

Critique

Helping Christians Develop Skill in Discernment

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Editor's Note



Moving the Fellowship Online.

Occasionally people ask me why our ministry is called *Ransom Fellowship*, since we aren't one, they point out. Some churches name themselves "Fellowships" and we're not a church. And unlike L'Abri Fellowship, we

are not a residential study center. So, what does Fellowship refer to?

Fellowship calls attention to the fact that we place great emphasis on the corporate nature of the Christian faith. We want to help Christians learn to be discerning, and we believe that is best accomplished within community. That's why the questions we include in these pages are "for reflection and discussion:" not only individual reflection, but group discussion. That's also why we encourage small groups that meet regularly to dig into the Scriptures and wrestle with applying it to all of life and culture. We need to listen to one another, learn from one another, appreciate one another's different insights, and sharpen and correct one another.

In an effort to extend this to our website, Ransom is beginning a discussion board in cooperation with *cino (www.cultureisnotoptional.com).

*cino—which stands for *culture is not optional—was begun by Rob and Kirstin Vander Giessen-Reitsma who wanted the sense of community they enjoyed as students at Dordt College to not end at graduation. *cino's statement of purpose will show you why we consider them kindred spirits: "The mission of *cino is to equip Christians to be faithful servants by uniting the community of believers and learning together how to actively redeem all of culture."

We have called attention to *cino in these pages, and have a link to them on our website.

We have also been talking to Rob and Kirstin about how we might work together, and the launching of the discussion board is one result.

We'll have a link to the discussion board on Ransom's website, which will be an easy way to access it. When you log on, you can sign up, create a profile to introduce yourself, and begin posting your comments, ideas, and questions. Anything and everything in these pages or on Ransom's website can be discussed, and occasionally we will post something that will hopefully stimulate some interaction. We hope, for example, that the case studies in *The Discerning Life* will be explored so you can, in community, help one another think about what faithfulness looks like in our pluralistic world.

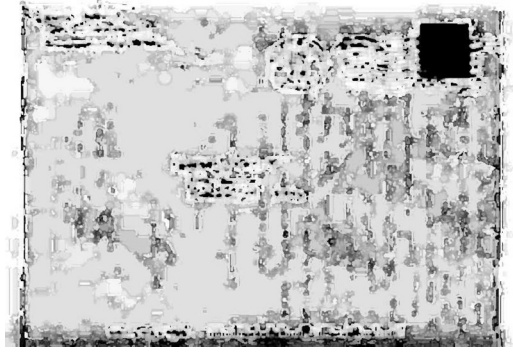
Please note: this is a discussion between all of you, not a chance to dialogue with us. We'll join in occasionally, and we'll monitor the conversation regularly, but it is primarily a chance for you to listen to each other, ask questions and explore possible answers. Remember that though the web can feel impersonal and anonymous, it is not. You will be interacting with real people, and the gospel calls us not just to say the right things, but to say the right things winsomely. The goal is to stimulate one another to think critically (for Christians that means thinking Christianly), not necessarily to develop some sort of "Christian line" that all have to adopt. Keep in mind, too, that not everyone who participates may be a believer.

We hope you will take advantage of Ransom's discussion board, which will be hosted on *cino's website (many, many thanks to Rob and Kirstin for their generosity in this). We pray it will deepen discipleship and develop discernment by encouraging winsome fellowship. After all, we are *Ransom Fellowship*. ■

~Denis Haack

Dialogue

re: Marriage, Babylon, and Movies



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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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.

I have come to have high expectations of *Critique* articles. Mardi Keyes' "Marriage in Western Culture" [*Critique* #7 - 2004] soars beyond even those expectations.

The challenge, as Keyes pointedly puts it, in avoiding the twin evils of cynical rejection and idolatrous inflation of marriage "is not achieving some golden middle ground of medium-sized hope. It is building our marriages on a different foundation altogether, on the biblical worldview, and the Christian Story."

In contrast to tired rants against secularism, what this article captures so nicely is the very challenge of campus ministry: helping Christian students to see and resist the myriad ways in which faith can readily become subordinated to and held captive by other narratives—e.g., the myth of romantic love. Indeed, convincing secularists they lack a Christian worldview is easy; it's the Christian students that pose the real challenge.

I can think of nothing better to help this process of "seeing" than an article like this—pastorally concerned and theologically grounded, academically responsible but not jargon-laden, realistic yet hopeful.

I am reminded of Rodney Clapp's classic "Why Christians Have Lousy Sex Lives," in which he writes that "Romantics make love in private, at best oblivious to the welfare of the surrounding community. Christians make love in public, realizing that Christian love is much more than merely sexual passion, and trusting that they can build an enduring, open, and generous love only through participation in the surrounding community called church."

I encourage *Critique* readers to read the full version of Keyes' article online (www.RansomFellowship.org/R_Marriage.html).

Karl E. Johnson
Director, Chesterton House

We wanted to write a quick note to encourage you in your work, as it is a much-needed blend of humility/inspiration/correction/reflection and, perhaps most importantly to us, an affirmation of the rich beauty and truth that God has built into the fabric of this world and in all people.

We used your Babylon series last summer in a study group with young adults, and recently pulled out the segment regarding legalism as a help for articulating our position against the infiltration of legalism from some friends of our son. We often appreciate how you are able to give voice to truth, to be sensitive but honest, and it gives us courage to try and be true to Jesus and be bold as well.

Craig and Tammy Patchin
Monroe, WI

I just wanted to say a huge and heart-felt thank you for your website. I've always loved film, for the sheer joy that a good story can bring, and for the way a good film can make you think and talk so hard afterwards about some of the big issues that get raised. And yet, I've so often been frustrated by Christian responses to film, which seem to concentrate so much on disapproving and condemning, even though with the best of motives.

Reading through your site has been such a breath of fresh air and a huge encouragement to me. It's been so good to find an intelligent, thoughtful, prayerful alternative. Many thanks for giving me so much to think about, (and reassuring me that I'm not alone out here!!)

Claire Cullingworth
From the UK via email

Tsunamis and

On December 26, 2004, the massive tectonic plates under the Indian Ocean shifted, and the most powerful earthquake in four decades rumbled across the sea floor off the coast of Sumatra. The quake caused the sea to heave, launching a tsunami that slammed into the coasts of nearly a dozen countries. In many cases, the water at the ocean's edge first receded, and then so quickly that it could not be outrun, surged inland, sweeping up everything and everyone in its path. Seven days later rescue units were only beginning to reach the most remote areas in the tsunami's wake. With each high tide, bloated corpses of those sucked out to sea washed ashore. Survivors lost shelter, numerous loved ones, livelihoods, food supplies, and perhaps most devastating, clean drinking water. Over 150,000 lives were lost in a matter of minutes, and many more could be lost over time from epidemics of typhoid and cholera. So much will need to be done to restore the basic necessities of life. The final death toll may never be known for sure, and the bodies of many of the missing may never be found.

