

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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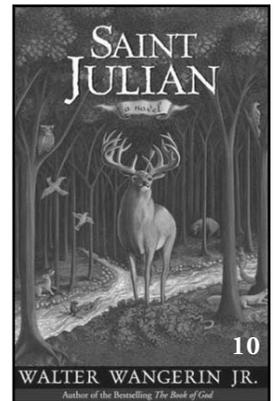
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Critique

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Editor's Note



Revisiting the Darkened Room.

We take movies seriously. As art created by people who are made in God's image. As windows of insight into the world view of people who do not share our deepest convictions and values. As a point of contact to discuss issues that matter. The cinema matters because it both shapes and reflects the culture, and we are part of that culture, for blessing and for curse.

So, we want our movie column, The Darkened Room, to accomplish three things. First, to identify the films we believe are particularly worth watching and discussing. Second, to help you begin thinking about the films in a distinctly Christian way. And third, to provide a set of questions that will help you discuss the film with your Christian and non-Christian friends. Our goal is to help you engage the film in a discerning way; we don't tell you what to think, but provide tools to help you think about the film.

This month's column, however, doesn't follow the normal pattern. Implicit in what I have written here is the notion that reading the movies of our culture allows us to read the culture. By noting the trends that shape its direction; identifying the ideas and values being assumed or debated; assessing levels of despair; seeing what is being trusted as a source of hope. In other words, movies act like a mirror, not just of ourselves as individuals, but ourselves corporately—as a culture as a whole. This is what Drew Trotter focuses on in "Movies and America: What the Five Academy Award Nominees for Best Picture Tell Us About Ourselves." He tries to capture the big picture; how they are a portrayal of our society. This too is part of the process of discernment.

We hope you will also go on to engage these five films thoughtfully. Watch future issues and/or our website (www.ransomfellowship.org) for discussion guides on some of these films. Drew is correct when he insists that they all raise important questions. Questions we want people to think about because they are questions the Bible is concerned about, and so they bridge easily and obviously to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since our friends and neighbors are watching and talking about these films, we need to be part of the conversation.

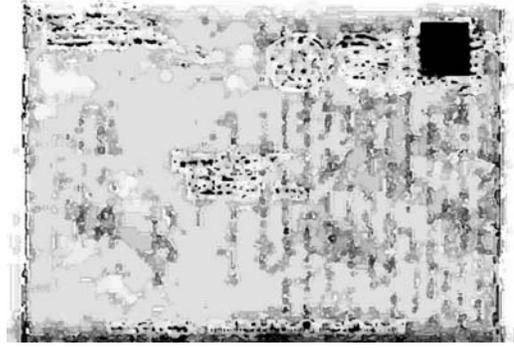
As you read The Darkened Room, remember that Drew is concentrating on only a few of the many things that need to be said about these films. He's trying to get at the big picture, and so isn't able to delve into the many details and themes that are of significance for the discerning Christian. We should not assume that we can skip these films because of his overview, or because we think them too dark and cynical to warrant viewing. For one thing, you might not agree with all he says about them. And living in the light does not mean isolating ourselves from the darkness and cynicism that surrounds us, but engaging that culture with the light of the gospel in a way that culture can hear.

And that means not just reading The Darkened Room, but actually going to the darkened room, praying that somehow, by God's grace, his glory will be so shown in and through us so that his world will believe. ■

~Denis Haack

Movie reviews online:
www.ransomfellowship.org

Dialogue



Re: Ransom's Website

Note our new Dialogue e-mail:
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.

Been wanting to tell you that I really like your website. I read your "Margie-authored" interviews which gave me the gift that day of great uproarious laughter. They were soooo funny. I could imagine that while writing Denis' interview, Margie started out in "informative mode" and then, somehow, something knocked her funny bone and she asked him "did you answer my question?" I honked when I read that. When I have a really bad day I'm going to get that back up on the screen and read it again. Does comedy qualify as a spiritual gift? I think it does.

Kris Ingle
Traverse City, MI

We have appreciated your efforts in *Critique* to review current and past movies which raise substantive issues that are worth our consideration. It helps us avoid wasting valuable time on shallow, meaningless entertainment, and also directs our observation and consideration toward those issues in a particular film from which we may benefit most.

Thank you for your work in *Critique*; we look forward to receiving each issue, and we frequently recommend it to anyone seeking a mature, discerning discussion of Christian perspectives on contemporary culture.

Steve and Glory Griffin
Watkinsville, GA

Thank you for the new website—learned about it reading *Critique* #1 - 2003. Wonderful and deepening content, provocative stuff, tasteful design.

James E. Walter
St. Charles, MO

Thank you so much for your thought-provoking newsletters. Sometimes I agree and sometimes I disagree, but I am always challenged.

Michael Fendrich
Mt. Vernon, IN

Because my son has been "in transit" for the last weeks, we have been getting his mail. I picked up your magazine out of curiosity. It's refreshing to see people willing to "look outside the box."

Mary Kolb
Williamsport, PA

We really appreciate the articles you publish as it encourages us in living authentically in our culture in light of God's word.

Ed and DeAnn Harris
St. Louis, MO

Loving Lesbian Neighbors

As Christians we believe that living faithfully before the face of God includes treating non-Christians as persons made in the image of God. As precious individuals for whom Christ died and for whose salvation we are called to be willing to give up everything—our reputations, our stuff, our time, even our lives. This is part of what we mean by following Christ, and is an implication of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Yet truth be told, this is easier with some non-Christians than with others. Some have lifestyles we find objectionable, or beliefs we find repulsive, or sins with which we are uncomfortable. So, though it may not be intentional on our part, we find ourselves treating some according to their sin (or our feelings about that particular sin), rather than simply as people bearing God's likeness. This is something Jesus never did, which may be one reason why sinners flocked to him.

With that in mind, consider this situation requiring discernment.

A Christian student moves with his wife and young son into a new apartment. They pray they can be a light for the gospel to their neighbors, and set out to meet and befriend the others living in their building. Among the friendliest is the family living in the apartment next door to them, who welcome them warm-

Though it may not be intentional on our part, we find ourselves treating some according to their sin rather than as people bearing God's likeness.

ly, inviting them to dinner, and happily accepting an invitation in return. The family in question, it turns out, consists of a lesbian couple and their two adopted children. They consider marriage to be a life-long commitment ("divorce is not an option"), believe in monogamy ("sexual promiscuity is wrong"), remember their wedding ceremony with fond seriousness, and are delighted to learn their new

Christian neighbor has taken some secondary counseling courses in marriage and family. Though not interested in "traditional Christianity," they are very interested in spirituality. They ask the Christian couple to pray for them, and say they would love to talk more, especially about how to build a strong family and deepen their relationship. After several more contacts, like the kind that naturally occurs between neighbors living on the same floor in an apartment building, they offer to exchange babysitting.

