

Kes

UK : 1969 : dir. Ken Loach : Kestrel / Woodfall : 113 min
prod: Tony Garnett : scr. Barry Hines, Ken Loach & Tony Garnett : dir.ph.: Chris Menges
Video: MGM VHS UMV 10162

[David Bradley](#)
Colin Welland; Lynne Perrie; Freddie Fletcher; Brian Glover; Bob Bowes; Trevor Hasketh;
Eric Bolderson; Geoffrey Banks; Zoe Sunderland; Joe Miller; Joey Kaye

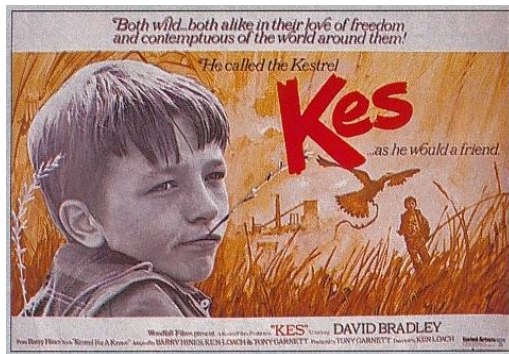
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**Both wild.. Both alike in their love of freedom
and contemptuous of the world around them!
He called the kestrel KES
...as he would a friend**



Contemplating beauty and cruelty – David Bradley

Source: Children in the Movies



Leonard Maltin's Movie and Video Guide 1996 review:

“Refreshingly unsentimental account of a young working-class boy who finds release from the darkness of his life by looking after and training a falcon. This is no typical boy-and-his-pet story; rather, it’s a pointed commentary on the lack of opportunities for the lower classes in England – a theme that’s been a constant in director Loach’s work. ***”

Halliwell's Film Guide review:

“In a northern industrial town, a boy learns about life from the fate of his pet bird. Realistic family drama that is one of the key British films of its period. From the novel "A Kestrel for a Knave" by Barry Hines. ** ”

“There emerges a most discouraging picture of life in the industrial north... infinitely sad in its total implications, it is also immensely funny in much of its detail.” – **Brenda Davies**

“Particularly to be admired is the way in which the dialogue has been kept flowing, as if it were always spontaneous, something proceeding from the moment.” – **Dilys Powell**

The Critics' Film Guide review:

“A small boy (David Bradley) in a north Yorkshire town befriends a kestrel. Funny, enchanting, and ultimately rather depressing. Barry Hines’s story has the effect of marrying Loach’s left-wing ideology and documentary realism to a humanity and humour which anyone can share. David Bradley is moving as the young boy, and there are very funny cameos as his schoolmasters from then unknowns Brian Glover and Colin Welland. The football game, in particular, remains a

classic. Far superior to most "boy and his pet" movies, this is one of the few British masterpieces never to have made much impact in the United States, where audiences seem to have found the accents impenetrable. **8/10**”

“Remarkable.. wonderfully entertaining, and warm and restorative as a hotpot.. Directed.. with.. insight and patience.”

- Robert Ottoway, **Daily Sketch**

The Good Film and Video Guide review:

“Or, Experiences of an English Childhood: the early-morning paper round, reading "Desperate Dan" on the way to school, the soccer match. Billy (Dai Bradley)¹, hasn’t much to look forward to, since traditionally the boys of the family go down the mine; but life is enhanced, if temporarily, by the acquisition of a pet kestrel. With Colin Welland as his English teacher and a script by the director, the producer Tony Garnett, and Barry Hines, who wrote the original novel. They are a mite self-conscious but exceptional talents among British film-makers in caring more for truth than effect or box-office. *** ”

The International Encyclopedia of Film

Entry on Ken Loach:

“...An extension of his television work, his first feature film "**POOR COW**" (1968) presented a grimy and over-flamboyant view of life in the raw. His second film "**KES**" (1968), a far more restrained and deeply affecting indictment of authoritarian apathy and ignorance as they affect a deprived schoolboy, achieved some fame through being initially neglected by the film industry.”

The Sunday Times Guide to Movies on Television review:

“Moving, touching, convincing tale of a boy with a falcon and the awfulness of contemporary (1969 – and it hasn’t improved) secondary education. Ken Loach’s direction is affectionate and understated; producer Tony Garnett’s choice of then unknown actors to support the remarkable boy, David Bradley, was triumphantly justified – Colin Welland, Brian Glover, Lynn Perrie among them. **33** ”

¹ David Bradley later changed his professional name to Dai Bradley, but not in this film.

