

# critique

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# CRITIQUE



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**ABOUT CRITIQUE:** Critique is part of the work of Ransom Fellowship founded by Denis and Margie Haack in 1982. Together, they have created a ministry that includes lecturing, mentoring, writing, teaching, hospitality, feeding, and encouraging those who want to know more about what it means to be a Christian in the everyday life of the twenty-first century.

Except where noted, all articles are by Denis Haack.

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# A Prayer for Terrorists



How does one pray in an age marred by terrorism? What words do I use, and for what do I ask?

When I recognize my poverty in knowing how to pray, it is reassuring to remember that my prayers are merely one part of the prayers of the church across the world. Each Sunday the sun's rays sweep across the earth as dawn spreads slowly across the globe, and God's people rise to pray. My prayers, feeble as they are, are one part of this great cry that comes before the Lord. And each day this reality is repeated. I can believe my prayers are significant but know they are not the final word, and that is a mysterious and gracious comfort. Other believers may know far better than I how to pray in an era of terrorism—after all, some of them live where the attacks have occurred.

It is even more reassuring to remember that the apostolic tradition passed on to us in the scriptures recognized we would at times be wordless when words seem so necessary. It would be at those moments, St. Paul wrote, that "the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words"

(Romans 8:26). The Holy Spirit, Calvin says in his commentary on this text, has "annexed prayers to the anxious desires of the faithful." As I sigh, he sighs, and his intercession is a reality beyond words in which my soul can rest.

And *The Book of Common Prayer* has a prayer that I have found helpful in an age of terrorism. I was raised in a tradition that scorned written prayers, but I have come to see that, at times, spontaneous prayers are insufficient. Often my heart's cry is best articulated not by my bumbling, inarticulate thoughts but by the words of a psalmist or by prayers written and honed over centuries of use. This prayer is "for our enemies" and, when I found it, I knew what my heart desired so desperately to say:

*O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Lead them and us from prejudice to truth: deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

All my spontaneous prayers on the topic had mentioned the victims, the first responders, the victim's families and colleagues, the authorities, even the perpetrators—but had ignored me. (Full disclosure: I mentioned myself in requesting safety.) This prayer, however, insists they, namely the terrorists (!), and I are fellow creatures, fellow sinners, and will both stand before God as Judge, in equal need of grace and salvation.

The notion that I would be tempted to similar sins as the terrorists is offensive to me, and rather convicting. If I were only a citizen of America it would be simpler, but I have sworn allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ and to his kingdom. This means I am, in St. Peter's

terms, one of the Christian "aliens and exiles" in residence here (1 Peter 2:11). That does not mean I will not care for the proper defense of America, but it certainly means my priorities and values must be tuned to a very different standard than that embraced by my pluralistic, post-Christian society. My society need only consider stopping them, killing them if necessary. I must also consider that they bear the image of God and so are persons whom I am called to love and win, even at the cost of my life.

So, I have been praying this prayer, and praying that I mean it as I read the words. ■



To the editor:  
Dear Denis,

I just wanted to send a note to let you know I always read *Critique* from cover to cover but the part I most look forward to reading are your "Editor's Notes." They always leave me with much to ponder. This latest one [*Critique* 2015:5] was especially touching. I found it bittersweet. I'm so thankful for the Lord's care in bringing your Aunt Ruth into your world as truly such an anchor. One wonders, sadly where you would be in life had it not been for her. To think of the far reaching ministry you have that affects so many lives is so connected to the "whispers of hope" she gave you.

You and Margie have experienced deep losses lately and I pray daily for you that you will have the strength to

continue on in what you do in spite of all these losses weighing you down.

With much love,  
Roxanne Rodgers  
Virginia, Minnesota

To the editor:  
Dear Denis

I just finished reading your tribute to your Aunt Ruth [*Critique* 2015:5]. I would like to tell you how sorry I was to hear your loss. I would also like you to know how profoundly moved I was by your tribute to her.

If I didn't know better, I would have sworn that you were writing about my own mother, Margaret. She too is a simple woman who finds great joy and contentment in the ordinary things of everyday life.

In the tumultuous 60's, when my relationship with my father was battered and broken, she (like Ruth) provided a safe place—a harbor—a respite as I

tried to negotiate the difficult waters of growing up in the 60's. She always seemed to have just the right word of encouragement when it was needed most.

Mom also could not have given a theological basis for her actions. But her love and acceptance were almost intuitive. She kept a loving, open home because she is a loving, open woman. She treats anyone who steps through her door with honor and respect—making them feel special and welcomed.

She is FYI, still alive at age 89. What a gift she is!

I find it compelling that on the night before he died, Jesus twice offered himself to his apostles as the source of their peace (John 14:27; 16:33). May his peace be yours in all its richness.

Fondly,  
Dennis Nordstrum  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

To the editor:

I recently moved into a new home in Omaha, Nebraska, to begin pediatrics residency. The move-in day was quite warm, muggy, and of course I inherited the upstairs room with two small windows, a wooden floor, and cedar closet. Basically one giant sauna. Anyway, I unpacked a box of *Critique* magazines, placed them on my desk for evening reading. However, I later decided to move them down to the common living area hoping that they may spark meaningful conversations with our guests (my room mates and I are attempting to living missionally in our neighborhood through hospitality, meals, and tea).