Now, just what does Christian faithfulness look like in this situation? Since living in a pluralistic culture means that we should expect to face such situations, it would be wise to think the issues through biblically ahead of time. Whatever faithfulness looks like, it surely is not merely reacting to the situation when it arises. ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your first (knee-jerk) reaction to this situation? Why do you think you reacted this way? What similar situations have you encountered or heard about?
2. If the Christian reports that he doesn't feel free to bring this up to his pastor or to the small group his wife and he are in, how would you respond? Why might many evangelicals not be open to discussing this with sensitivity? To what extent does "thinking Christianly" about these questions require all believers to come to identical conclusions as to what faithfulness looks like?
3. How would you pray for the lesbian couple? Are there things that you would not pray for them? Why?
4. If you would be unwilling to give them advice on building their relationship, why are you unwilling to do so? Write out a continuum as to the sorts of advice that they might ask for, and where, if anywhere, you would draw the line on granting help. (Advice on colors with which to paint their dining room, on establishing a household budget, on setting bedtimes for children, etc.) Why would you draw this line? How helpful is the metaphor of "drawing a line" in this scenario? To what extent are you comfortable with fellow believers drawing very different lines or suggesting a different metaphor?

Questions continued on next page...

Language and Humility

QUESTIONS CONT...

5. To what extent would you be willing to share with them positive experiences from your own marriage as to how to build a strong relationship? Your failures? Why? Would it make any difference if the non-Christian neighbors were heterosexual? Why or why not? Let's assume the neighbors were heterosexual but confessing materialists (and therefore according to Colossians 3:5, idolaters). Which sin is greater? How should this influence our thinking and choices? Why?
6. What biblical passages are relevant to sorting out this issue? (Be sure your list involves not merely texts dealing with marriage and homosexuality, but also with Christian interaction with non-Christians in a fallen world.) Also see "Homosexuality: Speaking the Truth in Love" by Mardi Keyes on Ransom's website (www.ransomfellowship.org).
7. Would you consider exchanging baby-sitting with these neighbors? Why or why not?
8. Though becoming Christians would require this couple to refrain from sexual sin (as it does all believers), would it require them to give up their children for adoption? Why or why not?
9. The church is called to be uncompromising on sin, yet to be the most welcoming and safe place for sinners. To what extent have we fulfilled this calling? To what extent is this true of our homes? What might we do to better maintain this biblical balance of truth and love? How did Jesus demonstrate it?

Earthy language

In the 1940s, novelist Dorothy Sayers was commissioned by the BBC to write a series of radio plays (published as *The Man Born to Be King*) based on the life of Christ for broadcast on the Sunday Evening Children's Hour. Concern was raised over how she would depict the Roman soldiers and the horrors of crucifixion, issues Sayers addressed in a letter to the director of the BBC.

"I will not allow the Roman soldiers to use barrack-room oaths, but they must behave like common soldiers hanging a common criminal, or what is the point of the story? The impenitent thief cannot curse and yell as you or I would if we were skewered up with nails to a post in the broiling sun, but he must not talk like a Sunday School child. Nobody cares a dump nowadays that Christ was 'scourged, railed upon, buffeted, mocked, and crucified,' because all of these words have grown hypnotic with ecclesiastical use. But it does give people a slight shock to be shown that God was flogged, spat upon, called dirty names, slugged in the jaw, insulted with vulgar jokes, and spiked up on the gallows like an owl on a barn door.

"That's the thing the priests and people did—has the bishop forgotten it? It is an ugly, tear-stained, sweat-stained, blood-stained story, and the thing was done by callous, conceited, and cruel people. Shocked? We damn well ought to be shocked. If nobody is going to be shocked, we might as well not tell them about it."

Source: "Keeping it Real" in *Context* by Martin E. Marty (March 1, 2003; Volume 35, Number 5) p. 1.

Virtue check-list

In a lecture given at the Rochester L'Abri in April 2002, Dr. James Sire, author of *The Universe Next Door* listed four categories of what he calls "The Intellectual Virtues." They should characterize the believer, he argued, because they are all essential to the development of a truly Christian mind and heart.

The first category involves what must be our never-ending acquisition of and hunger for truth; the second how to live in a society in which truth is doubted, suppressed, and denied; the third concerns our living out the truth we know and are convinced of; and the fourth how to speak about the truth in a way that can be understood in a pluralistic world. Sire noted that humility appears in all four categories, because, he said, absent humility they quickly turn into vices. A passion for holiness minus humility, for example, becomes legalistic, prideful, and self-righteous.

Sire's list is worth thinking about, adding to our daily prayer list, and reflecting on to what extent we display the virtue, and whether we are growing in it:

"Acquisition virtues (displaying a passion for the truth): inquisitiveness, teachableness, persistence, and humility.

"Maintenance virtues (displaying a passion for consistency): perseverance, courage, constancy, tenacity, patience, and humility.

"Application virtues (displaying a passion for holiness): will to do what one knows, love, fortitude, integrity, and humility.

"Communication virtues (displaying compassion for others): clarity of expression, orderliness of presentation, aptness of illustration, and humility." ■

~Denis Haack

Movies and America



by Drew Trotter

What the Five Academy Award Nominees For Best Picture Tell Us About Ourselves

There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all. But then, what is philosophy today? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavor to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known?

-Michel Foucault

Film Credits

Chicago

Runtime: 113 min.
Rated PG-13 for sexual content and dialogue, violence and thematic elements.

Gangs of New York

Runtime: 166 min.
Rated R for intense strong violence, sexuality/nudity and language.

The Hours

Runtime: 114 min.
Rated PG-13 for mature thematic elements, some disturbing images, and brief language.

Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers

Runtime: 179 min.
Rated PG-13 for epic battle sequences and scary images.

The Pianist

Runtime: 148 min.
Rated R for violence and brief strong language.

