

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

In This Issue

04 Meaningless and its meaning

Preston Jones argues that from a Christian perspective, life simply doesn't make much sense. An exercise in discernment.

06 What makes a good movie good?

Some people get frustrated when films raise questions they don't answer. Greg Grooms says that's part of the reason *Crash* is such good film.

10 Anxiety in search of love

Fiona Apple has released a new CD, *Extraordinary Machine*, which allows us to listen to her heart—and to see life clearer as a result.

12 The quintessential Gen-X Musical

The rock musical *Rent* has been capturing audiences for years; now a film version gives us a chance to see why it has touched so many so deeply.

14 Gospel and resurrection

Dorothy Sayers objects to how the story of Jesus is told, and John Garvey explains why resurrection makes life more real.

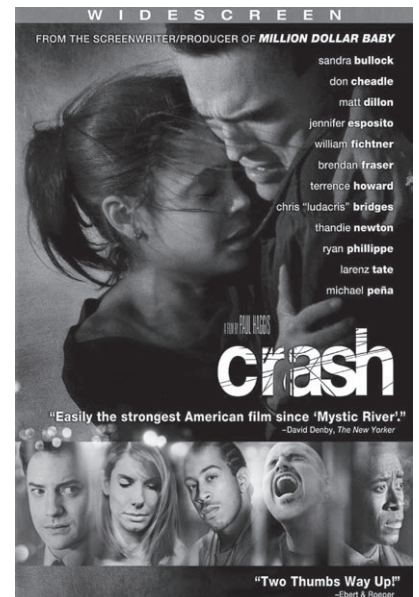
02 Editor's Note

03 Dialogue

16 On the Web

15 Denis Haack's playlist

Six CDs that have been on REPEAT, repeatedly, in his office over the last few weeks. Page 9—*No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* briefly noted.



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Editor's Note



An Unseemly Cheer

Unless you've been visiting another planet, you'll have noticed the fanfare accompanying the release of the film version of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*.

Although I haven't seen it yet, the initial

reports are good, and I'm glad for that. "It's a film about Christianity," we've cheered. "C. S. Lewis was a Christian and Aslan is really Jesus." At least that's what our news magazine editors and talk-radio pundits have proclaimed, repeatedly and loudly, for all to hear.

I am aware that many Christians feel they have little to cheer about, especially on the cultural front. Finally there is a film we can feel proud about, and so we've cheered. That's very understandable, I guess. It's understandable, that is, if our primary concern in life is winning some points in America's culture wars.

But consider another possibility. Consider what our response should be if the gospel, not the culture war, is our primary concern. Remember that America is both clearly post-Christian, and increasingly pluralistic, and that much of the postmodern generation thinks it has seen and heard what we stand for, and finds it wanting. That our desire to evangelize is primarily a power play, a way to gain political and cultural influence until we are able to impose our standards on society. Consider that we don't live in Jerusalem—to use a biblical metaphor—but in Babylon.

Consider that possibility, and then reflect on this question: In Babylon, how would our cheering about *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* likely be interpreted?

If the underlying message of the film, like

the book, is the Christian gospel, why not let the film (and book) stand on its own? Why not trust God enough to allow the Holy Spirit to use a great, subtly creative and powerful story to awaken non-Christians to the Story of the gospel? I have no doubt that the gospel can turn Babylon upside down—it shook Rome to its foundations, and it has lost none of its power in the intervening centuries. Is it too much to suggest, however, that when an imaginative, winsome presentation of the gospel is about to be given in Babylon, it just might not be the best strategy to blow trumpets and shout, "Hey, non-Christians, this isn't just about a lion, it's about Jesus! It really is!"?

All those headlines in "Christian" news magazines and talk shows on "Christian" radio are probably great for increasing subscriptions and garnering donations, but I doubt they are very effective in gaining a thoughtful hearing for the gospel.

Now, I know that God can, in his gracious providence, overrule our folly. I also know that the gospel is the power of God, and that his grace will not be thwarted in a fallen world. I know that the Father is bringing all things to their appointed end in Christ, even if I can't see evidence of the progress, and even if the church at times seems to erect barriers to Christ's Kingdom. I know all that. And I believe it. But I also believe we bear responsibility to be faithful.

The next time something like *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* comes along, let's do things differently. Let's inform the editors and pundits that if they cheer, we'll stop writing checks. Instead, let's pray. Let's allow the story/Story work its magic in opening hearts to grace. And let's be available for conversations where we listen, ask thoughtful questions, and warmly speak truth in love. ■

—Denis Haack

Dialogue

re: Halloween



Send e-mail to:

letters@ransomfellowship.org

You are invited to take part in *Critique's* Dialogue. Address all correspondence to:

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or e-mail:
letters@ransomfellowship.org

Unfortunately, we are unable to respond personally to all correspondence received, but each one is greatly appreciated. We reserve the right to edit letters for length.

Please repent
Let me ask you this: Who is God's enemy? Who does God warn us of, to be careful because this enemy roams about, seeking whom he can devour? Satan, that's who. He is the god of this world, the great deceiver. Do you really think that God wants us to dress up like Satan? What does the Bible say about witchcraft as well? Or divination? Or the summoning of spirits. All these are an abomination unto God. Do you really think He would want us to parade around in ghoulish makeup or to look like a ghost or a vampire? The theme of Halloween is DARKNESS. It is Satan's high day and I've read books by former Satanists who say that Satan LOVES Halloween, that it is his day! The witches and warlocks sacrifice animals and babies to Satan on this day. God warns us to have no dealings with the things of darkness or to mimic evil. If you think it's o.k. to celebrate it, that God approves of this, you are in deep trouble because you're spiritually dead. I beseech you to get down on your knees in prayer, ask God's forgiveness, repent, then turn from this evil. Do some research about it as well. But most of all, allow God to teach you what Halloween is really about.

