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## The Quiet Room: A child's silence

by Stuart Fischhoff, Ph. D.

Director: Rolf de Heer  
Year of Release (1996)

*The Quiet Room* is that rare film which presents the world through the eyes of a child, not as an adult presumes it might be, but as the child understands it to be. It is a film which explores the tattered remains of a marriage that, to the ken of a child, has inexplicably begun the painful slide into the abyss. It is a film about a crack in the family that, in many ways, is as unfathomable to the audience as it is to the child.

And that is how a collapsing marriage should look when we are viewing it through the eyes of that child.

*The Quiet Room* explores the child's heroically naive gambit to bring that slide to a screeching halt so that her world can right itself and life can go on as it once did, as a triad of love.

Refreshingly, the child's gambit is not active hostility or cry-for-help self-destructiveness. It is something far more powerful than actions and words. It is...silence! *The Quiet Room's* success is in no small part due to its dramatically understated yet psychologically illuminating journey into the rarely charted cinematic waters of elective mutism.

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Elective Mutism: An unwillingness to speak even though one is capable of speech. The disorder is not something that routinely splashes across the big or small screen. It is one of the more difficult disorders to dramatize precisely because it is not especially exciting to watch. There is no hysteria, no overt paranoid delusions, not even a few servings of word salad. Cinematically, elective mutism, before *The Quiet Room*, has been about as riveting as watching a corporate accountant cook the books (give me an on-screen mugging any day).

Nine years ago I was a consultant on the TV series Peter Benchley's *Dolphin's Bay* ( I know, I know, Peter Benchley's what? ). The drama was produced by Paramount Television and took place -- and in fact was shot in -- Australia. The show dealt with a widowed marine biologist whose teenage daughter had elected to be mute. The device simply could not sustain even a season's episodes. *Dolphin's Bay* was canceled just as I cashed the check for my last script consult.

With *The Quiet Room* the Aussies have tried it again. And damn it if they haven't made elective mutism interesting, even dramatic. Not edge of the seat dramatic, mind you, more cerebral than visceral, but dramatic nonetheless.

*The Quiet Room* works, in part, because it takes the viewer inside the child's mind as she narrates events, past, present, and future. We hear her but her parents don't. She struggles to make sense of the gradual collapse of her safe, secure world. We see her mind jump back and forth in time, comparing what her life was when she was three, with what it is at seven and frightfully, what it might be in all the mornings to come.

We marvel at how this child comes upon a gambit of silence. We admire the logic that spawned it. Words are extensions of our minds and

limbs. With our words we reach out across space and grab hold of people, stopping them dead in their tracks. There's magic in them thar' morphemic hills. Ironically, we, the homo verbums of our species ("Words, I never leave home without them"), often forget the power that these insubstantial forces exercise as much by their absence as their presence. Yet for a seven year old, one for whom words are still wondrous tools, but for whom their power has failed, it is perhaps easier to recognize that their absence might be just what the doctor ordered.

A little girl might just muse: "If I talk, Mommy and Daddy ignore my pleas. If I cry and tell them I'm afraid, they provide only teasing lulls and then reignite. They reassure me but then beat each other up with my tears. What happens if I don't cry? What happens if I don't talk? Let's see. Oh look, Mommy and Daddy pay more attention to me. I don't get them upset by the things I say. I can control them by saying nothing! They can't divorce if they have to worry about me...what's that saying Daddy told me...oh, yes, silence is golden."

While *The Quiet Room* is a fictional tale, it is not sitcom froth topped off by a feel-good finale. As much as the young girl might want to believe she is the center of the parents' universe, as much as the parents try to make her believe that she is, the parents are the true center to each other's universe. Until that center stabilizes, the g-forces will inevitably pull them back into the abyss of discord and the threat of dissolution.

Those who counsel married couples should see *The Quiet Room*. Those engaged in fighting their own marital wars should see it with their children. No, not to provide the child with some new coping strategy; but to reveal that someone can understand what children might be thinking. It may even be a tool to enable them to break through to the battling titans/parents of their

lives; let them know that the events swirling and curling before a child's frightened eyes are, as the film's seven year-old tells us, "hurting my heart."

Rating: 3 Siggies

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