For more information on these movies, go to <http://www.imdb.com>

really like. Rather, I should look at the top five grossing films. There is more than a grain of truth in that argument, but it fails for two reasons.

First, Hollywood arguably has the most significant artists working in America today, and while we could debate whether the greatest artists are found in independent films or in Hollywood, I believe the most thoughtful, influential artistry in America is found in the Hollywood system films. If that is so, then Hollywood's self-selected films may well be, in the long run, the most influential movies made.

Second, the Hollywood industry, while wanting to make as much money as it can, makes so much money that its chief movers and shakers regularly alternate between movies they *want* to make with those they produce solely for money. For example, Steven Soderbergh made *Erin Brockovich*, then *Traffic*, *Ocean's Eleven*, then *Solaris*. Harvey Weinstein greenlighted both *The Hours* and *Spy Kids 2* in the same year. While Hollywood is about making money, there is so much money being made that the industry can afford to push agendas if they wish, and they certainly do.

Movies tell us better than anything else who we are. But how do we best read them for their cultural significance? The Academy Award nominees for best picture are an excellent place to start. They are selected by the 6000 or so members of the Academy, and there is only one criterion used. In the words of the Academy itself, "the Oscar represents the best achievements of the year in the opinion of those who themselves reside at the top of their craft." There are flaws with the process, but it's

When asked why he didn't frequent the movies, T. S. Eliot reportedly said, "Because they interfere with my daydreams." Indeed, movies often seem more real than the lives we live. They are bigger, deal with more serious questions, involve larger than life characters and situations, fill us with dreams and hopes and fears, introduce us to lives we wished we lived or, alternatively, lives we're glad we don't. The darkened room is, in a word, a place of magic where we're transported to a world utterly unlike our own.

But movies can and do show us about the world we actually inhabit, too, for we don't spend the money and time unless we have some connection to what happens on the screen. Last year, Americans spent over \$9.4 billion dollars at the movies. We can learn much about ourselves by looking at the films we watch.

It can be argued that by looking at the five Academy Award nominees for best picture, I'm only looking at what Hollywood thinks of America, not what America is

still probably the best way to know what Hollywood thinks. These are the films they believe have reached the highest standard for telling us who we are.

This year two things struck me about the nominees, overall trends not evident in previous years. First is the diversity of genre included.

Chicago. For the second year in a row a musical was nominated; a musical that was anything but *My Fair Lady* or *West Side Story*. There is in *Chicago* a sardonic view of life that is laced with a striking self-loathing of the entertainment profession. From *42nd Street* and *The Gold Diggers* right up through *The Sound of Music*, the musical has always been very simply plotted and finished in an upbeat, emotionally happy way. One feels anything but happy at the end of *Chicago*, unless one didn't like the picture and is happy it's over. With its gritty, man-hating women, dreary prison lighting and set design, angry, sensually erotic dancing, and sarcastic, ironic ending, *Chicago* is a unique musical in movie history. Last year's musical nominee, Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, credited with resurrecting the musical, was certainly edgy and somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but it did not have the mean spirit that *Chicago* has. So much for 9/11 doing away with irony in the arts.

Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers. This fantasy epic continues the Tolkien story of high adventure with a big budget and plenty of story and special effects. The introduction of the first believable, nearly entirely CGI character, Gollum, in film history, is noteworthy, but as far as genre goes, *The Two Towers* is in the great Hollywood tradition of fantasy epics. But here, too, there is an uncommon difference: usually this kind of story is either animated (*Sleeping Beauty*) or set in human history (Errol Flynn's *The Adventures of Robin Hood*). Because of CGI, Peter Jackson was able to make the movie largely in real time and space with "naturally" introduced special effects.

The Hours. Here's a picture not easily categorized. Since it moves back and forth between the 1920's, 1950's and 1990's, it is both a period-piece and a contemporary drama. Three stories comprised of a single day (almost) in the life of three

women, woven around *Mrs. Dalloway*, the novel by Virginia Woolf. It's also an intensely focused character study.

Gangs of New York. The magnum opus of Martin Scorsese, perhaps the most revered director working in Hollywood, is an historical epic. Like *Towers*, everything is on a grand scale, but the two films deal with very different subject matter. *Gangs* is rigorously historical, with detail after detail scrutinized for historical accuracy, though *Gangs* manipulates major historical events chronologically to achieve very deliberate ends. Unfortunately, Scorsese forgets the essence of any great film, i.e., story, but the sweep of this movie has "grand epic" written all over it.

The Pianist. Roman Polanski's holocaust picture is a straightforward drama unique to this sub-genre in that it's the only film (to my knowledge) that tells almost the entire story from the point of view of a holocaust survivor. *Schindler's List* and *Sophie's Choice*, to name two of the best in this group, both have a traditional audience POV. While *The Pianist* is not so abstract as to shoot everything through the eyes of its main character, Wladyslaw Szpilman, a classical pianist and a Jew in Poland during WWII, much of it seems that way. Though Szpilman survives, the picture is dominated by illustrations of man's inhumanity to man. Even the hopeful sub-theme that art makes us human and helps us triumph in tragedy is crushed by the images of suffering, death and cruelty. Desson Howe of the *Washington Post* accurately called it "a sonata of human suffering and tragedy." Formally, this picture is very much a character study, in the context of the war.



In these movies, major life questions abound.

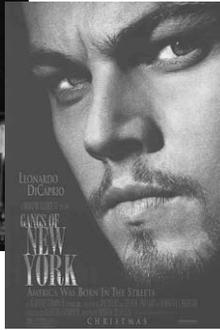
So, as far as genres are concerned, we have great diversity: a musical, an historical epic, a fantasy adventure film, a character study and a sort of period piece.

The second thing I noticed overall about the nominees is how elevated their thinking is, and, therefore, how high the quality of these films' thought-provoking nature.

In the 2002 nominees for best picture, major life questions abound. In these films, one can experience complex and profound explorations of the capacity for human beings to survive suffering; of the nature and extent of what we so glibly call "man's inhumanity to man;" of the role of art in shaping and influencing human thought and behavior; of the complicated nature of sexual relationships; of virtues like honor, courage, persistence, bravery, mercy, and discernment; of the role of suicide in modern life, both contemplated and actualized; of the price of fame; of cruelty, racism and territorial thinking in a society ruled by chaos.

