



## CLOSE-KNIT AND TIED IN KNOTS

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By Diana Maychick, Record Film Critic

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**CROOKED HEARTS:** Directed by Michael Bortman. Produced by Rick Stevenson, Dale Pollock, and Gil Friesen. Written by Bortman, based on the novel by Robert Boswell. Photographed by Tak Fujimoto. Music by Mark Isham. Edited by Richard Francis-Bruce. With Vincent D'Onofrio, Jennifer Jason Leigh, Pete Berg, Cindy Pickett, Juliette Lewis, Noah Wyle, Marg Helgenberger, Wendy Gazelle, Peter Coyote. Released by MGM-Pathé. 112 minutes. Rated R (language). Opens today.

Like a dysfunctional version of the Waltons, the Warren brood from "Crooked Hearts" inadvertently transforms its love for one another into something awful.

The movie transmutes in much the same way: writer-director Michael Bortman's exploration of a contemporary suburban family begins promisingly, if a little slowly, but ends up wallowing in stifling melodrama.

The story line has potential however. It's a gold mine of the poison that comes from too much familial closeness. And it begins innocuously enough, as it should.

Middle son Tom (Pete Berg) returns home after dropping out of Berkeley during his freshman year. Curiously, his family celebrates this event with a party. Dad (Peter Coyote) makes a toast, recalling other mistakes made by his kids, the time one of them forgot her lines in a play for instance, and the time another blew up his science experiment in the living room.

The family members are the only party guests. Sis Cassie (Juliette Lewis) has baked a cake for the occasion. Mom (Cindy Pickett) dances with her other two sons, Charlie (Vincent D'Onofrio) and Ask (Noah Wyle) -- short for Askew.

But there's hostility lurking beneath the surface, something peculiarly inbred about the group, something subliminally incestuous.

The pivotal character is Charlie, the rebellious, older sibling, and D'Onofrio carries it off well, especially in one scene where he brings home a drunken, vegetarian bimbo and foists his rapacious sexual appetite on his family.

Coyote is properly understated as the seemingly wonderful patriarch of the clan, a man for whom the word family takes on religious dimensions, and Berg, whose middle-child character is also the narrator, manages to convey a bemused perplexity at how so wonderful a constellation of intelligent adults could go so wrong.

The script miserably fails these actors though, especially when it attempts to explain in concrete terms just why Charlie and his father have a difficult relationship. "Crooked Hearts" offers a single reason for their discord, and of course it is a woman.

A decade before, the father and son were rivals for the same waitress, a luminous strawberry blonde named Jenetta (Marg Helgenberger), who also caught the eye of young Tom.

His father's indiscretion enrages Charlie, but it is never clear whether he's more upset about his dad's faithlessness or his own hurt pride.

What Charlie does for revenge rivals the out-of-proportion actions found in any two-bit potboiler. First, he sleeps with another waitress -- his brother Tom's hometown girlfriend (Wendy Gazelle) and gets her

pregnant. Then he sets fire to the family home. He also inadvertently contributes to the death of his youngest brother.

All these tragedies are marked by one of those peculiar Warren brood parties, where someone comments that this family is like a drug and its members are all junkies for it.

That may be so, but to the outside world, the Warrens hold about as much appeal as a group of mass murderers. Even their friends are highly neurotic, especially Marriet (Jennifer Jason Leigh) who won't begin a relationship unless the young man signs a contract promising to call after making love.

The Warrens become caricatures of themselves here and the movie becomes a cautionary tale against starting a family. You'll leave the theater wishing all the adult children had apartments of their own, so that the movie would never have taken place.

Illustrations/Photos: PHOTO - Peter Coyote and Cindy Pickett in "Crooked Hearts.'

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