A few days passed, and one of my new roommates decided to read the



"Blaming God" article [*Critique* 2015:1]. Over the course of the next few days, we had some excellent conversations, mutual encouragement, and he did experience some inner healing and healing in his relationship with God. I spare you the details as I'm not a very good writer. But we are very blessed.

So I just wanted to thank you for your work that you both do.

Stay courageous  
Austin Vandenberg  
Omaha, Nebraska

To the editor:

Denis, dear friend whom I should be in contact more often,

I am sitting in my study trying to organize papers and my life and came across a copy of *Critique* that I put in a pile of articles and magazines to read, but somehow the pile doesn't seem to get any smaller...so I pulled out the 2015:3 issue and was intrigued by your review of *The Zero Theorem*. I should probably see the movie before I read your review, but the review is in hand and it will probably be a while until I see the film.

It seems to me that Terry Gilliam in the film is visually producing a secular Ecclesiastes. Even the name of the computer gamer, Qohen Leth, seems to be a play on the Hebrew word for the preacher, *Qoheleth*.

Greetings to Margie.  
Larry Snyder  
St. Louis, Missouri

To the editor:

Dear Denis:

Thank you for reviewing *Our Great Big American God* and *The Experience of God* [*Critique* 2015:5]. I've written in *3 Theories of Everything* and often teach that, "The world is the salt and

light of the Church." It is interesting to read about Turner's expanded application of that idea.

In connection with *The Experience of God* and Hart's exploration of what "Reality" means, students often ask me what I mean by reality. I tell them "Reality is: Who God is, What God does and What God wants." Everything else (sin, death, lie, ego-centrism) is false and unsustainable. We suffer because we are split between the two. It is possible because of Christ to move increasingly into Reality. Live in hope.

God bless you, brother.  
Love in Christ,  
Ellis Potter  
Switzerland ■



# When Nigeria is Home



I was handed a book, told I should read it, did, and now want to recommend it to you. Our friend, Anita Gorder, had stopped by a wonderful independent bookshop in St. Paul, Common Good Books ([www.commongoodbooks.com](http://www.commongoodbooks.com), Garrison Keillor, proprietor). She asked the staff for a recommendation, and was pointed to *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She read it and said I should, too. I'm glad she did.

Adichie, born in Nigeria in 1977, studied medicine, communications, and political science, earning masters degrees in creative writing (John Hopkins) and African studies (Yale). Her books and short stories have won multiple awards, and she divides her time between Nigeria and the U.S. Her prose is deceptively simple, marked by keen observation, clear description, and

lively dialogue, full of insight into the human condition, and evocative enough to transport the reader's imagination into places and hearts that exist a world away.

*Americanah* (2013) is the story of Ifemelu, a Nigerian student in America who eventually returns to Nigeria. It is the first novel I have read that offers me entrance into the experience of an African immigrant in the U.S., allowing me to see my own culture in fresh, though not always pleasant, ways. Because it is the "home of the free," many, if not most, Americans assume that any legal immigrant from Africa, or anywhere else for that matter, will find life in the U.S. not merely an attractive improvement over their native setting, but one that can be navigated with ease. Adichie punctures these myths by allowing us to walk in Ifemelu's shoes and so see the immigrant experience with sharper clarity. It is a perspective that we Americans need to gain.

*Americanah* is not anti-American, even when Americans or American policy are difficult to defend. It is an affectionate and honest telling of life from the perspective of an immigrant who wants to feel at home in a strange and alien land whose people, black and white, at times seem determined to keep her marginalized, and whose customs and manners at times prove incomprehensible. Nor is it anti-African, depicting a continent hopelessly snared in corruption and violence, but revealing, instead, a richly determined place brimming with people

yearning to find a way to flourish in a rapidly changing modern world and whose convictions and desires often cause them to push for very different ends. Nigerians and Americans both are shown to be glorious ruins, hoping against hope that in the end they might find an identity that demonstrates their existence has significance and dignity. And throughout, the need for love and community, and the deep yearning for a relationship that satisfies and truly lasts defines every character, for blessing and for curse.

Impressed by *Americanah*, I tracked down two more of Adichie's novels.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) is set in the heart of the civil war (1967–70) that erupted when southeastern Nigeria seceded to become Biafra. It was a brutal time when an estimated million civilians died in the chaos, fighting, pitiless violence, and famine that ravaged the countryside after Nigeria sealed the border to the seceding territory.



Adichie's story takes us into the home of a university professor, Odenigbo, who supports the effort to form a new state. Odenigbo, his attractive mistress Olanna, and her sister Kainene, are Igbo, a highly Christianized people group with a long list of grievances against the largely Muslim north. Odenigbo's young servant Ugwu, is from an isolated country village, providing a rural perspective of the unrest and suffering. And Kainene's lover, a Brit who came to Africa with dreams of becoming a great writer but fails miserably, rounds out the cast of characters. They each are swept along by events far greater than they can control, and they are thrown into a cauldron of early hope, growing disappointment, and finally grief, loss, and suffering. Though the novel is set in a particular setting of civil war, the deeper issues that animate Adichie's story of the desire for liberty are universal human.

And *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) is a story set in two related Nigerian families. Teenaged siblings, Jaja and his younger sister Kambili, are from a wealthy family and have the best of everything, but their father is a legalistic, abusive, and controlling Christian. When the father's sister, Auntie Ifeoma, invites Kambili and Jaja to come stay with her, they suddenly taste life that is free, unafraid of animism, and full of laughter though much poorer. The experience forever changes them—their values, dreams, and beliefs—and sets them on a path of conflict and eventual tragedy when the siblings return home.

