

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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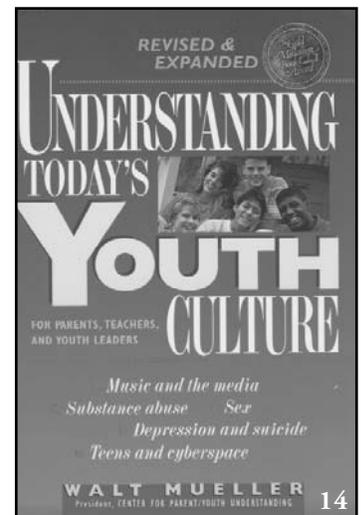
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Editor's Note



The Cost of Creativity

Some people are good at catchy titles and headlines, but I am not. I grumped earlier over the effort it took to come up with titles for some talks I will be giving. I want the titles to be descriptive yet creative and attractive, and achieving that is not always easy. It can also take an amazing amount of time.

Which reminded me of a catalog for a community education program I happened upon when Margie and I were traveling along the northern shore of Lake Superior. One entry was for a woodworking class called, "Build Your Own Casket." What caught my eye was a quote used to advertise it:

None of us are getting out of this alive, so you might as well bury yourself in your work.

I have little interest in woodworking and no place to store a casket, but that quote was enough to tempt me to sign up.

I find that it takes me as long to develop the creative aspects of a talk (titles, stories, Power-Point presentation) as it does to write the talk itself. When I speak on film, I spend hours choosing which scenes to show. Creativity costs, in other words. It costs time and effort, and both tend to be in short supply in our busy, fast-paced world.

It is this cost which can tempt us to concentrate on the content and forget the process, making sure things are true and good at the expense of making them beautiful. To some extent at least, it could be argued the evangelical church in the West has tended to strike that bargain over the past century or so. It's a losing proposition from a biblical perspective.

The Scriptures reveal that God who is both true and righteous is also glorious beyond imag-

ining. The Redeemer and King is also Creator, and we have been made in his image. When he called the cosmos into existence by his eternal word, he made it a riotous display of colors, textures, shapes, and sounds. And then he called it Good, in case we might have doubts about it. And when the Second Person of the Trinity entered our world, he came as a story-teller.

With such a divine investment in creativity, my grumping is a measure of worldliness, a commitment to efficiency and productivity which may make sense in terms of the Industrial Revolution but is contrary to a Christian view of things. Both the process and the content matter, and they matter because God exists.

A special meal served on special plates, with a few flowers and linen napkins (in a fast-food world). A letter written with a fountain pen on home-made paper (in place of an email). A play read aloud in a living room lit by candles, each guest given parts marked on the script (instead of going to a movie). A talk which is not only true but creative (instead of everything sounding business-like).

All these things take time and effort. They are all costly. So much in our post-Christian culture leans against them. And part of Christian faithfulness means saying No to the world, and Yes to the glorious grace of creativity. Not just for artists, but for all God's children, across all the ordinary things of life. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue

Re: *Bruce Almighty*

Send e-mail to:

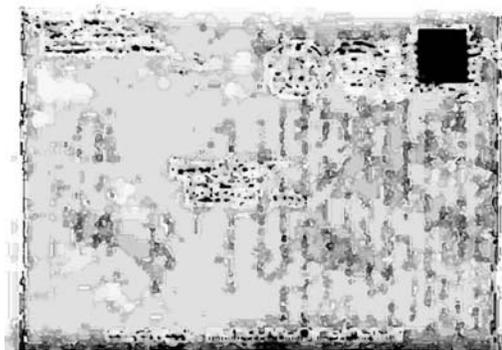
letters@ransomfellowship.org

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

Marsena Konkle
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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.



I just received the latest *Critique*. I'm a new recipient. Thanks for this ministry. I respond to a couple thoughts from the article "Almighty Sins." You (Marsena) ask, "It's striking to me that Christians consistently object to two particular sins in the movies: premarital sex and foul language. Yet it seems to me, equally serious sins are also found in *Bruce Almighty*: selfishness, lovelessness, and jealousy. I've never heard of a Christian community boycotting a movie for realistically depicting these. I wonder why." And "...we don't want to see reality depicted on the movie screen..."

Maybe the Christian community should be more upset about these other sins. But I have some comments arising from the above remarks:

1. As depicted in most movies, foul language and graphic sexuality are so unnecessary. Incessant profanity is not a part of my daily life, and I work in a secular business. In fact, in most secular businesses, swearing is not well-tolerated. Does it happen? Yes. But it is not the usual way to converse. For me it is offensive, and I do not enjoy foul language.

2. I am a sexual addict. I have used various sexually inappropriate ways to act out. You say, "We have people in church acting out, because they don't accept the whole human being. They deny that we are sexual beings." I must say, I disagree. I do not know all that is involved. I believe that there was hurt in my young life that sexual acting out seemed to cover, for awhile. Yes, there was a misunderstanding of sexuality in the teaching I received. Someone has characterized this as "Sex is dirty—save it for the one you love." I never heard these exact words, yet there was confusion. But this is not what made me act out.

So, I am "weak," in the way Romans 14 says. I probably could not go to a movie like *Bruce Almighty*, knowing that the raised skirts

and other sexual images hook me. I read also a comment about the movie, *Wicker Man*. I remember seeing that some years ago. And the primary image in my mind is of a woman dancing seductively in a hotel room. That is a sad thing to say. You may have no idea how sad.

No matter the importance of engaging the culture—I agree with this—I, for one, am unable to engage some things in the culture, without doing spiritual and psychological and possibly physical harm to myself. Some might say, "Oh, what a wimp. Can't he handle this stuff? It's nothing, really." To such a comment I say, please read Romans 14.

If it IS possible to expose oneself to excessive violence, graphic sexuality, and gutter language without doing harm to one's self, I know it is not possible for me. Please "do not despise the weak." And I need to be careful not to "judge the strong." At the bottom of it all, we in the community of Christ must love one another.

Thank you for your thoughts, and for considering my comments.

