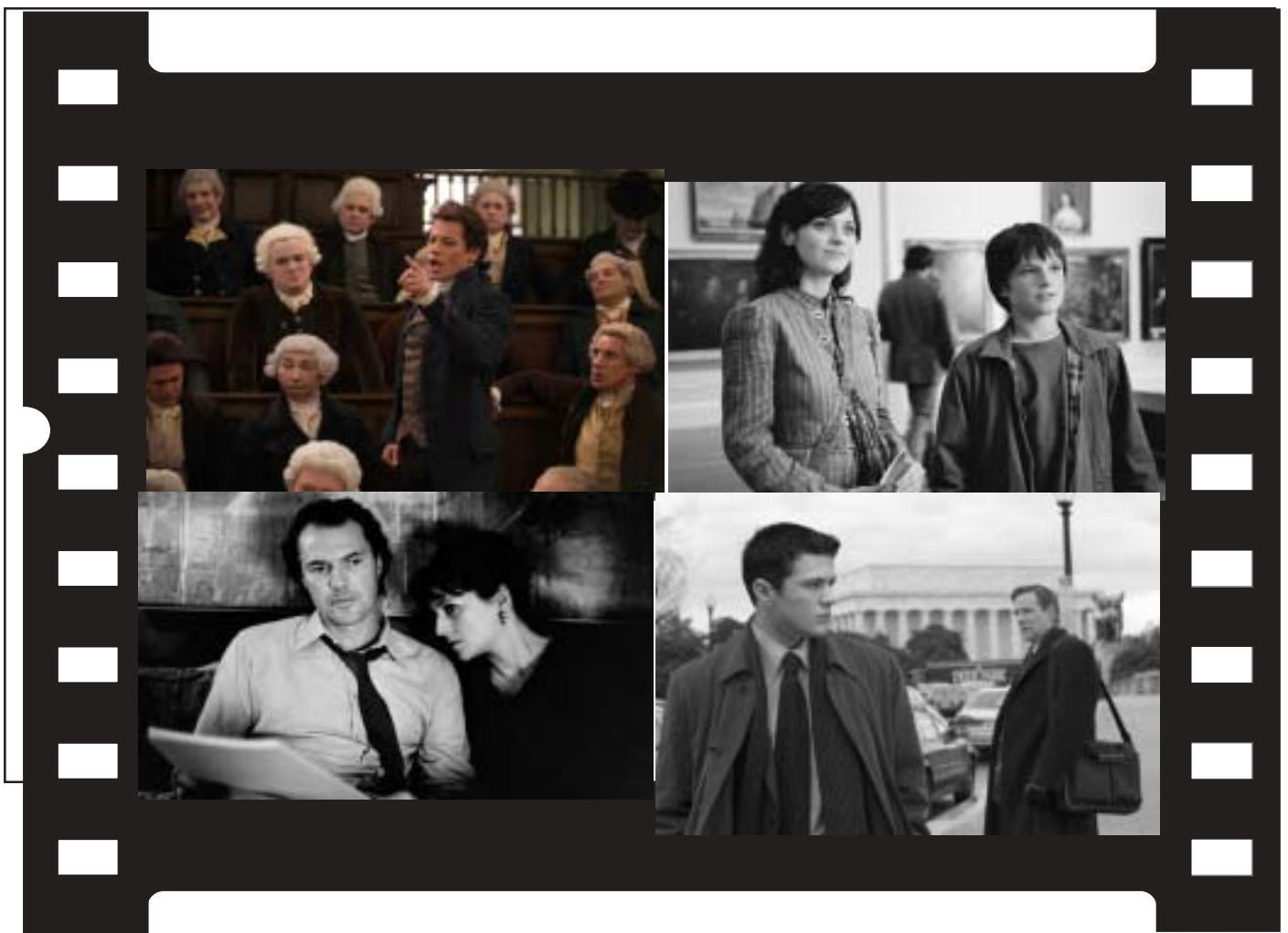


Visual Parables

Film & Faith in Dialogue



Clockwise, Upper L to R, Scenes from: *Amazing Grace*; *Bridge to Terabithia*; *Breach*; *Lives of Others*.

Inside: *Amazing Grace*; *Bridge to Terabithia*; *Little Children*; *Venus*; *Breach*; *Christy Film Guide*; more.

Visual Parables

Editor/Publisher
Dr. Edward McNulty

Web Editor/Consultant
Dr. J. Nichols Adams

Columnist
Rev. Doug Sweet

Short Film Reviewer
Rev. Markus Watson

ISSN: 1064-6485

VISUAL PARABLES is published quarterly as a print piece, and reviews are posted weekly on its website. Subscribers are permitted to copy a review or a guide for a one-time use by members of their organization. All other rights reserved under the International Copyright Union, the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan-American Copyright Convention.

Subscription orders :

To use credit card write to:

LectionAid

PO Box 19229

Boulder, CO 80308-2229

1-800-475-7555

<http://www.lectionaid.com/order/subscription.html> or

When giving gift subs. or to use a check, send to: VP, PO Box 370, Walton, KY 41094

To reach Editor Ed McNulty and for

Address Changes:

1-859-493-0286

mcnulty@fuse.net

Contents

Spring 2007

Issue No. 181

At Theaters

Amazing Grace	1
Bridge to Terabithia	9
Little Children	14
Because I Said So ..	15
Music & Lyrics and Factory Girl	16
Breach	17
Venus	19
Zodiac	20
300	21
T. Lives of Others	23
Wild Hogs	25
The Care Bears Movie.....	26
Tyler Perry's Daddy's Little Girls	27
Black Snake Moan	28

On DVD

Land of Plenty	30
Happy Feet	36
Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman	38

Sweet Resources

P raying the Movies	32
----------------------------------	-----------

Film Guide: Christy.....

Interviews

With Ken Wales.....	7
With Katherine Patterson.	12

Book Reviews

Not For Sale & Amazing Grace	6
------------------------------------	---

Lectionary Links

Media Meanderings.....	48
-------------------------------	-----------

Our Film Content Rating Guide

Our unscientific assessment of the content of a film in regards to Violence (V), Language (L), and Sex/Nudity is measured on a scale from 0 (None) to 10 (Highest). It is intended to give readers an overall idea of the contents.

At Theaters

Amazing Grace

Rated PG. Our ratings: V-1; L- 1; S/N-2. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 3:27-28

William Wilberforce was less than 5 ½ feet tall, yet he towered over most of his fellow members of Parliament in the latter quarter of the 18th century (except, of course, for his good friend who became Prime Minister, William Pitt the Younger [Benedict Cumberbatch]). A gifted orator, he was elected to Parliament at the unheard age of 21 where he became a close friend and ally of William Pitt, son of the previous Prime Minister of the same name. Once converted to Christianity, he, joined with like-minded friends to reform “the manners of society.” However, this did not mean just social niceties, but included the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, reformation of the brutal penal code and prison system and of the way in which children were treated, and a host of other social concerns. But he was pre-eminently noted for spearheading the long campaign to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire. Sad to say that today he is little known in this country,



*John Newton advises Wilberforce to stay in politics
(c) 2007 Walden/Roadside Attractions*

something which I hope that the excellent film *Amazing Grace* will rectify. Directed by Michael Apted (best known for directing *Coal Miner's Daughter* and *Gorillas in the Mist*), this is a riveting story of a small man with a gigantic task, one far more revolutionary in its impact than the bloody revolution taking place across the English Channel during his time.

Even had he been healthy, William Wilberforce, called “Wilber” by his friends, would have been incredible, accomplishing so much, despite suffering from a debilitating form of colitis that struck him down from time to time. His doctor brought him some relief from his pain by prescribing the wonder drug of the time, laudanum, an opium derivative, but its side effects sometimes were as bad as his ailment. Steven Knight's screenplay touches on some of the highlights of this man's complex life, but obviously has to simplify matters a great deal by combining some characters and telescoping some of the events and time span. (See the book by Eric Metaxas, described briefly at the end of this review, to fill in the huge gaps in the movie story.)

The film opens in 1797 with the 34-year-old Wilberforce (Ioan Gruffudd) stopping his coach so that he can tell a man to stop beating his fallen horse. Wracked with pain and exhausted by all of his battles in Parliament, he arrives that night at the country estate of his cousins Henry and Marianne

Continued on next page



Wilberforce presents to Parliament his anti-slavery petition from the people. (c) 2007 Walden/Roadside Attractions

Thornton (Nicholas Farrell and Sylvestra Le Touzel), where they give him the tender loving (and firm) care he needs. They take him to Bath in the twin hopes that its famed waters will help cure him and that he and the woman they arrange for him to meet, Barbara Spooner (Romola Garai), will be attracted to each other. However, each of them walk out of the situation, not caring to be so manipulated, and it is only later that Barbara comes to Thornton Manor, where she induces Wilberforce to recount his life in regard to his seeking the abolition of slavery. Thus the film is a series of scenes between the present and flashbacks to the past.

We see something of Wilberforce's conversion from the bland rationalist philosophy of the Enlightenment, favored by his mother and most of the upper class of society, to the heart-felt faith of the evangelicals, so influenced by the preaching of George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers—though unless you know of this background, you might think that he was led to God by the beauty of nature, rather than a long process of conversations with a close friend, study of the Scriptures inspired by reading a book by Philip Doddridge, and evangelical preaching, for we are shown little of the latter, and Wilberforce is in a garden when he expresses his reawakened faith. I write “reawakened” because, as Eric Metaxas's book relates, the young Wilberforce had been drawn to John Newton's evangelical faith during the brief period after his father died that he lived with his Aunt Hannah and Uncle William at Wimbledon, themselves close friends both of Newton and famed evangelist George Whitfield. Wilberforce's well to do parents were like most of those of the upper classes, or who aspired to be, despisers of orthodox Christianity as hopelessly primitive and outmoded. They spent their nights playing cards and gossiping, or dancing and going to the

theater, so when his widowed mother saw in her boy's visits and his correspondence a change of attitude toward her frivolities, she smelled “methodism,” and promptly swooped down upon Wimbledon to snatch away her boy, despite the pleas of William and Hannah. Safe back home, the fervent faith implanted in the boy grew weaker, until at last had almost vanished. Wilberforce grew up to join in all the gaiety and frivolity expected of a young man of his time.

Once he became a Christian again, he believed that he should give up politics because of all the maneuvering and compromises required to move any bill through Parliament. His good friend William Pitt, uncommitted to what he regarded as an outmoded religion, argued against such a rash move. Thus Wilberforce pays a visit to John Newton, his old mentor. Albert Finney makes a wonderfully captivating John Newton, except for the ridiculous, ragged monk's robe they dress him in when Wilberforce comes calling. The two talk of the old days and of his recent conversion, the older man suggesting that Parliament is exactly where he as a Christian should be. “You have work to do!” the old sea captain tells him.

Given the new spirit and impetus, Wilberforce throws himself into the abolitionist cause. Earlier we had seen his keen wit in being able to cut down any sneering opponent, no matter how high-born. A close-knit group of men and women reformers gather around him, most notably Thomas Clarkson (Rufus Sewell), James Stephen (Stephen Campbell Moore), and Olaudah Equiano (Youssou N'Dour). The latter had been slave in the West Indies, and when brought to England, was able to earn enough money to buy his freedom. He wrote a book about his slave experience that became a best seller, thus helping to raise public awareness of the brutal nature of the slave trade. He and others provide Wilberforce with an education in the misery of slavery, taking the Parliamentary member on a tour of the docks and a slave ship. What he saw was to haunt the dreams of Wilberforce for years, his conscience never giving him rest as long as the slave trade existed.

