

A TRIP DEEP INTO THE ITALIAN ALPS

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The Eight Mountains. Felix Van Groeningen and Charlotte Vandermeersch, Directors. Produced by Wildside, Rufus, Manuetto Film. 187 min.

Have you ever wanted to visit the hamlets of the Italian Alps? If so, the next-best way to get there and to soak up its beauty and mystery is the 2022 film by Felix Van Groeningen and Charlotte Vandermeersch, *The Eight Mountains*. It was released in the USA in 2023.

This film is based on the 2016 novel of the same name written by Paolo Cognetti; the novel deservedly won the Strega Prize in 2017 (Italy's equivalent of the Pulitzer Prize for fiction). I can't recommend the novel strongly enough.

The two main characters, soul brothers, are brought to vibrant life on the screen by Luca Marinelli and Alessandro Borghi. The third main character is the mountains of northwest Italy, and her presence is masterfully shared with us by the directors and the director of photography, Ruben Impens.

The human story is mostly about the friendship between two boys: the city boy, Pietro, and the mountain boy, Bruno. We follow them become thick as thieves in one of those magical summers of our childhood — exploring rivers and abandoned houses, rolling down hills, wrestling each other, and experiencing the endless summer days and nights with the feeling of eternity that only childhood and childhood friendship can hold.

Then our boys become teenagers, that strange species, and the teenagers become men. The city boy, Pietro, gradually becomes a professional writer. The mountain boy, Bruno, gradually becomes a dairy farmer and they drift apart. Their unique bond becomes a distant memory as told through the perspective of Pietro until a death reunites them and gives them the gift of an unusual reunion and the chance to resuscitate and deepen their bond.

Without spoiling the lesson that was masterfully crafted by Cognetti and beautifully rendered onto the screen by Van Groeningen and Vandermeersch, I can say that this story captures so much of what is important in relationships. Through Pietro's boyhood, adolescence, drifting 20s and

maturing 30s, we get to witness the gains and losses—and accompanying joys and regrets—of a rich life, a life made richer through the power of reflection. As we accompany him on his journey, we too get to ask ourselves about our most important relationships and whom we’d like to reconnect with while we still can.

The framework for Pietro’s journey is the stunning landscape of the Italian Alps. One can only imagine what this cinematic experience would be like in a theater — feeling closer to the infinity of the sky and the enormity of the mountain on the big screen must bring the spectator close to the awe you would feel in the presence of the real thing. But many viewers will have to take it in on the small screen, like I did, and still be transported to a timeless and mysteriously beautiful place and population.

There is also a linguistic journey to appreciate in this wonderful film, actual lessons of learning a dialect. Bruno speaks mostly dialect with his mountain tribe and there are several moments in which he teaches/translates these expressions into standard Italian. Through the joy of Pietro’s attempts to comprehend, learn and use these expressions, the viewer gets a brief reminder of just how fun it can be to move to a new land and learn a new language. And this brings us back to the realization that sometimes good art can be *almost* as transporting as international trips. This fine film comes as close to accomplishing that as possible.

Tying together the novel, the landscape and the performances is the music performed by Daniel Norgren. A musician whose own life is embedded in Big Nature, and this sense of understanding comes across in his poignant score.

The directors also deserve a special compliment for deciding to learn Italian to make this movie. In an interview with the directors on The Criterion Channel, Charlotte Vandermeersch says, “...this was very important to us...it is the way to authenticity.”

Above all, this is a story that will make the viewer reflect on relationships and how fleeting they all are. It may also push you to plan a trip to the Italian Alps. I recommend the book and the movie, in that order, in the strongest possible terms.

As of the writing of this review, it is available for rental on Amazon Prime, Apple TV and Vudu. It is also available with a subscription to the Criterion Collection.