Tragedies require a response. Various nations have sent aid and individuals have been giving to charities and relief organizations. People are also speaking out, raising questions, suggesting responses, and trying to make sense of a seemingly senseless event.

For example, John Seel, a regular contributor to these pages, responded by writing a letter to the editor of his daily newspaper: "Today as we stand in line to exchange our Christmas presents, the greatest humanitarian crisis of our lifetime is unfolding. Several days ago, I told my wife that I suspected the death toll

from the tsunami disaster would exceed 100,000. Ironically, on the same day, the *Dallas Morning News* reported that this very 'red' city has the worst philanthropy record of any large city in America. We can decry Washington's paltry response to date. But far more significant would be for every Christian in this city to send \$100 or more to an organization that is scrambling to respond. The world has come to hate American foreign policy. Most of those killed in this week's disaster are Hindus and Muslims. This is a unique opportunity to demonstrate that American justice is not spelled 'just us.' Christians

How do we explain a calamity like this in light of our belief in a sovereign, good, and all-powerful God?

need to stop talking about the End Times and start showing some true religion. 'Religion God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows' (James 1:27). This week they have been given a name and face."

Christian voices are not the only ones that are being heard. For example, the BBC posted comments on their website from believers of various faiths.

From a Hindu, Rani Moorthy, an actress and writer: "The tsunami brings into question both personal and collective destinies for Hindus. In terms of the latter, we are born in an age of destruction, known as Kali Yuga, an age that lasts for perhaps 1,000 years. This says that we must go through a series of set-backs, obstacles, suffering, eg AIDS, and a propensity for natural disasters. Mankind goes through this to be renewed.

"As for my personal destiny, there is no central text in Hinduism as there is in

other religions so it's up to each of us to formulate our own understanding, based on the Brahman—the divine—and the belief that all of us will one day escape the endless cycle of birth and death and be returned to our maker. My belief is that I am connected to all humans and so while I grieve for those that have died in the tsunami, I don't feel sorry for them because they are part of me and part of the divine. Their deaths are a manifestation of karma, the debits and credits you amass through your series of lives."

From a Buddhist, Lama Ole Nydahl, a teacher of Diamond Way Buddhism:

"We all die, sooner or later. Some have conditions for living long lives and some for short lives. That is your karma—the total effect of one's actions and conduct. What might have precipitated the tsunami was a lot of people coming together who had the karma for a short life and, to an extent, this is perhaps a reflection that these areas were over-populated.

"The shifting of tectonic plates is inevitable, but fewer people in the areas affected would have led to a much smaller loss of life. When watching the TV news, reading the papers or thinking about the tsunami, we are thinking about the Buddha we like the best—perhaps the Red Buddha, the Buddha of limitless light. We do this so that when those who died in the disaster wake up from the shock of dying—we believe it takes about three days to do so—they will be sent up to the Buddha we have in mind. Buddhists think the mind is indestructible so, after a while, if one wants to and is able, they will have the choice to take rebirth in society as beings who help others."

From a Muslim, Iqbal Sacranie, Secretary General of the Muslim Council of Britain: "It is the teaching of Islam that it

a Good God

is through the will of God Almighty that this has happened but then the positive side is the way mankind has reacted. People will question why it is taking place, why the enormity of loss of human life, but it is that aspect which is beyond us and it is our firm belief that any such disaster, anything of that nature happening, is through the will of God Almighty. Allah knows best.

“We certainly have the right to question. It’s a time for us to really think of ourselves, our deeds, our acts, and we need to ponder over this... People of faith need to have a very firm belief in God Almighty, that at the end of the day it is through his will and it is for the betterment of mankind at large.”

From an atheist, Hanne Stinson, Executive Director of the British Humanist Association: “Religion cannot provide an explanation

for the tsunami, and while prayer for the victims may comfort those who pray, it will not provide practical help to the people whose lives have been devastated by this appalling disaster. Science can explain earthquakes and tsunamis, even if we are still unable to predict where and when they will happen. Our response to this and other disasters, as compassionate human beings and regardless of our religious or non-religious beliefs, must be to provide whatever help we can.

“Faith in god does not protect people from disasters or give the victims what they need to survive and rebuild their lives. We need to accept responsibility for our fellow human beings. We need to put our efforts into practical ways of preventing disasters when we can, preparing for disasters that cannot be prevented, including investing in

early warning systems for tsunamis, and helping those affected by disasters. We cannot rely on any god to solve the world’s problems. We—the people of the world—are humanity’s only hope.”

How should we respond as Christians to the Indian Ocean tsunami? How do we explain a calamity like this in light of our belief in a sovereign, good, and all-powerful God? How can we express our beliefs and live in a way that those who don’t share our convictions might understand something of the gospel?

It’s worth some careful reflection and discussion. ■

~Denis Haack

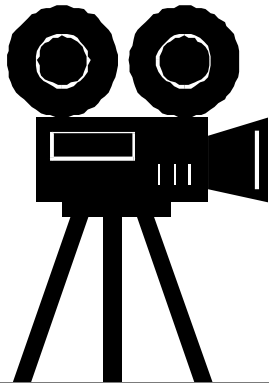
Source: The BBC material can be found online (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/4138095.stm>).