It was in 1787, seven years after entering Parliament and about three years after his quiet embrace of Christianity, that the small man took up the cause of the abolition of the slave trade. Although opposed to slavery itself, the abolitionists wisely thought that it would be easier to abolish the trade before tackling slavery itself. Slavery and the trade were so embedded in the life of the Empire that few, except the Quakers and John Wesley, had



Olaudah Equiano conducts Wilberforce on a tour of a slave ship. (c) 2006 Walden media/Roadside Attractions

questioned it. Wilberforce soon found this out, with the angry members of Parliament offering a myriad of reasons why abolition would “destroy the Empire.” The first vote on his bill was a disaster, with just a little over a dozen members voting in favor.

It would take twenty years of pleading, educating, demonstrating, and maneuvering before William Wilberforce would emerge victorious—in 1807, this year being the Bicentennial of the abolition of the slave trade—and a year after the great man’s death (in 1833) all the slaves of the Empire were declared to be free, almost 30 years before they would be set free in the United States, and over fifty years in Brazil. At one point in the early 1790s Wilberforce actually had enough votes to pass his bill of abolition, but on the night of the vote (Parliament’s business sessions often did not begin until early evening) many of his supporters were attending a comedy at the theater, and thereby the bill failed for lack of votes.

Ken Wales and Michael Apted’s film is a fit tribute to William Wilberforce and the cause to which he was so dedicated, as well as to the circle of friends who inspired and supported him in his cause. It is encouraging to see that the producers are tying the film in with the abolition of modern slavery—see the brief review of the two books that the film studio has sent out to critics—thus making the film more than just an entertainment event. This is a film that churches should be taking their youth to see and discuss—and in those communities where the film has not been booked, church folk should be calling the theater managers urging them to book the film. This is one movie that really matters.

For Reflection/Discussion

- 1) Although it seems hard today to understand how slavery could be defended, what arguments can you recall that were raised in the film by its defenders? How was slavery virtually a part of every aspect of business and society then? You might go to such sources as Wikipedia to find out more about the trade, and especially the “triangle” involving transporting of Africans to the West Indies and America; the brutal process of harvesting and refining sugar and making it into rum; and the trading of the latter for goods manufactured in England—much of this involving the same ships.
- 2) What does Wilber reply when he visits John Newton and is asked about his conversion? How is Newton’s description of conversion as a drip by drip process amidst a storm appropriate to his visitor’s assertion that it was “not by lightning”? How might this be a reference to the account of the apostle Paul’s conversion in Acts 9? What was your own coming to accept Christ like? A slow process that arose from your parents taking you to church since your infant baptism? Or were you not raised in the church, coming to Christ at an evangelistic meeting or the persistence of Christian friends?
- 3) Note that Newton did not give up the slave trade right away after his conversion: how does this indicate that conversion is a process, at least for some? With total conversion, how does what the apostle Paul wrote in his second letter to the Corinthians come into play? How must Newton (and all who are prejudiced) have regarded Africans when he transported them into slavery? When he gave his life fully over to Christ, how did the savior change his “human point of view”? Has this happened in your life, perhaps changing the way you once regarded members of other races or unacceptable groups? (For a good film that shows that we all are in need of change is *Crash*. Another excellent film showing how a teacher emerges from stereotypical ways of viewing outsiders is the documentary *Paper Clips*, reviewed elsewhere in this issue.
- 4) From the first scene when he intervened in the whipping of a fallen horse to a later mention that he was a founder of the Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, we see that Wilberforce’s compassion was not limited to human beings. How is this a natural out-flowing of agape love? Note that in the Torah there is a concern for the wellbeing of animals, the ox being included in the commandment to take a sabbath rest and to be allowed to eat the grain

that fell to the floor during the threshing process (See Exodus 23:12 and Deuteronomy 25:4)

- 5) How did the tour of the docks and the slave ship affect Wilberforce? Have you had a similar response when you saw firsthand third world poverty or conditions of those living in our inner cities? (Something like this happened when a group from a church went with members of an African American church to a home in the projects, and the mother told the captivated whites how she could not allow her children to play outside, even in front of their door, because of drive-by shootings and the ever present drug dealers.)
- 6) In what ways do we see the human side of Wilberforce? How does he rise above his bouts of sickness? At what points was he ready to give up his struggle? How does the film show the importance of community—of having those around to inspire, challenge, and sustain one's spirit? (The book is especially good at describing the lively group at Clapham, the residence of the reformer.)
- 7) How could the campaign that Wilberforce and his friends mount seem like the fore-runner of subsequent campaigns to change the mind and attitude of the public? We see in the film, for example, the famous drawing of a slave ship and the tiny figures of slaves crammed into every possible space; Wilberforce's box, designed to show audiences how small the slave's living space aboard a ship was. Tours of a slave ship; and more. Not shown was the famous medalion designed by Wedgwood, famed manufacturer of elegant china and pottery, showing a kneeling slave in chains asking, "Am I not a man and a brother?" How is this important in a battle against those who prefer the status quo?
- 8) The film humorously shows that reformers are not above political tricks, such as giving away free tickets to the races so that the opponents of Wilberforce's bill are absent when it unexpectedly is brought up for vote: might this be an example of the words of Jesus to his disciples to be as wise as serpents and as harmless as doves?
- 9) How did you feel when Wilberforce at last achieves his goal? Did he feel that his work was finished, or what? Check into the second of the following books to learn that the slave trade is *still* flourishing! For more about the reformer visit www.amazinggracemovie.com, and among the 30+ websites described in *NOT FOR SALE*, check out at least www.NotforSaleFund.org.

AMAZING GRACE: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery by Eric Metaxas. (Harper San Francisco, 2007; 283 pages; \$21,95, hardback. A good book that will greatly enhance enjoyment of the film, it fills in the many gaps that the film leaves in the history of the times and of the development of Wilberforce's character. Wilberforce seemed to be involved in virtually every progressive movement in England. The book provides a fuller profile of his

many devoted friends—indeed, the account of their frequent gatherings at his Clapham estate makes one wistful for such company. The account of the religious revival led by George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers will be of special interest, the author relating that the last known letter written by the dying John Wesley was to Wilberforce, encouraging him to fight on against the slave trade.

NOT FOR SALE: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It

David Batstone. (Harper San Francisco, 2007; 306 pages; \$14.95, paper.

It might come as a shock to learn that there are *to* *day*, in this bi-centennial year of the official ending of the slave trade in the British Empire, still at least 27 million slaves! The author, a professor of ethics at San Francisco University, documents all of his accounts of the slave trade in Asia, Africa, South America, Europe, and the United States (yes, here too!) with footnotes citing such sources as the U.S. Department of State. The stories of specific persons enslaved are counterbalanced by accounts of leaders who are fighting against the traffic, so this is a book of hope, with specific suggestions as to how the reader can be involved, describing over 30 websites for further information. This book should be circulating in every church of our denomination, and would make a great study resource for local women's associations (because most of the slaves are women and children).

Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery by Eric Metaxas. (Harper San Francisco, 2007; 283 pages; \$21,95, hardback.

Filmmakers have to leave out as much as they include about a subject, so this well-written book will fill in the many gaps in the history of the times

Continued on p. 48

Interview with AMAZING GRACE producer Ken Wales



Star

Ken Wales, the producer of *Amazing Grace*, could easily have retired some years ago, but he has too many dreams to be content with leisure activities, such as playing golf or going fishing. His current film *Amazing Grace*, chronicling the life and times of William Wilberforce and his long, uphill battle against slavery is one dream fully realized. When I first met him at a media conference sponsored by the Presbyterian Media Ministry at San Francisco Theological Seminary several years ago, his passion then was focused on this project plus one that would be a sequel to the Oscar winning *Chariots of Fire*, the stirring film about the Scottish athlete and seminary student Eric Liddell and his involvement in the 1924 Olympics. Now that his first dream has been achieved, Ken is hard at work on the second, with still another film project emerging.

When I caught up with him via telephone, Ken was not in Hollywood, but in a Virginia Beach hotel preparing for an interview on “The 700 Club” about his Wilberforce film. From Virginia he was scheduled on Friday to fly to Cincinnati and then go to Wilberforce University near Dayton, Ohio. It was highly appropriate and symbolic that he would screen and discuss his film at the only institution in the world to bear the name of the great British abolitionist. “The film has been very well received,” Ken reported. “At its New York premiere an associate of Barbara Walters said that the audience gave it a standing ovation. Recently I showed it at the Earl Lectures at the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, and the reception there was also enthusiastic.” (A mutual friend, film director Mike Rhodes, like Ken, a Presbyterian, was also at Berkeley teaching a film and faith course. He reported how appreciative the audience of theologues were.) Ken stated that he has been working on this project “for six or seven years.” “Originally I wanted to do a film, not about Wilberforce, but rather about a man I admired very

much, John Newton, the author of the beloved hymn ‘Amazing Grace.’”

John Newton, once captain of a slave ship, had been converted half-way to Christianity while still captaining his ship, and then, much later when he had retired from the slave trade, realizing that the profession and the Christian faith were incompatible, turned against the practice. Wilberforce came to know Newton and his stories of the horrors of the slave trade during the all too short period when he was a boy living with his aunt and uncle, the latter friends of Newton and thus evangelical Christians. His own widowed mother, a “proper” Anglican who believed that Christianity was one of those innocuous things one put up with on Sundays for propriety’s sake, was horrified that her twelve year-old son was imbibing the religious fervor of the “methodists,” so she traveled to the estate and brought her son home, despite the pleading of his aunt and uncle. The boy relapsed into the frivolous life of card parties, dancing, and eating that constituted the life style of most of the well to do English citizens of the time. Later, however, when barely in his twenties and facing the unusual prospect (for one so young) of a career in the House of Commons, Wilberforce experienced a recon version to Christ, which he thought would lead him into a life of meditation apart from the crudities of the world. During this period of indecision he visited his old mentor John Newton, who gave him the advice that changed the course of history—that Parliament was perhaps the very place in which the young man could best serve Christ.

Explaining how difficult it is to gather the finances for a movie, Ken stated that the “six or seven years” it took him to bring his dream to fruition is not unusual in Hollywood. As often, it was a matter of connecting with the right person that opened the path to success. “I was discussing my project with Philip Anschutz, and he suggested that I join forces with his Walden Media because they were interested in doing a film on William Wilberforce, the spearhead of the British abolitionist movement.” This made sense because of the connection between the Abolitionist and the old slave ship Captain, and so soon the project was green lighted, with the famed director Michael Apted signed to helm the film. Walden Media has had a great track record, its family-oriented films including *The Lion*, *The Witch and the Wardrobe*, *Holes*, and *Because of*

Continued on next page

Interview with AMAZING GRACE producer Ken Wales

Continued

Winn-Dixie.

The film's budget, Ken reports, was modest by Hollywood standards—\$29-\$30 million—at least compared to such epics as *Superman Returns* or the *Mission Impossible* series. “Some have told me that it has the look of a \$100 million epic.” Now, having seen the film, I can agree, the scenes of all the sailing ships in the harbor being truly spectacular, as well as those showing the bustling streets of 18th century London and Bath, and the impressive ones of Parliament in session. The latter, Ken revealed, “Were shot in an old church that we found. It had the famous curved balcony for spectators very much like the one in the old Parliament chamber.” The opening of the film is modest by blockbuster standards, Ken observes, “850 screens, but hopefully the number will increase when word of the film spreads.”

From his earliest days in the entertainment industry Ken Wales has displayed such optimism. At the media conference mentioned earlier, the Hollywood producer held his audience spellbound as he recounted his many years spent in television and film, first as an actor playing the boyfriend of the daughter on “Father Knows Best.” He was offered a part in the film *From Here to Eternity*, but because it was an unsavory character, the young actor declined, believing that it would besmirch the wholesome public image he had carefully nurtured. The producer angrily threatened that he would no longer be able to find work, but Ken refused to back down. He did find work, but it was behind the camera, for many years working without credit with Blake Edwards of *Pink Panther* fame. “I introduced him to Julie Andrews and was a participant in their marriage ceremony.” His best known work in the 90s was the *Christy* series, which won a number of Emmy awards (Mike Rhodes was his director for the series).