The Two Towers is the second of the J. R. R. Tolkien trilogy made by the brilliant young film-maker, Peter Jackson. It continues the story of Frodo the hobbit, the ring of power and the fellowship of men, dwarves, elves and hobbits who were commissioned to destroy the ring in the Crack of Doom in Mordor. It is a remarkable film, in many ways more remarkable than the first, *The Fellowship of the Ring*, because it had to chronicle the middle of the story, always less interesting for an audience than the beginning or end, and it took on the burden of following three distinct stories as the Fellowship split into three parties.

The Darkened Room cont.



Jackson stuck very well to several of the books' themes. For instance, the biblical idea of the smallest and weakest being the bravest is seen in both Frodo and Sam's adventures, as well as in Merry and Pippin's. The depth of the horror of evil, the difficulty of doing right without reward, and the inestimable worth of friendship are all maintained and strengthened.

But two things caught my attention in this movie. First is the anti-anthropos stance of the film.

The characters of both Théoden, king of Rohan, and Faramir, captain of

Gondor, are stripped of the high place of honor they have in the novels and are made into strangely weak, indecisive leaders. This change doesn't seem to be because of a feminist agenda; Éowyn, the daughter of Théoden and princess of Rohan, is neither more nor less than she is in the books. This is a mystery to me, but it follows the pattern in the arts toward denying the classically heroic virtues of courage, honesty, and bravery in men. Perhaps worse, it destroys the fine balance Tolkien gave to the heroic and the cowardly men.

Second, in the books, Frodo, while suspicious of Gollum, clearly pities him, and it is this pity that eventually causes the ring to be destroyed, though not in the way Frodo anticipated. In the film Frodo seems reluctant to feel pity for the creature. It's as if Jackson and his wife, Fran Walsh, who are primarily responsible for the script, feel pity is an unacceptable emotion for audiences today so they avoid it.

So what does *The Two Towers* tell us about ourselves? That we still need

enchantment, and we will go to great lengths to get it. That we do believe the punch line of this film, that "there is some good in this world and it's worth fighting for." And we want to know the fear and dread of evil, but we want to believe good will triumph. We will turn out in droves for the third installment, because we know that it is so.

Chicago, *The Hours*, and *Gangs of New York* are much darker pictures, and,

The thought-provoking nature of these films is striking.

though I believe *The Pianist* attempts to bring a positive note at the end, I think it, too, casts a shadow over the human condition.

Chicago is Bob Fosse's Broadway musical brought to the screen by a new film director, Robert Marshall. Throughout this film, themes like the despair of women (all of whom have been jailed for murdering their husbands), the allure of fame at any price, and a cynicism toward every institution from the church to the law court dominate. Greed, lies, power, show biz—all are simply what they are: neither good nor bad, they are the way of the world, and to survive in it, you better learn them. Everything from the blasphemy of Billy Flynn ("If Jesus Christ had lived in Chicago in the thirties, things would have turned out differently") to the bathos of the lonely "Mr. Cellophane Man" supports the idea that there is no solid "good" in life; only those who exercise what power they have, stepping on whoever gets in their

way are going to survive. Nobody triumphs.

Since this is everybody's front-runner, we should think about what *Chicago's* popularity tells us about ourselves. Absent from this film is goodness in almost any Christian sense of the word: no one forgives, sacrifices for the good of the other, or helps the weak. The innocent are brutalized, the guilty turn the courts and the prisons into platforms for their careers. Cynicism and sarcasm abound. America must be in a more despondent state than we ever knew for a film like this to have done as well as it has.

The Hours is perhaps the darkest of all the nominees. The movie seethes and roils, tosses and turns through the lives of three women, all of

whom either contemplate, fail an attempt at, or actually commit, suicide. All three are lesbians, highlighting their sense of not belonging in the world. At its deepest level, the film is a study of life lived from hour to hour in fear that one will never find rest or be at ease in the world.

The story of Virginia Woolf, who begins and ends the film, holds the centerpiece of the film. Even though her story line has the least screen time, it's her novel that has made an impact on the other two women, a 1950's housewife (Julianne Moore) and a 1990's editor (Meryl Streep). While Virginia's husband seeks to love her in spite of her growing madness, she spends her days writhing in despair. Moore's character, Mrs. Brown, bakes a cake on her husband's birthday, narrowly averts taking her own life, and decides to leave him when she has given birth to the baby girl she now carries. Streep weeps and stumbles through her day, refusing to be consoled by her daughter or her lover, seeking to

encourage a friend, and witnessing a friend's suicide.

The movie relentlessly despairs of finding any hope or rest in this life. The hours simply pile one upon the other, full of emptiness and death. While the movie seems to say that if we will only embrace that fact, then we can find some hope, it never spells out how that is actually achieved.

Gangs of New York's message is just as depressing. The movie is filled with the chaos, filth, blood and crime of a society boiling and stewing as it makes itself. Brutal killings abound and though there is a love story, even that is virtually devoid of tenderness as revenge and retribution dominate even its plot line.

The movie centers on the revenge that Amsterdam, played by Leonardo DiCaprio, seeks to take on Bill the Butcher, the magnificent, blood-thirsty leader of the most powerful gang in the area who killed his father. The plot meanders hopelessly with unlikely betrayals, loveless love triangles, mystifying acceptances of fate, and stock-in-trade schemes. The setting of the movie, its tone and texture, however, are worthy of the almost \$100M budget spent on it, and, though the material is too often weak, the performances are superb.

The main idea of the film, however, begs far too many questions and lacks credibility. During the climactic fight scene, the gangs mix with the draft riots of 1863, and the all-too-obvious point is that war=crime and soldiers are butchers. One gets the feeling that Scorsese is trying to say that order comes only out of chaos, but the message is far too simple. Didn't goodness and obedience to the law have anything to do with the founding of our country and its greatest city? Again, despair and grunge rule the day in the vision of this movie. What does the popularity of this film say about us?

Lastly, *The Pianist*. My favorite of the five, this film tells the story of a Jewish classical pianist who through a series of circumstances ends up surviving in Warsaw, hiding out, secluded and alone with nothing but the music in his head to keep him company. The first half of the movie shows Szpilman's family and their quarrels and discussions concerning how to face the increasingly horrifying situation; the second half follows Wladyslaw as he tries to stay one step ahead of the Germans. A German commander, Wilm Hosenfeld, actually hides Wladyslaw after hearing him play Chopin's *Nocturne* in C Sharp Minor, as the war is winding down.

