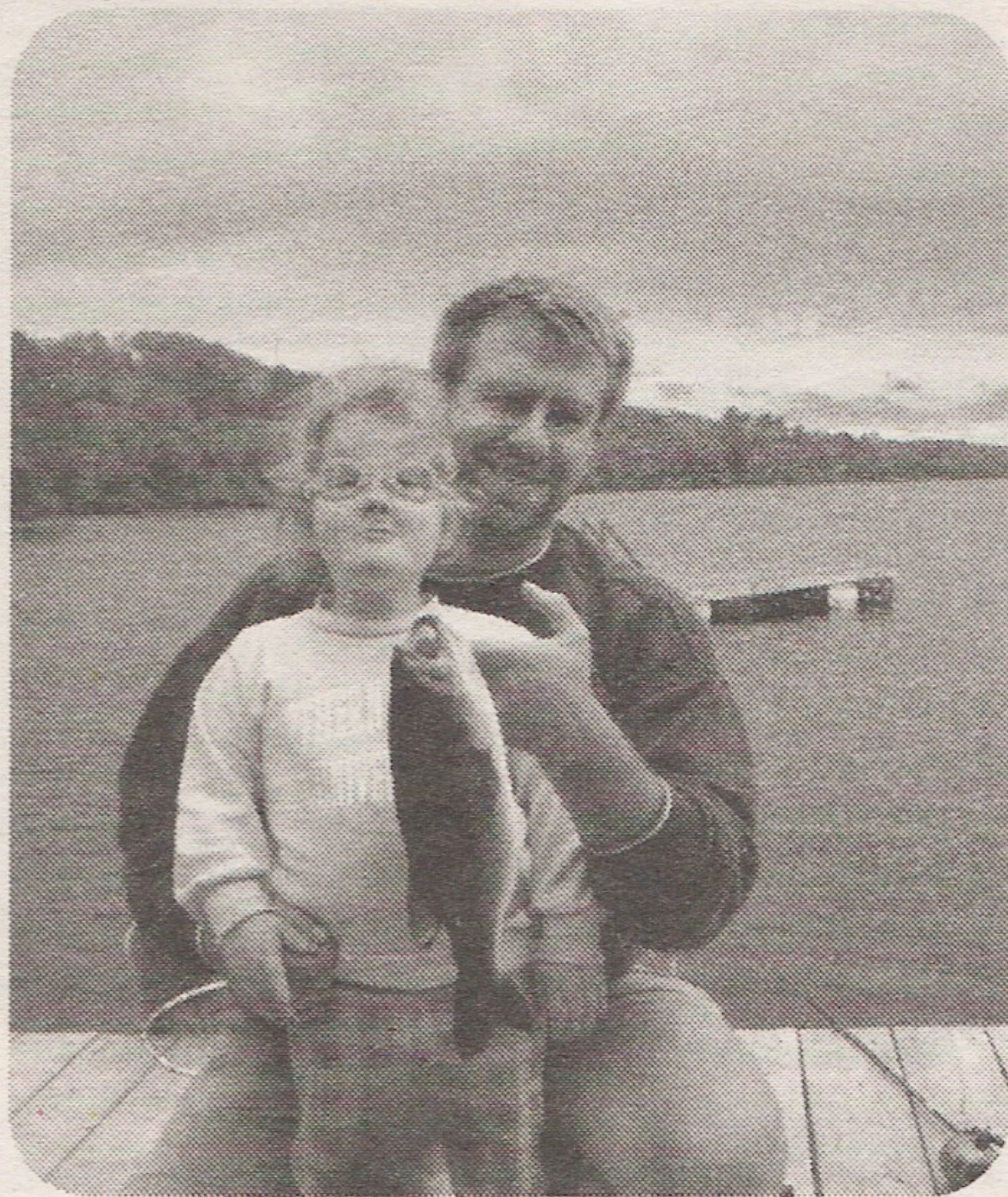


## HIGHLIGHT

**A Life Without Pain**

The Bell, Sunday at 5:00 p.m.

Movies about exceptions to the rule have been the rule in movies almost since their invention, and so it remains. In the digital age, filmmaking may have become less expensive, but not less competitive: The unusual story is still a relatively affordable means for the film financier to promise escapism or merely attract attention—often at the expense of *truth*, assuming we choose to define it as the rule and not the exception. By following her documentary about voluntary amputees (*Whole*) with this documentary about kids who are physically impervious to pain, St. Paul-based filmmaker Melody Gilbert shows no sign of resisting her own considerable challenge: to explore the nature of nonfiction as it relates to the drama of lives so bizarre that we're inevitably compelled to watch, but not necessarily to relate. (How do we identify with those who can't feel? Don't we as moviegoers long for the sense of how ordinary people like us deal with pain day in and day out?) *A Life Without Pain* is indeed a singular sensation, although its subjects are threefold: Miriam, a seven-year-old living in Norway, bit off her tongue when she was a baby and more recently walked around for weeks with a broken leg because she didn't know what had happened; Gabby, a three-year-old in Minnesota, has gone blind in one eye from excessive rubbing (now she wears protective goggles); and, on the brighter side, 10-year-old Jamilah of Germany has had enough experience with Congenital Insensitivity to Pain (CIPA) to minimize the frequency of cuts and bruises. Of course we feel for these children, in no small part because they themselves *can't*



feel. But Gilbert's film is principally an intellectual experience—almost Cronenbergian in the way that its body horror haunts the imagination most of all. Here—as always in cinema, but more profoundly—we're made painfully aware of our inability as viewers to make ourselves felt by the people onscreen: The obstacle to our connection with Gilbert's subjects isn't their insensitivity (or ours) so much as it is the medium itself, which has the power to stimulate some of the senses, but not all. If the feeling of identification comes even less easily in Gilbert's extraordinary work than it does in Cronenberg's, it could owe to the simple fact that fiction is more easily manipulated than truth. Or is it? In the end, the larger reality of *A Life Without Pain* is that movies of every kind bring us in touch with the Other's experience—and they don't. Gilbert will be present at the Bell to introduce the screening and answer questions afterward. —Rob Nelson