Take care,

**Gail
via email**

Denis Haack responds
Though you didn't mention it, Gail, I assume you are writing about James Jordan's piece, "Halloween: A Distinctly Christian Holiday," that appeared in *Critique*, and now is posted on Ransom's web site (http://ransomfellowship.org/D_Halloween.html). Since you asked us questions, let me respond with two of my own.

First, did you read our posting of Jordan's

piece carefully? We published it as "an exercise in discernment," words which are printed under the title. And we included discussion questions to help Christians think through the ideas Jordan raises. Ransom Fellowship exists to help Christians develop skill in thinking Christianly, so that they can apply the truth of Scripture to every aspect of life. Which is why we not only publish articles explaining how we can grow in being discerning, but exercises like this one so people can work on sharpening their ability in being discerning as the people of God. Thus, the piece is not necessarily an expression of what we/Ransom believes, but an effort on our part to stimulate Christians to not be reactionary but instead be able to think clearly, and speak/live truth in love. A good deal of your email asserts things that Jordan's piece never states—your arguments would be more convincing if you dealt with what he actually wrote. To mishandle someone's position, even if he is mistaken, treats him lightly. He may be wrong, but he is still a person made in God's image, whose ideas should be taken seriously by anyone claiming to care for truth.

And for my second question: Do you really believe the tone of your email would lead anyone to repentance? It could be that you dashed it off quickly, as is easy to do with email, which is one reason we need to use the technology with care. On the other hand, there is a mistaken belief in Christian circles that speaking with heat, sharply, and in a commanding tone is "prophetic." Even if we assume for the moment that the biblical prophets did speak in such a tone, those of us who are not his specially called, inspired prophets should speak instead with care, compassion, and humility. ■

Meaninglessness

I stared at the computer screen and the depressing email message it conveyed, and I wrote a response and deleted it. Then I began another response and deleted it. Then I went home. My wife said: “None of this stuff will matter in ten years.”

Of course, my wife knows that part of “this stuff” *will* matter—how I respond to it, the attitude I decide to take on, the extent to which I do or

don’t brood. But the actual professional disagreement that tugged me into the mud a few days before I sat down to write these words won’t

matter. Everyone will have moved on to other things. Justice and wisdom may prevail in time, or they may not. I’m pretty sure that I will lose the argument

I don’t see how anyone could read the Bible and come away thinking that it paints a picture of a world that makes sense.

that led to the depressing email. But my wife is right: In the big scheme of things, *it* doesn’t really matter. What matters is whether I am faithfully using—or at least genuinely trying to faithfully use—the gifts God has given to me. Everything else gets burned (I Cor. 3:13).

This point came home to me when I was in the national archives in Canada doing doctoral research. I kept seeing a newspaper column by a guy who, appar-

ently, had been a popular pundit in the 1970s. I had read dozens of books about Canada by that time, but I had never heard of the writer. He was a star in his day. He got invited

to parties for big shots. But an eager and budding historian who was writing a dissertation on Canadian history had never heard of him. His hundreds of thousands

of words had slipped into a memory hole.

Not long after this I had a meeting with a member of Canada’s Parliament. I walked out of it feeling like I needed a shower. This guy was so hollow, so shallow, it astonished me that he could have been repeatedly elected to high office. Yet he could call the newspapers any time and get his name in print. He was on TV all the time. He met with world leaders.

Being a graduate student at the time, I was wondering what I wanted to do when I grew up. I had this feeling that I wanted to be “important.” But then I kept meeting people who held supposedly important jobs and I was so unimpressed by them. Many of them seemed mediocre compared to others I knew who really were talented and deserving but didn’t kiss up to people—or they paid attention to students instead of hammering out academic articles no one reads (so they didn’t get tenure)—or they weren’t slick

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate response to this article? Why do you think you responded this way?
2. “What matters is whether I am faithfully using—or at least genuinely trying to faithfully use—the gifts God has given to me,” Jones says. “Everything else gets burned (I Cor. 3:13).” Do you agree? Why or why not? Does this text teach this?
3. “This is something that I appreciate so much about the Bible,” Dr Jones writes. “It takes seriously the fact that this world is insane.” Later he adds, “I don’t see how anyone could read the Bible and come away thinking that it paints a picture of a world that makes sense.” Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. As Jones notes, Christians usually argue that life is significant and that it is less than biblical to assert that things are meaningless or that life is ridiculous. That we shouldn’t speak of life in such terms for the sake of our witness—if we use such terms we will imply that Christianity is not the ultimate source of meaning, and we will be using a bad apologetic in a post-Christian world which is searching for true meaning in life. How would you respond? Could it be that Dr Jones’ approach could be a better apologetic for the Christian faith in a post-Christian world?
5. Where do you most intensely feel/see the meaninglessness, the ridiculousness of life?

Questions continued on next page...

and its meaning

and good at the “networking” game. And all along, as I sat in classes taught by some weak, some good, and some very good professors, I remembered that the best teacher I ever had taught at a nightmare of a high school and, in the evenings, at a no-name junior college.

All this pointed me to a basic fact, namely, that human life is ridiculous. Maybe this idea makes some Christians nervous. They want to believe that if there is meaning in life greater than what we can create on our own, then life must make sense. But life doesn't make sense. I don't see how anyone could read the Bible and come away thinking that it paints a picture of

a world that makes sense. If the idea that God came into the world via a teenage virgin living in a backwater of the Roman Empire isn't nutty, then I'm not sure what is. St. Paul knew this: “God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise” (I Cor. 1:27)

A world that makes sense wouldn't need redemption. And people trapped in worldly nuttiness wouldn't recognize the Gospel for the good thing it is if it made complete sense, for if it made sense it would seem so out of order in a wacky world. This is why Paul says that the Gospel is wisdom and foolishness—not one or the other: both.