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. How have you reacted emotionally to the news of this calamity? Are these emotions appropriate for a Christian? Are they sufficient? What actions have you taken? Are these actions appropriate? Are they sufficient? How do you know?
2. Thomas Howard has commented that only God is capable of seeing the full extent of the Fall without lapsing into hopelessness, despair, or cynicism. The problem with the news media, then, is that its strength is also its danger, namely, it provides so much information that we can be easily overwhelmed. Howard says that learning of the effects of the Fall should prompt us to prayer, fasting, and wise action. With this as a guide, what plans should you make about your consumption of the “news?” To what extent do you display hopelessness, despair, or cynicism that needs to be repented of?
3. John Seel’s letter was written to speak specifically to the population—and to the Christians—of Dallas, TX. Write a letter that would speak specifically to your neighbors, and to the fellow Christians in your city.
4. Each person holds some sort of world view, a set of basic beliefs about things that is the lens through which they see and make sense of life. Tragedies like the Indian Ocean tsunami can cause people to doubt their basic beliefs, or to challenge others whose beliefs don’t seem to be helpful in sorting out the meaning of the tragedy. Christians might find their belief in an infinite, personal, loving God challenged. Where was your God on December 26, 2004? If he could have stopped it, why didn’t he? Our challenge is to be sure we hold a balanced, nuanced biblical view; to be able to talk about and live it out creatively; and to provide creative and thoughtful responses to those who propose an alternate world view. How much progress have you made in this? What plans do you need to make? What questions and doubts have been raised (in your mind or by others) by the calamity? What responses have you heard by Christians that have been unhelpful? Helpful?
5. The brief statements posted by the BBC suggest a series of tasks it would be helpful to perform. First, write a Christian explanation of the tragedy—maximum 200 words—that you would like to see posted on the BBC site, alongside these. (After writing it, you may want to compare it to the one posted by the BBC by a Christian.) And finally, write a brief response—again, maximum 200 words—to each of the other postings, a response that is designed to generate conversation and reflection.

The Darkened Room

But Ya Gotta See 'Em



Movies That Won't Be Nominated for an Oscar

by Drew Trotter

We are in the midst of "Oscar season," as the distributors of pictures spend large amounts of money on campaigns in trade journals trying to persuade academy members to vote for their film. As people who care about the influences in our world, Christians should be paying attention to these films; almost every one of them has something to tell us about ourselves or our neighbors.

But this is also a good time to reflect on some of those pictures that are not likely to be nominated for anything, movies that are worth watching, not because they are popular in Hollywood but because they have intrinsic worth. They may be popular, just not "respectable" enough for academy consideration. They may be well-loved, but too unknown to achieve recognition. They may be too edgy, or too sweet, or even too Christian. Lots of reasons cause movies to be passed over at awards time.

In what has been called the year of the documentary with all of the flap surrounding *Fahrenheit 9/11*, one very fine film may be overlooked and ought not to be. *Super Size Me* is the chronicle of writer/director Morgan Spurlock's thirty-day experiment of eating nothing but McDonald's food for breakfast, lunch and dinner. At the beginning of the month, Spurlock is a healthy man who combines a balanced diet with

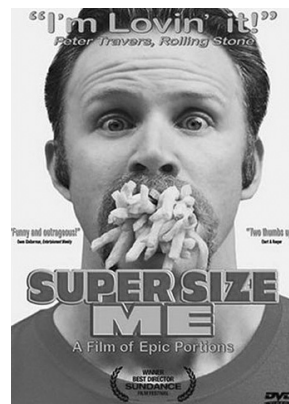
regular exercise. He is not a fitness expert or diet guru, or anything more than a very regular guy in his approach to food. Living with a vegan, he regularly debates with her the wisdom of eating meat and one of the enduring strengths of this movie is how like most people Spurlock seems to be.

The film is simple, but compelling, as visits to the doctor, interviews with detractors as well as avid proponents of fast food, and expert testimony from authorities on all things dietary in America are interspersed with statements to the camera by Spurlock that chronicle a long, slow, but clear slide into sickness on his part. The tension mounts when one of his doctors in particular becomes seriously alarmed at Spurlock's health. The doctor is quite

serious when he accuses Spurlock of risking too much and possibly damaging himself beyond repair. Though the movie, like most documentaries, essentially explores a social problem, it is not without its dramatic flair.

Focused, fair to all sides, and not alarmist, this documentary presents evidence clearly, displaying an America that is rapidly fattening

itself for its own slaughter. The contrast with *Fahrenheit 9/11* could not be more obvious from a filmmaking standpoint, but the real strength of *Super Size Me* shows through in that, while the McDonald's corporation steadfastly refused to meet or speak with Spurlock during the filming of the movie, they did drop the supersize option within a month of the film's release. *Fahrenheit 9/11* almost certainly did nothing more than encourage the already converted and anger the opposition. *Super Size Me*, on the other hand, has caused real



Super Size Me

(www.supersizeme.com)
Runtime: 96 min.
Rated PG-13 for language, sex and drug references, and a graphic medical procedure.

The Clearing

(www2.foxsearchlight.com/theclearing)
Runtime: 95 min.
Rated R for strong language.

Spider-Man 2

(<http://spiderman.sonypictures.com>)
Runtime: 127 min.
Rated PG-13 for stylized action violence.

Saved!

See the discussion guide by Travis Scott (www.RansomFellowship.org/M_Saved.html)
Runtime: 92 min.
Rated PG-13 for strong thematic issues involving teens—sexual content, pregnancy, smoking and language.

The Village, Hero, & The Incredibles

For more information on these (and any) movies, see Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

change and has the potential for causing much more.

In the category of small, independent films is a thoughtful thriller starring Robert Redford and Willem Dafoe called *The Clearing*. Sensitively written and directed by Pieter Jan Brugge, and beautifully shot by Denis Lenoir, *The Clearing* centers around the kidnapping of a wealthy, retired executive. Some reviewers criticized the film for being flat, even calling it a “suspense movie on Prozac,” but I found the exploration of flawed people—as we all are—fascinating, as their foibles play out in a crisis situation.

The relationships between not only kidnapper and victim, but also family members with each other as they remember, regret and seek to discern the right move, were thoroughly honest and challenging to my sense of how I would react in those situations. Overall, the film forces us to ask the question: “How have you spent your life? If faced with death, would you have any regrets?”

Technically, the film is a superb entertainment, building to a climax that I found totally unguessable. The performances are all stellar, and Redford particularly, though a major star and not flattered by either lighting, camera angle or dialogue, develops the most realistic character he may have ever played. A tense and sad film, *The Clearing* reflects the situations of too many real families in America today.