When I returned to the subject of these projects, especially his cherished dream of producing a sequel to *Chariots of Fire*, Ken replied that this definitely is in the works, “Its title will be *Wings of Eagles*.” When I mentioned that that was the passage from Isaiah which Eric Liddell read from on the Sunday on which his fellow athletes were running, one of *Chariots of Fire*'s great scenes, Ken said that his film would take up where the original left off, following Eric Liddell after his brief Olympic glory to China where he served faithfully as a missionary,

eventually becoming interned by the Japanese during WW 2 and dying in the camp. “Also, I have been approached by those who hold the rights to C.S. Lewis's *The Great Divorce* about bringing that work to the screen.” Thus it looks as if Ken Wales will be engaged in bringing us inspirational film fare for some years to come. Whenever someone says how terrible (or “godless”) Hollywood is, there is always the example of Ken Wales to point to, a man who, like his newest film, is full of amazing grace.



Wilberforce and Barbara Spooner
(c) 2007 Walden/Roadside Attractions

Give a Gift, Receive a Gift

We have several DVDs of *Nanny McFee* to give to those who give 2 VP subscriptions to friends; several 2 disk sets of *Ten Commandments* for those who give 2 subscriptions; and early in April we will have 5 copies of the new *Charlotte's Web* DVD to present.

These are offered to those who send checks to the walton office. For further info, write: mcnulty@fuse.net (859-493-0286)

Bridge To Terabithia

Rated PG. Our ratings: V-2 ; L-1 ; S/N-1 . Running time: 1 hour
35 minutes)

*He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.
Colossians 1:12-14*

*See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all.
I Thessalonians 5:14*

Director Gabor Csupo's film remains faithful to Katherine Paterson's classic Newbery Award book, unlike the PBS one hour version of some years back. Much of the credit for the film's faithfulness is due to the co-writer of the script David Paterson, son of the book's author. It was for him that Ms. Paterson wrote the original story to help him (and herself) deal with a childhood tragedy many years before when he was in the second grade. Although the unfortunate trailer announcing the opening of the film suggests that the film is a fantasy story akin to *Eragon*, lovers of the book need not fear, the special effects taking no more than ten minutes of screen time.

The story centers on the liberating friendship of a farm boy and city girl Leslie, whose parents have



*Jessie and leslie doing what they do best--run.
(c) 2007 Buena Vista Pictures*



School bullies taunt Jessie's little sister May Belle.

(c) 2007 Buena Vista Pictures

moved to the country to protect their daughter from urban dangers. Jesse Aaron lives with his three sisters and parents on a Vermont farm generating a marginal income, so his father Jack (Robert Patrick) has to work in town. His family always short of money, the boy is embarrassed by having to wear his older sister's hand-me-down gym shoes on the first day of the new school term. Jesse has not been popular, and so he is withdrawn, enjoying sketching in his large notebook, and going for early morning cross-country runs before breakfast and chores. His dream is, now that the bigger boys will be in the sixth grade, to be the fastest runner in his fifth grade class. That very day the boys will run races to see who is the swiftest.

On the playground as the boys line up, Leslie Burke, the girl who has just moved into the house near Jessie's, joins in. When Jessie's rival tries to push her aside, Jessie says to let her run. To his chagrin, Leslie outruns him. Defeated by a girl! After the race when Leslie tries to become friends, the disappointed boy rebuffs her.

Leslie herself turns out to be an outsider. Only child of a professional couple who have decided to quit the rat race of the city and raise their daughter in what they idealistically think is the simple purity of the countryside, she becomes the butte of ridicule

Continued on next page

Bridge To Terabithia



Jessie is reluctant to try swinging on the rope, whereas Leslie can hardly wait to swing on it.

(c) 2007 Buena Vista Pictures

and jokes when she tells Mrs. Myers (Jen Wolfe), the class teacher, that she cannot watch the assigned TV program because her family does not own a television set. No one, Jessie included, can imagine a family so kooky that they deliberately give up television. However, the persistent girl manages to dispel Jessie's hostility and become his best friend. We might even call her a mentor because through her rich imagination she will expand the boy's horizons, leading him into worlds that he had not dreamed of and do things he would have been too timid to dare by himself.

From a Christian perspective Leslie becomes an agent of grace, one of whom C.S. Lewis no doubt would approve, the great Christian fantasy writer placing such a high value on the human imagination. (Indeed, author Katherine has said that she apparently borrowed the name of the fantasy kingdom Terabithia unconsciously from one of Lewis's Narnia books, this being the name of an island shown on a map in one of Lewis's books.) The story demonstrates well the power of the imagination to enrich arid lives and to help in coping with the harsh realities of life, such as school bullies and lack of money

Before Leslie entered his life, Jessie's world was very circumscribed, although there is a music teacher who thrills him by praising the drawings in his notebook. It is telling that when the two children are out running and come to the stream where an old rope hangs from an overhanging tree branch, it is Leslie who tries swinging across to the other side. Jessie is very hesitant when she tells him to try. It is a good thing that he overcame his timidity, because it is then that they discover the woods (of which also Jessie is fearful at first), and Leslie, enthusiastically declares that they have discovered a hidden kingdom—one which on a later visit she dubs "Terabithia."

The Disney people have asked that reviewers not reveal an important plot detail, so I will only say that through the power of imagination Leslie leads Jessie in creating a magical kingdom in the woods. It is a land where they find refuge from a school bully, and, more important, inspiration as to how they can stand up to the bully. A film about friendship, loss and grief, and even grace and reconciliation, *Bridge to Terabithia* is a better family film even than last year's *Narnia*. Indeed, I think I have to go back to Stephen Spielberg's magnificent *Empire of the Sun* and *E.T.* to find a family film that compares, at least in regard to gospel values and themes embedded in a mesmerizing story! Another film in which imagination is crucial, and worthy of comparison, is *Pan's Labyrinth*, suitable for adults, rather than families. What a coincidence that both films were released so close together in time.

The filmmakers come close to ruining the book by using CGI special effects to transform a squirrel, birds and schoolyard bullies into attack creatures so that we viewers see what Leslie and Jessie conjure up in their minds, but fortunately there are only a few minutes of screen time given over to them. And I believe that fans of the book will agree that the finale of the CGI-enhanced scene, which gives the film its title, involving Jessie and his little sister May Belle really is a beautiful moment. Every parent, teacher and pastor would do well not only to see this film for themselves, but take individual children and classes to a matinee showing and talk about it afterward. No wonder author Katherine Paterson has expressed her satisfaction with the film: I believe that we have a new classic film in the making here.

For Reflection/Discussion

The following contains spoilers, so see the film before reading further.

- 1) In what ways does Jessie feel like an outsider at home and at school? What does he turn to for meaning? Does any aspect of his situation remind you of your own experience at school? How can children be as cruel as adults in their treatment of others? When and where have you felt like an outsider? Who first made you feel welcome or a part of the group?
- 2) Have you overcome a bad first impression of someone, as Jessie did with Leslie? How is it im-

Bridge To Terabithia

portant always to give such a person second chance(s)? In what ways are the two children different from each other? Yet, what unites them—their artistic interests? Their both being looked down upon by their classmates?

- 3) Another case of bad first impressions is how Jessie feels about Mrs. Myers: when does his opinion of her change? How is that scene, late in the movie, a moment of grace? What is it that she says that is exactly what Jessie needs to hear at the time?
- 4) Which of your teachers touched you in a way similar to music teacher Ms. Edmonds (Zoey Deschanel)? Why are such teachers so important, especially in the primary grades?
- 5) Think/talk about Leslie as an “agent of grace”? Martin Luther taught that Christians must be “little Christs” for one another: how is Leslie’s effect upon her friend similar to what the author of Colossians 1:12-14 wrote? How is Ms. Edmonds, when she takes Jessie to the art museum, also an agent of grace? In what way do you think that the world of art Jessie discovered is similar to Terabithia? How do you think his exposure to world art will expand his horizons?
- 6) What do you think Terabithia means to the two friends? Do they have much power in the real world? What about in Terabithia?
- 7) How is Leslie and Jessie’s revenge upon Janice an example of “an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth”? Who is it that breaks through this? What was it that leads to looking at Janet through “new eyes”? Do you think that the children have arrived at a point in their moral development close to what the apostle wrote in I Thessalonians 5:14?
- 8) After Leslie attends the Easter Sunday service with the Burkes, she, Jessie, and May Belle talk about God. Who has the view of a very judgmental God? How would such a view go against the grain of someone like Leslie? How widespread do you think that May Belle’s view of God is? Were you ever enslaved to such a view? How is belief in an angry, judgmental God truly “enslaving”?
- 9) Do you think that Jessie is right in feeling partly responsible for what happened to Leslie?



- What did he do, or rather not do, when Miss took him to the art museum? How do his parents as well as those of Leslie’s help him cope with his grief? How is his response to Mr. Burke concerning the dog an act of grace?
- 10) How is Jessie’s last act a passing on of the spirit of Leslie? What meaning now do you see in the title “Bridge to Terabithia”? How is what he is doing for May Belle a “passing on” of what Leslie had done for him? In what ways have you been a link in the long chain of “passing it on”?
 - 11) Have you enjoyed a Terabithia in your own childhood? (For this writer there were three, shared with friends at various stages in my young life: one was the woods where we played Tarzan, swinging on vines and facing imaginary foes, animal and human—we even learned the “ape language” found in the Tarzan books and the back page of Tarzan comics; the second was a medieval kingdom represented by toy knights, many of which were homemade; the last one was the planet “Korta” during my teen science fiction days, with all sorts of details drawn out—costumes, maps of planetary systems, even four foot-high models of space battleships.) What do you think you gained from such imaginings? How have the novels of Katherine Paterson informed or stirred your imagination?

Katherine Paterson: An Interview with the Author of *Bridge to Terabithia*

Katherine Paterson: An Interview with the Author of *Bridge to Terabithia*

The release of the Disney film *Bridge to Terabithia*, based on a Newbery Award book, was the occasion for my interview with its author Katherine Paterson. The daughter of Presbyterian missionaries, Katherine Womeldorf Paterson, remembers well her early childhood in China, but went to school when her family moved to Virginia because they could see that the US and Japan would soon be at war with each other. The Womeldorfs moved around between North Carolina, West Virginia, and back to Virginia. She attended King College in Bristol, Tennessee, and after graduating, taught sixth grade students in Lovettsville, Virginia for a year. This experience formed an important part of her book *Bridge to Terabithia*. She reports on her website (terabithia.com) that “almost all my children were like Jesse Aarons.”

When she was a girl the then Miss Womeldorf did not dream of becoming a writer, though she did write plays for her sixth grade friends to perform. Instead, she wanted to be either a movie star or a missionary to China. Apparently deciding on the latter career (she did act in plays during her school years), she attended the Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond. Her path to China was blocked by the Communist take over, so a friend suggested she go to Japan, something she resisted because she had grown to hate the Japanese due to their brutal invasion of China. She did go to Japan, learning to love the people and their culture, as her book *Sign of the Chrysanthemum* shows. After four years she returned to the US to study theology in New York City. She gave up her plan to return to Japan when she met and fell in love with the young Presbyterian pastor John Paterson. Her mission field changed to that of a series of pastorates and her family that grew to include four children.