This is something that I appreciate so much about the Bible. It takes seriously the fact that this world is insane. The agony that pervades the natural world—the congenital geniuses in the Third World who never learn to read because their demonic governments don't care about them—restaurant workers on the upper floors of the World Trade Towers being forced to choose between jumping to their deaths or being immolated—Paris Hilton acquiring international fame while genuinely talented actors play bit parts in moldy theaters—all of this is crazy! And there's nothing I can think of in the Bible that suggests that someday good expla-

nations for everything will be offered. To know that “all things work together for good to them that love God” (Rom. 8:28) is one thing; to think that everything will eventually make sense is something very different.

To me, life's ridiculousness is full of meaning. This is a theme of Ecclesiastes: Life is vain, so be smart and fear God, who never asks us to make sense of life but only to attempt to act in this world as if we were him. To try to treat people the way he wants

people to be treated. To denounce what he denounces. To give as he gives. What could be more meaningful than combating earthly

vanity with the insertion into daily affairs of efforts—however feeble—to act in the situation as God would. “What Would Jesus Do?” is an excellent question. It's a shame that it was turned into a bumper sticker fad. Alas, the meaningful can be conquered by the ridiculous. The battle goes on.

The battle goes on. And it goes on. Meaninglessness and its meaning: The kind word uttered after having spent 60 minutes in a torturous line at the Department of Motor Vehicles. The encouraging note sent to the promising young person even as you brood over ignorant student reviews of your classes. The hard preparation put into a sermon that you know most people won't appreciate. Picking up garbage strewn on the street, though you know there will be more the next morning. The brief prayer for the stranger in distress you'll never see again. ■

~Preston Jones

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Preston Jones, a Contributing Editor to *Critique*, teaches at John Brown University. A few of the paragraphs in this article are taken from *Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant?* forthcoming from InterVarsity Press, and co-authored with Greg Graffin, frontman of the punk band Bad Religion.

...QUESTIONS CONTINUED

6. What does all this imply for the Christian needing to have and exhibit a sense of humor? What does it suggest about the tendency of many evangelicals to approach everything in life with a deep solemnity?
7. “There's nothing I can think of in the Bible,” Dr Jones writes, “that suggests that someday good explanations for everything will be offered. To know that ‘all things work together for good to them that love God’ (Rom. 8:28) is one thing; to think that everything will eventually make sense is something very different.” Respond. If this is true, how much of your life might remain unexplained, in terms of meaning, forever? How does this change your view of living on the new earth in the Consummation?
8. To what extent might Christians, in an honest desire to commend Christ as the source of true meaning, overstate the biblical understanding of meaning in life?
9. What texts of Scripture could you suggest that support Jones' argument? Which texts argue against it? How would you sort this out so we can speak and live faithfully according to the revelation of Scripture?

The Darkened Room

What makes a good



A review of *Crash*

by R. Greg Grooms

One of the more delightful parts of my work as a campus minister at the University of Texas at Austin is watching films with students. For us it's a practical and valuable exercise in developing discernment. Mary Jane prepares dinner for the crowd, we eat, watch the film, and then spend a few hours talking about it.

In our discussions the central questions rarely vary from film to film: we talk about the ideas presented in the film, what makes these ideas attractive, how buying into them influences the way we live our lives, and what kind of questions we'd like to discuss with writers and directors. But inevitably someone raises another question: Is this a *good* movie?

It's a question that makes me cringe.

Often when we say a movie is good, all we mean is that we find it entertaining. To combat this know-nothing approach to film I periodically offer a seminar entitled "Watching Films to the Glory of God" that raises the question without really answering it. My goal isn't to talk about what *I* like in films as much as it

is to make students think about what *they* like and why. So we review the technical

aspects of movie-making, performance, creativity, content, and, yes, the entertainment value of film.

My goal here is different. In this review I want to confess what I as a follower of Jesus Christ have come to value in films and why, and to explain why I think *Crash* is a very good film.

Let me explain. The greater part of my struggle as a Christian middle-aged man isn't to understand things better, it's to translate my understanding into something more. All too often there is a disconnect

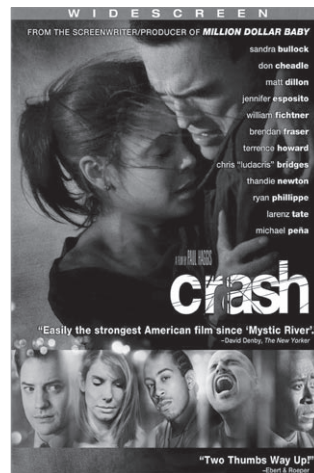
between what I know to be true and the way I really see things. For example, losing my temper with my wife once produced a biblically sound sermon on anger, which unfortunately didn't help me one whit in my struggles with my temper. This is not only evidence that my sanctification isn't complete, it shows that the way I look at the world isn't very Christian.

Having a Christian world view is more

than having biblical answers to the basic philosophical questions. It's having those answers by God's grace actually shape the way I see, understand, and feel about the world. For me a good film is one that helps me do this better.

Crash follows the lives of several people over a 36 hour period: a black police detective (Don Cheadle) with an ailing mother and a thieving little brother;

two young car thieves (Chris Bridges and Larenz Tate) who are constantly debating



All too often there is a disconnect between what I know to be true and the way I really see things.

Crash Credits:

Starring:

Don Cheadle
(Det. Graham Waters)
Matt Dillon (Sgt. Jack Ryan)
Ryan Phillippe
(Officer Tommy Hanson)
Sandra Bullock (Jean Cabot)
Brendan Fraser
(Dist. Atty. Rick Cabot)
Ludacris (Anthony)
Larenz Tate (Peter Waters)
Shaun Taub (Farhad)
Terrence Howard
(Cameron Thayer)
Thandie Newton
(Christine Thayer)
Michael Pena (Daniel)

Director:

Paul Haggis

Producers:

Don Cheadle
Paul Haggis
Mark Harris
Robert Moresco

Screenplay Writers:

Paul Haggis
Robert Moresco

Cinematographer:

James Muro

Original Music:

Nathan Larson

Runtime: 113 minutes

Release: U.S.A. 2004

Rated R for language, sexual content, and some violence.

movie good?

society and race; a image-conscious district attorney (Brendan Fraser) and his spoiled, depressed wife (Sandra Bullock); a racist veteran cop (Matt Dillon) who disgusts his more idealistic younger partner (Ryan Phillippe); a successful black Hollywood director (Terrence Howard) and his wife (Thandie Newton); a Persian-immigrant (Shaun Toub) who buys a gun to protect his shop; and an Hispanic locksmith (Michael Pena) and his young daughter (Ashlyn Sanchez) who is afraid of bullets. Their lives don't so much tell a story as raise a host of questions.

