonding which can only result badly for each partner. Disaster awaits.

A protracted introduction highlights Jody, local scenery, and second unit shots of neighborhood fauna. Adventure begins when Slewfoot, a legendary bear with eminent domain privileges, invades the Baxter property and kills a prized porker. Penny sets off in pursuit, accompanied by a fearful Jody and three hounds. Successfully tracking their prey, two dogs begin a campaign to worry and distract it. However, instead of ending conflict rapidly with well-aimed bullet, Penny's gun misfires twice. This grants the target a lamentable reprieve. Taking advantage of equipment malfunction, enraged quarry gives chief assailant a lethal toss. Stunned, its onlooker comrade beats a quick retreat to safety. Even further to the rear is a survivalist keen on living to see another sunrise.

Disappointed by both weapon and backup, Penny determines to rid himself of a dangerously ineffectual helper. His solution: trade with the Forrester family.

So he and his sole remaining child traipse over to their neighbors. Father reports in detail the shortcomings of an unscarred, battle-shy tail-wagger. Most listeners respond avidly to combat description doled out in measured intervals. One, though, keeps attention focused on the disreputable, cowardly hunter whose failings are being highlighted repeatedly.

Lem Forrester resolves to add another four-legged bone-chewer to his collection, completely discounting Penny's words. Brooking no denial, he pulls a rifle from wall brackets, demonstrating its effectiveness with unnerving rapidity

and precision. Penny, favorably impressed, feigns reluctant willingness to accommodate Lem's demand for a trade. Soon, however, he accedes to the latter's aggressive offer.

After a brief repast, the Baxters leave with a new, store-bought, functional firearm. They're minus one sorry excuse for a Slewfoot chaser, a situation Jody finds so amusing he can barely disguise his mirth, nearly sabotaging Penny's mission.

Sometime later, in consequence of this one-sided deal, unannounced visitors lure remaining swine from the Baxter place. From a baited trap, they remove them to a new home. Jody, suddenly showing a previously undetected skill at reading footprints, points out the culprits' tracks to his distracted dad.

Penny, a magnet for misadventures, fails shortly afterward to observe a rattlesnake hidden beneath a grape-vine. It challenges his right-of-way. Bitten immediately for disturbing the serpent's peace by pulling at its cover, Penny responds belatedly with a blast from his treasured new gun. Stricken, though not downed, the victim crashes homeward through oaks and palmettos. Coming to a clearing, he spies a doe. Alarmed at the man's noisy arrival, it springs up off the grass, too slowly to evade a fatal bullet to the head. After the animal drops, Penny cuts its belly open with a knife, extracting a liver. That he applies to two punctures on his right arm. Then the man requests Jody to take his blade and cut away a piece of doe heart. Jody does, falteringly. After some brief exchanges about Pa's condition, his son is sent off to rouse the Forresters. Their assistance is essential, notwithstanding previous identification as livestock robbers. Unless they ride at top speed to fetch Doc Wilson, Penny will be a goner.

Jody's errand is interrupted at the outset by discovery of a fawn at clearing edge. Though hardly the time to worry about it, Jody comes to a halt. What should he do? Pa urges speed. One quick look at him convinces the boy action cannot be delayed. He races off to obtain help.

Pa makes it back, miraculously, to the Baxter Homestead, where he recovers overnight from fever. A relieved Jody uses his parent's weakened condition to elicit a promise to permit him a pet fawn. The one whose mother had been killed the day before. If only he can find it.

Of course, the seeker ultimately does, carrying it gently back in his arms to

a misgiving household. For the Baxters live and prosper only if their crops do. Can Jody keep his foundling away from them? If he fails, what then?

Many coarser elements of Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' novel have been expunged from the MGM film. Aggravating insistence upon depicting female characters as utterly dependent upon males has been downplayed, though the writer's mindlessly brawling menfolk display intemperate fisticuffs in both book and motion picture. Screenwriter Paul Osmond adheres closely to book plot, an extraordinary occurrence in American filmmaking. Much of the dialect from the story is retained, with Peck and Nashville resident Jarman delivering it with credible accuracy. Original clothing from natives of the Lake George region, sought out for authenticity, adds to credibility. So, too, does a Baxter cabin modelled on one where a prototype family befriended by the author resided.

Wildlife is genuine enough, also, despite typical Hollywood idealization of their movements amid sunny verdure, motions seconded by cavorting boy and fawn.

Unobtrusive camera angles reveal character and gesture transparently, an essential for effective family films.

While editing is generally taut, with maximum sustained suspense during the tracking of Slewfoot and subsequent battle, far too great a slackness is evidenced by intrusive depictions of area animals doing nothing whatever that in any way advances the plot.

Among cast members, the standout is Claude Jarman, Jr., whose radiant smiles and childish skippings exemplify to perfection Jody's innocence, playfulness, and determination to please. Yet when darker, more intense passion is required in later portions of the film, Jarman rises to the occasion with trembling lower lip, gushing eyes, and pulsing body. Brown does an exquisite job of directing that novice, who had no prior film acting experience. Jarman deservedly netted a Special Citation from the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for his performance.

Gregory Peck's commendable Penny Baxter is accident-prone, overindulgent, traditionally pious, yet willing to adopt devious measures when confronting potential troublemakers. He looks and acts quite comfortable in the role. Yet a

later performance as another Southern father in **TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD** inadvertently overshadows this one.

The narration heard in **THE YEARLING** is spoken by Peck with customary dignity and ease.

Jane Wyman lands a thankless role as Ma, a woman who may never have possessed much love to share with any child. After losing three previous offspring, Ory has hardened herself into basaltic formidability. Her resistance to any visual outpouring of love keeps Jody at a distance. He cannot understand why she treats him with constant neutrality, discouraging through silent disapproval in rare moments when active denial or rebuttal would invite conflict with Penny. Wyman follows the author devotedly. Too much so, making her character impossible to empathize with.

Supporting characters are colorful and stereotyped. They are directed competently, but fail to make any remarkable contributions to what is essentially a quartet consisting of father, mother, son, and pet.

It seems to be Delius, rather than Stothart, whose spirit enlivens music heard. Appropriately blithe and sunny in earlier parts of the film, the score becomes rowdier and more ethereal during sections devoted, respectively, to a fight in town and Fodderwing's departure for painless second home among clouds. A gentle principle theme unassumingly reflects characters of boy and deer.

Sound recording of ambient background noises is integrated well with dialogue and music. Though never testing extreme pitches, the soundtrack gracefully captures dialogues and sound effects.

This early version of **THE YEARLING** is a laudatory resetting of Rawlings' Pulitzer Prize-winning story, containing nothing injurious to child viewers while reinforcing traits of friendship, responsibility, and home team support. It's recommended family viewing, a film about emotional maturation that retains relevancy for new audiences, showing clear indications of doing so for future generations. Adults, like children, will find situations depicted intriguing and dramatically honest. **THE YEARLING** is a prime example of Hollywood filmmaking for families at its best.