I caught up with Ms. Paterson by telephone on the morning that she was getting ready to leave her Vermont

home for the premiere of her film in Los Angeles. Having seen the one hour PBS, not so faithful adaptation of her book, I asked her how she felt about the new Disney version: “They’ve done much better in the new production.” She had written the book in the 1970s for her son David, when his friend Lisa was killed by lightning. It was her way of dealing with the girl’s death, for herself as well as for her son. This time it was David who co-wrote the movie script. The studio had their writer, plus a couple of others, she relates, but “David was able, even after the other writers had a go at it, to go back and bring it close to the story in the book and keep it faithful, so I’m very pleased the way it’s come out.”

Although *Bridge to Terabithia* is labeled a “children’s book,” it is far from the likes of those penned by such writers as Beatrix Potter. There is a touch of fantasy in the book, but the story is grounded in reality where death can intrude suddenly, people live close to the poverty line, and some of the characters utter curse words. We talked about the latter, especially at complaints from a few teachers and parents, and the author replied, “My feeling is that when you’re writing, you’re being as honest as you can be, and you have to be true to your characters. They’re not going to be



Katherine Paterson's vision enhanced by screen special effects.
(c) Buena Vista Films

Katherine Paterson: An Interview with the Author of *Bridge to Terabithia*

Continued

exemplary human beings; they're going to be *human* beings. And they will speak and act the way persons would in those circumstances." We spoke of movies that include unsavory elements, and she commented, "Violence seems okay, but one swear word..."

As to this movie, she continued, "I don't think it's a movie for very young children. It's a tough story. It's a story even of—you know, I get letters from parents who say death is not appropriate for a ten year-old, and I think, 'Well, it happens.'" A daughter of missionaries and wife of a Presbyterian pastor, Katherine Patterson is very much a Christian writer, or perhaps, better, to set her apart from some writers whose stories seem as artificial as those old formulaic movies once produced by Christian organizations, she is a writer who is a Christian. She responded with, "I think your writing is who you are, and if you are a Christian, then that comes through willy nilly, and not something that you have to put in." I stuck in my two-cents worth, saying that the theme of her story is grace, but she does not spell this out—she lets us discover that for ourselves, to which she responded, "Well, that's what you do in a story. That's what Jesus always did in stories."

All through her writing career Katherine Paterson coped with being both a busy mother of four children and a pastor's wife. She reports that her husband John has been her staunchest fan and critic, often encouraging her, especially when she was starting out and it seemed that no publisher could be found for her novels. "He feels like my writing has been my calling." (Her first writing was church school curricula for the Presbyterian Church in 1964, but she wanted to go on and write the kind of fictional stories she enjoyed reading.) Amidst the busy life of parish and family she has had to discipline herself to set aside time for writing. "When it was ever mentioned in the odd conversation with parishioners that I wasn't playing the role of a proper preacher's wife, he would say, 'Well Katherine has her own calling.' I was very much a part of the church, and I cared about it. I sing in the choir; I teach Sunday school. I do things that any concerned member would do, but I don't try to play the role as in the old time, or the traditional, of being 'the

preacher's wife.'"

The novelist will be spending much of the next few weeks helping to promote the movie and the book. She recommends the movie without reservation, expressing a great deal of praise for the young actors who play Jessie, Leslie, and May Belle. She also reassured me that the ads and previews of the film, giving the impression that this is a special effects-driven movie, are misleading. The special effects do not overwhelm the story, as has happened in other films. The movie returns to the book, including the touching scene left out in the TV adaptation of the disliked teacher saying just the right words of comfort for Jessie. Her son David told her of the incident on the set when they were shooting this scene and it had to be shot over again because the sound of sobbing was heard, and not from an actor. A burly tattooed cameraman got so caught up in the scene that he started crying.

Katherine Patterson has brought a sense of grace and of self-worth to millions of young readers, and also to adults still young enough at heart to read books in which children, often on the fringe of society, are the main characters. Through her almost twenty fictional works (two for young children co-written with husband John) she has, in words taken from her book "tried to push back the walls of his mind and make him see beyond to the shining world—huge and terrible and beautiful and very fragile." These are from Jessie's thoughts about what his friend Leslie had done for him, but they are also true for those who read Katherine Paterson's wonderful books.

Attention Newsletter Editors

The new section "Film Capsules" contains brief film reviews and a related Scripture that you can use in your publication. Subscribers have permission to reprint them one time, with the credit given at the bottom. Watch VP's website-visualparables.net- for weekly additions.

Little Children

Rated R. Our ratings: V-4; L- 5; S/N-6. Running time: 2 hours 10 min.



Sara introduces herself to Brad in the park.
(c) New Line Cinema

*Can fire be carried in the bosom
without burning one's clothes?
Or can one walk on hot coals
without scorching the feet?
So is he who sleeps with his neighbour's wife;
no one who touches her will go unpunished.*
Ecclesiastes 6:27-29

This film about adultery and fear of child molestation might seem like a big screen version of the silly TV series *Desperate Housewives*, until one realizes that Todd Field is the director and co-writer. He is the one who gave us the chilling parable about the tragic results of unforgiving hearts, *In the Bedroom* (see Meditation 20 in my book *Praying the Movies II*), so we know that there will be more than laughs and titillation in the film's two connected stories. Some of the film's locales are places where children gather—a small playground and a swimming pool—but it quickly becomes obvious that the “children” of the title does not refer to actual ones, but more to the so-called adults who are supposed to be watching over them and already planning their entrance into Yale or Harvard. In this sense the film is like last year's French film that was more about the parents than their child, *L'Enfant*.

Sarah Pierce (Kate Winslet) takes her little daughter Lucy (Sadie Goldstein) every day to the neighborhood playground in a Massachusetts bedroom community. She sits apart from the other gossipy mothers, and yet close enough to overhear their speculations about the handsome father who brings his little boy every day but always sits at the opposite end of the vest pocket-sized park. They have

dubbed the handsome man “The Prom King.” One day, when Sarah accepts their dare to go over and find out the “hunk's” name, she not only exchanges names, but embraces and kisses him. The shocked women quickly gather up their children and flee the park. This scene not only provides a good laugh, but it parallels a far more serious scene later in the community swimming pool.

Sarah and Brad Adamson (Patrick Wilson) also laugh at the hasty departure of the mothers, but as they encounter each other later at the community swimming pool, their initial attraction leads to an adulterous affair, the pleasure of which is real, but which holds out no lasting promise. Both of them, dissatisfied with their deeply flawed spouses, are ready for something more challenging than minding a child, but for the sake of their children are not ready to end their marriages.

The satire of the first story stands in stark contrast to the tragic drama of the second one, in that it deals with Ronnie McGorvey (Jackie Earle Haley), just released from jail to which he had been sentenced for exposing himself to children. He becomes poison to everyone in the neighborhood, the scene when he is spotted in the crowded swimming pool being one of the starkest scenes to be found in any recent film, with parents frantically calling their frolicking children out of the water (it might remind you of the beach scene in *Jaws*). Ronnie's mother May McGorvey (Phyllis Somerville) still has high hopes for him, but he knows himself too well to believe or follow much of her advice—and there is Larry Hedges (Noah Emmerich), a former cop and friend of Brad's who makes it his mission to hound Ronnie out of the neighborhood “for the sake of the children.” Larry, it turns out, has his own past, weighing on him like excess baggage. This is probably a more insightful study of American suburbia than *American Beauty*, one that you will not easily forget. There is even a strange form of reconciliation and almost redemption at the end that will stay with you a long time.

For Reflection/Discussion

- 1) What seems to be missing in Sarah and Brad's marriages that each would look beyond their spouses for meaning or fulfillment? How do

Continued on next page

Little Children

Hollywood scriptwriters often use this as an excuse for adultery? Does either character seem to have any vestige of faith? How does their plight show the importance of keeping open the lines of communication in a marriage?

- 2) Why is the novel *Madame Bovary* appropriate for study at the book club meeting? What do you think of Sarah's comments in response to the opinion of the other women?
- 3) Why do you think Brad is so long at taking the bar exam? Do you think that becoming a lawyer is his or his wife Kathy's ambition? Also how might her success as a documentary filmmaker affect Brad?
- 4) What do you think of Ronnie? How is the community's reaction to his presence fueled by the media's attention to the issue of sex offenders? (In Cincinnati, for example, local news-casts several times a week run a scary story asking such questions as "Is there a sex offender living in your neighborhood?" And recently, "Is there a sex offender sitting next to your child in school?")
- 5) What about the vigilante Larry Hedges (Noah Emmerich)—why do you think he is so fixated on Ronnie? What do you think of the last scene and what transpires between the two of them? A touch of grace? For another film that deals with a sex offender in a deep way see *The Woodsman*, in which Kevin Bacon portrays a child molester just released from prison.
- 6) What do you believe lies ahead for the various characters? Do you see any sign of hope in the film's ending?



Sex offender Ronnie McGorvey's only friend is his mother who can see no wrong in him.

(c) New Line Cinema

Because I Say So

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V- 1; L-3 ; S/N-4 .
Running time: 1 hour 50 min.



Daphne Wilder and her three long-suffering daughters.
(c) 2007 Universal Pictures

Children, obey your parents in the Lord, in the Lord');” for this is right. ‘Honour your father and mother’—this is the first commandment with a promise: ‘so that it may be well with you and you may live long on the earth.’ And, fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord
Ephesians 6:1-4

The Wilder family is not a Christian one, and Daphne's husband has been long gone from the scene, so we would have to change the wording of the apostle Paul's advice to “mothers, do not provoke your children to wrath.” With that little change, we can easily see that this control freak of a mother, played by Diane Keaton in her most frenetic manner, stands in desperate need of it. Although her three grown daughters have moved out, and two of them have married, she cannot let go, which is perhaps the last barrier in becoming a good parent.

Daphne so wants youngest daughter Milly (Mandy Moore) to meet the right man that she advertises on line for a man and goes through a seemingly endless series of comic interviews until at last arriving at the one she thinks is suitable for Milly, handsome architect named Jason (Tom Everett). But at the dinner club where she has become almost a fixture interviewing candidates, musician Johnny (Gabriel Macht) talks with her and thinks he would like to meet the daughter. The provocation “to anger” is the fact that
Continued on page 15

Music and Lyrics

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-0; L- 3; S/N-3 .
Running time: 1 hour 36 min.



Pop composer Alex asks Sophie, his substitute plant caretaker, to be his lyricist.
(c) 2007 Warner Brothers Pictures

*O Lord, who may abide in your tent?
Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart...
Psalm 15:1-2*

No room in the Lord's tent for Alex Fletcher (Hugh Grant). He will say almost anything to pop diva Cora Corman (Haley Bennett) to insure that she will use the song he has co-wrote for her new act, even though her rendition totally destroys its tender mood. Alex has co-wrote the song with the young woman who cares for his apartment plants Sophie Fisher (Drew Barrymore) after he has discovered that she had a talent for writing song lyrics. Once a member of a band called PoP(back in the 80s), Alex was dropped from the group and now has been reduced to singing at class reunions, amusement parks, and fairs. His hapless status is accented in the scene in which he is being interviewed for a guest spot on the TV show *Battle of the Has Beens.*"

Alex begins to see his lyricist as more than a writing partner, but their relationship is set back when he practically grovels before Cora's gross despoliation of the song "Way Back to Love," which actually is a charming piece. Sophie tries to voice her

Factory Girl

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 1; L- 6; S/N-8.
Running time: 1 hour 27 min.