This isn't a coincidence. In an interview with the BBC, *Crash* director Paul Haggis described a good film as one that "...makes you ask questions of yourself as you leave the theater." Many of the questions he asks in *Crash* deal with race. Indeed, one reviewer reduced his take on the film to two words: Racism lives!

Yet while Haggis is clearly quite dismayed by the many manifestations of American racism, he doesn't fall prey to the cynicism that is such a tempting response to it. Indeed he takes great pains to make us see that the Most Offensive Racist in his story—Matt Dillon's cop—has a tender side, too,



***Crash* director Paul Haggis described a good film as one that "...makes you ask questions of yourself as you leave the theater."**

(e.g., he loves his sick and aging father) and is capable of true greatness (e.g., he risks his own life in rescuing a black woman from a burning car). In his tale Haggis takes care to show that almost every one of his characters is both racist and remarkable.

Making sense of our greatness and our depravity was at the heart of Blaise Pascal's faith and of his world view. In his *Pensees* he wrote:

It is dangerous to let a man recognize too clearly how much he has in common with the animals without at the same time helping him to realize his greatness. It is also unwise to let him see his greatness too clearly without realizing his baseness. It is even more dangerous still to leave him in ignorance of them both. So it is advantageous to draw attention to them both.

The danger of not recognizing our depravity? The evil in us hides itself from us. When was the last time you were surprised by the depths of your own depravity, when you did something that shocked even yourself? In *Crash* the Persian shop owner, Farhad, sees himself as a good man surrounded by thieves. But when disaster strikes, and his shop is looted, his anger drives him to attempt murder, an act that he would never have thought himself capable of.

Ryan Phillippe plays the good cop counterbalance to Matt Dillon's racist bad cop. His character is sympathetic, sensitive, one we like to like. But caught in the grip of his own fears and prejudices, he commits the most shock-



ing and brutal act in the story.

Matt Dillon's character sums up this danger well, when he says, "You think you know

who you are. You have no idea."

The danger of not seeing our greatness? When confronted with our depravity we see nothing worth redeeming. A common take on *Crash* among students was "Haggis just thinks we're all scum." My response to them was to urge them to look closer.

Perhaps the most winsome character in the film is the locksmith, Daniel. He works hard, treats people with respect, and cares for his family. In a scene that is the emotional high point of the film, he whimsically calms his daughter's fear of bullets with an invisible cape, which he promises will protect her from harm. So when she returns from school one day to find him held at gun point by Farhad, who imagines him responsible for the destruction of his shop, she flings herself between her father and the gun, imagining the cape will protect her from harm. And it does, in a way.

Later, in explaining what happened, Farhad calls it a miracle: "an angel" intervened to save the girl and him from harm. And while still later we learn that what we witnessed was not a miracle in the strict sense of the word, it was nonetheless as good an illustration of the grace of God at work as I've seen recently in film.

Of course this is only my take on *Crash*. And I fear that if Paul Haggis were here he

Darkened Room cont.

would take issue with much that I've seen in his story. After all, his intent was just to raise questions, and I'm still old-fashioned enough to think that the real meaning of a film is what the writer/director intended it to be. Still I am free to supply answers to those questions from my own faith, and in so doing to more fully flesh out my world view.

In *Prince Caspian*, C. S. Lewis wrote "You come of the Lord Adam and the Lady Eve... And that is both honor enough to erect the head of the poorest beggar, and shame enough to bow the shoulders

Biblically speaking there is a glory to being human. This side of the fall there is also great shame in being human.

of the greatest emperor in earth."

Biblically speaking there is a glory to being human. God has made us in a small way to be like himself, in his image, and in so doing has crowned us with glory and honor. This side of the fall there is also great shame in being human, for there is no part of us that is not touched and disfigured by our sin.

At times the shame I see in other people overshadows the glory God created



in them. Even as I verbally and mentally reject racial

stereotypes, I still often see stereotypes instead of people. And as Pascal said, calling attention to this, as Haggis has in *Crash*, is "advantageous" because it amends my seeing, bringing it more in line with my thinking.

And at others, especially while strug-

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to *Crash*? Why do you think you responded as you did?
2. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? In what ways were they ineffective or misused? Two very important aspects of cinematic technique evident in *Crash* are the editing and the music. How was the editing used to enhance the story line? How did the music enhance it?
3. What is made attractive in *Crash*? How is it made attractive? How does this change the impact of the film?
4. Most stories actually are improvisations on a few basic motifs or story-lines common to literature. What other films come to mind as you reflect on this movie? What novels or short stories? What Scriptures?
5. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Which character offended you the most? Why? Offended you the least? Why? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
6. What is the significance of the ending snowstorm?
7. How satisfying is the conclusion to the film? How satisfying is it meant to be?
8. Where have you noticed racist attitudes and/or actions? To what extent have you been personally touched by racism? To what extent and in what ways have you found yourself tempted to stereotype people?

Questions continued on page 9...