The Time Out Film Guide review:

“Barry Hines’ novel, about a young schoolboy in Barnsley who attempts to escape the tedium and meaninglessness of his uninviting working-class future by caring for and training a kestrel that he finds, is never allowed to fall into undue sentimentality by Loach’s low-key direction (his first feature). Rather than a tale of a boy and his pet, the film is a moving and lucid examination of the narrow options open to people without money, family stability and support, or education. Terrific performances, illuminated by Chris Menges’s naturalistic but often evocative photography.”



Source: *World Cinema, A Short History*

The United Artists Story note:

“A boy finds freedom from a dull, industrial town by training a kestrel.”

Variety Movie Guide 1993 review:

“Based on a book by Barry Hines film tells of a lad brought up in a drab Yorkshire village. He’s the product of a downbeat home with a permissive mum² and a drunken, bullying brother. He goes to a school where the kids are also bullies and the teaching staff mainly a bunch of aggressive, unsympathetic, impatient robots. Then he finds a baby kestrel (a small falcon) on the moors. He determines to train the kestrel to fly and from then on he’s a loner,

² Nonsense. She is inadequate as a single parent, they mean. But she realises that herself.

obsessed by his new interest which gives him his first purpose in life.

Simply, the film-makers have brought the background of the boy’s life vividly into reality. They have surrounded him with local people (only one or two are minor actors) and turned the spotlight on this black side of British education and home life.

The young hero is brilliantly played by David Bradley, particularly in one memorable scene where an understanding master (Colin Welland) persuades him to tell the class about his kestrel and how he trains it.

Filmed entirely on location, “**KES**” sometimes seems rough and ready, but much of the moorland stuff is superb, and writing, editing, and, above all, Ken Loach’s direction are all done with dedicated affection.”

The Virgin Film Guide review:

“Imagine “**THE 400 BLOWS**” reconfigured around a working class English boy living in a grimy industrial town and you get some idea of the emotional power of this bleakly realistic film adapted from a novel by Barry Hines.

Billy Casper (Bradley) is the product of a broken home and the victim of school bullies. He takes refuge in his comic books and shoplifting. One day he finds a baby kestrel (a small falcon) and becomes determined to raise the bird. He names it “Kes” and promptly steals a book on falconry. He becomes quite adept at his newfound skills and catches the eye of his teacher, Mr Farthing (Welland).

However his relationship with the beautiful bird cannot ameliorate his depressing home life with his brutish older brother, Jud (Fletcher). Nor does it change the fact that his future options are severely limited by lack of class status, money, or family stability and support.

Though it’s a sensitive and heartfelt film, “**KES**” never lapses into the sentimentality that often attends these “a boy and his pet” pictures. Ken Loach’s low-key, clear-eyed direction makes this a fairly unique “children’s film”³. It is aided immensely by Chris Menges’s naturalistic yet evocative cinematography. *** ”

³ This critic has difficulty accepting the existence of children’s films per se! (not that **KES** is one) and half the review is evidently cribbed from Time Out.

13th London Film Festival (1969)
programme review:

"A simple telling of the story - delinquent boy, oppressed by family and school and the prospects of a glum future, seeks self-fulfilment in training a kestrel - might suggest yet another working class saga. But Ken Loach, in adapting Barry Hines' story, has developed a kind of inner realism, derived from both Truffaut and TV documentary; the result is sad, funny and disturbing in turn. The real Barnsley locations and people help a lot; also the verisimilitude with which the script has caught local speech and a way of living.

The influence of "**THE 400 BLOWS**" may be most evident in the numerous school scenes, yet even here Loach makes his own strongly personal comment in the beautifully sustained episode when the boy (a brilliant discovery, David Bradley) describes his adventures with the kestrel.."
John Gillett

NFT bulletin – August 95 – review:

"A stark masterpiece sprung from the bleak backdrop of a south Yorkshire industrial town, this is one of the most uncompromising and moving "kids' films" ever made⁴. "**KES**" provided inspiration for many artists, not least Jarvis Cocker, by showing that a film can be about a particular community, place or pursuit without being parochial or commonplace. The screening will be introduced by Jarvis Cocker from Pulp and, schedule permitting, Ken Loach."

[no listing in "Speelfilm Encyclopedie", "Movies on TV and Videocassette 1988-89", "Rating the Movies (1990)", "TV Times Film & Video Guide 1995" or "Video Movie Guide 1993" – shame on all of them!]

Radio Times reviews:

"British director Ken Loach tells the story of a lonely young Yorkshire boy whose life is transformed by his relationship with his pet kestrel."

⁴ Precisely because it *isn't* a kids' film. ie: it wasn't made with that audience in view.