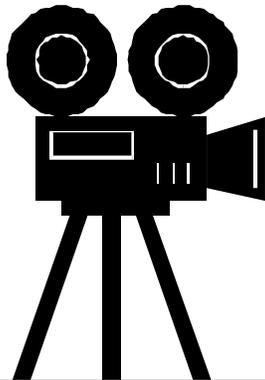
**name withheld upon request
via email**

Marsena Konkle responds:

Thank you so much for your letter. You bring up an important issue (sexual addiction) which I didn't address at all in my discussion of *Bruce Almighty* [*Critique* #6 – 2003]. Sexual addiction is a very real problem, both in and out of the church. For you, I would imagine that avoiding movies, television, and probably the internet is as essential as an alcoholic avoiding bars and gatherings where the focus is on drinking. It's a wise and godly choice, knowing that the movies contain temptation you are better off not subjecting yourself to. We all have weaknesses and

continued on page 16...

Whale Songs Ancient Voices



A review of Whale Rider

by Denis Haack

“She fell into the sea. The thunder of the whales departing was loud in her ears. She opened her eyes and looked downward. Through the foaming water she could see the huge tail fins waving farewell.

“Then from the backwash of Time came the voice of the old mother whale. ‘Child, your people await you. Return to the Kingdom of Tane [Maori god of Man] and fulfill your destiny.’ And suddenly the sea was drenched again with a glorious echoing music of the dark shapes sounding.”

Film Credits

Starring:

Keisha Castle-Hughes
(Paieka “Pai” Apirana)
Rawiri Paratene
(Koro)
Vicky Haughton
(Nanny Flowers)
Cliff Curtis
(Porourangi)
Grant Roa
(Uncle Rawiri)
Mana Taumaunu
(Hemi)

Director:

Niki Caro

Based on the novel by:

Witi Ihimaera

Screenwriter:

Niki Caro

Producers:

Bill Gavin
Linda Goldstein Knowlton
and others

Original Music:

Lisa Gerrard

Cinematographer:

Leon Narbey

Costumes:

Kristy Cameron

Runtime: 101 minutes
Rated PG-13 for brief language and a momentary drug reference.

One of the delights of *Whale Rider* is the eleven-year old Keisha Castle-Hughes, who plays Pai in her first role as an actress. It is a remarkable performance. This low-budget film is both charming and revealing. Charming for being a simple story, lovingly told. Revealing as a reminder that in our religiously pluralistic world, old pagan traditions like the Maori’s belief in the Ancients are attractive to a generation starved for transcendence.

Koro gathers the boys of the tribe, and begins to train them in the traditional rituals and myths that have been passed down over so many centuries. Pai has a natural affinity for the tribal lore, but he forbids her involvement. Still, she finds ways to learn the chants, and even gets her kindly but wayward Uncle Rawiri to teach her the warrior art of Maori stick-fighting.

Convinced no male heir will be produced by his disappointing sons, Koro takes the boys of the tribe to a distant lagoon. There he takes the whale’s tooth pendant which he wears as the sign of being chief and throws it into the water. The boy who retrieves it will be his successor, but none can find it on the bottom nestled among the seaweed.

So in his despair, Koro chants, calling for the Ancestors, for their wisdom, for their presence. Pai also chants, but her voice they hear.

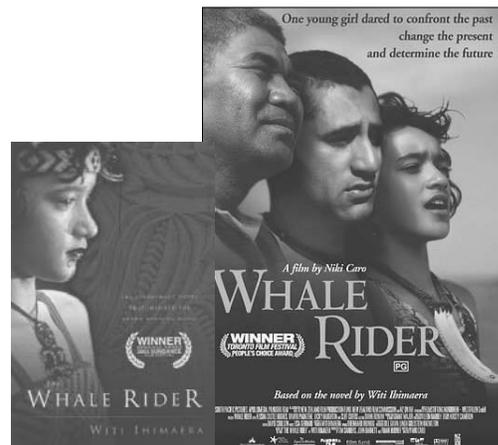
Whale Rider has won acclaim at a number of film festivals, including awards at the 2003 Sundance Film Festival, and in Toronto and Rotterdam. Based on a novel by the same title, the themes which shape the plot are hardly novel: girl achieves success in a male-dominated world; tradition gives way to the pressures of modernity. Still, in *Whale Rider* we watch them unfold in unpredictable

ways. The window of insight into Maori culture and religion is fascinating, and the strong acting makes us care about this dwindling tribe of people in a tiny, decaying village so far away on the shore of New Zealand.

The Maori chants and traditional beliefs that are depicted in *Whale Rider* are strangely attractive. This is a world that few of us know, and there is something in the eery echos of the other-worldly songs of whales that draw us further in. Add a main character that we grow to love and cry with, and *Whale Rider* turns out to be a film that can pull the heart-strings and tap into our desire for significance in life

that transcends the ordinariness of the moment.

The postmodern generation yearns for spirituality, a transcendent story, and for worship which displays a deep-rooted, imaginative beauty. Does not the Scriptures promise all three: a true intimacy with God, a Story that fulfills all imagining, and spiritual disciplines that stretch back over millennia? Then why aren't we displaying them? How will we commend our faith to someone like Pai and Koro when they move



How will we tell our Story so its immeasurable beauty can be heard over the songs of the whales?

in next door? And how will we tell our Story so that it's immeasurable beauty can be heard over the songs of the whales? ■

~Denis Haack

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What was your initial reaction to *Whale Rider*? Why did you react that way?
2. In what ways has the ever-growing religious pluralism of our postmodern world been most evident to you? Does religious pluralism make you uneasy? Why or why not? How does religious pluralism affect your faithfulness as a Christian?
3. What is the message(s)—both major and minor—of the film? Consider how the film addresses themes such as:
 - the nature of reality or what is really real;
 - what's wrong with the world, and what's the solution;
 - the impact of our postmodern world on traditional ideas, values and community; and
 - the significance of story to bring meaning to existence.