...QUESTIONS CONTINUED

9. How would you answer the question, "Is it a good movie?" To what extent do you agree with Grooms' analysis of this question?
10. "All too often," Grooms writes, "there is a disconnect between what I know to be true and the way I really see things." To what extent is this true of you? Where does it tend to reveal itself? What are you doing about it?
11. Director "Haggis described a good film as one that 'makes you ask questions of yourself as you leave the theater.'" Is this how you identify a "good film?" Why or why not?
12. In Blaise Pascal's day making sense of the two sides of human nature was thought to be a persuasive argument for the gospel. Do you find it persuasive? Why or why not?
13. To what extent are you developing meaningful relationships with people very unlike you—in terms of race, or cultural background, or religion, or world view, or lifestyle, or values? What plans should you make? What will be missing in your life if, in an increasingly globalized world, you remain isolated in a group with people largely like yourself?

gling with the persistence of my own sinfulness, I need to be reminded of the glory of how God has made me and of his grace at work in me to restore me in his likeness. Perhaps this is why *Crash* takes place during the Christmas season.

After all, living in hope is easier when we have a reason for it. ■

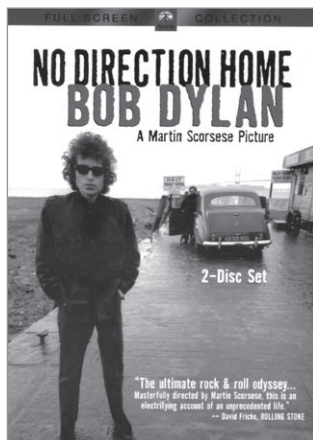
~R. Greg Grooms

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Greg Grooms, a Contributing Editor for Critique, lives with his wife Mary Jane in a large home across the street from the University of Texas in Austin, where they welcome students to meals, to warm hospitality, to ask questions, and to seriously wrestle with the proposition that Jesus is actually Lord of all.

Briefly Noted: No Direction Home: Bob Dylan

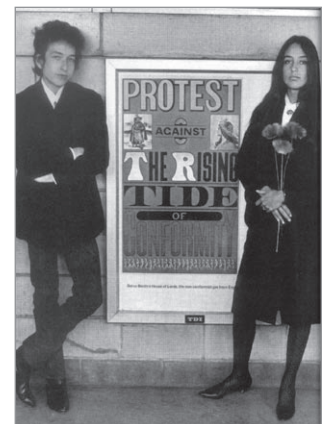
by Denis Haack



No Direction Home is not just a documentary of the early years of Bob Dylan, but a superbly crafted film which allows us a glimpse into the Sixties, a period which helped shaped our world, for blessing and for curse. Director Martin Scorsese uses old film and TV footage, thoughtful interviews with Joan Baez, Allen Ginsberg, Liam Clancy, Dave Van Ronk, Peter Yarrow and others, as well as with Dylan himself, along with concert footage to help us not just hear the music, but to understand the music and the times. The two-DVD set includes a number of full-length performances by Dylan that appeared in the film only in part, as well two other features from the years leading up to 1966.

Bob Dylan's significance as a musician has always been his ability to have his finger on the pulse of the times while writing music that was never time-bound, but timeless. His intensity, creativity, and passion are on display in *No Direction Home*, and we are richer as a culture for his presence and his artistry. Roger Ebert says that the film "creates a portrait that is deep, sympathetic, perceptive and yet finally leaves Dylan shrouded in mystery, which is

where he properly lives." *No Direction Home* is 208 minutes—that's 3 ½ hours—long, but every minute is worth watching. ■



Anxiety in search of love



Fiona Apple's *Extraordinary Machine* is about love, breaking up, and hope.

Soon after Fiona Apple's third CD, *Extraordinary Machine* was released, Travis Scott phoned to say it was extraordinary. I've learned to trust Travis when it comes to popular music; he doesn't just listen to popular music, he listens Christianly. So, I bought the CD, and thought I'd use it as background music as I answered some emails that had languished for... let's just say they'd languished in my inbox.

Before the first song—the title song—was half over, however, I pulled the liner notes from the CD case and forgot the guilt I was feeling about being behind in correspondence.

Apple's music is intensely personal, an invitation to hear the longings and sorrows of her heart. Her story is

not identical to mine, but we share the same brokenness, the

same humanness, the sense that life's not the way it was intended to be—and that is where the connection is made.

Apple's music is intensely personal, an invitation to hear the longings and sorrows of her heart.

*I certainly haven't been shopping for any
new shoes
I certainly haven't been spreading myself
around
I still only travel by foot and by foot, it's a
slow climb,
But I'm good at being uncomfortable, so
I can't stop changing all the time
I seem to you to seek a new disaster every
day
You deem me due to clean my view and be
at piece and lay
I mean to prove I mean to move in my own
way, and say,
I've been getting along for long before you
came into the play*

*I am the baby of the family, it happens, so
Everybody cares and wears the sheep's clothes
While they chaperone
Curious, you looking down your nose at me,
while you appease
Courteous, to try and help—but let me set
your
Mind at ease
If there was a better way to go then it
would find me
I can't help it, the road just rolls out behind
me
Be kind to me, or treat me mean
I'll make the most of it, I'm an extraordi-
nary machine*

[From "Extraordinary Machine"]

Apple's "nuanced delivery," one critic says, "sticks the knife in, but slowly. It's both charming and devastating." Her voice draws us in, expressive, alternately sultry, hurt, and angry, with a beautiful clarity that fits

the arrangements. *Rolling Stone* (#990/991) chose *Extraordinary Machine* as one of the best records of 2005, calling it "a classic breakup record that maintains deep emotional undertow without ever getting lost in misery." Many of the songs, apparently, were composed after Apple's relationship with Paul Thomas Anderson, director and writer of the film *Magnolia*, came to an end. There is little to distract us, and we hear clear traces of the hip hop and jazz that influenced her. Apple uses her voice effectively to express both the weariness of the disappointment that plagues life and fuels the yearning for something more permanent. (For Apple fans: the debate over whether the bootlegged version is better is an unfortunate diversion. "I think that the Mike Elizondo version [the official CD] is more pared down," she told *Paste* magazine, "it's closer to what it sounds like when I just play the piano and sing them, rather than having a lot of different instruments around.")

