Reviews of **YOU CAN COUNT ON ME**

Sammy Prescott	**Laura Linney**
Terry Prescott	**Mark Ruffalo**
Rudy	**Rory Culkin**
Brian	**Matthew Broderick**
Bob	**Jon Tenney**

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To make a splash as a playwright nowadays, you need a welter of glittering epigrams, a fancy theatrical metaphor for class (or racial or gender) struggle, and a surly disdain for naturalism. Kenneth Lonergan's work has none of these things, yet he has somehow emerged as the most potent dramatic voice of his generation—the real deal. The reason that his plays (the best known is *This Is Our Youth*) are at once so understated and so vivid can be discerned in his first film as a director, ***You Can Count on Me***—which also happens to be the best American movie of the year.

What the film is "about" can't be summed up in a line: Its themes remain just out of reach, its major conflicts sadly unresolved. But Lonergan writes bottomless dialogue. When his people open their mouths, what comes out is never a definitive expression of character: It's an awkward compromise between how they feel and what they're able to say; or how they feel and what they think they *should* say; or how they feel and what will best conceal how they feel. The common term for this is "subtext," and *You Can Count on Me* has a subtext so powerful that it reaches out and pulls you under. Even when the surface is tranquil, you know in your guts what's at stake.

Almost from the start the movie is numbed by loss. It opens with a man and a woman at night, driving. The woman comments grimly that it's ironic how adolescents get braces at the exact moment that they're most self-conscious. The man shrugs. Then they swerve to avoid a pickup truck, and a policeman knocks at the door of a house where an adolescent girl (with braces) and her younger brother are watching television. The cop, who knows the girl, opens his mouth but can't bring himself to speak. He could be the movie's mascot.

Then we meet that girl, Sammy (Laura Linney), as a grown-up, putting flowers on her parents' grave. She has a smooth, autopilot sort of life in that same family house, where she's raising her 8-year-old son, Rudy (Rory Culkin), by herself. Sammy has no contact with her ex-husband, which has allowed the boy to spin out all sorts of fantasies about the father he has never met. Lonergan is such a brilliantly offhand writer that an early, seemingly inconsequential remark of Rudy's—that he resents a homework assignment because it's too "unstructured"—provides a clue to his melancholy. Sammy is a devout churchgoer: She thinks her foundation is solid. But her faith can't keep the structure of her and Rudy's life from sagging.

What sets the narrative in motion is the arrival of Sammy's younger brother, Terry (Mark Ruffalo), a stoner and a drifter who works odd construction jobs and anxiously dodges connections. He has been out of touch for six months, and he only shows up now because he's running away

from a woman whom he has impregnated. The first scene between sister and brother is indelible. Ruffalo's Terry, with his thick, snarled hair and glazed eyes, sits opposite Linney's Sammy in a restaurant but doesn't want to meet her gaze. He fidgets, looks around, frowns over his salad, speaks as if from a great distance. He wants to stay inside himself, to keep his anger and confusion under wraps, but Linney is so present, so up front in her effort to reach out and engage him, that he loses his cool and screams at her how terrible it is to be "back in this f—ing hole getting lectured again."

For lack of a better plan, Terry sticks around and, almost without meaning to, bonds with Sammy's son. In some ways he's a healthy presence—he's rather fatherly. In others he's like one of Ibsen's dementedly misanthropic idealists, filling the boy's head with weirdly acid denunciations of the town and contriving a nightmarish encounter with the absent father. Sammy wants him to stay on, wants to change him and restore his faith. But can she risk living side by side with such despair, such chaos?

I could watch *You Can Count on Me* again and again just to savor the ways in which the characters try to communicate. Out of context, the lines aren't especially memorable, but beat by beat there's more going on than in movies 10 times more explicit. Watch how Sammy and her occasional lover (Jon Tenney) make small talk and then attempt to hug after sex: Their hands bump and their arms move at different speeds, and you know in that instant that they're not and never will be in sync. Watch how the hilariously unlikable new boss (Matthew Broderick) at the bank in which Sammy works attempts to project authority through bullying corporate-speak and ends up looking like a lost little boy, and how this unexpectedly touches her, so that she ends up having passionate sex with him.

On her way to meet Broderick at a hotel, Linney listens on the radio to Loretta Lynn singing, "(I'm) the Other Woman (in Your Husband's Life)." She shakes her head, abashed, as if to say, "Oh, how sordid I am"; then a cackle of pure, what-the-hell defiance bursts out of her; then she shakes her head again, abashed. Lonergan is a genius at showing you the somersaults and back flips and triple-gainers of the average mind in the course of about 10 seconds; and Linney is marvelous at bringing out the tensions between this woman's firm mask and quivering soul. Her plainness is utterly gorgeous.

Lonergan himself puts in an appearance as Sammy's laid-back minister, to whom she turns in the hope that he can reach her wayward brother. The minister/playwright poses an earnest question: "Do you feel your life is important?"; and it's Terry's inability to answer it that gives us our fullest glimpse into his heart. As a director, Lonergan is similarly unimposing and yet penetrating. Two shots from inside Sammy's car as she drives through the town (the film is set in upstate New York) defines her universe, but beyond that there's not much flash. Lonergan doesn't yet know how to make the camera show us things that his dialogue doesn't, but when you write dialogue like he does, you can take your time to learn. Hell, he can take another 20 movies to learn

STEPHEN HOLDEN (*New York Times*)

For all the bullying inspirational slogans hurled at us about never giving up on your dream, following your bliss and today being the first day of the rest of your life, the fact remains that most people's lives run on fairly narrow tracks. And in the real world, as opposed to self-help fantasyland, once you find yourself on a track, it's awfully hard to get off, even if it's headed nowhere in particular.