What is attractive here? How is it made attractive? Where do you agree? Disagree? Why? In the areas in which we might disagree, how can we talk about and demonstrate the truth in a winsome and creative way in our pluralistic culture?
4. In what ways were the techniques of film-making (casting, acting, direction, script, music, sets, action, cinematography, editing, lighting 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?
5. 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 sections of Scripture?
6. 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.
7. What insight does the film give into the way postmodern people see life, meaning, and reality? How can you use the film as a useful window of insight for Christians to better understand our non-Christian friends and neighbors?
8. Might the film be a useful point of contact for discussion with non-Christians? What plans should you make?
9. To what extent does your faith in Christ flow into a living relationship with Jesus, a healthy spirituality, and a vibrant worship? How will you commend your faith to a neo-pagan? To what extent is your witness to the Story of Jesus marked with creativity, beauty, and surprise?

Beginning the

On my way to a walk along a creek near our home, I stopped to talk with some neighbors who were sitting on their porch. The cool autumn weather prompts front-porch life in Minnesota, as V's of Canadian geese fill the sky and the sun sets. We talked casually of this and that, and then as I walked along the creek listening to the cries of red-winged blackbirds, I thought about how true conversation always tends to be so unpredictable. I had stopped to say hello, but had left with an invitation. Pleasant, but not what I would have predicted.

Sales pitches, lectures, and sermons, on the other hand, follow a specific agenda, which is fine since no one imagines them to be actual conversations. That is true even if the presenter involves the listener in some way. This involvement inserts a small measure of unpredictability into the presentation, of course, but the agenda still reigns supreme, and the involvement can be terminated if it threatens to take things too far off course.

All of which raises an important question for Christians who would like to introduce the gospel into their conversations with friends and neighbors. Namely, how do we introduce the gospel and still keep it a conversation?

I have argued in these pages [see www.RansomFellowship.org/R_Babylon10.html] that a good way to launch the conversation is by listening to and discussing the stories of our culture. All people, whether they realize it or not, tend to explore their deepest fears, beliefs, hopes and values in the stories they tell, and want to hear repeatedly. For the postmodern generation, the primary place where their stories are

told is in the movies. Thus, we can use the movies as both a window of insight into their world, and as a point of contact to begin talking about the things that matter most. It is true that we will likely not share many of the ideas and values depicted in the cinema, but then, we live not in Jerusalem, but in Babylon. Whether we like it or not, our culture is not Christian but post-Christian. We can hardly expect Babylonians to promote the world view of Jerusalem because, well, they are

We may say that we have nothing to hide, but the duplicity lodged deep in our fallenness always keeps full visibility at bay.

Babylonians. Still, as the best film makers produce movies, they both reflect and mold the convictions and values of their culture. Those convictions and values are woven into the stories they depict on the screen, and they address the Big Questions of life and death. The very Questions we want to discuss in light of the answers provided in the gospel.

More than a few who have heard me say this, however, find it to be a very questionable proposition. “Why use the stories in movies as our point of contact when there is a better, more personal option? Why not just get to know our non-Christian neighbors well enough to hear their real-life stories and begin there instead? Then we won’t have to deal with all the questionable stuff in the films.”

Good question.

Our tightly hidden hearts

None of us are completely honest and open to one another, to God, or even to ourselves. In a fallen world, none of us dare to be. What psychologists define as defense mechanisms make sense when full honesty can be used to destroy instead of to heal, to blackmail rather than to forgive. Even within the church some wounds would have salt thrown into them if they were uncovered for public display. Which is why observers have noted that far too often the community of God’s people shoots its wounded. So, we hide our wounds, any sins deemed unacceptable, and say we are doing “Fine,” when admitting the problem will be more painful than lying about it.

In fact, the problem goes deeper yet. Even when we determine to be fearlessly transparent our fallenness stands in the way. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure,” the prophet Jeremiah says, and then adds, “Who can understand it?” (17:9) It is a rhetorical question, and the answer is, “No one but God.” We may say that we have nothing to hide, but the duplicity lodged deep in our fallenness always keeps full visibility at bay. Our wickedness makes our memories selective, our interpretation of events skewed in our favor, and our view of sin incomplete. John Calvin said that even if we honestly confessed all the sin we knew, the vast majority of our guilt would remain unconfessed.

Now imagine not a Christian who has an assurance of divine grace and acceptance, but a non-Christian who has neither. Who like us has found it discomfiting to look deep into the hidden recesses of their soul. And who has, perhaps, been transparent before

Conversation

and been burned in the process. Is it any wonder that they might be shy about discussing, in the most intimate terms, the Biggest Questions of life and death? Blaise Pascal rightly noted that we usually find ways to be distracted from such things. Since we who love God and his holiness find repentance painful, can we not empathize with an unbeliever who is anxious not to probe too deeply?

So, our problem as Christians is this. We wish to bear witness to the gospel of grace in Christ, because it is in him alone that redemption can be found. Yet, this word which we bring is fearsome. It is God's word, "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit... discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). What could possibly be more threatening than that? Let's not sentimentalize this text: swords hurt. The writer goes on to insist that "no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (4:13). That is a terrifying thought, and only the grace of God is sufficient to keep us from despairing at the prospect.

We must realize then, that when we witness to the gospel of Christ, we bring a word which is both loving and threatening, both gracious and dangerous. We are asking people to face the Big Questions of life and death, which is never to be taken lightly. We are inviting people to honestly face their greatest fears and all the sordid little secrets that they, like us, work hard to keep buried in the deepest recesses of their hearts.

So, how do we get the conversation to that level? Consider four possibilities.

Possibility #1: Use an evangelistic technique. Some have proposed that there are things we can do to steer the conversation

toward topics which open the door to a gospel presentation. The one that was popular when I was a young believer was to ask someone, "If you died tonight, where do you think you would go?" Now, I have no doubt that God has used this technique, and for that grace I am thankful. Nevertheless, the technique still leaves me cold. My difficulty is that I simply can not imagine a casual conversation in which that question would be the next natural statement to make. Perhaps those conversations exist, but none have included me. And the times that question has been raised in my presence the conversation ceased, at that moment, to be conversations, and became sermons. Or arguments. (Of course I realize it can be raised between two close, dear, long-time friends, but that is beside the point here.)