Three things stand out to me about these novels by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

First, as I already mentioned, Adichie is a fine author, a good storyteller, and

someone who grasps the significance of how good stories tell the truth about what it means to be a human being in a broken world. The characters in her novels live in a world very different than I do yet I identified with them, and had no difficulty seeing things through their eyes. One advantage of living in an era of advanced modernity is that voices that might have remained far away a few years ago are now easily available in our globalized world. One such voice is that of Adichie, and for that I am very grateful.

Second, I am impressed how reading Adichie's novels broadens my perspective on the world. As I read these stories, I was struck once again (sigh!) by how my view of things tends to be very American-centered. I suppose that's not totally surprising: I am an American living in America. On the other hand, America is *not* the center of the universe, American perspectives are not the final word on life and reality, and American culture is not a manifestation of God's kingdom. Being able to guard against being provincial in my perspective of things is important, especially in a pluralistic world. Adichie's novels help to that end, and for that too I am grateful.

Third, all three novels show how the Western secularized view of life has permeated Nigerian culture, or at least permeated Adichie's take on it. In *Americanah* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for example, there is almost no significant inclusion of religion in the story, by which I mean in a way that shapes the characters, their societal setting, or the plot in a deeply meaningful way. And though religion is central to the story of *Purple Hibiscus*, it is the now familiar story of Christianity breeding oppressive fundamentalists. This stands in

sharp contrast to reports indicating that Nigeria tends to be a very religious place, that Muslims make up a significant part of the population and that the Christian church is growing rapidly there. Adichie mentions religion and describes belief and superstition as existing, but political and economic ideologies are far more central to her stories. As I read I couldn't shake the feeling that the novels seemed slightly tone deaf, rather like Western novels that blithely assume that those with intellectual prowess and advanced education can essentially ignore religious belief and committed believers. In fact, faith permeates human existence, even in secularized circles.

Still, even with that caveat, I recommend Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novels, especially *Americanah*. ■

#### **Books recommended:**

*Americanah* (New York, NY: Anchor Books; 2013) 588 pages.

*Half of a Yellow Sun* (New York, NY: Anchor Books; 2006) 541 pages.

*Purple Hibiscus* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books; 2003) 307 pages.



# Am I Addicted to Diversion? A

Here are two anecdotes, and the point I want to make.

One. This past weekend I checked a spy novel out of the library, and am hooked. I knew that was a possibility when I checked it out, so I determined to only pick it up when I truly had time to spare. Amazing how much time I had to spare this week.

Two. I have to fill out some forms that, though necessary, are annoying, long, and tedious. The deadline is a month away, but yesterday I had 45 minutes before leaving for a meeting, so I decided to get started. I got the file with the forms out. I sharpened two #2 pencils, filled my fountain pen with ink, found my calculator, and noticed the dirt of my two African violets were bone dry. My laptop dinged, signaling new e-mail, so checked that, found there were four, two of which I answered and two I deleted. By then it was time to leave for the meeting. My wife claims it's a sign of elderly attention deficit disorder, but I remember doing something similar in my thirties at income tax time. It has more to do with detesting filling out those stupid forms.

And my point: not only do we live in a world brimming with distractions, but we consciously and subconsciously embrace all sorts of diversions to keep from having to face more important things.

*Distractions...that's what makes up a big part of our lives, y'know? The distractions. Lots of times, we're like moths fluttering around a porch light. Bugs'll swarm around that bulb, all distracted, forgetting in their minuscule insect brains that there's something else they should be doing, like biting people or making more bugs. We're like that, although our brains are generally larger...*

*Human distractions are bigger, better light bulbs. We got TVs and computers. We got blinking casino lights and live bands on cruise ships playing yet another version of "Hot, Hot, Hot" until you wanna puke, but in the end, they're all just porch lights. So we go from one bright bulb to another until we hit the bug zapper, and it's all over. [Neal Shusterman, *Ship Out of Luck*]*

As our lives and times get ever busier, the problem of diversion becomes greater. There is more that is urgent to divert us from what is important, more that is entertaining to divert us from what is enriching, more that is interesting to divert us from what is difficult. And perhaps most troubling of all, as Os Guinness points out in *Fool's Talk*, "Even the best of pursuits can become the worst of diversions" (p. 100–101). Which means that as our lives and times get busier, the problem of diversion becomes less obvious, more difficult to notice.

At times we all eagerly embrace some diversion to keep from having to deal with something that is hard, or draining, or embarrassing, or that will challenge some cherished idea or value, or call into question some comfortable aspect of our lifestyle. This is not entirely a bad thing, since sometimes we need a diversion to keep from being overwhelmed. Too much reality at one time can be stunning beyond endurance. "No one can see me," God told Moses, "and live" (Exodus 33:20). Not only is the full glory of ultimate reality overwhelming, being finite creatures means our ability to absorb the brokenness of the world is also limited. Only the Almighty can be exposed to all the brokenness of this sad world and not descend into cynicism or despair. Just because the media is able

to bring to our attention so much so fast and so constantly doesn't mean we should simply acquiesce in accepting it. When we sense the pull towards cynicism or despair, we would be wise to be diverted from the onslaught of horror that is reported again and again each news cycle.

Still, even with that caveat, the argument can be made that, by and large, diversion is more a problem than a solution for most of us most of the time. Rather than tackle perennial questions, our world tends to embrace fleeting entertainments and, rather than face essential and possibly convicting issues, we tend to fill our calendars with activities that keep us so busy that the issues by default are passed by. And so we simply keep on, never quite getting to what we really need to get to.