Even in a world where relationships are fragile

and easily broken, and in a culture where they are so tenuous no one expects them to last, human beings are simply incapable of walking away. We instinctively knowing that aloneness is far worse. It is as if the Creator's declaration, "It is not good" to be alone is branded into our souls.

*I was staring out the window
The whole time he was talking to me
It was a filthy pane of glass
I couldn't get a clear view
As he went on and on
It wasn't the outside world I could see
Just the filthy pane that I was looking through
So I had to break the window
It just had to be
Better that I break the window
Than him or her or me*

[From "Window"]

We may feel near despair, yet somehow love holds out promise, and relationships still beckon as potential carriers of grace. Which is why it cuts so deeply when someone treats us selfishly, using us to meet their needs without really caring.

*I'm undecided about you again
Mightn't be right that you're not here
it's double-sided, cause I ruined it all
But also saved myself, by never believing
you, Dear
Everything good, I deem too good to be true
Everything else is just a bore
Everything I have to look forward to
Has a pretty painful and very imposing before
O' Sailor, why'd you do it
What'd you do that for
Saying there's nothing to it
And then letting it go by the boards*

[From "O Sailor"]

In our humanity we mirror God's image, so we can not endure our fallenness and mourn it, for we were made to be whole. St Paul says all creation groans under the abnormality, and Apple deftly translates

that inchoate cry into music.

*Please please please
No more maladies
I'm so tired of crying
You'd think I was a siren
But me and everybody's on the
sad same team
And you can hear our sad brain
screaming
Give us something familiar
Something similar
To what we know already
That will keep us steady
Steady
Steady going nowhere*

[From "Please Please Please"]

The weariness of our fallenness can be so great that "please please please" is the most eloquent prayer we can muster. I feel that, keenly, especially when God seems absent, content to remain silent in those interminable periods between evidences of grace.

"Apple, who is twenty-eight," *The New Yorker* notes, "is as musically sure-footed as she is emotionally labile.

Extraordinary Machine is the confident extension of a rich and original musical language that she has been carefully fashioning for the past decade." The CD is a finely crafted musical exposition of Fiona Apple's world, but don't be surprised if it seems somehow, strangely familiar. The question is not whether we live there too, because we do. The question is whether we are willing to embrace the brokenness of those going nowhere, as Christ embraced ours. ■

It is as if the Creator's declaration, "It is not good" to be alone is branded into our souls.

~Denis Haack

CD recommended: *Extraordinary Machine*, songs written by, vocals and piano performed by Fiona Apple, produced by Mike Elizondo and Jon Brion (Epic/Clean Slate; #EK 86683) 2005.



**by
Denis
Haack**



The Darkened Room

The quintessential



by Denis Haack

A review of *Rent*

Jonathan Larson began working on his rock musical in 1989, and it finally opened in 1995. It's hard to break into the world of Broadway; the month before *Rent* opened Larson had to sell some books to get enough cash to see the film, *Dead Man Walking* with a group of friends. In one of the final rehearsals the director and Larson were singing one of the songs together when Larson said someone should call 911—he had a sharp pain in his chest. An ECG revealed nothing wrong, and the doctors sent him home. A few days later Larson died of a ruptured aorta aneurism. He was 35.

Rent went on to win 4 Tony awards in 1996, including Best Musical, and a Pulitzer Prize. As of this year (2005) it is beginning its tenth year on Broadway. Far more impressive, however, has been the response of so many young adults who have seen it—and seen it, and then seen it again. Tom Beaudoin expresses

his response to *Rent* this way in the opening lines of his book, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*.

My most recent religious experience happened in the third row at the closing performance of Rent. On May 25, 1997, the Shubert Theater in Boston was packed with twenty- and thirty-somethings who resonated with the themes of this quintessential GenX musical. Having played in Boston for six months, the cast had established an intimate relationship with the audience, many of whom had attended dozens of shows (I myself went four times). At various moments during the performance, tears streaked the faces of the cast members. At times I would look up through my own damp eyes to see the entire section around me weeping. During some songs, people raised their hands in the air as if at an evangelical revival. They seemed to acknowledge that the drama—the liturgy—was about us and yet beyond us, giving meaning to our lives, and life to our fragmented existence.

Beaudoin is correct to argue for the importance of popular culture in the postmodern yearning for meaning and spirituality. He is also correct to note that *Rent* in particular resonates in the hearts and imaginations of a generation.

*525,600 minutes, 525,600
moments so dear.
525,600 minutes—how do you
measure, measure a year?
In daylights, in sunsets, in mid-
nights, in cups of coffee.
In inches, in miles, in laughter, in strife.
In 525,600 minutes—how do you*

Rent Credits:

Starring:

Rosario Dawson
(Mimi Marquez)
Taye Diggs
(Benjamin Coffin III)
Wilson Jermaine Heredia
(Angel Schunard)
Jesse L. Martin
(Tom Collins)
Idina Menzel
(Maureen Johnson)
Tracy Thoms
(Joanne Jefferson)
Adam Pascal
(Roger Davis)
Anthony Rapp
(Mark Cohen)

Director:

Chris Columbus

Producers:

Robert DeNiro
Chris Columbus

Writers:

Jonathan Larson
(book, musical lyrics
and music)
Stephen Chbosky
(screenplay)

Cinematographer:

Stephen Goldblatt

Runtime: 135 minutes

Release: U.S.A. 2005

Rated PG-13 for mature themes
involving drugs and sexuality, and
some language.