When we witness to the gospel of Christ, we bring a word that is both loving and threatening, both gracious and dangerous.

I believe that techniques are useful in technical matters, but they tend to kill conversations because by definition they are manipulative. And people must never be manipulated because they are made in the image and likeness of God.

There is another problem as well. When we suddenly insert Big Issues like death into an otherwise casual conversation we can inadvertently trivialize the very message we desire to commend. As finite creatures our context makes a difference. If we are chatting about ordinary things and suddenly someone starts asking about death, the atmosphere is changed. Either the comments about death itself are made to appear insignificant, or the person speaking is made to appear uncaring about those to whom they are speaking. No context of appropriate solemnity has been

provided to make the question seem appropriate, or even truly serious.

Yet, I appreciate the desire that gave birth to this technique. Facing our mortality is a bracing experience, and tends to bring into sharp relief the things that matter most. Death is an enemy which Christ faced on our behalf, and so to be able to talk about it with my non-Christian friends is a good idea. But I'd like to do it naturally, by God's grace, not as a technique. In other words, I want to find a context in which I can openly discuss death with my non-Christian friends because they are open to the conversation.

Possibility #2: Demonstrate compassion in relationships. The word "compassion" means to "suffer with" someone, and there are few things more precious than a friend who is willing to walk with you through the loss of a loved one. Do we have friendships with non-Christians that are marked by such faithfulness? We should.

Silence is important at moments like this, but those who cry with us earn the right to say things that we will accept from no one else. We may have to wait for the grief to pass, of course, before there is a time to speak, but such experiences open the door to talking about death, and life, and all they mean.

Perhaps it is we who will suffer the loss, and the non-Christian who will walk beside us. That is a precious gift, for presence is a grace in this lonely world. Letting them grieve with us, share our pain, and hear our doubts provides them a view into what life in Jesus consists of. It will not be perfect, of course, but that isn't a problem because our perfection was never the decisive factor. Where need abounds, his grace abounds, and that is the decisive factor.

The only problem with this is that we may have a long time to wait before it

Reading the World cont.

occurs. That doesn't mean we should not be there for them when the need arises, but it does mean that we will want to find other ways to prompt discussion of deep things—like death—in the meantime.

Possibility #3: Sensitively listen to our friends. As we ask questions and get to know someone, there can be, by God's grace, little moments of vulnerability. As they tell their story over time, they may choose to include details which hint at loss, disappointment, and deep hurt. Demonstrating that we care, and gently asking questions can sometimes open the door to deeper discussion.

This requires holy-spirited sensitivity, which is nurtured only when we spend regular and unhurried time before the face of God in prayer and in his word. Our witness to the gospel is not simply a rational matter, but involves our full humanity as a child of God. Learning to truly listen instead of using the time to figure out what to say next can allow us to hear between the lines, and to notice the quiet, gentle prompting of God's Spirit within us.

Review the conversations recorded in the New Testament in which Jesus interacted with unbelievers. He showed this sensitivity, and though he had added insight because he is God, we are not left entirely alone as we seek to witness to the gospel. Jesus told his disciples that it was to our advantage that he was returning to heaven, because the same Spirit which convicts the world of sin would dwell within us (John 16:5-11). Such sensitivity to people must be coupled with great humility, but we dare not allow the busyness of our age to keep us from maturing in this way, so that we

grow increasingly sensitive to both our friends and to the Holy Spirit.

Occasionally this vulnerability occurs rather quickly in a relationship, but usually it reveals itself only after a great deal of time, when trust has been developed. So, we should be faithful, and patient.

But what about conversations with people we are only beginning to get to know?

Possibility #4: Using Babylonian stories. I have tried over many years to be a faithful witness, and yet I can remember

Good art not only reveals something of reality, it speaks to the heart in ways that can not be reduced to words.

very few instances when death was the natural topic of conversation. Most of the time the subject was quickly changed when death was mentioned, or some other signal was given that my friend had no interest in pursuing the topic. Yet, every person with whom I have watched the film *Wit* could barely wait to begin talking about it. They have cried during the movie, been moved deeply, and needed no invitation from me to discuss it, and at great length.

I have asked what people consider to be the meaning of life, and occasionally the conversation which results has gone somewhere. Yet, every person with whom I have watched *13 Conversations About One Thing* could barely contain their enthusiasm to talk about it. And not just in a broad theoretical way, either, but in deeply personal terms.

I have tried to ask people how they deal with the moral failures they are guilty

of, and a few of those conversations have included my sharing something of the meaning of Christ's cross. Yet, without exception everyone with whom I have watched *Crimes and Misdemeanors* has eagerly tackled the topic, often with an honesty that takes my breath away.

The list could go on. *Blade Runner* for what it means to be human in a technological world. *Chocolat* and *The Wicker Man* for neo-paganism and Christianity as competing world views. *Contact* for the meaning of truth, and the relationship of knowledge and faith. So many issues that probe so deeply, and in each case it is the art, the Babylonian stories of my non-Christian friend that sets the agenda. An agenda which involves the Big Questions—the very questions addressed specifically by the gospel.

The question answered

The role that stories play should not surprise us if we hold a biblical view of art. Good art not only reveals something of reality, it speaks to the heart in ways that can not be reduced to words. When the prophet Nathan wanted David to face the horror of his wickedness, he knew he would be confronting his King. So he came with a story, a piece of fiction about a lamb that was sure to hook the heart of David, who had been a shepherd as a boy. When Jesus, the Incarnate One from all eternity came to preach the good news of the Kingdom, he told stories about wayward boys, lost coins, and seeds that grew in rocky soil. Brief but poignant bits of fiction that lodge in our imagination like a splinter under a fingernail.

Such is the power of story. And since the stories of a generation is where that generation explores their deepest convic-

tions and dreams, the stories quite naturally revolve around the Big Questions of life and death.