*Like a gold ring in a pig's snout
is a beautiful woman without good sense.*
Proverbs 11:22

This is a very flawed, sometimes confusing film, but it provides a fascinating at the hollowness of many of the people involved in the art world of New York in the Sixties. It is framed by its subject Edie Sedgwick (Sienna Miller) talking with her therapist in 1970 as she relates the incidents of her tormented life since meeting Andy Warhol (Guy Pearce) in 1965. A rich heiress enrolled in art school, she readily accepted his invitation to become "a superstar" in his anti-art movies. The darling of the anti-establishment crowd drinking and mainlining their lives away, Warhol's intention was always to remind the viewers that they were watching a movie, and in no way participating in events far away—as he makes his spoof of a Western he deliberately instructs a crew member to lower the mike boom so that it will show in the frame.

Although gay, Warhol surrounded himself with beautiful women, focusing his attention on one at a time, until he had gained all he wished from her. Such a fate befalls Edie, her face becoming well known through her mentor's underground movies, and Andy even taking her to meet his mother. Toward the end of their relationship he humiliates her during a filming scene. The film also delves into her troubled relationship with her parents, especially her father whom



Andy Warhol's "Factory" where his friends hang out.
(c) 2007 MGM Pictures

Continued

Factory Girl

she calls Fuzzy (James Naughton). Disapproving of her chosen lifestyle, they cut her off, refusing to help her even when she is cast out and penniless. There is an affair with a folk/rock singer identified only as the Musician (Hayden Christensen), which might be made up. The Musician is made to look like Bob Dylan, and rides a motorcycle, but there is no known record of the real Sedgwick having such an affair, and Bob Dylan made a threat to sue before the picture was released. Whatever the truth, there is no doubt that the screen Edie is right when she says that she made “the wrong choice” along the way. It is not giving anything away to report that she died of a drug overdose a year after her. Thus the Teacher might well have written of the hollow lives of the “superstar” and so many of her friends, “Vanity of vanities...vanity of vanities! All is vanity.”

Because I say So

Continued from p. 13

Daphne has told Millie none of this, so you can imagine what happens when, after meeting both men, she discovers her mother’s hand in all of this. Daphne is certainly the kind of parent that makes the commandment embedded in the Torah a most difficult one to observe! The film is far too over the top much of the time, and yet there are several heart-felt scenes between mother and daughter that makes this cream puff of a film worth a trip to the theater at matinee time.

Music and Lyrics

Continued

objections, but each time Alex manages to intervene, the result being that Cora is left thinking that they both approve of her rendering of the song.. I will leave it to you to see how the “boy loses girl, boy wins girl back” part of the formula is worked out. This gentle little romantic comedy demonstrates that with good writing, acting, and music, the old romantic formula can still charm. A nice film for those who want something light in between more meaningful film fare.

Breach

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V- ; L- ; S/N .
Running time: 1 hour 50 min.



FBI turncoat Robert Hanssen insists that his assistant Eric O'Neill attend church.
(c) 2007 Universal Pictures

*Like the glaze covering an earthen vessel
are smooth lips with an evil heart.
An enemy dissembles in speaking
while harbouring deceit within;
when an enemy speaks graciously, do not believe it,
for there are seven abominations concealed within;
Ecclesiastes 26:23-25*

*The heart is devious above all else;
it is perverse—who can understand it?
Jeremiah 17:9*

I hope that actor Chris Cooper at last will achieve the recognition due him for his fine work, his portrayal of FBI traitor Robert Hanssen in Billy Ray’s *The Breach* being an incredible feat. Despite the fact that we know that the real traitor is in a federal prison in solitary confinement, director, actor and script work together to keep us in suspense as to how the agent, after twenty years of selling secrets to the Soviets, was finally entrapped.

When the ambitious Eric O’Neill (Ryan Phillippe) is assigned to staff Hanssen’s new office, the young operative thinks the Agency is out to entrap a sex deviant, and so he dutifully keeps a record of all of his boss’s phone calls and comings and goings. Hanssen is an exacting boss, with a disdainful atti-

Continued on next page

Breach

Continued



O'Neill's FBI superior Kate Burroughs tells him very little about his first assignment.
(c) 2007 Universal Pictures

tude toward his colleagues. He is also very devoted to his Catholic faith, attending Mass every day and belongs to Opus Dei, a Catholic lay organization devoted to preserving and spreading the pre-Vatican II faith.

O'Neill chafes under the burdens of his assignment, one of the latter being Hanssen's taking an interest in him and his wife, inviting them to his home and urging him to become more active in the Catholic Church. The boss's unannounced calls at the O'Neill's home is especially troubling to his young wife. O'Neill thinks that the fast track to being promoted to a full agent does not consist of being a glorified secretary, so when he complains to his superior Kate Burroughs (Laura Linney), she reveals that the special project that Hanssen has been heading is a phony one, that they have good reasons for believing that Hanssen is selling secrets to the Soviet Union. Then the young operative, realizing that he is on the front line of the most important counter-intelligence operation in FBI history, settles in for the long haul.

As stated at the beginning, we know the outcome of the story, and yet such moments as when O'Neill obtains Hanssen's palm pilot and has to download its contents before the always suspicious man returns to his office is very suspenseful. The script seems like it could have come from the pen of John le Carre, but its story is true, one that played out over many years, during which the identities of hundreds of our operatives behind the Iron

Curtain was revealed by Hanssen, his treachery leading to the deaths of most of them. And this by a man obsessed with a rigid morality and faith in God! Chris Cooper has played many fascinating people during his career, but none as conflicted and devils as Robert Hanssen: it is a credit to his thespian skills that he leads us to both loathe and sympathize with the human being behind the traitorous acts. As we think about his double life Jeremiah's words about the mystery of the human heart take on new meaning.

For Reflection/Discussion

- 1) What do you make of Hanssen's strong beliefs and yet his acts of betrayal? What other instances of a person's compartmentalizing their life do you know of? How is this segregation of religion and life a danger to both? How do you think he can excuse his interest in internet porn and his taping of his private love life, not to speak of his betrayal of his country?
- 2) How does actor Cooper show his seething resentment at not being appreciated by the Agency and his sense of superiority to others? Compare the film's depiction of a villain with that in such thrillers as the Mission Impossible or James Bond series.
- 3) Why do you think that O'Neill becomes attached to his boss despite what he learns about him? Did you feel sympathetic to him at times? What does his work cost him personally—in other words, do you a cross in his life?
- 4) What do you feel and think of Hanssen's last words to O'Neill, "Pray for me"?



A tense moment between O'Neill and Hanssen.
(c) 2007 Universal Pictures

Venus

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 1; L- ;5 S/N -6. Running time: hour 34 min.



Maurice takes Jessie on a tour of London.
(c) 2006 Miramax Films

You turn us back to dust, and say, "Turn back, you mortals."

For a thousand years in your sight are like yesterday when it is past, or like a watch in the night.

You sweep them away; they are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning;

in the morning it flourishes and is renewed; in the evening it fades and withers.

Psalm 90:3-6

Go see this study of old age and its persistent affirmation of life, and then ask yourself whether or not actor Peter O'Toole was again robbed of "Best Actor Oscar." Although at 74 (and far sturdier than he appears in this film) he still has many films to make, if *Venus* were to be his last, what a way to go out! Thanks to Hanif Kureishi's literate script (he also wrote *My Beautiful Laundrette*) and Roger Michell's firm direction, keeping all from the four veteran stars from any tendency to "ham it up," this little gem of a film will be one to return to again and again, it is so good.

Maurice (Peter O'Toole), Ian (Leslie Phillips), and Donald (Richard Griffiths) are three thespians who meet regularly for coffee to share their aches and pains and fond memories of their days in the theater when they were well known to the theater-attending public. Maurice still is able to obtain a small part, but Ian is so disabled that his grand-niece Jessie (Jodie Whittaker) is dispatched to live with and take care of him. However, they do not get along, partly because she hasn't a clue as to what to do in the kitchen; also she is so surly that Ian is convinced she was actually kicked out by her mother and foisted onto

him. Maurice, however, has a very different view of the 19 year-old, dubbing her "Venus," after the painting to which he introduces her when they visit the National gallery and stand before the great painting by Velasquez, "Rokeby Venus." Despite his operation for prostate cancer which renders him impotent, Maurice is strongly attracted to the girl.

At first she sees him as a doddering old fool from which she can extract what she wants, including the use of his apartment for an afternoon of sex with her scruffy boy friend that she has picked up somewhere. She does not want him to touch her at first, but as their relationship grows, she permit's a kiss and touch on her shoulder. There is a lovely moment while she is taking a bath and Maurice's recitation of Shakespeare's sonnet "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?" obviously touches her, this being the first time she has ever heard such poetry. She is thrilled to ride with him in the huge limousine that he has ordered to be transported in to the site at which a costume film he has a small part in. When he has a brief spell that interrupts his on-camera dialogue, she is at last genuinely concerned for his welfare. The story of her transformation, which is subtly shown in change of make-up, hairstyle and clothing, will remind one of *Pygmalion*.

This depiction of old age still seeking the joy of youth and of living in general comes to dirty old man territory, but skirts it just in time. This is a touching tale of age and youth and an appetite for life that refuses to fade away, right up to the end.

For Reflection/Discussion

- 1) What in the film confirms and what challenges your view of the elderly? How close do you think Maurice is to what Jesus meant when he said, "You must become like a child to enter the kingdom of heaven"?
- 2) What is Jessie like when Maurice first meets her? How does she change during the course of her relationship with Maurice?
- 3) How does death hang over the characters? What do you think of Maurice's statement, "I am about to die, and I know nothing about myself"? A confession? Why do you think he says this—do you believe that he has carried over

Continued on next page

Venus

Continued

his acting from the stage into his life and relationships?

- 4) What has apparently happened in Maurice's marriage? How do we see that he and wife Valerie (Vanessa Redgrave) have reconciled? What grace do you see in his last visit with her?
- 5) How did you feel when Ian and Maurice visit St. Paul's and gaze at the plaques where former colleagues are buried, such as Laurence Harvey and Robert Shaw? What do you think that the little jig that the two perform signifies? Compare it to the beautiful circle dance of the five sisters in *Dancing at Lughnasa* or the two men dancing by the sea in *Zorba the Greek*.
- 6) Why do you think Maurice wanted to go so badly with Jessie to the sea? (Note the seascape painting that we see several times in the film.) What might the waters of the sea symbolize?

Zodiac

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 5; L-5 ; S/N-4 . Running time: 2 hours 36 min.

*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?
Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?
In arrogance the wicked persecute the poor—let them
be caught in the schemes they have devised.
For the wicked boast of the desires of their heart,
those greedy for gain curse and renounce the Lord.
In the pride of their countenance the wicked say, 'God
will not seek it out';
all their thoughts are, 'There is no God.'*
Psalm 10:1-4

Although there have been other films, such as *Dirty Harry*, inspired by the real life Zodiac serial killer who struck terror into northern Californians in the late 1960s and 70s, nothing quite like this David Fincher directed film has been made. Scriptwriter James Vanderbilt built his screenplay on Robert Graysmith's two books *Zodiac* and *Zodiac Unmasked*. Robert Graysmith, played by the innocent-looking Jake Gyllenhaal, was the cartoonist for *The San Francisco CHRONICLE* when he first heard the editorial board talk about the serial killer, who would send taunting notes and cryptic puzzles to the newspaper (and two others), demanding that they

publish them or he would strike again.

Robert Downey Jr. plays Paul Avery, the rebellious crime reporter who is about as devoted to drink and drugs as he is to his profession. Assigned to the story, he resents Graysmith's looking over his shoulder: the latter, good at puzzles and codes is able to solve the killer's cryptograms. Mark Ruffalo portrays Detective Dave Toschi, who regards Avery and Graysmith as a nuisance during the early years of the hunt for the killer, but, years later, changes his opinion of Graysmith when the latter approaches him with his research into the identity of the still at large killer.