The Pianist wonderfully portrays the inhumanity man is capable of—murders,

I do fear when our cultural stories are as filled with cynicism, hopelessness and dread as this year's nominees are.

beatings, starvings, betrayals. Hard moral choices are offered and made, and the film can only be praised for that. However, it still lacks the hope that a Christian can have even during a time of war and economic turmoil. I don't expect films to center on such themes in a culture that largely ignores God's relevance but I do fear when our cultural stories are as filled with cynicism, hopelessness and dread as this year's nominees are. Just seven years ago, the five academy award nominees for best picture were *Braveheart*, *Babe*, *Apollo 13*, *Il Postino* and *Sense and Sensibility*. Last year's winner was *A Beautiful Mind*. But this year, we are absent the hope these films at least espoused, even if with no basis.

Perhaps this is a good sign, for it can only signal an increase, it seems to me, in the suspicion that man can solve his problems by himself. As the postmodern philosopher, Michel Foucault once wrote: "To all those

who still want to talk about humanity, about its reign or its liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what humanity is in its essence, to all those who wish to take humanity as their starting-point in their attempts to reach the truth—to all these warped and twisted forms of reflection we can answer only with a philosophical laugh, which means, to a certain extent, a silent one." (*The Order of Things*, pp. 342-343).

The postmodern distrust of man is of course good news for the Christian since we must regularly let go of our own methods of salvation before we can grab hold of God's. Nevertheless, not one of these films in any positive sense signals that a turning to God would be a positive move. Their universes are devoid of any transcendence at all, much less the infinite-personal God of the Bible, and in leaving Him out of his explanation for man's dilemma, postmodern man loses the chance to give complete answers to who we are as men and women. Resolution to that question is found only in the One who, while fully God, was also fully man, and to whom alone we should look to find out not only who we are, but who we ought to be. Only then can we transform Foucault's silent snicker of derision into the full-throated laughter of joy. ■

~Drew Trotter

Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the executive director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2003 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.



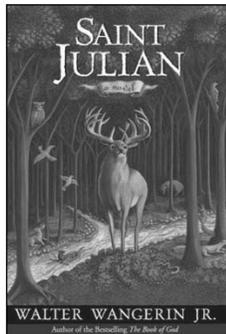
A Saint, by

The tradition in which I was raised put great stock in cheaply produced evangelistic tracts, distributed freely to unsuspecting non-Christians. One popular example, “A Tip for You,” was designed to be left on your table in a restaurant, the “tip” in question being not a gratuity, but how to get saved. It could be that God uses tracts like this to bring people to himself—but then he is a gracious and sovereign God who is not limited by the folly of his people. If I was asked to identify the “evangelistic tracts” that I am willing—and eager—to give to non-Christians, most would be novels. *Foreign Bodies* by Hwee Hwee Tan, for example. *The Second Coming* by Walker Percy. *Indian Affairs* by Larry Woiwode. Or *Saint Julian*, a new work of fiction by Walter Wangerin.

Compellingly written and wonderfully mystical, Wangerin’s story is sprinkled with Latin phrases from ancient Christian liturgies and Scripture which can be attractive to postmoderns yearning for a spirituality rooted in the distant past. Set in the period of the Crusades, yet resonant with the perennial questions of life and death, this is a novel many non-Christians might be happy to read and to discuss. Because the author assumes a biblical world view, drawing the reader to see life and reality from within that perspective, Wangerin’s novel invites the reader to consider the faith without seeming to proselytize.

In *Saint Julian*, the lord of the castle, a just man much loved by the peasants, artisans, and warriors who live and work on his land, has an only son, much beloved.

*“Julian, my son, come sit beside me.”
And the lad skipped through the*



Wangerin’s novel invites the reader to consider the faith without seeming to proselytize.

large hall to the dais, where his father sat upon a wooden chair carved all over in curious figures, a pelican, a phoenix, a cross between.

“Look into this book. Canst read, lad?”

“Aye, father.”

“Art easy enough in Latin, then?”

“Aye, father.”

“Then read this.”

Little Julian leaned against his father’s shoulder, reached toward the book open on his father’s lap, then put the tip of his pointing finger upon the page where the letters were individually inked in a crabbed calligraphy. Slowly, shoutingly, the lad read:

**“BEATI MISERICORDES:
QUONIAM IPSI MISERICORDIAM
CONSEQUENTUR.”**

It was the bellow of a boy at lessons. The hall re-echoed Julian’s melodious ‘consequentur,’ and the sharp edge of a massy battle-axe—a tremendous seven-foot weapon which hung from hooks above them—hummed.

With his own thick forefinger, Julian’s father touched the back of his boy’s hand. “And what is misericordia?” he asked.

And Julian, crossing one foot behind the ankle of the other, said, “Mercy. Blessed are the merciful”—he was trans-

lating the whole without his father’s further request: “for they shall obtain mercy.”

And the man with solemn instruction said, “Remember this.”

And the boy, now winding his fingers through the tangled fall of the man’s black hair, said, “I will, Father.”

But Julian does not remember, at least not until much later, after so many have suffered and died, and after he, like the Prodigal in Christ’s story, is suddenly and surprisingly brought to his senses by grace.

Over the years I have often given thanks that Christ has graced his church with gifted folk (to use Paul’s list in Ephesians 4:11), apostles and prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. I have benefitted from them all. The apostles’ list has always struck me as incomplete, meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. And so I have also given thanks for other gracefull believers, such as story-tellers who like our Lord in his fiction help me see with far greater clarity. Walter Wangerin, Jr., a Lutheran pastor and master craftsman with words, is one such story-teller for whom I am deeply grateful.

The first fiction of his that I read was *The Book of the Dun Cow*, which won the American Book Award, and is probably the book I have reread more often than any other. This fantastical story of Chauntecleer the Rooster, Mundo Cani the sad but courageous dog, and their terrible battle against evil Wyrm, seared my soul. It also opened my eyes to the grace, vitality, and power of ritual and biblical liturgy in the day-to-day life and worship of God’s covenant community.