"Ken Loach seems to acquire a surer mastery of his art with each picture, yet this, one of his earliest features, is still one of his best. Adapted from Barry Hines's "grim up North" novel, it has such a ring of authenticity that you can almost smell the chips. As ever, he coaxes remarkable performances. Outstanding is David Bradley as the teenager who finds solace in a baby kestrel from the pain of his dysfunctional family life [sic] and the torment of school. ***** "

"British director Ken Loach tells the story of a lonely young Yorkshire boy whose life is transformed by his relationship with his pet kestrel."

"Ken Loach's drama starring David Bradley. Billy Casper is a withdrawn 14-year old boy who lives on a northern council estate with his mother and stepbrother. He shows little interest in his schoolwork and is ambivalent about his future. One day, however, his life gains a sense of purpose when he finds a kestrel nest from which he takes a fledgling to raise as a pet. ***** "

"The touching story of a lonely boy and his love for Kes, a kestrel fledgling which he raises as a pet."

...and when the book was read on Radio 4:

“Barry Hines’s “Kes” is read by Stephen Tompkinson, star of “**Ballykissangel**”. “I first read it when I was about 12, ” Tompkinson says, “It was the first book that came alive for me because I was from a similar area. It really registered with me as a novel and a film... I hope I’ve done it justice.” ”



Bradley) suffers bullying at home and at school and faces a bleak future. He finds a young falcon on the moors and sets about training it. The experience of caring for another creature enlarges and brightens his outlook on life, offering new hope.”

“When a lonely Yorkshire youngster finds a baby kestrel, his bleak existence is suddenly transformed.”

What’s On TV reviews:

“There’s a rawness and a sense of spontaneity about “**KES**” which cuts through all the usual Northern kitchen-sink-drama clichés to reveal something more than just the usual rough collection of noisy arguments and nosey neighbours. David Bradley is completely believable as the sullen, sensitive youth who finds an abandoned kestrel⁵, but just as important are the bleak background details of his life: his selfish mother, Lynne Perrie, cruel older brother and the grim school (where Colin Welland is the most understanding of his teachers) in which everything seems to be geared towards failure rather than success. A modern classic. 3333 ”

“Social drama set in northern England. An 11-year old working class boy finds some escape from the routine of school and an unhappy home life by training a kestrel chick. Part of the “Beastly Xmas” season.”

“Director Ken Loach’s acclaimed naturalistic drama about an 11-year old working class boy in Barnsley who finds some escape from his unhappy home life by taming and training a kestrel.”

Sunday Times review:

“Ken Loach’s well-acted masterpiece is set in a grim Northern town where a boy (David

Daily Mirror notes:

“Classic British drama starring David Bradley and Colin Welland.”

“Unhappy Yorkshire lad finds release in taming a kestrel. Unusually harsh view of industrial life “oop north” redeemed by touches of hard-bitten humour. With David Bradley. *** ”

⁵ No. He steals the fledgling from its nest.



Bully-proof headwear

Source: The Moving Picture Boy

Children in the Movies review:

“ **"KES"** is a tragic love story about a schoolboy Billy Casper (David Bradley) and a kestrel that he finds, adopts, nurtures and trains. Formerly Billy has been involved in acts of delinquency and petty theft: the hawk has had the effect of socializing him, or at least keeping him out of trouble. "He never knocks around with anybody else... he's mad over it", says one schoolboy when the teacher, Mr Farthing (Colin Welland), is pressing Billy to talk about something that has happened to him and the subject of the kestrel is raised.

He begins to talk hesitantly about the bird to the class, but as he warms to his subject and he feels the attention, absorption and even exhilaration of his audience, his spirit takes flight. it is the working-class schoolboy's equivalent of Henry V's speech at Agincourt. Momentarily he is king of the classroom, imparting information, answering questions, inspiring by example.

It is a beautifully acted, written and directed scene, but it also owes much of its impact to its context. It is not only the first time in the film that Billy has found his voice, but also the first time he has discovered an audience that listens. It makes a telling contrast to the scene that has just preceded it in the office of the headmaster, who has launched a tirade against his young miscreants - "Yours is the generation that never listens" - but who himself does not listen to an innocent youngster who has merely brought a message and who is about to be included in the punishment.

Also Billy's classroom speech is in the context of a lesson about fact and fiction, a detail that is a quick reminder of the celebrated opening school scene of Dickens's "Hard Times": "Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else and root out everything else." Like "Hard Times", **"KES"** is an indictment of an educational system tending to uniformity, utilitarianism and a mecha-nization of the human spirit.

What Billy has to say in this school lesson contains its own implicit lesson about schooling, and a system that restricts rather than releases potential. Remember that this school scene, in which Billy discloses the most fundamental interest of his life, is taking place only two weeks before he is due to leave.