The over two and a half hour long film is too complicated to go into here, but the police procedural/thriller never flags in holding one's attention. The film spans almost thirty years, during which the trail goes cold and at times the killer apparently inactive (there is often doubt as to whether he really committed all the murders he claimed while active). The scene in which the detectives interrogate a worker, who might or might not be the killer is almost as chilling as the brutal murders—though fortunately we are not shown all of the gory details of the latter.

Robert Graysmith's interest in the case becomes such an obsession that he loses both his newspaper job and his marriage. And yet, if his books and this film are to be believed, he did uncover the identity of the killer, although fate (or God) intervened, so that officially the killings were never solved. The film goes well with Psalm 10: were the men in the film of a religious bent, one could imagine them turning to it many times in their long and difficult pursuit of the brutal murderer who not only eluded justice but taunted those who sought to uphold it.



For reporter Paul Avery finding the Zodiac Killer is a job, but for his colleague Robert Graysmith it becomes an obsession that consumes his life.

(c) 2007 Paramount Pictures

300

Rated R. Our ratings: V-9 ; L- 2; S/N-6 . Running yime: 1 hour 57 min.

Simeon and Levi are brothers; weapons of violence are their swords.

O my soul, come not into their council; O my spirit, be not joined to their company;

for in their anger they slay men, and in their wantonness they hamstring oxen.

Cursed be their anger, for it is fierce; and their wrath, for it is cruel!

Genesis 49:5-7a

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord just as Christ has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

Colossians 3:12-14

300 is definitely not a date picture with its depictions of battle blood and gore and homoerotic depictions of the Evil Oriental Menace faced off by the gorgeous "300" hunks who look like the "After" picture in the old Charles Atlas body building ads. Director Zack Snyder and screenwriters Kurt Johnstad, Michael B. Gordon have fashioned from Frank Miller and Lynn Varley's graphic novel what amounts to a cinematic paean to brute violence as a way of life.

The film pushes its R rating close to NC-17 territory with so many graphic decapitations of violence, such as the spurting blood from sword-pierced bodies and hacked off heads and limbs. We are supposed to admire the hero King Leonidas (Gerald Butler) who murders the Persian emissaries from King Xerxes when they demand that he submit to Persian rule. Granted that the ambassadors are so arrogant that the audience applauds their fate, but Leonidas's pushing them into the abyss of the pit violates the international protocol of any age. In the prologue to the film we are introduced to Spartan life by the sequence in which the boy Leonidas is often beaten to toughen him up and then torn from his mother and forced into the wilderness where he



Spartan King Leonidas bids farewell to his wife and son before leaving to fight the invading Persians.
(c) 2007 Warner brothers Pictures

must either fight off the dangerous beasts or perish. Thus all Spartan males who do survive their brutalized childhood become soldiers through and through with no time for pursuit of the arts or philosophy, their slogan being, "Only the hard and strong may call himself Spartan. Only the hard. The strong." .

Leonidas refers contemptuously to the Athenians as "philosophers and boy lovers," an anti-intellectualism that finds reflections in our own society. Indeed, one could view the graphic novel and the film as a diatribe against left wingers who "lost" Vietnam to Communists. The film could be invoked today against those opposed to the Iraqi war, often accused as "not supporting the troops." King Leonidas' decision to resist the impending Persian invasion by force is opposed by those controlling the Council, so he chooses 300 of his bravest soldiers (and who must have one grown son at home to support the family) and says that they will be his body guard accompanying him on "a stroll" to the north.

Th 300 are depicted as the ultimate fighting machine. Indeed, the only time we see a touch of humanity is when the Captain (Vincent Regan), devastated by the death of his son by decapitation, breaks down for a moment and utters his regret that he had never expressed his special love for him—a sentiment going against Spartan propriety.

We do have to admire the courage of the 300 and their resolve to hold the huge Persian horde at

Continued on next page

Continued from p. 21



Leonidas and his 300 are eager to fight the Persians.
(c) 2007 Warner Brothers Pictures

the spot chosen by Leonidas. It is at the pass of Thermopylae, strategic because it is such a narrow place between the mountains and the Aegean Sea. Here the advantage of the huge number of the Persians will be offset somewhat. The pluck of Leonidas is also admirable, causing him to respond to the Persian emissary's boast that their arrows will blot out the sun with, "Good, then we will fight in the shade." (This and other bits of dialogue were also used in the 1962 film *The 300 Spartans*.) The slaughter is tremendous, with the piles of Persian slain forming a small mountain blocking the path of the enemy. We are saved from any feelings of sympathy for the Persians by never really seeing any of them as humans—indeed, the filmmakers bring in some legend and mythology, the Persian army populated with large, misshapen giants and fearsome ogre-like creatures. King Xerxes himself (Rodrigo Santoro) is not depicted in his full-bearded Persian-robed splendor, but rather as a hairless homo-erotic belonging more to the Rome of Fellini's *Satyricon* than to the Middle East.

The special effects, including the use of computer-generated landscapes are impressive. Most of the color is washed out, except for the red cloaks of the Spartans and the gaudy clothes of the Persians. Far more than the 1962 film, this one depicts the horrible gore of battle, even celebrating it as a sign of manliness. The glory that Leonidas extols in his address to his men, based on the sword, is a world away from the "kingdom, the power, and the glory" which Christ teaches in the gospels. No room for compassion or love of enemies in Spartan life, Leonidas and his men being very much like the dying Hebrew patriarch Jacob's description of his son's Simeon and Levi .

For Reflection/Discussion

- 1) How did you feel when Leonidas kills the Persian ambassadors who come to him at Sparta? What was the reaction of the audience to this sequence? What would you say to an attempt to ethically justify the act?
- 2) How do you think that the murder of the ambassadors stem directly from Spartan beliefs? Compare the Spartan lifestyle with that of Athens? If you have seen *To End All Wars*, how is it like the Japanese Bushido code? Would you want to live under this? What signs of anti-intellectualism do you see in our own culture?
- 3) What do you think Leonidas would think of the apostle Paul's words to the Colossians? How have the Spartans' extreme emphasis upon manly courage distorted their way of life? And yet how did it, in a real sense, save Greek civilization?
- 4) How is the film's distortion of the Persians' character (which included their calling them "barbarians") similar to what ever nation does in regard to its enemies during wartime? (Remember that it was the Persian conqueror of Babylon who put forth the humane police of letting the captives return to their homelands, among whom were the Jews: would you call this the act of "a barbarian"?)
- 5) How do the 300, in sacrificing their lives for others, bear some resemblance to the teaching of taking up the cross?



This is the way King Leonidas treats the Persian Ambassador and his companions, and the Spartan dares to call the Persians barbarians!
(c) 2007 Warner Brothers Pictures

The Lives of Others

Das Leben der Anderen (German with English subtitles)

Rated R. Our ratings: V- 2; L- 4; S/N- 5. Running time: 2 hours 17 min.



East German playwright Georg Dreyman and actress Christa-Maria Sieland are unaware that they are being spied on. (c) Sony Pictures Classics

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

Matthew 13:33

Winner of the 2006 Best Foreign Film Academy Award, director/writer Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck’s film takes on the difficult task of showing the positive affect of a good man upon one whom at first we might despise. It is easy to show how “one rotten apple spoils the whole bushel,” as witness the large number of films in which one person seduces and corrupts others. Goodness, however, is much harder to show without descending into sentimentality and cloying sweetness. Set in the last days of the East German nation (1984, five years before the fall of the Berlin Wall), this film suggests that even a dedicated member of the dreaded Stasi, the secret police, a man who lives and thrives in the dark, is not immune to the attraction of light, that a little bit of yeast does indeed have a big effect.

Capt. Gerd Wiesler (Ulrich Muehe) seems like the

epitome of the soulless servant of the state who would gladly entrap his own mother if he thought she were engaged in activities that threatened socialist society. He would have made a good Dominican Grand Inquisitor or chief of staff for Sen. Joe McCarthy. In one chilling sequence interspersed with shots of his grilling of suspects he passes on his interrogation techniques to a group of Stasi recruits, pointing out that one need not resort to brutal physical torture, that sleep deprivation and psychological techniques can manipulate the accused into divulging the truth. One just needs patience and persistence.

Wiesler’s classmate Lt.-Col. Anton Grubitz (Ulrich Tukur) is a better politician, so he has become his friend’s superior. The two attend the opening of a new play mainly because Grubitz wants to schmooze with his superior, Minister Bruno Hempf (Thomas Thieme), whom he knows will be in attendance. The drama is by East Germany’s premier playwright Georg Dreyman (Sebastian Koch) and stars the leading actress Christa-Maria Sieland (Martina Gedeck). Grubitz points to the playwright as a good example of the loyal citizen dedicated to advancing socialism through his art. Wiesler demurs, stating that the man does not seem quite right to him. During the intermission, when Grubitz goes to greet Minister Hempf, he parrots his friend’s observation, and the minister agrees. Grubitz, seeing an opportunity for advancement, secures the minister’s authorization to place the playwright under full surveillance.



Stasi Capt. Gerd Wiesler monitors every word and movement of the playwright and actress. (c) Sony Pictures Classics

The Lives of Others

Continued



Georg is worried about his blacklisted mentor Albert Jerski. (c) Sony Pictures Classics

Grubitz assigns his friend to carry out the surveillance, and so Wiesler and another man take 12-hour long turns listening in on all that takes place in the playwright's quarters. They discover that Georg shares his quarters with Christa-Maria, and that Georg is deeply concerned with the fate of the man who had been his mentor and director of his earlier plays Albert Jerski (Volkmar Kleinert). The latter has been blacklisted because of his "anti-socialist" views, forbidden to work for the next seven years. Georg tries, and fails, to get the ban lifted. However, Wiesler does not pick up any words of incrimination, the playwright always on guard, careful of what he says. At Georg's birthday party the snoops do hear journalist Paul Hauser (Hans-Uwe Bauer) urge his friend to take a more public stand for freedom. Georg has been able to walk the thin edge of earning the esteem of the Communist Party by not including anything controversial in his plays, while at the same time, because of his artistry, keeping the good will of members of the artistic community. Jerski is present at the party, but he says almost nothing, sitting off by himself, brooding while reading a book. He has violated Georg's wish that guests not bring him any more books by giving him what appears to be a large thin one wrapped in gift paper. Later it turns out to express both the giver's opinion of his friend, it is the musical score for "Sonata for a Good Man."

The more Wiesler listens in and records the words and actions of Georg in his reports, the more he too apparently comes to share this opinion of his subject. The Sonata is haunting and complex, a beautifully apt musical description of Georg. Indeed, as matters become more complicated, with Christa-Maria Sieland pursued by Minister Hempf so that she

is torn between her desire to maintain her acting career by acceding to the lecher's wishes and her deep love for Georg, Wiesler intervenes by arranging for the playwright to discover why his beloved goes out alone on certain nights. He is moved when he listens in on Georg's confronting her and forgiving her, telling her that she does have a choice, regardless of consequences. At one point Wiesler even approaches and speaks briefly a word of encouragement to her while she is sitting alone in a café, though not, of course, revealing his identity or eavesdropping role in her life.

The climax of the film is a miracle of the human heart, reminding us again that God, though perhaps officially banished from the "workers' paradise," is nonetheless around, working in strange and wondrous ways. Without giving away the details, I can say that by the film's conclusion we are presented with two good men.

For Reflection/Discussion

You should wait until you see the film because it is necessary to include spoilers for meaningful discussion of this superb film.