The way so many lives coast along on familiar but frustrating paths is one of the themes of "You Can Count on Me," the perfectly pitched directorial debut of the playwright ("This Is Your Youth") and screenwriter ("Analyze This!") Kenneth Lonergan.

Because it arrives near the end of one of the most dismal film seasons in memory, this melancholy little gem of a movie, which won two major awards at the Sundance Festival, qualifies as one of the two or three finest American films released this year. If nothing better comes along between now and the end of December, it could reap some more honors.

What distinguishes "You Can Count on Me" from almost every other recent American film is its modesty. Although visually handsome, it is about the furthest thing from an event movie and would fit as comfortably on television as it does on the big screen. Its biggest strength is a steadfast integrity that sharpens as the story goes along. Steering clear of the shrill melodramatic confrontations and kitschy spiritual uplift that Hollywood routinely confuses with profundity, it proposes no pat solutions for its characters' problems. One significant character, a likable but cautious young boy, is the refreshing antithesis of the psychically gifted, problem-solving superchild that is becoming one of Hollywood's most obnoxious clichés.

"You Can Count on Me" is an exquisitely observed slice of upstate New York life that reminds us there are still plenty of American communities where the pace is more human than computer-driven. The movie dares to portray small-town middle-class life in America as somewhat drab and predictable. Without ever condescending to its characters, it trusts that the everyday problems of ordinary people, if portrayed with enough knowledge, empathy and insight, can be as compelling as the most bizarre screaming carnival on "The Jerry Springer Show."

The two main characters, Samantha and Terry Prescott (Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo), are a grown-up brother and sister who reunite after not having seen each other for some time. Samantha (known as Sammy), a single mother with an 8-year-old son, Rudy (Rory Culkin), works as a loan officer in a bank in the fictional New York town of Scottsville. A quiet, slightly wilted place with a sleepy main street whose vitality hasn't entirely been co-opted by shopping malls, it is a typical middle-to-working-class New York State community. Country music dominates the local jukeboxes, and the soundtrack serves up a generous helping of Steve Earle's country-rock.

Samantha and Terry share a childhood trauma, recalled in the film's opening scenes, of having lost both parents in a car accident when they were very young. In remembering this event the film exercises a stunning restraint. We see the parents having a banal conversation in the car moments before the accident and then the looming disaster. Cut to an anxious policeman about to bear the horrible news to the children who have been waiting at home. Sparing us their reaction, the movie cuts to the sermon at the parents' funeral service, where we see the priest's lips moving while no words are heard on the soundtrack except for the ethereal cry of a children's choir.

These early scenes demonstrate an unerring sense (one shared by the best screenplays) of when it is best to leave things to the imagination. And as Ms. Linney's and Mr. Ruffalo's grown-up Samantha and Terry reunite, quarrel and reminisce, you retain a lingering image of the two of them as children, silently clinging to each other, still mute with shock.

In their beautifully harmonized performances, Ms. Linney and Mr. Ruffalo evoke this sibling bond with an astounding depth and subtlety. Ms. Linney's Samantha may be a responsible mother and churchgoing Catholic, but we learn that she was a wild teenager who has had to choke back her rebellious instincts in order to bring up her son. Even now, her innate rebelliousness still manifests itself in ways both small (she secretly smokes cigarettes) and large (she recklessly initiates an affair with her new boss, a persnickety straight arrow with a pregnant wife).

Mr. Ruffalo's Terry is a classic overgrown adolescent. A good-hearted drifter with a perversely self- destructive streak, he has recently spent time in prison after a bar brawl and has also impregnated a suicidally inclined girlfriend in Worcester, Mass. The main reason for his visit to Scottsville is to borrow money from his sister to deal with the situation. Samantha is furious and disappointed by her brother's lack of direction and behavioral sloppiness. He in turn is contemptuous of her for remaining stuck in Scottsville, whose small-town atmosphere he finds suffocating.

Terry stays on longer than he had planned and further infuriates Samantha with his irresponsible treatment of Rudy, who instantly gravitates toward him as a father figure. One evening, as a boyish prank, they sneak out to a pool hall while Samantha is away; later they are caught lying about it.

Samantha, in the meantime, finds herself torn between a sudden marriage proposal from her on-again, off-again boyfriend Bob (Jon Tenney) and her foolish affair with her boss, Brian (Matthew Broderick), who is instantly besotted. On the job Brian is a gray-faced, passive-aggressive company man and stickler for rules who is so obsessed with appearances that he issues an edict forbidding his employees to use loud colors on their computer screens.

The culminating event, an excruciating, brilliantly executed scene of emotional chaos as old personal wounds are ripped open, is Terry's impulsive, ill-advised decision to take Rudy on a surprise visit to meet his roughneck biological father (Josh Lucas) whom Samantha has built up as a hero to the boy. Mr. Ruffalo's star-making performance deserves to be added to the list of charismatic, grownup lost boys that includes the Marlon Brando of "A Streetcar Named Desire" and the Jack Nicholson of "Easy Rider."

Talking in a slightly dazed drawl, bursts of anger occasionally flashing through a manner that suggests the defensive, semi-apologetic attitude of a boy trying to please his strict mother, Terry is a softer, contemporary version of this archetype. He is the kind of man women instinctively want to rescue, only to discover a maddening obstinacy lurking beneath his appealing boyish surface.

"You Can Count on Me" makes some slight missteps. In an otherwise scrupulously realistic movie, Mr. Broderick's Brian borders uncomfortably on caricature. But in countless other small but telling ways, the movie gets its characters and their world exactly and indelibly right.