“Why use the stories in movies as our point of contact when we can hear their real-life stories and begin there instead?” Yes, hear their real-life stories,

by all means. How else will we get to know them in any meaningful way? But also use the stories in movies because the stories in the best films raise issues that would be hard to discuss if we had merely verbalized them. Besides, how can we get to know someone if we refuse to listen to the stories they hold most dear? It is true that those stories will contain “questionable stuff,” but then so will the stories of their lives. They are, after all, fallen creatures, just as we are. The best movies spin a tale which draw us in, so that our heart is exposed in ways that we normally work hard to protect. Film draws us into a world in which people like us wrestle with what we wrestle with, and since we identify with them, it does not seem so vital to keep the recesses of our hearts so tightly hidden. The world of the movie is safe (because it’s fiction), yet probing (because we were drawn in), so the discussion about what matters most can begin.

This isn’t to say that every film discussion goes well, because like any conversation they are unpredictable. Nor is it to say that movies excuse us from showing compassion and listening to the personal stories of our friends. Nothing could be further from the truth. Compassion, our presence, and unhurried time to listen are all costly, but they are part of faithfulness.

I am not arguing that using movies as points of contact to begin conversations with non-Christians is somehow the only way to

proceed. If you have found another point of contact that prompts people to eagerly talk about death, meaning, reality, guilt, and morality, then by all means use it. Just don’t use techniques to try to short-cut the process. In the

meantime, I’m going to continue to use film. I can appreciate the artistry, the insight, and the beauty of the best Babylonian art without having to agree with all it represents. And as we discuss the stories, I can relax in the conversation. Not because I know all the answers, but because I am convinced that the Story of Jesus fulfills all human stories, in ways that both stagger the imagination and bring grace and healing to all the secret, hidden, hurting recesses of every human heart. ■

~Denis Haack

Editor’s note:

This is the 11th installment in the Babylonian series, on being in the world but not of it. The first ten installments can be found on our website <www.RansomFellowship.org>. In my next piece I will explore whether film discussions can ever get past merely discussing the Big Questions to a telling of the gospel itself, of how we can by God’s grace move from pre-evangelism to evangelism.

When Jesus came to preach the good news, he told stories. Brief but poignant bits of fiction that lodge in our imagination.

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A Ransom Movie Review

www.ransomfellowship.org/M_Kieslowski.html

A Discerning Eye



Shaping Our Kids' World View

It's 11:20 pm Thursday night. I'm looking ahead to a busy and exciting Labor Day weekend at the Mueller house. Tomorrow at 4 pm, my daughter Bethany plays her first field hockey game of the season. At 7:30, Josh's senior season of football kicks off. At 8 am on Saturday morning, we get on the Turnpike to head four hours west with Caitlin as she starts her second year at Geneva College. Then bright and early Tuesday morning, Nate climbs on the bus for his first day of middle school. Right now, I should be in bed thanking the Lord for my kids and wondering how I got so old so fast. Instead, my head is somewhere else... spinning from what I've just watched over the last three hours.

Tonight I did what I do on MTV's annual Video Music Awards day—I watched and processed the show. This year, I had to head right to the computer to record my thoughts. The VMA's—like all popular entertainment—function in our culture as both a *map* and a *mirror*.

As a map, the VMA's direct and shape the developing worldview of vulnerable children and teens who look to the music industry for guidance and direction. In that sense, viewing the three-plus hour broadcast puts me in the same "classroom" as our kids. For those of us who want to know what the kids we know and love are learning from these teachers, the VMA's give us a front row seat in the classroom. It's imperative that we know what our kids are learning. That way, we can affirm or correct where necessary.

As a mirror, the VMA's allow us to gaze at ourselves to see what we look like and what we've become. The show is an accurate reflection—

although many of us won't admit or believe it—of how we've changed, what we think, how we live, and who we are as a culture. Granted, the reflection I saw tonight was not something I liked. Nor was it an accurate reflection of me as an individual. But collectively... I can't argue with the fact that what I saw is a reflection of what our youth culture has become.

All that said, what does this year's VMA map and mirror have to tell us about our culture and our kids? What follows are some random and initial musings regarding what we can learn about youth culture and how to minister in it, from this year's VMA's.

The popular music industry is gasping for air. With the exception of the first five minutes of the show, there was very little that was eventful or new. Popular music is looking for that "next big thing"—something to spike record sales. Evidence of that was the fact that Justin Timberlake won three awards (don't get me started on that one!). Yes, Coldplay won three awards too. But overall, the industry is on autopilot. I'm not sure when the next big thing is coming along. But when they find it and it hits, it's going to make a big splash.

Now... about those first five minutes... homosexuality and lesbianism are no longer stigmatized or seen as sinful. In fact, they are celebrated in the mainstream. First, you've got Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera singing Madonna's "Like A Virgin" while dressed in white wedding "dresses"—actually, they looked like they had been purchased at Victoria's Secret. Don't forget that just three years ago these two were topping the charts as the reigning "good girl" queens of formulated, generic pop music—and millions of parents were buying their albums and concert tickets for their seven, eight, and nine-year-old girls.



Today, those young fans are three years older and not even into their teenage years. The Britney and Christina they're listening to are totally reinvented as bad girls. What are those young fans learning from these "maps?" Tonight, Madonna joined them on stage. Dressed in groom's black, she played the part of the man in the on-stage lesbian wedding fantasy. She broke into her song "Hollywood" and began to bump and grind with her two "virgin" brides. Somewhere near the end of the opening number, Madonna ended her song with the lyrics "I'm bored with the concept of right and wrong." Those lyrics were sung in the context of engaging in an open-mouthed kiss with both Spears and Aguilera. That opening number set the stage for the anti-climatic appearance of the flamboyant homosexual cast of the hit Bravo series "Queer Eye For The Straight Guy" as presenters. Remember, "map" and "mirror." We've got to be addressing issues of sexuality with our kids.

