



FROM THE WIP

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Over the Hills and Far Away: A Family Treks Across Mongolia to Help their Autistic Son



by Jessica Mosby
- USA -

The premise of the new documentary film *Over the Hills and Far Away* is straight from the handbook of the American bourgeoisie: Journalist father and professor mother take their young autistic son on a summer vacation to Mongolia where they horseback ride across the country meeting with shamans – all in an attempt to help cure their son after Western medicine has failed. But the film should not be written off as a vanity project conceived by people with money to burn; it is actually a very heartfelt and realistic look at one family's struggle to confront their son's autism in an unconventional way. *Over the Hills and Far Away* premiered at this year's [Sundance Film Festival](#) in the U.S. Documentary Competition. A companion book, *The Horse Boy*, will be published this Spring.

Rupert Isaacson and Kristin Neff were bona fide globetrotters (they met in India) before having their son Rowan and settling in Texas. They were living the American dream, until, at the age of two and a half, Rowan completely withdrew from his parents and stopped talking. He was then diagnosed with autism. Isaacson, who narrates the film, likens the diagnosis to "being hit in the face with a baseball bat."

For the next two years Isaacson and Neff consulted doctors who prescribed conventional autism medication, but Rowan's endless tantrums (sometimes lasting hours) and incontinence left them hopeless. A short clip of an inconsolable Rowan flailing, screaming, and crying on the bathroom floor as his helpless parents try to comfort him was almost too much for me to watch. I then understood why Isaacson and Neff were willing to try anything, including traveling halfway around the world, to help their son.



• Rowan and his friend Tamoo in Mongolia.
Photograph by Justin Jin. •

Autism is a developmental disability that affects social interaction and communication, and yet no one knows definitively what causes it. The number of children diagnosed with autism is skyrocketing; some estimates put the number of American autism cases at four million in the next ten years. The film does a nice job of balancing the medical intricacies of autism with the more personal narrative. Interviews with experts – such as Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen of Cambridge University and Dr. Temple Grandin of Colorado State University, who is autistic herself – are interwoven with footage of the family's Mongolian adventure and their pre-trip life at home.



• Rowan's mother Kristin is desperate to find a way to help her autistic son. Photograph by Justin Hennard. •

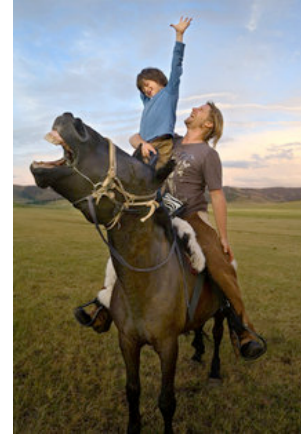
Isaacson, a shaggy blond with a charming accent who also produced the film, conceived the idea for the Mongolia trip after watching Rowan interact with animals, especially horses. When Rowan rides a horse with his father, he is a completely different child: calm, articulate, and happy. This special connection is undeniable as animals are exceptionally docile in Rowan's presence. Isaacson had extensive experience with shamans from his years of traveling and writing about Africa, and at one point trained horses professionally, so he wanted to find a place that combined horses and shamanic healing. Mongolia was the perfect destination – its state religion is shamanism and it is the birthplace of horseback riding.

The film's multiple angles – autism, alternative medicine, and travel – create a complex story, while conceding that such a radical approach is not for everyone. Neff, a pretty California girl with a toothy smile, isn't even sure if her husband's plan is a good

idea; she initially calls the trip “absurd,” especially because she doesn’t particularly like horses. And even when they do make it to the land of Genghis Khan, Isaacson questions his decision during a particularly trying day with Rowan, “Did I really have his best interests at heart here?”

After meeting with a few shamans, Rowan does make some noticeable cognitive advances, but he also has a few meltdowns. The family traipses on, horseback riding into the Siberian forest in search of an illusive and powerful reindeer-riding shaman called Ghoste. Along the way they have fun singing “Over the Hills and Far Away” (the film takes its name from the traditional English song) and joking about “Code Brown,” a nickname for Rowan’s incontinence. The parents don’t believe that the trip will “cure” Rowan’s autism; rather, they hope that it will alleviate some of his more debilitating symptoms. For instance, Neff wants Rowan to accept using a toilet.

Over the Hills and Far Away was made on a very limited budget. Director Michel Orion Scott and two crew members filmed with a handheld camera, often on horseback. But the camera work is so steady, the sound so clear, and the panoramic shots of the Mongolian countryside so breathtaking that it is hard to imagine that an entire Hollywood crew was not following along. The pace of the 93 minute film is very well done too; Editor Rita K. Sanders maintains the adventure’s momentum as the family’s story organically develops and suspense builds about the lasting effect of the trip on Rowan.



• Rowan is completely transformed when he rides a horse, here with his father in Mongolia. Photograph by Justin Jin. •

Isaacson and Neff let it all hang out. In Texas their house is messy, and in Mongolia they’re filmed at their emotional and physical breaking point. In the age of reality television, with its heavily staged and carefully edited drama, it is very refreshing to watch real people confront genuinely difficult situations in a raw and truthful way. What makes Isaacson and Neff so likeable (and what really makes the film so endearing) is that they are willing to do anything for their son; at one point, both parents are gamely whipped by shamans, and then Neff is instructed to drop her pants and cleanse her crotch – the crew films this ritual, and her naked backside.

Over the Hills and Far Away is billed as a documentary about autism, horses, and Mongolia. Yet that classification doesn’t really give the film its due, because at its heart, it is an extremely accessible and beautiful story about a family working together to overcome a problem.

Jessica's review is part of this month's [focus on disability issues](#). - Ed.

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About the Author

Jessica Mosby is a writer and critic living in Oakland, California. In the rare moments when she's not traveling