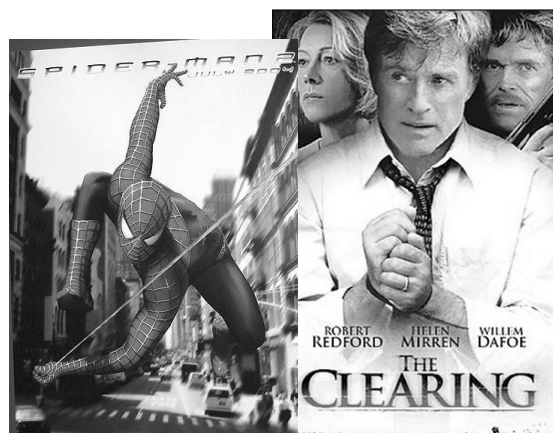
Big box office movies are usually deemed unworthy at Oscar time (unless they are so big, like *Titanic* or *The Return of the King* that they simply cannot be ignored). *Spider-Man 2* is hardly unknown; it will be the second-highest grossing film of the year, pulling in \$373M at the box office this summer. But *Spidey 2* is notable because, though it is a big budget (at \$200M, the largest of the year)

action/adventure fantasy, its strength really comes from a character-driven idea to which all of us can relate. Peter Parker, the film’s main character, has kept his identity secret from many of those he loves because he does not want them to get hurt by being associated with him, and he believes this strategy best fulfills his life dictum, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Parker’s dilemma is that of many parents, churchmen, teachers and others in authority: when do we share good knowledge, even though that knowledge also has the potential to harm? Parker spends much of the film being confronted with the problems that his choices cause, not least to himself. From a good heart, he is trying to do the right thing, but he has been blind to the intrinsic arrogance his decision entails. He has not seen that trusting those you love to do the right thing is essential to human relationship. Believing one must all alone shoulder the responsibilities of life demands a refusal of what a friend of mine called “the greatest gift God gave us at creation: dependency.”

Another movie to be seen, though you may not like it, is *Saved!* This teen comedy purports to be a moral tale, but one of its taglines shows its real colors: “Got Passion? Get Saved.” Savagely dismissing all things Christian as unrelentingly hypocritical, the film does not depict a single Christian as acting or even thinking redemptively at any point.

Fortunately, the movie was so bad that reviewers without a Christian axe to grind nevertheless regularly panned it, but beware: the movie made almost twice its cost back in box office receipts alone, so we may well see more of these slams at the faith in the future.

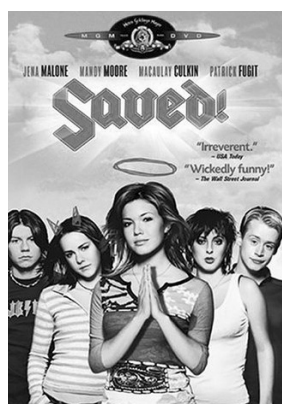


Why spend the time and the money to watch *Saved!*? Two reasons. Christians should see it because we too easily forget how biblically illiterate—indeed how non-Christian—our country really is, and watching a movie like this every once in awhile shows us how far we have to go, even to earn a hearing for our views. Far too many people think *Saved!* gives an accurate picture of Christian high schools in America, and, in fact, of Christians. We need to be aware of how vigilant we must be to “love our neighbor as ourselves” since a large body of the public sees us completely otherwise.

And the second reason to view *Saved!*: Since we really are sinners and hypocrites, it does not hurt us to be reminded of it.

Though critics and audiences alike were lukewarm to *The Village*, I found its discussion of perspective (the main character is a blind girl) engaging, and the movie a highly entertaining thriller, as all M. Night Shyamalan movies are. *Hero* is the most recent in what is fast becoming a long line of Chinese action pictures with both head and heart. Last, but not least, everyone should see *The Incredibles*; the Pixar people just keep on rolling out “kids movies” from which adults can learn much. ■

~Drew Trotter



Dr. Andrew H. Trotter, Jr., is the president of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, where he teaches and writes on theology and culture, focusing on modern American film. Copyright © 2005 by Andrew H. Trotter, Jr.

The Church:

Though it's earned me just four sheets of state-approved paper and roughly 1,064 cups of coffee, I make a living as a student and writer. I'm a part of the church. Some days, when I put these two autobiographical bits together, I have to work to fend off discouragement; I am both grateful for and fairly confident of my calling (as a writer more than a student), but when I consider the number of churches that would both affirm and support what I see as gifting and ministry, I sometimes feel uncomfortable. I imagine visiting a church alongside a missionary, and I have this picture in my head: We are both given fifteen minutes to stand before the congregation and talk about what the Lord has done for us and in us and, as we envision, what he will do through us. Then the request for support. Two baskets are passed around, one labeled "missionary" and one "artist." The baskets come back. The missionary's flows over with encouraging letters and banknotes. Mine comes back with one piece of paper on which some joker's drawn a fish and a loaf of bread. After the service, while the missionary is shaking hands and juggling conversation, I remind myself that I'm no victim, that I am loved, and that I do love the church. I tell myself the missionary probably needs the support more than I do. I hate making these qualifications. I go home and read *Blankets* by Craig Thompson.

Quickly, word association: comic books.

Some of you are thinking The Green Hornet or Beetle Bailey or Archie and

Jughead; some of you are resenting your parents for throwing away sure profit on eBay; most of you, likely, are thinking childhood. Let's try it again, this time with two items: comic books, adults.

Now you're probably thinking about a segment of the population that you find, at best, eccentric. The legitimacy of that judgment aside, we don't tend to equate comic books with maturity, intellectual engagement, or, and maybe especially, spiritual searching. Which may be part of the reason Craig Thompson has eschewed the label "comic book" for *Blankets*, which he calls an "illustrated novel." *Blankets*, though paneled and inked, is not a comic book.



We don't tend to equate comic books with maturity, intellectual engagement, or, and maybe especially, spiritual searching.

What it is is a beautifully illustrated, linear account of one character's struggle to reconcile his artistic talent with the message he's grown up hearing: "God has already created things well enough—why does He need you to try and add to it? Go on, get serious, grow up, go into real ministry, child, and be a godly man."

If you pick up *Blankets*, you'll likely notice two things straightaway. One, it's heavy, 582 pages. Despite its mass, when I opened it for the first time, I didn't close it until I'd finished it. Then I passed it on to a friend, who did the same, who passed it on to a friend, who did the same. A few months ago, I posted a call for response on my website to people who'd read *Blankets*, asking for their

critiques. Everyone who responded mentioned reading the book through in one sitting. Maybe we've done so because the genre is new to many of us, but more likely because the writing is as good as the drawing. I'm no art critic, so I can't successfully describe or explain the use of brush and pen as artistic techniques, but I do know that whatever Thompson chose, it works—thick, dark strokes measure heavy words, for instance. The story, though, is what keeps me reading. This is a novel, but it's also thinly-veiled autobiography, as Thompson admits in several interviews.

The second thing you'll notice is the drawing on the cover: Two adolescents stand huddled in the snow, a thick forest as backdrop, and it looks cold: one picture saying 582 pages' worth of words.