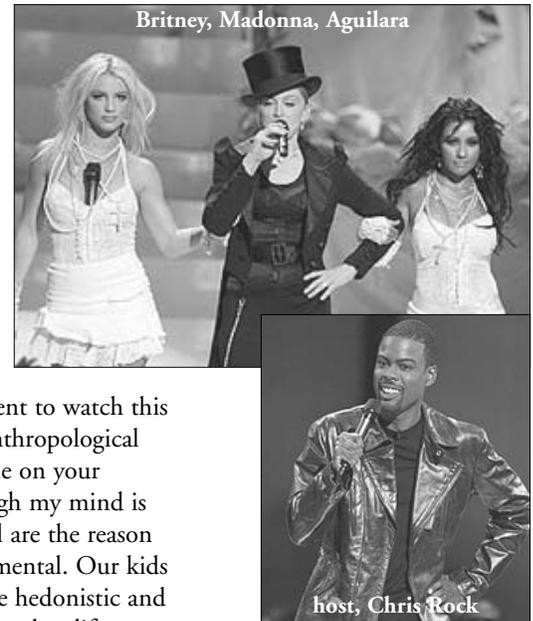
The urban Hip-Hop style and ethos rule. It is stamped all over today's youth culture. The genre is #1 among children and teens. It's flavored the commercials (have you watched the commercials on Nickelodeon lately?). Our kids sing and dance to the gangsta lifestyle. In our postmodern climate, there's nothing wrong with that. Granted, not all hip-hop music and style promotes the thug life. But I think VMA host Chris Rock was pretty insightful when he joked about 50 Cent's success and the fact that nobody talks about the music. Instead, they talk about the fact that he was shot nine times. The rise of the distinctive urban lifestyle and music into the mainstream of suburban and rural white America begs another question... now that the truly urban owners of the genre and lifestyle have seen it move into the mainstream, what will they invent and adopt as their own? As all successful youth marketers and cool hunters know, you look for the edgy stuff and market it to the world. But once it becomes a fad, those who originally owned it as their own start looking for something else. Those who work in urban ministry need to keep their ear to the ground for what's coming next. But that too will eventually be packaged, marketed, and sold to the mainstream.

Freak dancing isn't freaky anymore. It's been described as "having sex with your clothes on." That's certainly what it looks like and is also how it functions. We saw it on-stage at the VMA's and it's an integral part of most videos. We've got to do a better job of teaching our kids about issues related to modesty and a Godly sexual ethic.

When it comes to sex, there are no rules. If you were an alien sent to watch this year's VMA's from a sociological/ anthropological perspective, what would you scribble on your notepad? What kept running through my mind is that the sex act and all things sexual are the reason for living, boundary-less, and sacramental. Our kids are growing up in a world where the hedonistic and unbridled pursuit of pleasure is integral to life. Fornication, adultery, and homosexuality aren't even seen as naughty enough to be pursued in a sneaky way. Again, we've got to do a better job of teaching our kids about issues related to modesty and a godly sexual ethic.

Normal looking girls don't have a chance. If you taped the show, watch it again with that last statement in mind. The body image pressure continues and we'll see more and more of our girls at younger and younger ages begin to self-destruct over appearance. Sadly, our guys are getting the message too. Did you hear the banter last night between Nelly and Murphy Lee as they lustily discussed females and their posteriors?

What's next for the Olsen twins? They were there tonight and they're also on the cover of the latest edition of *Rolling Stone*. Keep your eye on them. How they grow up will set a pattern for our kids. Watch how they are marketed and reinvented. It will serve as an interesting case study.



The VMA's—like all popular entertainment—function in our culture as both a map and a mirror.

by
**Walt
Mueller**

Postmodern self-rule dictates how to live life.

In today's world, there is no objective, transcendent authority outside of self. The "I" determines all things ethical. "I" does what "I" wants to do. For a great example, take another look at 50 Cent's performance of his hit song "P.I.M.P." It oozed postmodern individualism. But he wasn't alone. We've got to be teaching our kids about truth and authority.

Women are ornaments for men.

The VMA's featured what we so often see in the music videos—singers, dancers and women who just stand around doing nothing but being scantily-clad sexual objects for men. I've often used this crude analogy that isn't very pretty... that so much of the music today depicts women as nothing more or less than urinals that hang on a men's room wall. As such, they are objects used by males to relieve themselves in. We must be teaching a true Biblical view of personhood.

Pain is mainstream. Who would have ever thought that Johnny Cash would be a video star in 2003? And, even more unbelievable is that he did it with a remake of Trent Reznor's "Hurt" from the 1994 Nine Inch Nails album *The Downward Spiral*. That's one song worth discussing with your kids. The opening line—"I hurt myself today, to see if I still feel." Those words capture the essence of the epidemic of teenage self-abuse.

How about Jessica Simpson's suit?! I stand by what I wrote about her a couple of years ago ["Shame, Shame,



Mary Kate and Ashley

Shame!" in *youthculture @today* (Summer 2001), and posted on <http://www.cpyu.org/news/01suml.htm>—she's the poster girl for dis-integrated faith. When are we going to start teaching our kids

that coming to faith in Christ is not just about going to heaven??? No, it's about living the Kingdom of God here on earth and integrating that faith consistently into every area of our lives.

Beyonce never once thanked God.

Unless I missed it, the winner of three moonmen stepped out of character and never once thanked the Lord. In a way, I'm happy as her music and lifestyle haven't been especially spiritually fruitful.

There's not a kid in this world or a performer on that VMA show who is beyond redemption. Our prayers and our ministry efforts need to be built on that conviction.

Finally, here are my two personal highlights from the show.

First, the Fred Durst/Jack Black parody of Michael Jackson at last year's VMA's was brilliant! And second—on a more serious note—I was thrilled to hear Missy Elliot's words after receiving the award for "Best Hip Hop Video" early on in the show. She thanked God and then said why... "for giving me the talents and the creative mind." Hey, Missy Elliot might not be bringing glory to God through her music. But her theology was dead-on right in her comments.



As I head to bed tonight, my heart does ache. It's the map and the mirror that I watched tonight that make me hurt. If you watched, you're probably hurting too. Let's use the map and the mirror as catalysts to respond as Jesus would. There's not a kid in this world or a performer on that VMA show who is beyond redemption. Our prayers and our ministry efforts need to be built on that conviction.