To help us understand the dynamic of diversion, Guinness turns to the wisdom of Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*:

*"I have often said," Pascal wrote, "that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his own room." Why? Because we all have to surround ourselves with diversion to take our minds off ultimate reality including the fact that we all will die. Once, after spending the evening at the house of a very wealthy woman, the painter Francis Bacon came away incensed because she had plastic flowers rather than real flowers. "The whole point about flowers," he exclaimed angrily, "is that they die." As Pascal put it, "If man were happy, the less he were diverted the happier he would be." But that is not how we are. "Being unable to cure death, wretchedness and misery men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things."*

*In Pascal's time, the opportunity for a life*



# are you?

*full of diversion was the privilege of the rich and powerful. "That, in fact, is the main joy of being a king, because people are continually trying to divert him.... A king is surrounded by people whose only thought is to divert him and stop him thinking about himself, because king though he is, he becomes unhappy as soon as he thinks about himself." Thus the hunt is more important than the capture, and the search than the discovery. "Men cannot be too much occupied and distracted, and that is why, when they have been given so many things to do, if they have some time off they are advised to spend it on diversion and sport, and always to keep themselves fully occupied."*

*What was once the preserve of the rich and powerful is now in the hands of almost everyone in advanced modern society. The whole high-tech iWorld is so full of diversions and busy, entertaining distractions of all kinds that they have been called our "weapons of mass distraction." (p. 100).*

As Guinness mentioned, it can be difficult to identify our diversions because they may have begun not as a distraction but as an honest effort to get involved in a good thing. Perhaps I became a volunteer for some charity, or determined to be the best in my field, or began a fitness routine, or began mentoring kids at a nearby elementary school, or started teaching a class at church (or whatever) because there was a need. I wanted to do a good thing and had enough flex in time and energy that getting involved was not just a good thing but really satisfying. But that was then, and now things are a bit different. Life has changed since I began, and though I can easily list the way things have changed, it's harder to find the time and energy to do the hard work





of reconsidering what my priorities should be. Besides, if I conclude that my priorities require me to rearrange my commitment, that will lead to difficult conversations, disappointment, and the knowledge that my saying No leaves a need unmet. It's easier to just keep doing what I'm doing. Perhaps I can figure out how to be more efficient and solve the problem that way.

Even talking can be a diversion. "Wise men lay up knowledge," the Hebrew proverb says, "but the babbling of a fool brings ruin near." (10:14). Why? Because being addicted to hearing my own voice and opinions can keep me from hearing what I really need to hear. And yet I often prefer what I have to say more than what you might have to say.

Some distractions sneak up on us. We get a new cell phone. We bought it because we need a phone and can't help that it comes with new apps and possibilities and games and music and fitness measures and scheduling links and alerts and search engines and reminders, and each of these comes with the explicit promise that it will make life easier and more efficient. In a technological age, can we even tell when some gadget begins to be more of a distraction than it is helpful?

Though the forms our diversions take may be modern, the problem is an old one. The Hebrew prophet Amos, for example, could see that even music could be misused.

*Woe to those who lie upon beds of ivory,  
and stretch themselves upon their  
couches...  
who sing idle songs to the sound of  
the harp  
and like David invent for them  
selves instruments of  
music. (Amos 6:4-5)*

The ancient seer was not being critical of King David or the music he produced, but of how the people of God used music as an excuse not to attend to what was important. St. Paul urged his young protégé, Timothy, to warn the Christians under his charge not "to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies which promote speculations rather than the divine training that is in faith" (1 Timothy 1:4). Some teaching in the church may be intellectually stimulating and strikingly imaginative, yet a distraction from what is spiritually edifying. Some activities, good in themselves, can be a diversion too, for which Jesus corrected his friend, Martha (Luke 10:40-42).

Here's a trap that I must beware. It's possible to be open to eliminating diversions in one area of life, and to then use that openness to mask how closed I am to identifying diversions in other areas. In my case, I rarely allow myself to be diverted when it comes to exploring ideas and worldviews. I like reading about the history of ideas, and take delight in thinking through various worldviews, religious and ideological convictions, and their consequences. Although I was raised in a Christian family and context, I came close to rejecting the faith and am a Christian today because I became convinced it is true. My faith is an examined faith, so I do not fear difficult questions, even difficult questions for which I have no answer. I do not have answers to every question, never will and never hope to, but I do have good and sufficient reasons to believe as I do, and I am committed to put my belief into practice, even at cost. So, in the area of ideas, faith, beliefs, and worldviews, I actively push back against anything that might divert me from exploring them. If that

gives you the impression I am open to facing my diversions, it is not the entire story. I may not be easily diverted in the arena of ideas, but the arena of personal relationships is a different story—here I am not merely easily diverted, I eagerly embrace diversion. And if one isn't handy, I'll gladly invent one.

I know I can't trust myself on all this, because the stakes are too high and I'm easily diverted. I like my distractions, or at least I prefer them to whatever they are diverting me from. And more than likely I'm not even aware of all the distractions that divert my attention in less helpful directions. So, perhaps this is an issue in which community is essential. We'll never get rid of all the diversions, but perhaps together we can at least machete a path through the worst thickets and catch a glimpse of the horizon. I am at least convinced the important things deserve more attention than my diversions allow. ■

#### Sources:

Neal Shusterman quote online ([www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/16686450-ship-out-of-luck-antsy-bonano-3](http://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/16686450-ship-out-of-luck-antsy-bonano-3)).