Gen-X musical

*measure a year in the life?
How about love? Measure in love.
Seasons of love.
In truths that she learned, or in times
that he cried.
In bridges he burned, or the way that
she died.
Measure in love. Seasons of love.*
[“Seasons of Love”]

Margie and I saw the film at a weekday matinee, in an almost empty theater. We sat a row behind a young couple who leaned forward through most of the film, occasionally wiping their eyes. As the final credits scrolled across the screen, the young woman sat crying, hunched over, holding her face in her hands. Another couple stood and hugged each other, sobbing. A friend mentioned to us that their son, a non-Christian, saw the play four times and wept through it every time.

Rent is loosely based on Puccini’s opera, *La Bohème*.

Whereas the opera was set in Paris in 1830, *Rent* is set in New York City in the early Nineties; the specter bringing death this time is not consumption (TB), but AIDS. Mimi dies in both versions, and we hear snatches of Puccini’s music in guitar solos, but Larson’s update is a postmodern reading of life.

We live only in this moment. And there is nothing—but nothing—like aloneness and death to drive that home.

*The heart may freeze or it can burn.
The pain will ease if I can learn.
There is no future. There is no past.
I live this moment as my last.
There’s only us. There’s only this.
Forget regret, or life is yours to miss
No other road. No other way.
No day but today*

*There’s only yes. Only tonight.
We must let go, to know what’s right.
No other course, no other way.
No day but today.*

*I can’t control my destiny.
I trust my soul.
My only goal is just to be.*

*There’s only now. There’s only here.
Give in to love, or live in fear.
No other path. No other way.
No day but today.*
[“Another Day”]

I won’t try to give a summary of the story line, not because there isn’t one, but because the plot isn’t really central to *Rent*. It is the characters that are central, and their yearning for meaning, and for a love that will last in a cold and heartless world.

There is another aspect to *Rent* that Christians need to have ears to hear and eyes to see. It is generally assumed that Gen-Xers are relativistic, and that *Rent* simply celebrates an easy-going relativism in lifestyle and sexuality. But the characters depicted in *Rent*, like the Gen-Xers they represent, hold strong moral notions. Much of the plot surrounds a community-wide protest against unjust evictions, and the marginalized and powerless in society are seen as having dignity as people even if they are held in con-



tempt by the prosperous and the powerful. People in our postmodern world are far more complex than the over-simplified philosophical boxes we like to use to categorize them.

The message of *Rent* is a simple one: there is nothing more damning than to be finally alone, and nothing in life, not jobs, or success, even health are sufficient for meaning if we do not have love. We live only in this moment, and do not know how many more moments we have. And there is nothing—but nothing—like aloneness and death to drive that home. ■

~Denis Haack

Sources: The official *Rent* website (<http://www.site-forrent.com>), including the *Newsweek* review posted there by Gregory Beals; *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X* by Tom Beaudoin (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass; 1998) p xiii.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION & DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial or immediate reaction to *Rent*? Why do you think you reacted that way? How different was your reaction from that of Tom Beaudoin? What accounts for the difference?
2. A stage production of a play is always more intimate than a film of the play—what might be lost in the film version? How might that change your response to *Rent*?

Questions continued on page 14...

Gospel and resurrection

...QUESTIONS CONTINUED

3. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, direction, lighting, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, etc.) used to get the film's message(s) across, or to make the message plausible or compelling? What is attractive? How is it made attractive? In what ways were they ineffective or misused?
4. With whom did you identify in the film? Why? With whom were we meant to identify? Discuss each main character in the film and their significance to the story.
5. What insight(s) does the film give into the way postmodern people see life, meaning, and reality?
6. What have you heard about *Rent* from those who do not share your faith? What do you make of their response to the film (or play)?
7. What songs most captured your imagination? Why?
8. I have had Christian young adults tell me that the film moved them deeply, and that they found most of it portraying a Christian message of grace. How would you respond?
9. How comfortable would you be befriending people like those portrayed in the film? What does this reveal about your faith? What plans should you make?

An emasculated story

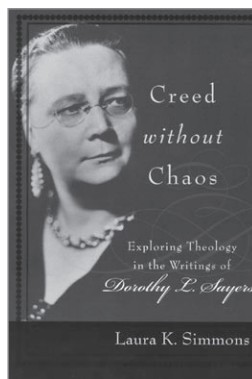
"The whole notion that the Son of God came in the flesh to the roaring, jostling... joking, quarreling, fighting, guzzling, intriguing, lobbying, worldly, polemical, political, sophisticated, brutal, Latinized, Hellenized, confused, complicated, careless civilization of first-century Jewry is utterly dissipated and lost. Christ wasn't born into history—He was born into the Bible (Authorized Version)—a place where nobody makes love, or gets drunk, or cracks vulgar jokes, or talks slang, or cheats, or despises his neighbors, but only a few selected puppets make ritual gestures symbolical of the sins of humanity. No wonder the story makes so little impression on the common man. It seems to have taken place in a world quite different from our own—a world full of

reverent people waiting about in polite attitudes for the fulfillment of prophecies.

"Forgive this outburst. Story-telling is my profession, and even if I believed *nothing*, it would

offend me to the soul to see that tremendous story so marred and emasculated in the handling."

Excerpted from a letter by Dorothy Sayers quoted in *Creed Without Chaos: Exploring Theology in the Writings of Dorothy L. Sayers* by Laura K. Simmons (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2005) pp. 50-51.

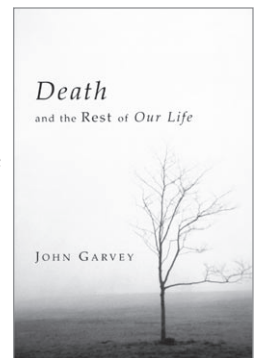


Resurrection as more real

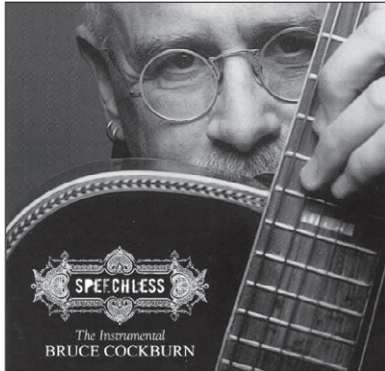
"Christianity turned the ancient idea of life after death on its head. Belief in resurrection was only a slowly dawning sense in Hebrew scripture. The world of 1 Samuel, with the story of Saul's visit to the medium at Endor to call up the spirit of Samuel, is not far from the world of Homer and the ancient Greeks. Sheol and Hades were places in which the dead were truly 'shadows of their former selves,' shades. Earth is where life is truly lived. After death only faint echoes live on. The concept of resurrection that we read about in Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Maccabees has moved beyond the earlier idea of death as a passage from firm reality into a dreamy land of shadows.