Now I'm heading to bed. I've got a couple of games to watch tomorrow! ■
~Walt Mueller

Walt Mueller is president of the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding. For more information about this excellent ministry and its myriad resources, contact CPYU by mail (P. O. Box 414, Elizabethtown, PA); phone (717.361.8429); email (cpyu@aol.com); or log onto their website (www.cpyu.org). Copyright © 2003 by Walt Mueller/CPYU.

Speaking Up

In these pages we stress that the Christian calling is to a life of faithfulness. That means, among other things, that our witness to the truth of Scripture must be both uncompromising and winsome, so that both the truth and the gracious beauty of the gospel are clearly demonstrated. Francis Schaeffer used to say that the Christian life is like walking on a path bordered on both sides by steep cliffs. Care must be taken that we not tumble off, perhaps backing over one side because so many believers seem intent on diving over the other. Some Christians,

for example, are unrelenting in arguing for the truth of Christianity, but don't seem to care that their lack of compassion denies the very gospel they proclaim. And on the other side, other Christians seek acceptance by unbelievers so fervently that their witness to Christ's Lordship and cross is stripped of all possible offense.

The discerning Christian will want to think about when we should speak up, when we should remain silent, and why. When to present a message, and when to ask questions. When to be content to demonstrate

the grace of God by how we live and love, and when to seek a hearing for the good news we hold most dear.

Which raises a whole series of questions worth considering. ■

~Denis Haack

Sources:

Barrs in *The Heart of Evangelism* by Jerram Barrs (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books; 2001) p. 193; Guinness in *Prophetic Untimeliness: A Challenge to the Idol of Relevance* by Os Guinness (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books; 2003) pp. 96-97.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. If the two cliffs of witness are "truth" and "compassion," which are you most tempted to fall over? Why? Which do you find most common among Christians?
2. Some argue that we have a responsibility to always speak up if someone (a teacher, supervisor, neighbor, or acquaintance) says anything that contradicts biblical teaching. Do you agree? Why or why not? They suggest that to remain silent is the result of cowardice, and demonstrates that we are ashamed of the gospel. How would you respond? Under what circumstances might it be wrong to speak out? Why?
3. Under what circumstances is it wiser to raise respectful yet probing questions rather than debate the truth? Should a Christian student at a secular school ever debate their teachers in class? Why or why not? What can we do to become better skilled at asking thoughtful, probing questions? When is debate called for?
4. "God has given us such great dignity as those who are made in his image," Jerram Barrs writes, "that, as the psalmist says, even God himself is 'mindful' of us. If God is respectful of the glory of our humanity, how much more should we honor the divine image in all we meet?" What does this "honor" look like? How should this honor be expressed when a point of sharp disagreement arises in a conversation with an unbeliever?
5. "Nothing sharpens us better," Os Guinness notes, "and guards us from slipping into lazy, cowardly thinking than wrestling with truths that are unpopular... It is too easy to hold or defend beliefs with which we are familiar, or doctrines that fit in comfortably with the conventional thinking of our day. But if that is all we do, we are likely to find ourselves with a convenient faith that is neither the true faith nor the whole faith." What doctrines or beliefs are you most comfortable defending? Why? What biblical doctrines or beliefs fit quite "comfortably" into the conventional thinking of our postmodern world?
6. What doctrines or beliefs are you least comfortable explaining and defending? Why? Which doctrines or beliefs fit least "comfortably" into the conventional thinking of our postmodern world? Why? What alternative ideas or values are preferred?
7. Under what circumstances do we need to be willing to discuss those aspects of biblical faith that are deemed most offensive in our culture, even at the risk of losing a friendship with a non-Christian? Why?
8. Is there a difference between "fighting for the truth" and "witnessing to the Kingdom?" Where do the two notions come from? Which is biblical?

Discerning Youth

Over the last few years some friends who are most dear to me have commented, "You need to know Walt Mueller." Byron Berger, of Hearts & Minds Books, said the same and once, upon discovering that I hadn't met Walt, looked at me as if there really wasn't any excuse for such slackness. Then, last year Walt and I were speakers at the same conference, and though I didn't need convincing because I was already familiar with his publications, the time together convinced me that Walt is indeed a kindred spirit. He is passionately committed to the truth of God's word and to engaging our increasingly pluralistic world with the gospel of Christ. And through his ministry, the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding (CPYU), he works to help parents, teens, and youth workers be thoughtfully and prayerfully discerning about youth culture. We're

pleased to introduce you to Walt's discerning ministry in this issue's Tuned In column (pp. 10-12) as he reflects on MTV's recent Video Music Award show.

CPYU's statement of purpose summarizes their work well: "We are a ministry working with churches, schools and community organizations to build strong families by equipping parents, pastors, youth workers and educa-



CPYU is a ministry equipping parents, pastors, youth workers and educators to understand the world of children and teens.

tors to understand the world of children and teens, by equipping teenagers to deal with the challenges of adolescence, and by equipping both parents and teens to live by the light of God's Word." CPYU offers seminars for parents and youth workers, a website, and a variety of resources.

youthculture@today is a quarterly newsletter from CPYU. Each issue contains extended music reviews, including both careful analysis and thoughtful recommendations as to how parents and youth workers can help their young people respond. Articles also touch on TV, films, fashion, and other aspects of youth culture, all considered from a biblical perspective. I hope Walt won't mind this comparison, but *youthculture@today*

could be described as *Critique* for teens, parents, and youth workers. If you work with young people, get on the mailing list. If you don't work with young people, get on the mail-

ing list anyway, because youth culture is a major force in molding the shape and direction of our postmodern world.