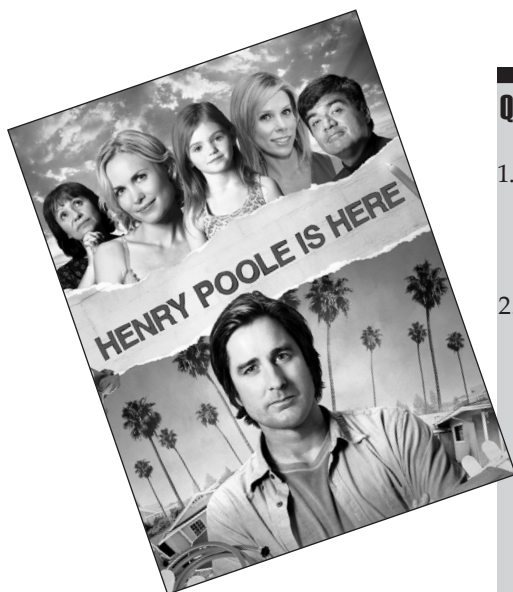
Fool's Talk: Recovering the Art of Christian Persuasion by Os Guinness (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).



## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. Some would argue that we live in an age in which distraction is particularly prevalent and powerful. Others would argue that embracing diversion is simply part of the human condition in a fallen and broken world. How would you respond? Why? Does it matter?
2. What forms of distraction detract from efficiency and productivity in your workplace? Do forms of diversion in your workplace seem to improve morale so well that they appear to do more good than harm?
3. "Even the best of pursuits can become the worst of diversions." Is the use of best and worst accurate, or is it an exaggeration? How does the process from best to worst tend to occur? Can we define the crucial moment when the activity shifts from best pursuit to worst diversion? What might we do to keep this from happening?
4. Describe the least distracted person you know. What makes them so? What advantages do you perceive, and what are the disadvantages to their lack of distraction?
5. To what forms of diversion are you most easily susceptible? How would your spouse, adult children, or closest friend(s) answer this question about you?
6. Why is it far easier for me to identify the things you use to distract and divert yourself than my own? How might community help us sort through this issue?
7. What fears might keep us from being willing to face our distractions? Are there ways we can help one another bear this burden?
8. Where in the church have you experienced intellectually stimulating and strikingly imaginative teaching that is nevertheless not spiritually edifying? Since those who were giving and discussing the teaching were convinced it was both edifying and important, how do you know they are not correct? What test(s) would you use? Why might some Christians be drawn to such useless (but fascinating) speculations?
9. How can useful and necessary technology subtly become a distraction? How can we guard against this danger?
10. Neil Postman, the author of *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, argues in *Technopoly*, "New technologies alter the structure of our interests: the things we think *about*. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think *with*. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop" (p. 20). Explore, as objectively as possible, what you believe Postman means. Do you agree? Why or why not? To the extent Postman's assertion is true, what is its significance to Western culture? What is its significance to the church? And what is its significance to us as individuals?
11. In a busy and fast paced world, we tend to be weary and stressed just from the ordinary requirements of life. The notion that we should set aside distractions to find time to reflect on and read about issues of fundamental and perennial importance in life can strike many people as precisely what they do not need, that doing so would probably greatly increase their stress and weariness. How would you respond?
12. In a world of great—and growing—need, it can seem inordinately self-centered to eliminate good activities in order to reflect on one's priorities and commitments. It can seem even more inordinately self-centered if the result of this reflection leads one to decrease rather than increase their involvement in social justice concerns. How would you respond?
13. *The need is not the calling*. Do you agree? Why or why not? Are some needs so great as to require this statement to be repudiated?
14. C. S. Lewis, in *The Weight of Glory*, writes, "We are always falling in love or quarreling, looking for jobs or fearing to lose them, getting ill and recovering, following public affairs. If we let ourselves, we shall always be waiting for some distraction or other to end before we can really get down to our work. The only people who achieve much are those who want knowledge so badly that they seek it while the conditions are still unfavorable. Favorable conditions never come." Discuss.
15. What important issues, topics, questions, or challenges do you wish you had energy and time to pursue? What is lost by not having time to pursue them?
16. What insights can a Christian gain from reflecting on the biblical texts mentioned in this article? How are these insights helpful to life in our world of advanced modernity?