Blankets takes the reader through roughly the first twenty years of the character Craig's life. He grows up in the rural Midwest with his younger brother Phil and two parents, who teach them a relatively conservative Christianity. Early in his life, Craig displays both an affinity and a talent for drawing, which is quickly dismissed by Sunday school teachers as a waste of time: "I mean, 'COME ON, CRAIG.' How can you praise God with DRAWINGS?" one teacher says. Whether Thompson is quoting directly from memory, the message he received as a child is clear: Good Christians go into missions work, or full-time ministry, all the while preparing for and verbally witnessing people into Heaven, where we'll all be worshipping, which activity will leave no time for doodling. At one point, in the spirit of compromise, the adolescent Craig considers using his drawing as a witnessing tool, but when he pictures it

Cold Comfort?

in his head, he realizes what cold comfort that is.

The cover illustration introduces the reader to that idea, that if we go to the church with our creativity, our imagination, our art, we'll have to leave it at the door, left stripped of an essential part of our identity, left partially unclothed and looking for something to replace it. When we forfeit a fundamental part of ourselves as creatures made in the image of God, we always look for substitutes, for wholeness, for blankets that provide more than cold comfort. For Craig, his blanket comes in the form of Raina, a girl he meets at a high school church retreat. Raina loves his art, his imagination, his creativity, and returns it in kind. When he visits her and her family at one point, she gives him a blanket she's hand-sewn, beautiful and creative and warm.

Though the book covers much ground—the church as mass marketing program, sexual abuse, distance between parents and children—the relationship between Craig and Raina is the center of the narrative arc, and rightly so, as first loves tend to be the defining stories of our adolescence. Craig sees in Raina so much of his restoration, so much of his innate understanding of what he thinks Jesus should be: warm, creative, encouraging, beautiful. The picture of Jesus that Raina embodies is, understandably, much softer, much more protective, more attractive than the Jesus held forth by the Christianity he's known. It's no surprise that Craig's (and *Blankets*'s) conflict lies chiefly between this beautiful, particular, individualized version of Christ and the confining, herd-mentality version presented by the church of his youth. This is the struggle that pulls both Craig and the reader through the book, and the one that the book and Craig leave the story with, unresolved. Don't mistake this for lack of resolution within the book; rather, Craig does make

decisions, ones that are refreshing and honest, though not final. I don't know where Craig Thompson the person stands now on these issues, but his art has given me reason to consider anew both what effect I, as part of the church, have had and am having on those who are looking for shelter and whether I am presenting Jesus as blanket or cold comfort.

I continue to pass this book on for two reasons. First, it's a beautiful work of art, aesthetically well-crafted. Second, the church needs to hear voices like this. Not every Christian would find this book appealing or worthwhile. It's not a "Christian" book. It is

[Thompson's] art has given me reason to consider anew what effect I, as part of the church, have had and am having on those who are looking for shelter.

a voice crying out from the cold, a beautifully illustrated example of a sheep that Jesus would leave the 99 to rescue. We need continually to refine our hearing, to listen for these voices. Generally, we say "yes" to art, though in an abstract way; meanwhile, we disillusion the makers of art when we offer little practical support, little encouragement, little room to stretch out and draw. Pastors, laypersons, deacons, seminary presidents—all would do well to hear. And I'm convinced that if every youth group leader were to read this, his own approach to understanding and interacting with the church's youth would be the better for it. And whether youth or twenty-somethings or forty-somethings, the church will always host people on the fringes, those looking for a creative, imaginative, beautiful sanctuary, for a place that affirms them as image-bearers; those who are legitimately struggling to understand and discern

their disillusionment with church; those who find satisfaction, like Thompson, in leaving a mark on a piece of blank paper.

A friend of mine who read *Blankets* said it made her think of doodling, on church bulletins, for example, and youth group scribbles. She said she thinks back to all the marks and drawings in the margins of teenagers' papers and wishes she'd have paid more attention to them, looked in those markings for calling, both in the vocational sense and the for-help sense. I've sat in pews behind children and teenagers and adults who, while the pastor was expounding a text, drew and scribbled furiously. Some of that

may be boredom, and some of it an authentic expression of one's faith. Either way, it reminds me that we are image-bearers, likenesses of a God who himself loves art, who scribbled furiously in sand and ordered ornate temple sculpture and gave John a vision of the new heaven and the new earth wherein

cultures will come to God with their artisans and poets and comic book illustrators alongside the shepherds and singers.

The church is not always, or necessarily, The Church, but it's one of, if not the, primary institutions God has established to display the beauty of his righteousness. Thus, we should continually examine the ways we display Jesus, ask whether the art in our words and images is aesthetically pleasing, relevant, engaging, and warm. A comic book has reminded me of this. ■

~Jeremy Huggins

Jeremy Huggins, 30, needs a job, preferably in Portland, preferably related to writing, editing, or publishing, before he graduates with an MFA Creative Nonfiction come June, which is the same month, coincidentally, that he's spent the most time drinking chocolate milk, low-fat and on ice, on the Haacks' back porch. He has mastered the comma-full, cumulative sentence. Copyright © 2005 by Huggins.

When the Church

I recently received an email that deserves more than the brief response possible on the Dialogue page in *Critique*. It raises questions I hear quite frequently as I travel and speak, and touches on issues which are deeply felt by those who wrestle with them. It's about when the church fails us.

Kristin Davis of Peoria, AZ, wrote:

"I cannot extol enough your efforts to inform/enlighten Christians about the cultural realities of our times and our responsibility to be thinking, compassionate people in the midst of a watching world. The editor's note in *Critique* #6 - 2004 was particularly refreshing to me because I have long struggled with, on the one hand, a desire to be civic minded and culturally engaged and, on the other hand, cynicism and despair over the world we live in and the direction we seem to be headed in collectively and individually. Feeling alienated, for the most part, by political and religious groups whose responses don't quite fit my own, *Critique* has been my lifeline and reminded me that I'm not alone in seeking to balance my convictions as a Christian with a sincere interest in understanding the world views and values of my secular neighbors (both those in my neighborhood and those abroad).