Without straining for symbolic significance, the film invites all kinds of inferences from Billy's relationship with the kestrel and his devotion to it. In the same way that the pigeons he cares for suggest a gentler side to Marlon Brando's hero in **"ON THE WATERFRONT"** (1954), so too does the kestrel suggest a sensitivity in Billy quite unperceived by family and teachers.

Whereas Billy previously sought relief in his comics from the oppressive industrial greyness around him ("I'm not goin' down pit" is his one constant refrain), now he finds it in the kestrel's natural grace, a contrast that places **"KES"** firmly in the tradition of English Romanticism and particularly in the tradition of an anti-industrial work of art such as D. H. Lawrence's *"The Rainbow"*.

The flight of the kestrel not only somehow expresses Billy's rebellion against the bleakly limited future into which his soul is being wedged by his elders, but also offers Billy a glimpse of the existence of another kind of life, one that is instinctual and free. It represents Billy's mute, inexpressible aspirations, and the brutal killing of it by his brother (because Billy has failed to place a winning bet for him at the betting shop) implies the death of something more than just the bird. Billy finds it in the rubbish-bin finally, a brutal metaphor for the fate of his aspirations and for the social scrap-heap that his schooling has implied is all he is fit for.

In the novel Hines strains for tragic eloquence in the final pages (I am reminded of F. R. Leavis's criticism of the final pages of *"The Rainbow"*, as if Lawrence were looking for somewhere to stop): the film's terseness is much more effective. Billy buries it quietly - the burial perhaps of his hopes and certainly of a grief inside him too deep for any words.

The killing of the kestrel brings together two other sub-themes of the film that have been a disturbing undercurrent in Billy's life: violence and injustice, at school and at home. Billy is subjected to constant physical threats from his brutish elder brother, Jud (Freddie Fletcher).

A counterpart of Jud appears in the form of the sports master (Brian Glover), also blond and loutish. He recalls Woody Allen's aphorism in **"ANNIE HALL"** (1977): "Those who can't do, teach: those who can't teach, teach gym." He also shows a relish for bullying disturbingly close to sadism. Mr Farthing's status as the most sympathetic adult in the film is confirmed when he rescues Billy from being bullied by a bigger boy.

School and family are similarly implicated in the theme of injustice. The unfairness of school life is underlined at a number of points in the film: when a boy is randomly picked out from a pack as the scapegoat culprit who has been caught coughing during assembly; when Billy is punished for understandably dozing off during school hours; and unforgettably in that lingering close-up of a smartly dressed schoolboy in the headmaster's office, tears forming in his eyes after being caned when he was only delivering a message, and his only protest being a single word, "Sir...".

Equally moving as a concise image of life's unfairness is the scene at home after Billy has discovered Kes in the dustbin and demands that his mother give Jud "a good hiding". "What you goin' to do to him? I want you to do summat to him." It is a desperate shout from a vulnerable generation for some form of adult authority to administer some form of appropriate justice. But no help is forthcoming.

Perhaps this summary gives the impression that **"KES"** is a more depressing film than it actually is, though I do think it is the equal of such neo-realist masterpieces as **"BICYCLE THIEVES"** and **"UMBERTO D"** in giving the texture of impoverished lives and evoking sympathy for the desperate situation of the insulted and injured in our society. If this drama-doc., ciné-vérité method has its limitations, it is that it reproduces the external world so authentically and naturalistically that it implies a kind of status quo. Far from converting people, it might even confirm them in their prejudices.

"KES" is so fierce in its indictment of the assembly-line attitude to education (I like the detail of the employment officer's getting Billy's name wrong simply because Billy has entered out of alphabetical order) that it could be interpreted as a diatribe against comprehensive education, which I doubt was the intention.

The scenes involving Jud, particularly his night out and his unlikely prowling of the school grounds in search of Billy, are amongst the film's weakest and least convincing. Against that one can applaud the film's undoubted improvement of the novel's structure by shifting the order of its sequences, and the wonderful humour of the school football sequence, with its parody "**Match of the Day**" captions, its air of fantasy, and where for once calculated injustice comes unstuck. The games teacher's blatant attempts to rig the match still fail through Billy's intervention (his incompetence as a goalkeeper). It has the equivalent feeling of Antoine's small victory over the teacher in "**THE 400 BLOWS**", but will similarly be followed by a blow directed at the boy.