# Henry Poole is Here



### Film Credits: *Henry Poole Is Here*

Rated: PG-13

Run time: 99 minutes

Director: Mark Pellington

#### Actors:

Luke Wilson as Henry Poole

Radha Mitchell as Dawn Stupek

Adriana Barraza as Esperanza Martinez

George Lopez as Meg Wyatt

Morgan Lily as Millie Stupek

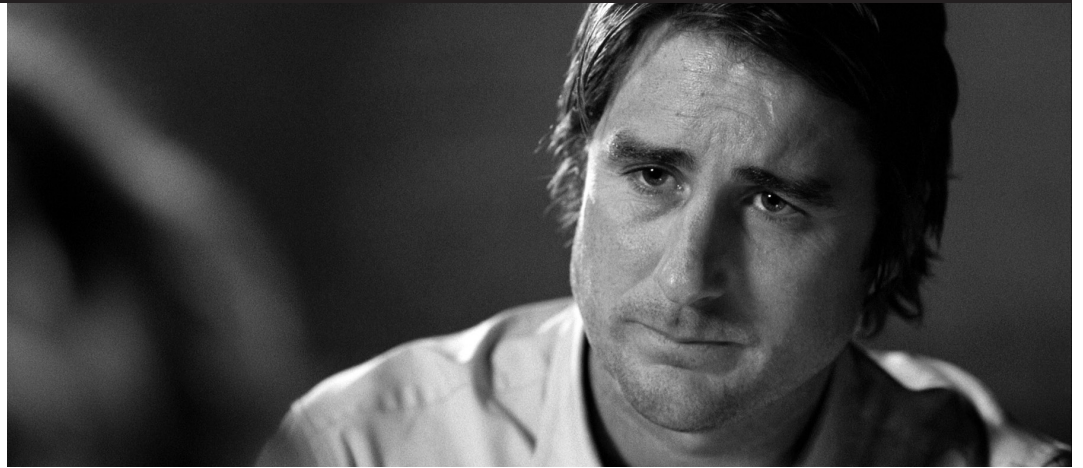
Rachel Seiferth as Patience

Release date: January 21, 2008 (Sundance Film Festival); then in limited release, August 15, 2008)

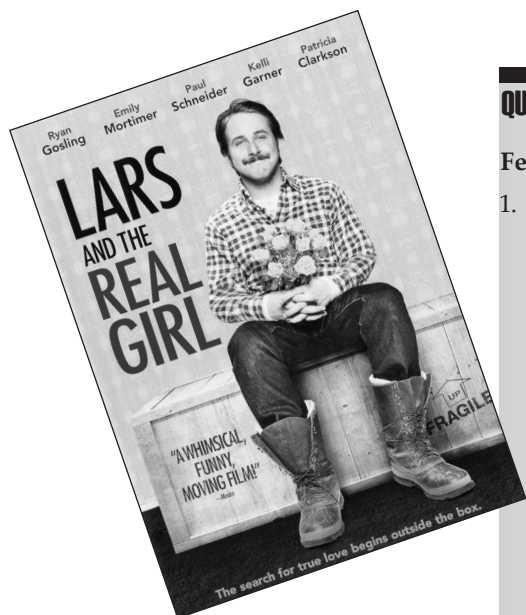
### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION, BY MARK RYAN

1. What was your first impression? What lines of dialogue, visual settings, or aspects of the soundtrack stood out to you?
2. What genre might you assign this film to? What other films did it bring to mind?
3. The late Roger Ebert said of this film that it "achieves something that is uncommonly difficult. It is a spiritual movie with the power to emotionally touch believers, agnostics, and atheists—in that descending order." Do you agree or disagree?
4. Who are the main characters in the story? What do we know about them? What (if any) is their relationship to one another? (Pay attention to the names of main characters!)
5. Much of the film centers around the purported 'faith of Christ' on Henry Poole's stucco wall. The director calls us as a viewing audience to engage the image and yet he keeps us from ever receiving a really clear view of it. Was this a good choice? How might our experience of the film have been different if we had of seen an unmistakably clear image of Christ?
6. Having thought some about the look and feel of the movie, the genre of the movie, and the chief characters of the movie, what do you identify as the theme of the movie? (What is this move about and how do you know?)
7. Thinking biblically...
  - a). To what degree does this film help us think about faith?
  - \* What does the Bible teach us about how men and women are drawn to faith?
  - \* What place do you maintain for the miraculous in a person's coming to faith or a believer being confirmed and strengthened in faith?
  - \* What other 'various testimonies' (providential prompts) are seen in this movie as supporting or leading to faith?
- b). In her discussion of this film, Frederica Mathewes-Green suggests that Christian moviegoers will embrace this film on account of its "depiction of Christian faith...as something other than the domain of cranks and loonies." Did you feel this way?
- \* How are you used to seeing people of faith depicted in film?
- \* Do you know an "Esperanza" in your community of faith or circle of believing friends?
- c). The film's director, Mark Pellington, endured a terrible tragedy: the sudden loss of his wife, leaving him to care for their toddler daughter. Does knowing this alter your evaluation of this film in any way?
8. Overall: Did you enjoy this film? What will you take away from having viewed it? (What are its abiding strengths? What are its weaknesses?) ■





# Lars and the Real Girl



### Film Credits: *Lars and the Real Girl*

Rated: PG-13

Run time: 106 minutes

Director: Craig Gillespie

Writer: Nancy Oliver

Actors:

Ryan Gosling as Lars Lindstrom

Emily Mortimer as Karin

Paul Schneider as Gus

Kelli Garner as Margo

Patricia Clarkson as Dagmar

Release date: October 1997 (U.S.A.)

Budget: Estimated \$12 million

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION, BY MARK RYAN

### Features and First Impressions

1. Reviewer Louise Keller (Urban Cinefile) writes, "This charmer of a film is one you will never forget. The elements are so bizarre, yet, like the film's characters, we are able to take a leap of faith and never look back." What about you? What most captured your attention—the 'bizarre elements' or the film's characters?

2. Given that one of the major characters in the film is a wheelchair bound, plastic sex-doll, it may be helpful to begin by establishing Bianca's actual role in the film:

\* Did Lars use Bianca for sex? (Be prepared to defend your answer.)

\* How would you describe the relationship between Lars and 'Bianca'?

\* What does Bianca provide or do for Lars?