Grace Alone

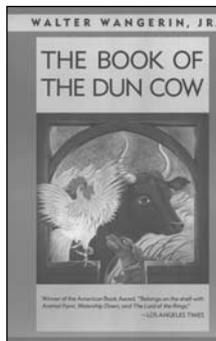
The Book of Sorrows, a sequel which appeared seven years later, continues the tale in which a rooster and a dog—such ordinary creatures!—take their stand against evil, even at terrible cost. Suffering is shown to be not merely the by-product of the Fall, but the way of the cross. Please understand: these novels did not just entertain me, they changed me. As a Christian I believe that a cosmic, spiritual battle is raging over God's good creation because the Bible reveals its existence, but the stories of Walter Wangerin made that belief live in my heart and imagination, and showed me that it is ordinary faithfulness which is, by God's grace, ultimately decisive in that war, not the actions of spectacular heroes like Superman, who are beyond our reach.

Julian is an unlikely saint. Born into a family of love and privilege, he is raised to assume his father's place as lord of the manor. Though his world is profoundly Christian, the medieval expressions of that faith are a world away from today's Christianity. In the distance Saracen armies threaten the peace, and the possibility of famine is never far away, but cultural forces are not the source of the trials which Julian must endure. An only child, he was born with red hair, and a raging lust for violence. As a child he attended all his lessons with care, but it was those that dealt with weapons—whether for war or hunting—that he craved most. He loved the kill, and soon that passion ruled him. Before long the hunt became a slaughter, and when his prey eluded him, Julian lashed out blindly, violently, at tragic cost. His sin carves a path of bloody death, kills hope, and makes him an outcast.

Saint Julian is the story of a journey, of a man who runs from himself, pursued relen-

tly by grace. A journey from sin to salvation, from unspeakable violence to quiet *shalom*, from son of the lord to homeless beggar. The story of a prodigal who leaves enslaved to his own sinful lusts to finally return home, ransomed by grace through Christ.

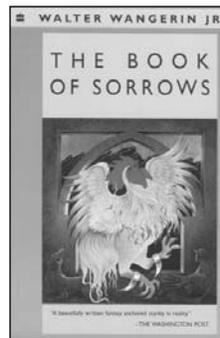
Saint Julian is also a cleverly crafted, subversive tale. As Wangerin crafts his story, he weaves in echoes of stories and dialogue from Scripture. Those who know their Bibles will have moments of sudden recognition, the biblical threads both illuminating Julian's story and demon-



These novels did not just entertain me, they changed me.

strating how The Story can define our stories, providing deeper meaning. Wangerin never calls attention to this seamless weaving of fiction and biblical narrative, and it infuses his prose with power.

Saint Julian is also subversive, because in telling his story, Wangerin uses Reformation insight to redefine sainthood in biblical terms. We expect the story of a saint to include great deeds borne of great piety, nurtured over a lifetime of sacrificial service and devoted commitment. Instead, *Saint Julian* is the story of a sinner who can not escape the grip of his own sinful nature, until lost and without hope, God's grace captures him. Julian is a saint, finally, not because he deserves anything (he merits only death for his horrifying crime) or because he does anything great (he returns to the manor, now



destroyed by enemies, a servant of ordinary people), but solely because of grace.

We recommend *Saint Julian* to you. Order two copies—and consider one a tract to be given away. ■

~Denis Haack

Fiction recommended:

Saint Julian: A Novel by Walter Wangerin, Jr. (San Francisco, CA: Zondervan; HarperCollins; 2003) 210 pp.

Fiction also mentioned:

The Book of the Dun Cow by Walter Wangerin, Jr. (San Francisco, CA: Zondervan; HarperCollins; 1978) 241 pp.; and *The Book of Sorrows* by Walter Wangerin, Jr. (San Francisco, CA: Zondervan; HarperCollins; 1985) 339 pp.

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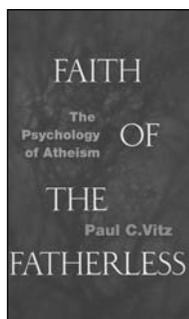
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All publishers want to do well. Fewer, it seems, also want to do good. Among those who do is Tom Spence, a tidy, impeccably dressed man of equally impeccable grammar whose Catholic household, in Dallas, is full of well-educated and well-mannered children. He is also the owner of Spence Publishing, a small but important producer of books—several of which have received national attention—that are “conservative” if not necessarily Republican. “We hope to shake up complacent conservatives,” Spence told me. “We think many American conservatives share many of the philosophical, cultural and spiritual assumptions that have produced the social confusion they lament.”

In particular, Spence’s books take on the libertarianism that’s become increasingly trendy among political conservatives—the libertarianism one finds, for example, in the *Wall Street Journal’s* editorials, which seem to have no problem

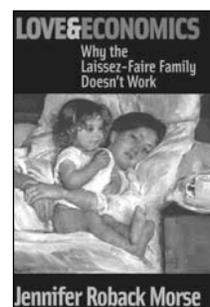


with pornography, abortion and “alternative” marriages. All of this is OK, libertarians tell us, so long as the exercise of one person’s rights doesn’t impinge on the exercise of another’s.

But, as Spence’s books frequently show, this way of thinking is nonsensical. Rather obviously, in the great majority of cases abortion involves at least six people: the mother, the father, the baby, the abortionist, the abortionist’s assistant and the professional responsible for disposing of the remains. And the one person with the greatest personal stake in the event—namely, the child—is precisely the one eliminated (figuratively and literally) from whatever discussions there might be.

For another example, New York University professor Paul Vitz observes in *Faith of the Fatherless* (1999)

that adult anger, hopelessness and disillusionment with life are more likely to develop in men who grow up without fathers than in others who knew their dads. If one “believes in a personal God,” Vitz writes, “life has obvious meaning, and one generally takes seriously the issues of moral and social responsibility.” Vitz suggests that God has made the world in such a way that, to a considerable extent, fathers can partly determine how their children come to view God and, by extension, life itself. An aloof or

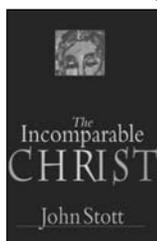


loving dad can lead a child to grow up believing in an aloof or loving God. An absent dad can lead a son or daughter to disbelieve in God altogether. This is something for driven, career-minded, jet-setting Christian dads to keep in mind.

