



i always
wanted to be a
Tenenbaum

by Maria Ilona Moore

The first time I saw *The Royal Tenenbaums*, I was a teenager full of angst and misunderstanding. It was my first introduction to the world of Wes Anderson and it brought me into the warm embrace of a family of films that has become a steadfast support system for me.

At 16, *The Royal Tenenbaums* was unlike anything I'd seen before. It was so vibrant, so attentive to style and detail, so perfectly formed that even with a running time of nearly two hours it didn't feel long. The film's melancholy appealed to a sadness I felt but hadn't yet named, and I was glad to have finally found a type of humour that felt right to me – stilted and tinged with darkness.

There was something so awkward, yet impossibly smooth, about the film, too. It embraced weirdness in a way I hadn't experienced before and, as a gangly teen uncomfortable in her body and her town and herself, I craved films which portrayed the lives of odd, flawed characters, in a way that didn't beg them to change in a make-over montage. *The Royal Tenenbaums* certainly did that.

The Tenenbaums are far from the perfect family. They are undeniably privileged and impossibly broken. Margot, Richie and Chaz, the adult Tenenbaum children, flounder and stumble, searching for a familial connection that just doesn't exist. Their mother, Etheline, is the only member who seems to have it together, perhaps due in part to the stabilising presence of her partner Henry Sherman, who remains a stoic constant amid the swirling chaos of the Tenenbaums' destruction. Unlike Eli Cash, Henry doesn't want to be a Tenenbaum, but he will stand by them anyway. As her children return to the nest one by one, Etheline looks on with the weariness of a mother unable to help her children and feeling that their faults are, to some degree, down to her.

While we don't have the same problems at the Tenenbaums (thank god), my family is somewhat unconventional. Growing up I didn't see my family dynamic reflected anywhere, not in the real families I knew, nor in the fictional ones. This is not to say it was a bad

family life (it wasn't), it was just different to those of my friends. My mum and dad's divorce didn't fit with the representations of broken families I saw around me, my parents didn't seem to do the 'typical' parent things, and in our house my mum, step-dad, sister and I all had different surnames, which seemed to mark as disjointed even when we weren't.

Of course, I now know that all families are bizarre and the perfect-on-the-outside ones are, quite often, the most messed up. But as a teenager, I just wanted to be like everyone else. I felt out of place, and I recognised something of myself in the Tenenbaums. When the film ended on that first viewing, I immediately wanted more, and I found it in Wes Anderson's entire back catalogue.

Relationships dominate Anderson's films; they are usually familial and always complicated. My love for the Tenenbaums eventually led me to the Whitmans (*The Darjeeling Limited*), the Zissous (*The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*) and the Foxes (*Fantastic Mr Fox*). It led me to found families – the 'A' and 'B' squad we choose to share our adventures with – and it led me to stories that were ridiculous yet rooted in reality. Anderson's characters may seem caricaturish at times, but their motivations stem from deeply universal themes which keep them relatable; love, friendship, family, death, loneliness, longing.

Like *The Royal Tenenbaums*, *The Darjeeling Limited* deals with three adult siblings. The Whitman brothers are unbound after the death of their father, although we suspect their unravelling began long before this. They wander through their individual lives lost and unhappy until Francis, the eldest, takes them on a journey across India where they continue to be lost and unhappy, but at least they are together.

Like most siblings, their relationship to each other is fraught – they love each other but, as Jack says during one fight, they might also “mace you in face”. Anyone with siblings can probably understand the conflict of simultaneously hating and loving someone; under all that anger there is the immovable bond of coming from the same place. That's what I got from watching Jack whine, Peter sigh, and Francis order food for his brothers before they can get a word in (we later see this is a trait he's picked up from his absent mother,

and his way of providing a parental presence as the eldest brother). The more we learn of the Whitmans, the less surprising it is that Jack, Peter and Francis are terrible at communication and completely obnoxious to each other. Their lack of stable relationships divide them, while also being the reason they need each other. Who better to help fill that void inside you, than the people you grew up with?

Unfortunately, our families often fail us – whether this is through their faults or, as is the case of Max Fischer in *Rushmore*, through our own desire to distance ourselves, out of embarrassment or empowerment. Anderson portrays emotionally and physically absent parents again and again in his films. They are incapable and self-absorbed like Steve Zissou, hiding in a convent like the Whitman brothers' mother, or simply unable to understand what their child is going through, like Suzy Bishop's parents in *Moonrise Kingdom*. Finding their parents lacking, the children of Anderson's films seek comfort externally, as do many of us in our own lives. We find people beyond the confines of our blood relatives, people to love us despite everything and to provide for us when our own family are unable to. These are the families we choose to reveal ourselves to and in return we are (hopefully) gifted with a group of people who don't care about genes, they just care deeply about us as individuals.

Throughout my teens and early twenties, I turned to Wes Anderson's broken families for support. I once joked that I wished there was one of his films I hadn't seen, which I could keep safely in a 'break in case of emergency' box until I needed it the most. There was, unfortunately, no secret Wes Anderson film, but repeat watches of my favourites saw me through tumultuous times at university and my first time living away from home, through the loneliness of moving to new cities and being unemployed, through self-doubt, insecurities and a broken heart. They provided a much-needed escape from reality while still being grounded in something familiar enough to reflect my own trials and tribulations. These days I don't watch the films as much as I once did, but I know they'll always be there for me when I need them.