Where the film is strongest is in its depiction of an inarticulate boy's soul. Played with a perkily matter-of-fact, beaten-but-not-defeated air by David Bradley, Billy is a lad who cannot define his own aspirations and what one might call his own spirituality but who briefly finds a kestrel to express them for him. Other Loach films like "**BLACK JACK**" (1979), with its Dickensian sense of social injustice, and "**LOOKS AND SMILES**" (1982), with its desolate look at youth unemployment, show a similar concern for young people. Yet none has the eloquence or magic of "**KES**."

TheMoving Picture Boy entry on Bradley:

"The unforgettable Billy Casper of Ken Loach's tragic film "**KES**" had one of the bleakest faces in the cinema's history. Its real-life owner was David Bradley, son of a coal-miner and a seamstress, and 14½ at the time of shooting. The film was made in and around Barnsley, David's own home town and that of Barry Hines, on whose novel "Kestrel for a Knave" it was based.

As a boy at odds with family, school and job-orientated society - not speaking the same language, though sharing a dialect - David was superb, and as often funny as sad. His blank

interview with the careers master and his uncoordinated attempts at goal-keeping take place in the same stupor of alienation. He can only come alive, beyond reach of satanic mills, in the countryside where wild things live - and so meets the little predator that teaches him, for a time, about freedom and beauty. (At the expense of mice, with whom Billy might even better have identified.)

David Bradley was now fired with ambition to act, and his immense hit in "**KES**" led immediately to offers, though it was two or three years before he made another film. He got a lead in Yorkshire Television's serial "**The Flaxton Boys**" (70), and worked on stage at the Leeds Playhouse. Then in 1971 - henceforth known as Dai Bradley to avoid confusion with an older actor called David - he joined the National Theatre company, and was to stay with them for five years, during which time he played in Shakespeare, Wedekind and O'Casey among others, and in 1974 took over the lead in Peter Schaffer's "Equus", a role which won him awards when the production toured South Africa and the USA.

Television appearances had continued, and in the cinema he had a lead with the Children's Film Foundation in "**THE SEAWEED CHILDREN**" (73), and a small part in "**ZULU DAWN**" (US/NL 78), before getting another big one in Anthony Page's "**ABSOLUTION**" (78) - unfortunately a fairly ludicrous thriller set in a Catholic school. (In which, I regret to say, Bradley murders Dominic Guard, star of "**THE GO-BETWEEN**".) He was also in a remake of "**ALL QUIET ON THE WESTERN FRONT**" (79) and "**THE GLORY GLORY DAYS**" (83).

More recently, he has been acting on stage in South Africa, including the leads in "Billy Liar" (a role he had already played at Nottingham), "For King and Country" and "The Wound" (which he co-directed)."

One of the essential titles to this archive. Masterpiece? Perhaps. But "**KES**" is unquestionably a little gem, hard-edged and translucent, with an unflinching eye for the squalid prospects of its central figure and the callous absurdities of life in a sixties state school. I grew up on a northern council estate, and attended a sixties state school there, so it has an uncomfortable familiarity. "**KES**" has all the honesty and directness of the best in European cinema - its people are very real, its predicaments believable, its resolution devoid of all sentiment or false hope. It was never going to do good box office in the States.

To me there is little humour, except of the most sardonic kind, in "**KES**", because it is scarcely overstated at all. The portrait of the peevish, strutting sports teacher (Brian Glover), who sees every football lesson as a testimonial match to his own talent, is spot on – I had one exactly like him. The headmaster caning the small boy (who has only been sent to him with a message) along with a job lot of smokers and other miscreants selected more or less at random, is not funny in the least. Arbitrary beatings were a daily fact of life in such schools. That adults can snigger at all this from the vantage point of their own social status is to miss the message, I think.

One NFT critic above erroneously decried this as a children's film. If only children's films *were ever* as uncompromising as this. If only "**Grange Hill**" or "**Degrassi Junior High**" shone the same searching light on the lives of kids, and the adults who impact on them directly. But children's series like that were in the business of social programming – just like Billy Casper's school – and could not allow reality to get in their way.

Loach's minimalist style – which threatens to be ripped off by the modern appetite for so-called "drama-docs", or "faction" – occasionally exposes itself when the banality of the dialogue sounds nevertheless *too* scripted. His actors were not the seasoned performers of "**Coronation Street**", and often cannot carry off the required air of spontaneity. The headmaster's remonstrations are one instance, or the conversations at the working men's social, or Billy's sniping with the papershop owner – they *seem* like fly-on-the-wall situations, except where members of the public have been given lines to say. And that feel of quasi-amateurism (in the best sense of the word) undermines the narrative flow. (Sorry, Dilys.)

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See also "**BADKONAK-E SEFID**" and "**BASHU**" - both recent Iranian films, and subject index under **ARAB WORLD / MIDDLE EAST**.