In *Love and Economics* (2001), Hoover Institution fellow Jennifer Roback Morse takes on the “laissez-faire family.” Morse observes, among many other things, that

Briefly Noted: 4 Views, 1 Lord

by Denis Haack



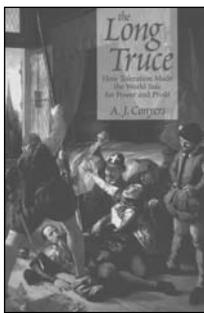
In 1974 John Stott founded the London Lectures in Contemporary Christianity, a scholarly yet popular annual lecture series designed to “expound an aspect of historical biblical Christianity and to relate it to a contemporary issue in the church in the world.” He was invited to give the 2000 lectures; the only possible topic, the committee felt, given both the nature of Stott’s life-long ministry and the fact this was a millennium year, would be that of Jesus. Stott’s lectures have now been published as *The Incomparable Christ*, and like all his preaching and writing, they are biblical, thoughtful, and clear; the mature teaching of a theologian and pastor who knows and loves God and his word. The book is divided into four parts: The Original Jesus (or how the New Testament witnesses to him); The Ecclesiastical Jesus (or how the church has presented him); The Influential Jesus (or how he has inspired people); and The Eternal Jesus (or how he challenges us today). It warrants careful reading and reflection. ■

Book reviewed: *The Incomparable Christ* by John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2001) 235 pp. + notes.

Publishing

kids need parents and that they are likely to suffer if both mom and dad chase careers at the expense of time with family. (The point seems obvious; yet it needs to be said—a lot.) Morse describes one sorry mom who, instead of “introducing her own children to great literature and world history,” is “stuck in a university office, grading a pile of illegible midterms written by other people’s children.” (As a teacher who spends more time each week with other people’s children than with my own daughter, I take Morse’s point, and am grateful that my wife is able to work from the home, though she finds even that an unpleasant distraction from motherhood.)

Spence Publishing isn’t only interested in describing and combating some current trends; it’s also interested in providing intelligent works that tell us where the intellectual, political and religious world we live in came from. In *The Long Truce* (2001), A. J. Conyers of Baylor University maintains that what started out as a good idea—that forbearance



is usually better than combat over difference—has morphed into “tolerance” as currently understood: “you’ve got your thing, I’ve got mine. Whatever.”

Conyers suggests that the early modern form of tolerance that gave birth to its postmodern kin helped to undo the glue that held communities and families together, and

this, Conyers continues, is what created a void filled by the modern State, whose tentacles reach into every citizen’s life. Consider that a Canadian provincial court recently found that parts of the Bible—the parts that touch on sexual matters—can be construed as “hate literature.” The public reading or presentation of these passages can now be prosecuted under Canada’s hate speech legislation—in the name of tolerance.

There is a tendency among conservatives, when they hear of such things, to get hysterical, or at least anxiety-ridden. One doesn’t find hysteria in Spence’s books. But neither does one find bemused detachment, born of a sense that the world is going to

hell, anyway, so one might as well not pay it much notice. Instead, in Spence’s work, one finds cool, intelligent, and often openly Christian assessments of, and engagement with, contemporary trends and ideas.

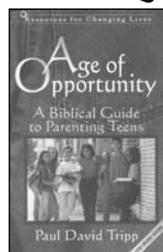
I, for one, think that Spence Publishing has helped me to see the world more clearly. ■

—Preston Jones

Preston Jones, a contributing editor to Books & Culture, teaches history, psychology and politics at The Cambridge School of Dallas. Copyright © 2003 by Preston Jones.

Briefly Noted: Parenting Teens

by Hans Madueme



In a time when the effects of sin blossom in the postmodern wastelands of American life, when the unseemly impulses of human depravity increasingly unshackle themselves from the light of Gospel truth, when our lives seem locked into tyrannizing cycles of incessant busyness, one might be forgiven for dismissing parenting as downright *perilous*. Paul Tripp, counselor and Academic Dean at the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation in Glenside, Pennsylvania, rightly challenges such pessimism in a heart-warming, God-centered, penetrating book. In its theological edge, practical genius, and piercing gaze, *Age of Opportunity* deserves the widest possible readership. Following the Puritans, Tripp writes with a profound theological and psychological grasp of people, unpacking the dynamics of parent/teen relationships in a fallen world. The book yields a gold mine of practical, godly advice. The reader will often reflexively gaze into the mirror of Scripture, enduring painful moments of liberating self-exegesis—*caveat lector*. Such books will help the church cultivate a wise community of physicians of the soul, the most important patients being at home. Read it for wisdom. Read it for the kids, that redeemed lives might more fully redound to the glory of God. ■

Book reviewed: *Age of Opportunity: A Biblical Guide to Parenting Teens* by Paul David Tripp (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed; 1997) 253 pp.+ suggested readings. *Hans Madueme is completing his internal medicine residency at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN. He plans to begin seminary in the fall of 2003.*

The History of



The

Music of Kate Campbell

In each of us...there is part of yesterday's man; it is yesterday's man who inevitably predominates us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from whom we result. Yet we do not sense this man of the past, because he is inveterate in us; he makes up the unconscious part of ourselves.

—Pierre Bourdieu

Southerners have a strong sense of place. In the songs of Kate Campbell one can smell the clay dirt roads of Georgia, picture the kudzu vines of North Carolina, feel the uncontrollable force of the great river of Mississippi. This is tactile music from the heart of a woman who understands the meaning of heritage and home.

*I'm going south of everything
Where the air is sweet and church bells ring
Back where I come from, back where I belong
Down where the sun shines in the rain
And life goes by from a front porch swing
You can keep the bitter cold
I'm gonna go south of everything*

Contemporary Americans have lost a sense of place. Like fiddler crabs we scurry from one suburban domicile to another. It's an ersatz world of designer identities—superficial and terribly the same. It is even eroding what it means to be a Southerner.

“Old Orlando” is lined with cobble-stoned streets and gaslights, giving the impression of history reclaimed. But it's not. There never was an old downtown Orlando—it is simply a mythic facade used as a setting for tourism.

*It's getting hard to find good grits and gravy
I know you know just what I'm talking about
Well that's the price you have to pay for progress
And to be living in the new south
We traded our boots for Italian loafers
And Bichon Frises are our new hounds*

*Thanks to Disney World and Coca-Cola
We're finally living in the new south*

American Christians have little appreciation for context and physicality—for the weight of the doctrines of creation and incarnation. We are not autonomous individuals shaped somehow by reductionistic rationality. Our identity is derived from our families and from the places we inhabit. We are embodied history. Which is why the sins of fathers are passed down from generation to generation. We don't know who we are until we know where we've come from. For many, homelessness is more than the product of geographic mobility; it is rooted in historic amnesia. Home is ground zero of selfhood.