"As someone who was raised Catholic and came to appreciate the evangelical and reformed faith in college, I have a difficult time embracing a denominational 'label' and finding fellowship in numbers. I crave the companionship of like minded individuals but too often encounter the 'stereotypical' campy Christian whose thought life seems more superficial than my secular neighbor (I know this is harsh but I'm trying to convey my frustration

with established groups I've courted). I've found stimulating intellectual curiosity in PCA (Presbyterian Church in America) circles, but many who were sorely lacking in social consciousness, compassion, and cultural engagement. I still feel at home worshiping in a Catholic church but disagree with many fundamental points of their theology. Maybe fundamental is the key word there—I'm more fundamental in my faith than many Catholics or Episcopalians and get discouraged by the 'all over the map' quality of their theological discussions. But most evangelical churches lack the element of participa-

One of the evidences of grace we naturally tend to look for is a church in whose worship we feel most alive and in whose fellowship we find a living community actively engaging our world.

tion that I appreciate in a church service (through confessions of faith, responsive psalms, saying the Lord's prayer, regular communion) and I leave feeling empty. So my question is, where do I belong?

"Since reading *Critique* is the only time where I consistently feel understood, accepted, affirmed and challenged, I thought I'd ask, though I suspect there's no real answer—it seems that this side of heaven we are all left to struggle with the inadequacies of our human efforts—the 'longing' is the clue to something greater to be hoped for."

Kristin

I appreciated Kristin's thoughtful, eloquent letter, and am very grateful for her gracious words about *Critique*.

It can be very lonely living as Christians in this sad world, even for those of us who have a church home. I find that

relatively few evangelicals seem genuinely interested in engaging their culture, though many are willing to denounce it. Uneasy about the direction of society, a frantic passion for safety has led them to withdraw into a Christian subculture which has its own dialect, softball leagues, music, and yellow pages. In this subculture, the preaching may address personal devotion, church life, and morality but often fails to creatively address the reality of life in our postmodern world. For those of us who want a church which wrestles with the implications of Christ's Lordship across all of life and culture, who recog-

nize that the approaches to evangelism and apologetics developed in decades past fail to engage the heart yearnings of the postmodern generation, and who desire worship which

has both deeply ancient roots and a living, thoughtful diversity in creativity which captures hearts as well as minds, it can be lonely.

Perhaps such loneliness is part of our calling in a post-Christian culture. C. S. Lewis has a wonderful section in *The Screwtape Letters* where Wormwood, a senior devil, says that the forces of darkness face their worst defeat when a Christian looks around for evidences of grace, finds none, and yet still believes. One of the evidences of grace we naturally tend to look for is a church in whose worship we feel most alive and in whose fellowship we find a living community actively engaging our world with the gospel. When no such evidence of grace can be seen, may we be the sort of defeat Wormwood most despises and fears.

As a child I was raised in a church which taught that culture was worldly

Fails Us

and so must be avoided. In high school I began asking questions and expressing doubts, and when it became clear that such talk was not welcome, I kept them to myself. But they didn't go away. My doubts were deepened in college as I discovered that many of my non-Christian friends were more interesting than my Christian ones. Or that watching slides of paintings through the centuries in art appreciation evoked a more profound spiritual experience than anything I had experienced in church. One of the saddest things in this world is how narrow many Christians' horizons are. "The Christian is the one whose imagination should soar beyond the stars," Dr Schaeffer said. I suspect that both Kristin and I would feel much more at home if that was exhibited more readily in the church.

Of course, in the end, even the best church experience will still be fragmentary and incomplete. It's just a question of how fragmentary and incomplete our experience happens to be. I suppose that is a mercy, always reminding us of what awaits at the return of the King, always prompting us to walk by faith in dependence on God. Still, it can be a severe mercy.

One option we must be careful to dismiss is withdrawing from the church. It is the church who is Christ's bride, in whom the Spirit dwells, and through whom we receive the indispensable grace of Christ's presence in word and sacrament. Our local church may seem to fail us in all sorts of ways, but to walk away is to leave the family that our Elder Brother died to redeem.

It is tempting to withdraw from the church and meet with like-minded friends at home, listening to tapes, perhaps, and "being our own church." I'm not very sympathetic to that sort of thing, because it is too easy.

Being in the church forces me to love people I find unlovable and would never invite to my home church. That too, is a grace.

It's interesting that when the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Jewish exiles in Babylon, he warned that they would be disappointed by some of their spiritual leaders (see Jeremiah 29:8-9). They would need to be discerning, since some of the prophets speaking in the Lord's name were telling lies. The church echoes with false voices today, as well. Leaders who develop theologies from obscure texts, discover interpretations which explain for the first time in two millennia what the apostolic writings mean, or concentrate on minutia of doctrine as if a scholastic approach to theology is the final measure of sanctification. It's tempting to walk away.

It is tempting to withdraw from the church and meet with like-minded friends at home, listening to tapes, perhaps, and "being our own church."

It is also discouraging to attend without having our spiritual dryness and loneliness addressed by worship and community. That too can tempt us to walk away, but instead I have tried to embrace the discouragement. So much of the postmodern generation finds evangelical Christianity unattractive and tends to distrust the institutional church. Thus, in my discouragement I can feel, to some small extent at least, some of what they feel, and this too is a grace. A grace I can embrace in the hope that it will make me better able to identify with a generation who is yearning for spirituality and meaning, but which finds the church failing to exhibit a faith that speaks deeply to their heart and mind.

Nor are we all called to be reformers of the church. We are called to be faithful, and need to be content with that. Those who seek to be a reformer without being called to

it end up being little more than agitators, always acting on their discontent. Jeremiah Burroughs says "Christian contentment is that sweet, inwards, quiet, gracious, frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God's wise and fatherly disposal in every condition." There are few things I find more convicting—and attractive—as that. I display precious little contentment, and have come to realize that growing in it will require situations in which discontent is my natural tendency. And where better to be faced with discouragement and discontent than the place we naturally expect to be redolent of grace, mystery, and shalom?

A few churches, for a variety of reasons, have become abusive towards their members. Often this involves demands for conformity

in areas in which Christians should be allowed freedom, and the pressure can be oppressive, the atmosphere stifling, and the impact destructive. In that case, we must find another congregation, even if it requires a substantial commute.

It is interesting that Kristin's spiritual pilgrimage (at least the part she mentioned) involved the Catholic, Presbyterian, and Episcopal churches. Ransom's Board of Directors, who are among our closest friends and without whom we would feel utterly lost, all are members either of Presbyterian or Episcopalian churches. All these particular churches happen to be evangelical and embrace a reformed understanding of the Scriptures, but they are quite different, and none is perfect. If we use Acts 2:41-42 as our guide, we can list four summary characteristics of the church: apostolic/biblical teaching, faithfulness in life, faithful observance of the sacraments, and a structure of accountability and discipline. In some places our choices might be very limited. All we can do is to choose one that comes closest to fulfilling these four.

