

'The Other Lamb' is impressively mounted, but emotionally chilly

Written by Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: «« out of «««««

Running Time: 97 minutes

While the idea of cutting oneself off from the modern world may seem appealing, doing so by way of a cult is a less than advisable life choice...especially if you happen to be a woman. So says the low-key chiller *The Other Lamb*, which depicts an independent community of people on their own in the wilderness. The story is intriguing, examining a changing dynamic within the group after spending years off the grid and following orders from their leader. Still, the film takes a very mannered and minimalist approach. While interesting, its cold and distant tone can leave viewers adrift from the proceedings.

The tale focuses on Selah (Raffey Cassidy), a teenage girl who was born within the cult run by its only male member, Shepherd (Michael Huisman). The figurehead lords over his many wives and daughters, telling them stories and giving them instructions on how to live. With womanhood approaching, Selah is a prominent devotee of Shepherd, flattered by her guardian's attention and praise. He compliments her beauty and devotion to his teachings and the cause (whatever that might be). However, not every member is pleased with their lifestyle. One of the estranged wives named Sarah (Denise Gough) begins to converse with Selah and she eventually begins to question Shepherd and his gospel.

This movie looks very impressive and succeeds at communicating an eerie sense of isolation.

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The scenic photography is striking and some interesting visual devices are used. String is extended out around buildings and trees in areas of the camp. It helps create a physical manifestation of followers trapped in what could almost be considered the web of a spider. Early on, it's impossible to determine when the film is set and this strange timelessness creates a sense of unease. Of course, when the camp is forced to find a new place to live and members briefly cross paths with non-members, an effective contrast between themselves and the outside world is created.

Performances are strong, with Cassidy making an impression as the teen who slowly begins to doubt her fearless leader. Most of the cast is captured using long takes and close-ups. It takes a great deal of skill to keep the attention of viewers while cast members stare quietly at each other and contemplate their place in this world. And early on, one finds the predicament of the lead character fascinating. After all, she knows very little about the outside world and can only believe what she has been told by an unreliable narrator who may be planning an incestuous future with his favorite child.

However, the story takes almost no unexpected twists and turns and feels a little too simple for a feature. It's very clear that the movie is critiquing power-hungry leaders and the patriarchy as the females within the family are abused and demeaned for disobeying Shepherd. Yet as presented, it's often difficult to get a sense of what draws the group members to their leader. As written, he pays his wives and daughters a compliment or two, but has an icy quality, even before his actions turn openly violent. He doesn't seem particularly charismatic or charming, and it would have been interesting to understand how a nasty figure could start such a cult and invoke extreme devotion in others.

Instead, Shepherd's motivations are obvious in that he wants nothing more than to maintain authority commanding an all-female cult and producing more offspring to serve him. As a result, one struggles with the motivations of the cult members and their slow response as events worsen. Perhaps it's meant to display the mundanity of evil, but it takes an extremely long time for the daughters to understand the gravity of the situation and attempt to take action. Beyond it being well shot, there's nothing about the story itself that will surprise or shock.

In the end, I admired this feature on a technical level, but also found the chilly tone and approach emotionally distancing. As such, my investment in the story wasn't as strong as it could have been. *The Other Lamb* is a well-made and performed feature, but one that is difficult to feel a deep attachment or devotion toward.

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