- 1) What do you think of Capt. Gerd Wiesler during the first part of the film? Would you think such a man capable of change? Compare him with Georg Dreyman. Wiesler lives alone in a spare apartment, apparently his sole companionship provided by a prostitute. When he asks her to stay to talk, how does her answer show that she shares with him a mechanical view of relationships? How is this necessary in both of their professions?
- 2) How is the life of an artist like Georg or Jerski especially complicated in a restrictive society? One might look for historical examples in the lives of such Soviet artists as Boris Pasternak, Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Dmitri Shostakovich (or Eli Kazan and "The Hollywood Ten" in America during the witch hunts of the HUAC/McCarthy era.).
- 3) What do you think it is that changes Wiesler in his view of Georg? What was his first act of kindness/grace? How did his omitting to record Georg's conversation about testing whether or not his apartment was bugged actually result in realizing that the dramatist was not so loyal after all?

The Lives of Others

Continued

- 4) How is Wiesler's conversation with Christa-Maria Sieland in the café a moment of grace? How is hers the tragic story?
- 5) After the fall of the Wall when Georg discovers that he was under surveillance after all, what does he do? When he saw the man spying on him now delivering mail (or flyers), why do you think he did not stop and talk with him? What do you think of the way in which he did thank the man? How must this have been a comfort to Wiesler in his reduced status in life?

Wild Hogs

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V- 4; L- 3; S/N-2 .
Running time: 1 hour 39 min.

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.
Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

Despite the drubbing this film has taken from the critics, I decided to see it on the basis of a friend's report, and was glad that I did.



"WILD HOGS"
© 01 John Travolta, Martin Lawrence, Tim Allen, William H. Macy
Photo credit: Larry Suberman
Walt Disney Pictures. All rights reserved.

Whereas it definitely is not in the same league as such biker movies as *The Wild One* or *Easy Rider*, nor for that matter, the film the plot of which this most resembles, *City Slickers*, *Wild Hogs* provides some comic relief and escape that such non-pretentious films can provide, as well as illustrating what the Preacher reminded his readers concerning the blessing of living in fellowship as compared to going it alone.

The story of four child-men who, in the midst of their midlife crises, yearn to rise above their humdrum daily lives, is one that many of us can identify with. Bobby Davis (Martin Lawrence) has dreams of making it big, but his bossy wife forces him to return to "The Firm," which turns out to be a drain unclogging business. Woody Stevens (John Travolta) is distraught to learn that his wild lifestyle has bankrupted him and that his wife has left him. Dudley Frank (William H. Macy) is a computer nerd who loves donning a leather jacket and meeting once a week to ride his "hog" with his three buddies and drink beer at a faux bikers' bar. Probably the most fortunate of the four is Doug Madsen (Tim Allen), a dentist who has a very supportive wife Kelly (Jill Hennessy) but a young son who has no respect for him.

At first the group resists the desperate Woody's call to break away for a week or two biker's trek from Cincinnati to the Pacific coast, but soon they succumb to his siren call, Bobby lying to his wife that he will be away at a convention. The main offensive sequence involving the old Hollywood stereotyping of gays takes place along the way when a muscular motorcycle cop wants to join them for the wrong reason. Out west at a real biker's bar the four run afoul of a gang led by Jack, played by Ray Liotta in his most sneering mode. When Woody accidentally burns down their saloon, the four take off, stopping over in the desert town of Madrid when they run out of gas. Here Dudley falls for the waitress Maggie (Marisa Tomei), and when Jack and his gang catch up with them and threatens to burn down Maggie's cafe unless the four come out from hiding, the four are faced with the choice of flight or fight, despite their fright.

Nice moment/sign of freedom: At the beginning of their trek the four, some more reluctantly than others, throw away their cell phones. How have these devices often been used in movies as symbolizing something other than a means of communication?

The Care Bears Movie

Rated S (For sugar content). Our ratings: V-1; L- 0; S/N-0. Running time: 1hour 17 min.



Up in the cloudland known as Care-A-Lot.
(c) MGM Pictures

It (love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

1 Corinthians 13:7

My children were into or entering their teens when the American Greeting Cards Care Bears were popular with preschool children (mainly girls), so I was able to avoid the film when it came out in 1985. Put off by what little I saw and heard of it—bright pastel colors and icky poo voices, I have managed to avoid it until the nicely packaged “25th Anniversary Limited Edition” of the film arrived in my mail box, and thus made me feel duty-bound as a critic to watch. Although I feel, as I’d feared, like a diabetic overdosed on sugar, I must admit that the film was better than expected, with messages that are positive and uplifting. So, even though the film reminds me too much of those teachers who feel that they have to address little children in sing-songy fashion, the film apparently works for young children.

The story is told to a room-full of orphans by Mr. Cherrywood (voiced by Mickey Rooney) as he and Mrs. Cherrywood are putting them to bed. Care Bears dwell up in the clouds in what they call Care-A-Lot, a beautiful place filled with rainbows and such. Their purpose is to see that the people on earth, especially the children, know that they are cared for and spread that care to others. Not so Kim and her

little brother Jason, who were abandoned by their parents, and who now look upon everyone in an unfriendly way. Adopted by two of the Care Bears, they are soon enveloped in an adventure brought on by a circus magician’s nephew named Nicholas, who also feels that no one cares for him because his uncle is always berating him for his mistakes. Seduced by an evil spirit within a book of magic spells, Nicholas invokes the spells to banish all caring from the world in revenge for not being cared for himself. There are lots of adventures as Kim and Nicholas, led by the Care Bears, and joined by the animals of Feeling Forest, slowly make their way toward the circus and the final confrontation with the evil spirit-controlled Nicholas.

There are, of course, a number of songs (the title song by Carole King), most of them not very good, but they and the dialogue do convey such worthy sentiments as the need to trust others, “You gotta take a chance on somebody else.” Another song addresses the young child just beginning to relate to others and learn about teamwork, “Nobody can do it alone” and “It’s a power to share, a power to care.”

Also visually, we see the results of not caring as the magic spells take effect—a cloud quake breaking the rainbow up in Care-A-Lot, and on earth the ruined circus with its broken wagons (similar to the far more artistically rendered scenes of the blighted plain in *The Lion King* when Scar usurps the throne). The assertion made by one of the Bears is also close to the New Testament sentiment when he says to the defiant Nicholas, “We care about everyone, even when they don’t care about us!” There is more, but you get the point.

I suppose. taking a visual parables approach to the film, we could say that the care Bears are the secular equivalent of angels, angels with garish fur and cutesy tattoos on their chests so that we can identify them. All in all, despite all the commercial ties—greeting cards, TV cartoon strip (some of which are included in the “Extras” of the DVD), wrapping paper, toy stuffed animals—there are some worthy elements in the film. Still, while watching I had to work hard to hold back my W.C. Fields impulse to gag and sneer.

Tyler Perry's Daddy's Little Girls

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V- 4; L- 3; S/N-2 . Running time: 1 hour 35 min.



Monty comforts his 3 daughters, fearful that they will have to live with their mother.
Photo: Alfeo Dixon (c) Lionsgate Films

And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

Galatians 6:9 (KJV)

There is no subtlety in a Tyler Perry film, but there is lots of heart, which probably is why audiences are so drawn to them—and there is also a touch of his Christian faith worked in, as it surfaces at a crucial moment in this romantic tale set in Atlanta. No doubt the film is very formulaic: boy and girl are repelled at their first encounter; boy and girl are attracted when they get to know each other; boy and girl separate; boy and girl overcome obstacles and wind up together, even though they might be from very different classes. In this case Monty (Idris Elba) is an expert auto mechanic working toward his dream of owning the garage; whereas Julia (Gabrielle Union) is a high powered ivy league lawyer striving to make partner at her firm by working long hours, often into the evening..

The two are brought together when Monty takes a moonlighting job as her driver because he needs extra income for the three daughters just entrusted to him when their grandmother who has been caring for them dies. Her daughter had deserted Monty and the girls to take up with the local drug dealer who can satisfy her craving for both money and drugs. When her mother dies, she apparently is upset that the older woman asked Monty to take custody of the girls. Out of spite she sues

for custody, and when Monty becomes angry with one of the thug/body guards and gets into a fight, this is held against him by child services, providing grounds for the custody suit. We can easily see where all this is going. Julia is a hot shot lawyer; Monty needs one, and—duh!

Despite the obviousness of the plot, the film is enjoyable, and it is good to see both a strong African American male take charge of his children, and a dose of the gospel deftly worked into the plot. Monty is depressed on the day he attends church, but the combination of Scripture, preaching, and spirited singing lift him up, renewing his strength and hope. The text is the one above, from Galatians, to which the pastor adds, “There is no sin in being weary. The sin is in giving up!” He says that if you do not faint, then you “are near your miracle...God is about to bring your due season!” The enthusiastic choir follows this up with the anthem, “Cast All Your Cares!” This sequence is a tonic for us viewers as well as for our blue collar hero. Another good moment in the film, one in which Julia sees the stuff that Monty is made of, when he uses the money he had been saving to buy the garage for legal expenses instead, “Parents sometimes have to give up their dreams so their kids can have one”



Monty, garage mechanic by day, moonlights as Julia's driver.

Photo: Alfeo Dixon (c) Lionsgate Films

Black Snake Moan

Rated R Our ratings: V- 6; L- 7; S/N-7 . Running time: 2 hours



But if the wicked turn away from all their sins that they have committed and keep all my statutes and do what is lawful and right, they shall surely live; they shall not die. None of the transgressions that they have committed shall be remembered against them; for the righteousness that they have done they shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?

Ezekiel 18:21-23

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil in this way the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:1-2

Director/writer Craig Brewer explores the torment and redemption of two very flawed people in his latest film, even as he did in his remarkable debut film, *Hustle and Flow*—and this one is just as bizarre a mixture of faith, sex, strong language, and violence. His current work will require a hard sell to get an adult group to watch (and also require careful preparation) because of its high score in R-rated elements. And yet the film manages to combine the sensuous and profane with the spiritual and redemptive, flesh and spirit held in creative tension throughout its length. *Black Snake Moan* is hardly a *Song of Solomon*, but if we are to get anything uplifting from the film, we will have to approach it in a way similar to that of the Biblical love poem—or maybe better, that of the story of the adulterous affair of David and Bathsheba and its sordid aftermath.

Christina Ricci, her hairstyle making her appear at

first like a young Goldie Hawn, plays the nymphomaniac Rae, who is seemingly possessed by sexual demons. As soon as her boyfriend Ronnie (Justin Timberlake) leaves their Tennessean town for the Army, Rae cannot restrain herself from whoring and consuming drugs and alcohol. Even Ronnie's supposed friend has his way with her one night, and then beats her so savagely that he pushes her out of his pickup and leaves her at the side of the road. The next morning Lazarus (Samuel L. Jackson), a vegetable farmer whose house is just up the driveway where the battered Rae lies unconscious, spots her. He brings her into his little house, deposits her on his couch and when she comes around and coughs spasmodically, tells her that he is going into town to get her some medicine.

Lazarus goes to the town drug store where his friend and fellow church member Angela (S. Epatha Merkerson) is the pharmacist. She brushes aside the patent medicine syrups and makes up a prescription for the cough, telling him he need not pay her. Back at the house Rae has awakened and runs around in her delirium so much that Lazarus goes to his tool box and, bringing out a long chain, locks it around Rae's waist and attaches the other end to his living room radiator. She is furious at this, yelling and screaming, and yanking and tugging at it as she tries to get out of the house. Lazarus tells her that no one will hear her because they are in an isolated part of the country. He has learned her name and her promiscuous reputation, so he has decided to restrain her and bring her to her senses.