Reading the World cont.

In making this choice, I think it is wise to keep Francis Schaeffer's advice in mind: if we insist on perfection or nothing, we will end up with nothing. And nothing, when it means being cut off from the grace of Christ's presence in word and sacrament is a nothing of devastating proportions.

On the other hand, there is much we can—and should—do in such a lonely and spiritually dry setting. We can, for example, set aside time intentionally to be with people who share our concerns. This could involve a visit to L'Abri for a period of study or attending a carefully chosen conference. The Francis Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Seminary in St Louis hosts a series of conferences and seminars each year that would be worth considering. L'Abri hosts conferences annually as well. And we list our speaking schedule on our website (www.RansomFellowship.org/A_Schedule.html) as we travel to various sites across the U.S., and occasionally, in Europe. Such conferences can also take us to places where we can worship in churches which are like an oasis, a respite from the lonely dryness. I am often tempted to complain that brief respites aren't much in the cosmic scheme of things. Then it's good to watch *The Passion of the Christ* again, and remember that respites in this fallen world aren't something I have any right to expect. My true respite awaits the welcome the King will give us when heaven and earth are renewed, forever.

In 1981, Margie and I moved our family to Minnesota partially for just these reasons. We knew no one in Rochester, but knew that there was a L'Abri here, and so were certain we could find the sort of community we needed. A fellowship of

Christians who took laughter, listening, and ideas seriously, sought to actually flesh out something of the reality of community, embraced culture and art as a good gift of God, were eager to engage the world thoughtfully and creatively with the gospel, and where we could be nurtured as well as use our gifts. Though we have never been formally part of L'Abri Fellowship, we have never regretted that move, though it involved some serious costs. To this day our dearest friends include L'Abri Workers Larry and Nancy Snyder, and there are few people with whom we feel more closely at home. Having friends that share our vision, hold us accountable, discuss ideas, books and

If we insist on perfection or nothing, we will end up with nothing. And nothing, when it means being cut off from the grace of Christ's presence in word and sacrament is a nothing of devastating proportions.

movies, pray with us, challenge our prejudices, and both laugh and cry with us over the follies of this life is a priceless grace. A grace even though we don't see one another as often as we'd like. A grace that doesn't dissipate by our regular times apart, because it provides a rootedness that gives birth to hope.

Today, we also have resources that few Christians have enjoyed over the last 2000 years. We can order tapes, for example, gather a group of inquisitive people into our living room, listen to them and spend the evening in discussion. One series that comes to mind as I write this is by Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian: "The Church: How to Believe Despite Christians," which can be

ordered online (www.redeemer3.com/store/). A growing number of small groups use *Critique* as part of their curriculum for study and discussion, which is one reason why we include questions for discussion in each issue.

We can also pray that God will lead us to the kindred spirits in our area. People who would be interested in forming a small group for Bible study, community, prayer, and cultural discernment. "Don't start a big program," Dr Schaeffer said. "Don't suddenly think you can add to your church budget and begin. Start personally and start in your homes. I dare you. I dare you in the name of Jesus Christ. Do what I am going to suggest. Begin by opening your home for community."

And though he wrote that in 1970, it is still good advice today. It can take time to form such a community, but by God's grace it can happen.

Every place we have lived we have prayed for that, and have always found

kindred spirits who wanted to be part of it. It's never perfect, of course, but it has always been stimulating and challenging. The small group of which we are a part now is of real significance in our pilgrimage towards spiritual maturity in Christ. Right now all the members of our small group happen to be from our Presbyterian church, but that hasn't always been the case. Often they have come from a variety of churches. Some we have met at conferences; some have responded to our spreading the word that we are hosting a book or movie discussion. Often non-Christians have been part of our small group as well, usually some who have first been in our movie and book discussions where we have earned their trust.

Another thing Margie and I have prayed for regularly over the years is that our living room in Toad Hall would be the safest place in Rochester. That those who join us there would sense that safety, and thus feel free to say anything, knowing they will never be attacked, belittled nor despised for saying something with which we would disagree. People made in God's image need a place to raise their doubts, challenges, and questions, explore their dreams, share their stories, and seek forgiveness yet one more time for the thing over which they have repented so many times before. Establishing a safe place is not something we take for granted, but something for which we must pray and work. And when we fail, as we have, we have to repent and begin again. There are few truly safe places in this broken world, even in the church. We can do little about that, but what we can do, we will: make our home a shelter, a place of safety not from the world but in it.

There is risk in all that I propose here. If we open our homes in warm hospitality, we

may not have time and energy to give to all the programs that need workers. In sharing people's lives we may find ourselves listening to their music or their stories in films, some of which may be the sort of popular culture banned from many Christian homes. We may befriend some disreputable people, and

There are few truly safe places in this broken world, even in the church...but we can make our home a shelter, a place of safety not from the world but in it.

discover that not all our brothers and sisters are sympathetic. Some may even prefer that we not hang out with their children, whom they are trying to protect from such things. But the risk is acceptable, I believe, because it is part of what it means to be faithful, and because Christ accepted that risk before inviting us to follow him.

Still, though this is a long response, it isn't much of an answer, because you are cor-

rect: there is no final answer to the question you pose. We live in a badly broken world, and that brokenness infects not only the world and us, but the church as well. Sometimes, truth be told, she seems to fail us. Still, she remains Christ's bride, and so we must remain faithful to her if we intend to be

faithful to him. But just because we aren't called to reform her doesn't mean we can do nothing. We can with God's help search out like-minded friends and begin carving out something of a community of believers who want to live under Christ's Kingship in every area of their life, actively engaging our world and culture with the gospel, even at cost. It won't be perfect, but it can be authentic. ■

~Denis Haack

Sources: *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment* by Jeremiah Burroughs (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust; 1648, 1964) p. 19. *The Church at the End of the 20th Century* by Francis A. Schaeffer (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press; 1970) p. 107.