\* How did you find yourself relating to / thinking about 'Bianca'?

3. Another significant 'character' in *Lars and The Real Girl* is the community that Lars is part of. How might you describe the collective character of this small midwestern town?

4. What other films can you think of that feature community life (whether comedic or dramatic)?

### Key Characters and Story Resolution

5. Lars and his brother Gus are the main men in the story. What do we know about these men?

\* How is Lars introduced to us? What does he struggle with (especially externally)?

\* How is Gus presented to us? (In what ways is he a contrast to Lars?) What would you say characterizes the brother's relationship to one another? (With what does Gus struggle?)

\* Why did Lars create Bianca? (What does the film tell us about Lars' past? What present circumstance seems to weigh heavy on Lars?)

6. The title of the film is important ... it is, *Lars and The Real Girl*. By my count there are four significant 'girls' in the story. Who are they? How do they relate to Lars (and Bianca)?

7. Of these various female characters, who is the real girl the movie title alludes to?

8. How did the story conclude? Were you satisfied by that ending? (Was there closure for Lars? Please explain why or why not?)

### Basic Theme and Points of interaction with Christian Faith

9. In light of discussion, how would you summarize what this film is and is not about?

10. Clearly, the advice of the town doctor is questionable. Nonetheless, as a community of believers who value truth telling, what might we learn from this film in the general approach taken toward Lars?

11. How is the church portrayed in this film?

12. Is there any 'gospel' in this film?

13. What do you take away with you from your having viewed this film?

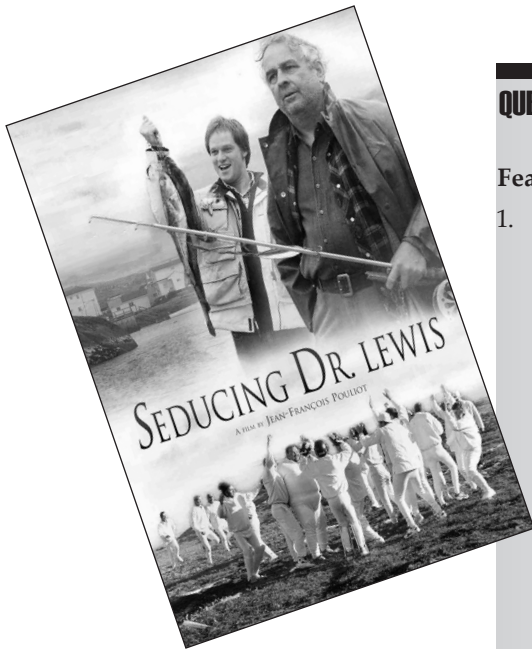


### Did you know?

14. The doll employed in the film had nine different faces, each used to show a sort of evolution of the character. Bianca's face starts out with quite heavy make-up. Later a more natural looking face without make-up is employed. Finally, her face is made up to appear slightly green in order to reflect her "failing health."
15. To help Ryan Gosling stay in character, the real doll was treated like an actual person (as is done by the characters in the movie). This extended to her being dressed privately in her own trailer and to her being present only for scenes that she was in.
16. In the scene where Lars is reading to Bianca, he is reading from *Don Quixote*, whose main character also has delusions.
17. In addition to his remarkable acting ability, Ryan Gosling (Lars) also performed the song "L O V E" (written by Bert Kaempfert and Milton Gabler). ■



# Seducing Dr. Lewis



### Film Credits: *Seducing Dr. Lewis*

Unrated

Run time: 108 minutes

Director: Jean-Francois Pouliot

Writer: Ken Scott

Actors:

Raymond Bouchard as Germain Lesage

David Boutin as Christopher Lewis

Lucie Laurier a Eve Beauchemlin

Release date: May 2003 (France)

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION, BY MARK RYAN

#### Features and First Impressions

1. Despite winning 14 awards at various Canadian and U.S. film festivals in 2003 and 2004 (including the audience award at Sundance), reviewers seem torn between praising this movie for its charm and pointing out its problems. What about you? What is your first impression of this film? What stands out to you as being either praiseworthy or problematic?

2. At the present time there are three re-makes of this film underway, an English-Canadian remake, a French remake, and an Italian remake. To what (if anything) do you attribute the desire to remake this film in local markets so quickly?

3. An important character in this film is the town itself. What do we know of this tiny Quebecois town of St. Marie-La-Mauderne?

\* How does the town appear? Why does it appear this way?

\* How might you describe the collective character of this town / its inhabitants?

\* What is this small town's real need? (How does the opening scene help serve to underscore this?)

\* What is its relationship to the larger city?

4. What other films can you think of that so features a locality and its collective character?

#### Key Characters and Story Resolution

5. Who are the main characters in the story? What do we know about these

people? (How are they each introduced to us?)

6. What are their individual and collective struggles? What does this lead them to do?
7. How did the story conclude? Where you satisfied by that ending?
8. How does Eve function in this film?

*NB: If time allows, consider these Nine Elements of Story Structure cf. Brian Godawa, from chapter 2 of Hollywood Worldviews: Watching Film with Wisdom and Discernment (IVP, 2002):*

- a. Theme
- b. Hero
- c. Goal
- d. Adversary
- e. Flaw
- f. Apparent defeat
- g. Final confrontation
- h. Self revelation
- i. Resolution

#### Basic Theme and Points of Interaction with Christian Faith

9. In light of discussion, how would you summarize what this film is and is not about?
10. Clearly, the town's plan and execution of it is questionable. As a community of believer's who value truth telling, what might we learn from this film?