Kate Campbell is a Southern singer/songwriter. The daughter of a Mississippi Baptist minister, her music is rooted in the glories, ambiguities and sorrows of the American South. Musically, she is compared to Mary Chapin Carpenter, Nanci Griffith, and Lucinda Williams. Her narrative songs are compared to William Faulkner, Flannery O'Conner and Eudora Welty. But such comparisons do her no justice. Here, as few have done before, is a voice that captures the pain and promise of place.

Campbell's career is also unique. She left a history faculty position at Middle Tennessee State University to pursue music. “I loved teaching, but when I turned 30,” she told the *Nashville Scene*, “I came to the conclusion that teaching was something I could come back to, that it was something I can do when I'm older. But if I was going to sing my songs, I had to give it a go now.” Her music is the history of a heart, the unconscious memory of a Southerner. Her seven albums are simple, honest, and powerful; her most recent: *Rosaryville* (1999), *Wandering Strange* (2001), *Monument* (2002), and *Twang On a Wire* (2003). Her songs are soul food. Campbell quotes Flannery O'Conner on the liner notes of *Rosaryville*: “Art is something that one experiences alone and for the purpose of realizing in a fresh way through the senses the mystery of existence.” In contrast to a world filled with entertainment as diversion, one reviewer wisely noted, “You need this woman's music in your life.”

a Southern Heart

Southerners have a strong sense of heritage, but it is a checkered history. How does a child of the South connect his or her identity to a past that is filled with images of slavery and burning crosses? I write as a Southerner. Virginia is my adopted home. I honor the memory of its heroes, Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson. I cried at the recent film *Gods and Generals*. And yet, my own family was deeply involved in the alleviation of racism in the South. My grandfather served as the Secretary of Negro Work of the Southern Presbyterian Church and was the president of Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a historically black teaching institution. I well remember my father storming out of a little café when he read on the menu: “We reserve the right to serve whomever we want.” Having grown up on the mission field, it was my first memory of segregation. My father’s outrage has left a lasting impression.

History textbooks rarely describe the ambiguities of Southern culture. How then is a Southerner to remember? How is the pride and shame to be faced?

These are questions Campbell, college history teacher turned folk singer, addresses. In her song, “Petrified House,” she tells the story of an aging woman living in a Southern downtown mansion, now surrounded by topless bars and strip malls.

*She believes that somehow that nothing has changed
Even though Sherman left Georgia in flames
Cotton’s still king and the south didn’t fall
As long as wisteria climbs up the wall*

But as the South has changed, there is much that remains the same. It was only last summer that ex-Klansman, Bobby Frank Cherry was convicted for the 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that took the life of four black little girls. The pain of the Civil Rights Movement is still fresh. Of these four girls, Campbell sings:

*Four little girls dress up nice
Singing about Jesus, red and yellow, black and white
Dreaming of freedom across the land
And all God’s children walking hand in hand
One deadly blast shattered the peace*

*Making for a dark Sunday morning on 16th St.
Who can explain such ignorant hate
When the violent bear it away
Bear it away, bear it away
Merciful Jesus, lift up our sorrow
Upon your shoulders and bear it away*

In one of her most poignant songs, “Looking Back,” from *Rosaryville*, she describes the importance of getting the history right and feeling fully both the triumph and tears of the Southern experience. This is wise advice, learned from study, reflection, and life.

I can still recall the night lightning burned the mansion down. We all stood in our pajamas on that hallowed Southern ground. When the flames had turned to ashes only blackened bricks remained and sixteen stately Doric columns there beneath a veil of gray. And it’s a long and slow surrender retreating from the past. It’s important to remember to fly the flag half-mast and look away. I was taught by elders wiser love your neighbors, love your God. Never saw a cross on fire; never saw an angry mob. I saw sweet magnolia blossoms. I chased lightning bugs at night. Never dreaming others saw our way of life in black and white. Part of me hears voices crying. Part of me can feel their weight. Part of me believes that mansion stood for something more than hate.

All of us are rooted in time and place. All our histories bear the scars of both fallenness and grace. Campbell traces these memories through the contours of her heart. In doing so, she helps each of us make our own connections and experience the deeper mysteries of existence. She doesn’t leave her listeners only with nostalgia and pathos. Campbell points beyond to our hearts’ true home. ■

~John Seel

Dr. David John Seel, Jr. is the headmaster of The Cambridge School of Dallas, a Christ-centered, classical college preparatory school. He is the author of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. Copyright © 2003 by John Seel.



by
Dr.
David
John
Seel,
Jr.

Hollywood Worldviews

<http://www.godawa.com>



Denis Haack

Worldviews in film

Screenwriter Brian Godawa has written a book, *Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Films with Wisdom and Discernment* (IVP; 2002) which explores movies as stories, and then identifies how those stories express philosophical world views or forms of spirituality. The book is a good (film) companion to James Sire's excellent *The Universe Next Door: A Basic World View Catalogue* (IVP).

Ransom Ratings

Design: A collection of pieces from a wide variety of sources and authors (including a surprising number of formatting typos).

Content: Godawa's site addresses a variety of philosophical and theological issues, from essays on Nietzsche to God's sovereignty to reincarnation, and one titled, "Sarcasm in the Bible." He also posts fragments from his book which were apparently edited out of the published version, and a variety of film reviews, such as "Forrest Gump: Existentialism for the Common Man." Identifying the world view(s) expressed in a film can help in unpacking a film's meaning, and Godawa's site and book helps that process, and provides resources for further reading. What is important, of course, is not forcing each film into a particular world view slot, but being able to reflect on the message of the film with sensitivity and insight. The postmodern generation seems eager to discuss movies, but they resist easy categories or anything which smacks of reducing them to a particular world view, unless they have identified with it themselves. Since it is their ideas and values we wish to engage with the gospel, it is the view rather than the label that should be emphasized. So, discernment will be needed as you surf and use the site.

Ease of Use: On the home page, click on "Hollywood Worldviews" to enter the part of the site related to the book and open to the public.

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Critique is a newsletter (published nine times each year, funds permitting) designed to accomplish, by God's grace, three things:

1. To call attention to resources of interest to thinking Christians.
2. To model Christian discernment.
3. To stimulate believers to think biblically about all of life.

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