"In Luke the angels at the tomb of Jesus say to the disciples, who expected to see Jesus' body, 'why do you seek the living among the dead?' (24:5). Resurrected life, far from being shadowy and ethereal, is more real, more truly alive, than we are capable of knowing on this side of death. Belief in resurrection inverts the usual ancient model: Now we are the shades, and this wounded world resembles the Sheol or Hades of the ancients' imagining. We are called to expect a life that our understanding cannot yet encompass, a wider life that goes from one depth of glory to another, forever."

Excerpted from *Death and the Rest of Our Life* by John Garvey (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans; 2005) pp. 82-83.



Denis Haack's playlist



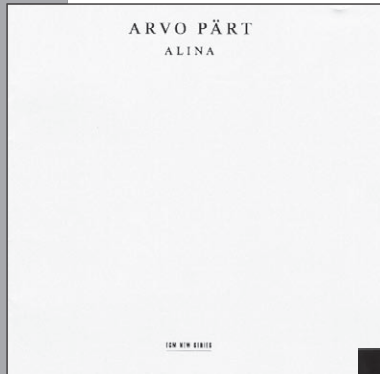
The Instrumental Bruce Cockburn: *Speechless* (2005; Rounder).

Bruce Cockburn should be cherished as one of those rare artists who has made it in the music industry without selling his soul. His finely crafted melodies, passionately thoughtful lyrics, and intimate concerts mean I automatically buy whatever CD he releases.

Speechless, his first fully instrumental CD, allows us to appreciate Cockburn playing 15 of his own compositions. A wonderful musical treat by a man with considerable skill as a guitarist.

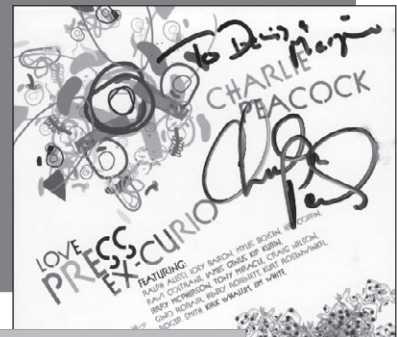
Arvo Pärt: *Alina* (1999; ECM Records).

This CD only has two pieces on it, each repeated in subtle variations. The first piece, "Spiegel im Spiegel," may sound familiar to those who have watched the film, *Wit*. It accompanies the brilliant hospital scene when the old professor reads *Runaway Bunny* to the dying Vivian. The second piece, "Für Alina," for solo piano, is equally lovely—the two together are among the most poignant, heart-wrenchingly beautiful compositions to come out of the classical tradition.



Charlie Peacock: *Love Press Ex-Curio* (2005; Runway).

I am no musicologist, so take this with the grain of salt it richly deserves, but in my opinion Charlie Peacock should be known primarily as a jazz pianist. He is a good author, an accomplished music producer, and a godly, indefatigable mentor to young musicians, but when he is at the piano playing jazz, he comes fully alive and shines. Here he joins some excellent fellow jazz musicians to produce a richly textured set of 9 pieces.



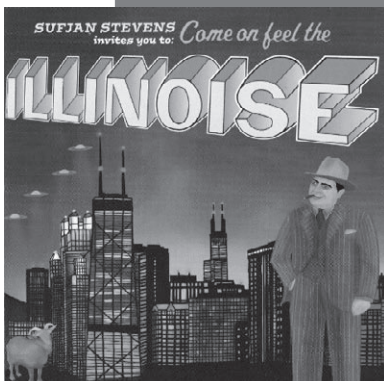
Rosie Thomas: *If Songs Could be Held* (2005; Sub Pop).

Thomas is a sweet-voiced folk song-writer/singer that combines keen observation of the ordinary things of life with disarmingly simple melodies to produce music that makes the listener feel at home in a world both sad and hopeful, laced with love.



Sufjan Stevens: *Illinoise* (2005; Asthmatic Kitty).

This self-taught folk/rock musician (he trained as a writer) spent four months during the winter of 2004 immersing himself in the land of Lincoln. He read travel brochures, memorized poems by Carl Sandburg, corresponded with people in the state, and in the end burst out in song. As the full title of the CD puts it, "Sufjan Stevens invites you to: Come on Feel the *Illinoise*."



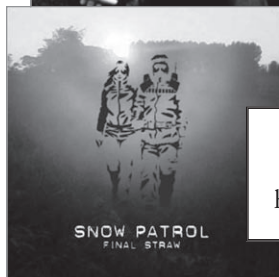
The White Stripes: *Get Behind Me Satan* (2005; Third Man).

Get Behind Me Satan is perhaps the Stripes' most musically diverse CD so far, with influence ranging from bluegrass to rock to even a touch of country—this last is hardly surprising given Jack White's involvement with Loretta Lynn's latest CD. The band has long loved dark mystery, unanswered questions, and quixotic creativity, all of which is in ample evidence here. "There is a drop of blood on the ground / And it seems to me that it's not my kind / And I can't be sure if it's yours or mine."

On the Web



Chevelle: *This Type of Thinking (Could Do Us In)*—music discussion guide by Travis Scott
http://www.ransomfellowship.org/Music_Chevelle.html



Snow Patrol's *Final Straw*—music discussion guide by Travis Scott
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2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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