\* Did the end justify the means? (In what ways does every community wrestle with this?)

\* Does such deception lead to happiness? Can a community really



continue on the basis of deception?

\* What kind of honesty does it take to really live in, build up, and ultimately sustain community life?

11. Is there any 'gospel' in this film?

12. What do you take away with you from your having viewed this film?

**Did you know?**

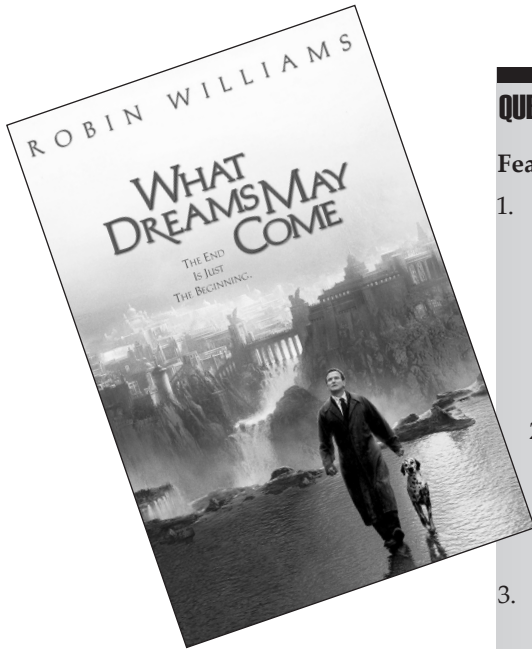
13. Harrington Harbour, where the film was made, is actually an English-speaking village, settled originally by people from Newfoundland.

14. This film was shot in just six weeks.

15. There was actually an English dubbed version of the movie which was very well done. Unfortunately it was only available on airline flights and for some reason they decided not to put it on the DVD release. ■



# What Dreams May Come



### Film Credits: *What Dreams May Come*

Rated: PG-13

Run time: 113 minutes

Director: Vincent Ward

Writer: Richard Matheson (novel) and Ronald Bass (screenplay)

Actors:

Robin Williams as Chris Nielsen

Cuba Gooding Jr. as Albert Lewis

Annabella Sciorra as Annie Collins-Nielsen

Max von Sydow as The Tracker

Release date: October 1998 (U.S.A.)

Budget: Estimated \$85 million

### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION, BY MARK RYAN

#### Features and First Impressions

1. Reviewer James Berardinelli (1998) says that, "*What Dreams May Come* has the sensibilities of an art film placed into a big-budget feature with an A-list cast." What most stood out to you about this film? The story? The acting? The visual effects?
2. *What Dreams May Come* won multiple awards for its visual effects, including an Oscar for Best Effects. How did the special effects serve to enhance the story?
3. What particular images stood out to you? Why did they draw your attention?
4. What artists (painters, poets, writers) seemed to be drawn upon?
5. Were you drawn into the story as it unfolded?
  - \* What did you appreciate about Chris and Annie's life together?
  - \* How did Chris' death leave you feeling? What about Annie's?
6. What about the story's ending... did you find the resolution satisfying? (Why or why not?)

What difference (if any) did viewing the alternate ending make for you?
7. And as you think about what you have seen, what other films come to mind?

#### Key Themes and Points of Interaction with Christian Faith

8. Based upon discussion so far, how would you summarize what this film is about?

9. Thinking in terms of the Christian worldview, what does this film say about heaven?
  - \* What seems consistent with biblical teaching?
  - \* What seems inconsistent?
  - \* What is strikingly absent from 'heaven' in this particular film?
10. Once again thinking in terms of the Christian worldview, what does this film say about hell?
  - \* How does one get to hell?
  - \* What seems inconsistent with biblical teaching?
  - \* And yet what images are employed?
11. What statement does the film make about love?
12. Is there any 'gospel' in this film?
13. What do you think the makers of this film wished to convey? And what do you take away with you from your having viewed this film?

#### Did you know?

14. When Chris goes to the city in heaven and we see people flying around overhead, keep an eye out for characters from 'Peter Pan' (Wendy, Michael, John) and 'Mary Poppins' (Mary Poppins herself).
15. The title, 'What Dreams May Come,' is derived from William Shakespeare's, *Hamlet* (Act 3; Scene 1), where we read: "To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; For in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this



mortal coil must give us pause..."

16. The last scene in which we see Annie alive, sitting on her bed, writing in her journal, shows a triptych painted by Hieronymus Bosch. The painting is called, 'The Garden of Earthly Delights' and features three panels, each being Bosch's interpretation of heaven, earth, and hell.

17. Portions of the hell scenes in this movie were shot on the decrepit, rusted hulk of the Essex class aircraft carrier, USS Oriskany (CV-34). On May 17, 2006, this ship was sunk to serve as an artificial reef. Other portions were shot at the Alameda Naval Air Station in an indoor swimming pool surrounded by blue screen equipment so the special effects could be added in later. In this pool extras, made up as ghouls, spent two 12-hour days. ■



**Mark Ryan**, together with his wife Terri, served with L'Abri Fellowship for many years (first at Southborough, MA, then on Bowen Island, BC). Presently, Mark serves the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute at Covenant Theological Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri.







HENRY POOLE IS HERE



LARS AND THE REAL GIRL



SEDUCING DR. LEWIS, AND WHAT DREAMS MAY COME (BELOW)