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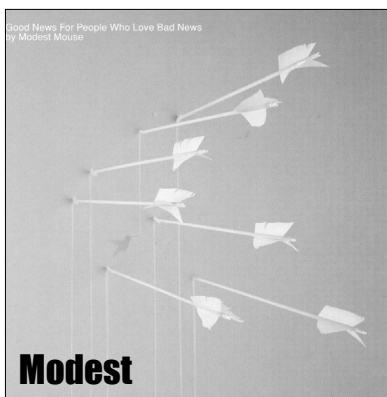


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We've Lost



Modest

Mouse's

Good

News

for

People

Who

Love

Bad

News

French social theorist Jean-Francois Lyotard describes the character of modern life as the “incredulity toward metanarratives.” By this he means that modern man is unwilling to believe in any overarching story that seeks to give meaning to life. Instead meaning shrinks to personal plots. The cosmic story as well as the civilizational story has been reduced to individual consciousness. Rather than submitting our lives to a story larger than ourselves, we write our

own scripts. We choose our meanings as we see fit. Or so we think.

The Northwest indie rock band, Modest Mouse, challenges this academic assumption. They raise a provocative question: “What is good news for people who love bad news?” Their answer is: “We’ve lost the plot and we just can’t choose.” We’re perplexed and paralyzed. There is no meaning and there is no hope of finding it. The optimism of postmodern academics finds little resonance in the life experience of these rock musicians.

And god I love rock and roll

*Well the point was fast but it was too blunt to miss
Life handed us a paycheck and we said “we worked
harder than this”*

Modest Mouse asks the immodest existential question, “How does one carry on in a world without meaning?” Laughing at the need for meaning, one finds instead that it is no laughing matter.

Good News For People Who Love Bad News is their third major release. Over the past decade Modest Mouse has developed a loyal fan base of lingering grunge fans, college radio types, and thoughtful beat poets who carry around tattered paperback copies of Whitman and Ginsberg. (Nine Inch Nail’s Trent Reznor is an acknowledged fan.) Modest Mouse fans pride themselves on being alienated from mainstream rock and hypercritical of commercial success. Nonetheless, *Good News* reached #19 on *Billboard’s* Top 200 Albums after

its release. The single “Float On” reached #2 and “Ocean Breathes Salty” is currently #6 after 14 weeks on the charts.

Modest Mouse is the vision of lead singer and folk poet Isaac Brock. His songs are meditations on death and being, mortality and meaning. The tone of *Good News* is less an angry diatribe as a lamentful resignation, a glance at the clouds, a mournful sigh, a reflective search for a scapegoat. Here is the logic of this album: youthful distractions from life lead to a gradual facing of life, while searching for someone to blame for life. Brock’s *Good News* is that life does not make sense and never will.

Time To Deny

Good News acknowledges both the pull of distraction as well as its final futility. And yet, Modest Mouse suggests that there is only so much reality without God that one can take.

*I’m gonna dance all Dance Hall everyday.
I’m gonna tell you what you want to hear anyways.
I could give myself a shot, I could get myself a pill.
I’m gonna go and try to buy a little more time to kill.
I need a can opener cuz I got some beans to spill.*

Even as one seeks to narc the pain, the pain persists. Brock has struggled with drug addiction, so his lyrics in the song, “The Good Times Are Killing Me” are clearly autobiographical. Brock speaks from the midst of his own struggle.

*Fed up with all that LSD.
Need more sleep than coke or methamphetamines.
Late nights with warm, warm whiskey.
I guess the good times they were killing me.*

And yet without a sense of hope, without any confidence in the possibility of meaning, the undertow of mindless escape and diversion is powerful.

*Shrug off shortsighted false excitement
and oh what can I say?
Have one, have twenty more “one mores”
and oh it does not relent.*

the Plot

Most people don't get trapped in addictions, but many people, even Christians, exhibit the signs of a restless spirit and a proclivity for mindless escape. People move from house to house, job to job, spouse to spouse in the unrelenting search for something more. Without meta-meaning, we focus instead on a life-long series of unfulfilling micro-meanings—projects replace purpose, consumption calling.

*I know that starting over is not what life's about
But my thoughts were so loud I couldn't hear my mouth*

The “if only” syndrome prevails. Peter Kreeft states, “We make our souls hostages to fortune by pinning our happiness on external things, and we do this to divert ourselves from ourselves.” Diversions mask directionless motion, an unwillingness to listen to our hearts or to face our situation.

Time to Accept

Wary of chronic diversion or the struggle to avoid the inevitable consequences of reality, Brock shifts to a spirit of resignation. *As life gets longer awful gets softer and if it takes sh*t to make bliss then I feel pretty blissful*, Brock sings in “The View.” He then concludes, *if life's not beautiful without pain, well I'd rather never ever even see beauty again*. Brock's solution to carrying on in a world without meaning is to deny the need for meaning, the longing for beauty, and the possibility of love. He dreams of clouds, but is mired in mud: *we were laughing at the stars while our feet clung tight to the ground*. His honesty is commendable. He is unwilling to deny the immediacy of death. This is all we get—our hopes and aspirations are only illusion. They don't fit the way things are.

His outrage falls on deaf ears. Moral judgments are useless; there is nothing to distinguish between what ought to be and what is, for what is, is all there is.

*Good luck for your sake I hope heaven and hell are
really there.
But I wouldn't hold my breath.
You wasted a life, why wouldn't you waste death?*

Youth were once thought to be the purveyors of idealism, the hope of succeeding generations. Today hope is gone, for any sense of transcendence has evaporated. *Good News* pictures life marked “Dead End.” Brock's music is a firm slap in the face to the casual hedonism of mainstream pop music. His is a view far more psychologically courageous and intellectually honest than the saccharine lie of diversion.



Time to Blame

But it is also a view that is fundamentally unsustainable. One observes in Brock's nihilism his instinctive need to point a finger at God. He doesn't believe in God, but he feels the need to blame God.

*If god controls the land and disease
And keeps a watchful eye on me
If he's really so d**n mighty
Well my problem is I can't see
Well who would want to be
Who would want to be such a control freak*

And so here it is in a nutshell. One can have autonomy or meaning, but not both. Brock has chosen autonomy, while the consequences of his choice haunt him. Nietzsche wisely observed, “Man can endure any ‘What’ if he only knows the ‘Why.’” For Modest Mouse the loss of the “why” makes the “what” almost unbearable. Despite what Brock's head tells him makes sense, the complaint of his heart puts him on a collision course with his Maker. So he shouts with poetic honesty, “God d**n!” Here his anger and longing meet—they push him to acknowledge what he is unwilling to. Either his outrage has meaning because God exists, or life is what it is. For cursing God is not indifference to God, but the first step back to God. ■

~John Seel

David John Seel, Jr., is an educational consultant, speaker, and author, most recently of Parenting Without Perfection: Being a Kingdom Influence in a Toxic World. He lives in Dallas, Texas.
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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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