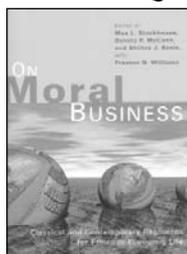
Today's Youth Culture E-Update is a free bi-weekly email



resource on youth culture, quotes, song lyrics, images, analysis, and more. You

Briefly Noted: Everything on Economics

by Denis Haack



On Moral Business is a massive collection of writing on the ethics of economic theory and life. The span it covers is impressive. In time it stretches from the Hebrew Scriptures and Greek philosophers to the present. In perspective it includes not only key essays written from all the various Jewish and Christian traditions, but from Marxist, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, secular, and African perspectives as well. "If one purpose of this anthology is to educate both clergy and lay professionals to the religious and moral significance of business and economics," writes Dennis McCann, "another purpose is to establish an agenda for research and constructive theological reflection." This is not a book that everyone will want to own, but those who need to think biblically about business and economics in our pluralistic and global world will find *On Moral Business* an invaluable resource. ■

Book recommended:

On Moral Business: Classical and Contemporary Resources for Ethics in Economic Life edited by Max Stackhouse, Dennis McCann and Shirley Roels (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing; 1995) 961 pp. + index.

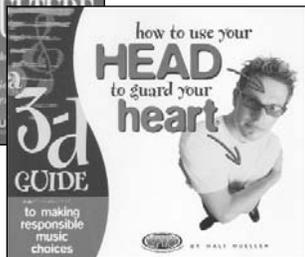
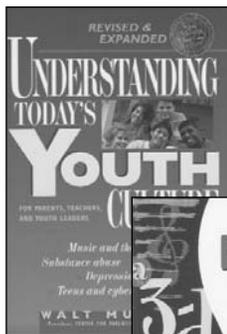
Culture

can sign up for it on CPYU's website, and though it is free, please send a donation. CPYU is a tax-deductible ministry, and this resource, like all they produce, is worthy of generous support.

Understanding Today's Youth Culture by Walt Mueller (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers; 1994, 1999). This 460 page book covers everything from understanding adolescence, music and media, the pressures teens face, substance abuse, and nurturing spiritual growth in young adults. I know of nothing on the market that is this comprehensive in covering youth culture, but if something else exists Walt has probably included it in the extensive recommended reading list at the end of the book.

How to Use Your Head to Guard Your Heart by Walt Mueller is a 10-page guide to help young adults make responsible

I know of nothing on the market that is this comprehensive in covering youth culture.



music choices as Christians. Rather than "mindlessly consume" their music, they are encouraged to "mindfully critique" it, and a series of creative questions are posed to help them accomplish precisely that. The booklet should be used in youth groups and family devotions.

<www.cpyu.org> I could list more resources—a lot more. But instead, I will simply suggest that you log on and begin ordering. And if they happen to have a button that is marked, "Click here to order a copy of everything," trust me: click on it. You won't regret it. And be sure to order copies for your pastor, youth workers, and church library.

We recommend the ministry and resources of CPYU highly. If you contact them, mention that you heard of them in *Critique*. ■

~Denis Haack

For more information contact the Center for Parent/Youth Understanding by phone (800-807-CPYU), or by fax (717-361-8964), by writing (CPYU, P. O. Box 414, Elizabethtown, PA, 17022), by email (cpyu@aol.com), or online (www.cpyu.org).

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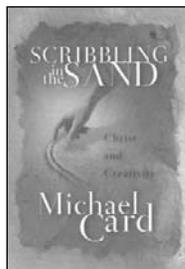
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All books mentioned in *Critique* may be ordered directly from Hearts and Minds. A portion of the proceeds will be donated to Ransom Fellowship.

Briefly Noted: On Creativity



by Denis Haack

Michael Card is best known as a Christian musician, but his new book, *Scribbling in the Sand*, is worth reading. An extended reflection on creativity, beauty, and art from a Christian perspective, it is personal and devotional rather than scholarly. "God is an artist and he is beautiful," Card writes. "He has woven his image into the fabric of our lives, which explains our drive to create things which are beyond us and which we don't always understand." For too long the evangelical church has operated as if only the true and the good matter, forgetting that God has also revealed himself as the God of all glory. It is true that art and creativity are messy, but we have no choice as believers. A presentation that is true and good but ugly can not be said to be the biblical gospel, nor is it honoring to the Christ it seeks to commend. Use books like Steve Turner's *Imagine* and William Dyrness' *Visual Faith* to shape your thinking on art and creativity, and *Scribbling in the Sand* to shape your imagination and guide your personal devotions. ■

Book recommended:

Scribbling in the Sand: Christ and Creativity by Michael Card (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 2002) 163 pp. + bibliography.

Dialogue cont.

...continued from page 3.

you are doing what all discerning Christians should do as a matter of course, because none of us are without particular sins. For some, sexual sin might not be the problem that gossip is. Whereas you don't need to avoid the cafeteria at work because you're not tempted to backstab your co-workers, another Christian might. This is why it's impossible to condense the Christian life into a few easy rules. *Bruce Almighty*, though perhaps not appropriate for you, does an admirable job of dealing with essential issues like prayer, grace, and forgiveness. To claim that no Christian should see this movie because the main characters live together is, I believe, missing the point, which is what I was trying to get at in my review.

I think your first point about foul language is actually a separate issue. Being offended by swearing (or any other sin) is

not necessarily a good reason to avoid (or condemn) the movies. As Denis has pointed out in his series on being in the world but not of it, we shouldn't be surprised when Babylonians act and speak like Babylonians. Even if your co-workers and friends don't swear, many others do (I could offer a great deal of anecdotal evidence from my own life that is opposite to yours). I'd highly recommend Denis's article, "On Being Offended in a Pagan World." He says it better than I, and even if you don't ultimately agree with him, it would be a worthwhile exercise in discernment. You can find a copy of the article on our website (www.ransomfellowship.org/R_Babylon1.html).

Life would be so much easier if we could simply say that movies are off limits for Christians because of the sin they often depict. But the pursuit of godliness is more nuanced than that. Discernment requires the hard work of engaging with the people

and products of our culture while also being honest enough to recognize when sin is at work in our hearts. None of us are exempt from this work, whether we are sex addicts or gossipers or enviers or don't rest on the Sabbath. As I said in the review, I'm floored that God sees me as worthy of redemption. We—all of us—have one thing in common: we're without hope if not for grace.

Marsena Konkle

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Everyone on Ransom's mailing list also receives *Notes from Toad Hall*, a newsletter written by Margie Haack in which she reflects on what it means to be faithful in the ordinary and routine of daily life, and gives news about Ransom's ministry.

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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