Rae tries her wiles on him, and because her clothes were shed during her sexual encounters the night before, she is clad only in panties, the remains of a blouse and a bra. Lazarus, though much older (Samuel Jackson is very deglamorized in this film, his hairline receded and his small beard giving him the appearance of ole Uncle Remus in Disney's *Song of the South*), is clearly attracted, and so it appears at this point that the film will follow *Lolita* and other such sensuous films. There is even a humorous incident when a black teenaged boy comes looking for Lazarus and finds Rae instead, she jumping on him and tearing at the flap of his jeans as soon as he comes through the door. Lazarus drives up and runs the boy off at the point of his gun, and then Preacher R.L. (John Cothran) pays a visit., but he refuses to be intimidated by Lazarus' shotgun, so the latter gives in and invites him to meet Rae and stay for supper. The conversation between pastor and nymph about a God who listens and the nature of heaven is a



very touching one, revealing that Preacher R.L. is definitely not one of those judgmental types found in so many Hollywood features.

Music plays a major role in this film, as it did in *Hustle and Flow*. Lazarus once was a bluesman, popular at the local juke joint, but his cares have disillusioned him so much that he no longer feels like playing, even the blues. At the beginning of the film his adulterous wife leaves him, with his younger brother no less. Thus, although he tries to help Rae, Lazarus is clearly a wounded healer. As the story progresses, and we learn more of his faith and church connection, we see healing taking place in himself as well as in Rae. There is a moving scene of this healing happening as Rae hesitantly at first sings “This Little Light of Mine,” with Lazarus gently accompanying her on his guitar. Even as this tender scene unfolds there is a sinister presence outside that threatens to take the film in still another direction, but—.

This is one of those films that deserves its R-rating, and such opening scenes as a nude sexual encounter between Rae and Ronnie, along with the frequent use of such words as M-F by Lazarus, will make it impossible for some church folk to see beneath its surface profanity to the spiritual themes it espouses. However, for those who can take such rough elements in stride, the film will be a real visual parable of grace and redemption.

For Reflection/Discussion

Warning: the following contains several spoilers.

- 1) What significance do you see in Samuel Jackson’s character’s name? In what ways is this a film of resurrection? For himself? For Rae? For Ronnie?
- 2) How is Lazarus a wounded healer? What significance do you see in Angela’s choice of the song she sings for Lazarus, “There Is a Balm in Gilead.” How is she herself a good influence on Lazarus?
- 3) Compare Preacher R.L. with those of other screen preachers? How would you describe his under-

standing of the gospel? How might his conversation with Rae be seen as the beginning of her road back to redemption? Or would you see this as beginning with Lazarus chaining her to the radiator? Think about/explain the conversation in which the Preacher explains his view of heaven and asks her what is her heaven? How is her answer appropriate? Despite her flaws, what good effect has she had on Ronnie?

- 4) What do you learn of her past that has contributed to Rae’s condition? How does the scene between her and her mother at the grocery store play against the usual way a film would stage this? (Those who have seen *In the Bedroom* might compare it to the scene in which the young woman who had inadvertently caused the death of the son of Sissy Spacek’s character comes seeking forgiveness and reconciliation.) How has Rae’s mother apparently refused through the years to accept her culpability in her daughter’s fallen condition?
- 5) What symbolism do you see in the chain? How is the unlocking of the chain a moment of Lazarus “coming to himself”? A moment of grace?
- 6) We have said that music plays an important role in the film: what meaning do you see in the song that Lazarus plays and sings (and which gives the film its name), “Black Snake Moan”? What meaning do you see in the two times that “This Little Light of Mine” is sung? Although it could be argued that the Preacher, Angela, and Lazarus are the light shiners (see Matt. 5:14-16 for the Scriptural source of the song), how is it appropriate that it is Rae who sings it?
- 7) On the critical side: did you find it a bit strange that the Preacher R.L. would be present in a juke joint? Compare him to Shug’s preacher father in *The Color Purple*: which sounds more plausible? And yet, how is his presence an affirmation of the “resurrection” of Lazarus? Often regarded as a den of sin and iniquity, how does the juke joint take on a different meaning in this film, even Rae’s very sinuously dancing with the men? Do you think that God can be found amidst such profane or secular expressions of joy and the love of living?
- 8) How is the marriage of Rae and Ronnie another milestone on their spiritual recovery? What hopeful sign do you see as Lazarus and Angela wave goodbye to the newly weds? What did you fear would happen to Rae and Ron as they drove amidst the speeding trucks on the highway? How again did the film take a different than expected turn? Do you think that we might “read into” the various twists and turns of the plot that God is a God of the unexpected, of surprises?



On DVD: Land of Plenty

Rated NR. Our ratings: V- 3; L- 5; S/N-1 . Running time: 1 hour: 18 min.



Henry shows Lana around the mission.
(c) 2004 Weinstein Co.

Deal bountifully with your servant,
so that I may live and observe your word.
Open my eyes, so that I may behold
wondrous things out of your law.
I live as an alien in the land;
do not hide your commandments from me.
Psalm 119:17-19

German director Wim Wenders (remember his spiritually infused *Wings of Desire*?) examines the mood of post 9/11 America through two very different characters in this thought-provoking film. Paul's (John Diehl) world is a paranoid one, well summed up when he declares, "They're trying to destroy our country. They're trying to infect us. I'm not going to let them." A Vietnam War vet damaged by Agent Orange and its derivatives, he spends his days drinking or taking drugs and driving around the streets of L.A. using his high tech surveillance equipment to spy on "rag heads" that he spots. He is determined to prevent what he is convinced will be the next attack, this time upon his own city.

It is 2004 when the second anniversary of the destruction of the Twin Towers and the assault on the Pentagon is about to be observed, and Lana (Michelle Williams) is flying back to America after being away for several years with her missionary parents in Africa, and more recently in Israel. She utters a quiet prayer of

thanksgiving just as the plane is getting ready to land at L.A. She is on a mission bearing the last letter that her now deceased mother had written in the hope of reconciling with the brother from whom she has been estranged because of their conflicting political views. While searching for her uncle Lana plans to stay at the inner city mission run by family friend Henry (Wendell Pierce). The uncle, of course, is Paul.

Lana is dismayed at the changes she sees in the land of her birth. The streets of L.A. that she observes are far different from the ones usually depicted in Hollywood films. No fancy shops along Rodeo Drive or lavish mansions in Beverly Hills, just boarded up shops and homeless men and women gathered under bridges or sleeping at night in cardboard boxes and plastic garbage bags, hence the irony of the title, when Henry refers to the city as "the hunger capital of America." Lana helps serve the food in the mission dining room in between her searches for her uncle. It is the tragic shooting of a Middle Eastern whom she had served that brings the two together.

Paul had spotted the man, whom Lana had learned earlier that day was named Hassan (Shaun Toub), and followed to the mission. Convinced, because the man had been carrying two cases marked Borax, that he was



Lana's Uncle Paul listens to street conversations with a special microphone in his high tech-equipped van.
(c) 2004 Weinstein Co.

gathering materials similar to what Oklahoma bomber Timothy McVeigh had used, Paul had followed in his van and parked outside the mission when his quarry had gone inside to eat. That night when Hassan was killed in a drive-by shooting right outside the mission, Paul is certain that the man was assassinated because he knew too much. He is not at all happy over being reunited with his niece, but later accepts her offer of help when she tells him that she knows the victim's name. Paul sends to the major TV stations the surveillance tape he had made of the shooting. The two discover that Hassan has a brother in a desert town where there is a chemical plant. Through church connections Henry and Lana learn how to contact the man, named Youssef (Bernard White). She agrees that she will travel with Paul and bring Hassan's body there for burial. So off they go in Paul's van to Death Valley, he believing that they will at last discover the group threatening his city with destruction.

As with the already mentioned *Wings of Desire*, Wim Wenders, teaming with scriptwriter Scott Derrickson (the original story was Wenders'), invests his film with a gentle spirituality that stands in such stark contrast to Paul's damaged psyche. Lana prays frequently, and we listen in on one of Henry's sermons in which he assures the homeless congregation that God loves and walks with them. There is no showy piety in either Lana or Henry, just a quiet faith which makes her prayers into conversations in which she seems to be talking with an older, wiser friend. This is a film perfectly designed for church groups and leaders.

For Reflection/Discussion

There are spoilers in this section, so wait until you have seen the film before reading further.

- 1) How does Paul demonstrate that war has its effects on its participants long after the guns have ceased fire? What must his private life be like—or does he even have one apart from his surveillance mission?
- 2) Compare Lana with her uncle? At first glance she might appear to be the naive innocent, but is she? What must she have seen in Africa? What does the exchange of emails with her boyfriend (?) in Israel reveal what she must have experienced when she lived on the West

bank?

- 3) How is Henry portrayed? We are shown nothing of his personal life: do you think that he is like Paul, in that he is totally immersed in his mission of compassion?
- 4) A good preaching/teaching scene is in the serving line when the homeless man angrily reacts to Lana's attempt to be friendly, and she surprises him by revealing that she does know his name. What do we see at the mission indicating that she is cut out for that kind of ministry?
- 5) How does Lana react on her ride from the airport when she sees so many homeless people? Check out the deleted scenes, one of which shows her going back to try to find the woman whose plight had moved her. How does this show that we must act when the opportunity to help confronts us?
- 6) How is Paul infected with the stereotypical view of Middle Easterners that so many Americans hold, especially since 9/11? What instances of this have you experienced?
- 7) How are we led to believe that we are watching a thriller? What does the story suggest about presumptions and circumstantial evidence?
- 8) How did you feel when Paul and Lana traveled to New York to visit the site of the attack? How is Paul's feeling similar to what he must have felt when he discovered the real reason for the Borax boxes that had made him so suspicious? Did the film's abrupt ending disappoint you, or can you see it as a way in which the filmmaker is inviting the audience to participate in working out its own resolution? How is what Lana says to her uncle a bit like verse 10 of Psalm 46? How does the Leonard Cohen song we hear playing on the soundtrack add to the film?



Lana helps serve food in the mission.
(c) 2004 Weinstein Co.

Praying the Movies: Fever Pitch

Season Tickets Grace



Lindsey brings Ben to meet her friends.
(c) 20th century Fox

Scriptures

...you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them...

Deuteronomy 5:7-9a

It (love) does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful...

When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.

1 Corinthians 13:5, 11

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. 4Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. 5Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

Phulippians 2:3-8

Introduction/Setting:

After escaping from the theater at which the Farrelly Brothers' dreadful *Dumb and Dumber* was playing, I would never have believed that one of their films would prove to be so inspirational. And yet their romantic comedy *Fever Pitch* is just that, in spite of it's sometimes over the top humor.

Ben Wrightman (Jimmy Fallon), a junior high school math teacher, takes his star pupils to a corporate office to demonstrate to them that math can lead them to a good job. Drawn to the executive who guides their tour, Lindsey Meeks (Drew Barrymore), he returns to ask her for a date. She turns him down, but when her three female buddies remind her that she is thirty and ought not to pass up an opportunity to meet "Mr. Right," she agrees, and what must be at once one of the sorriest, funniest, and touching of first date sequences ensues. Ben arrives to pick her up, but she is sick—really *SICK*, throwing up and moaning. He manages to get her into her night clothes and, to her amazement, cleans up the vomit in her bathroom.. He is asleep on her couch when she emerges from her bedroom the next morning. Lindsey's friends are thrilled for her, except for one, who wonders why such a good catch is still single, "How is he not tranquilized and tagged by now?"

We, of course, know why, because we have seen Ben's obsession with the Boston Red Sox, ever since boyhood when his uncle took him to his first game, and upon his death, bequeathed to his nephew his two invaluable season tickets. Ben is more than a fan, he is a devotee—the Red Sox Nation is his god, his idol around which his whole life revolves, from the way he dresses and decorates his apartment to how he schedules each day according to when they are playing, and even to when he takes his vacation—in the springtime so that he and his buddies can travel to Florida to watch the Sox train and play their practice games. At the ballpark Ben has come to know the people in the nearby seats so well that he regards them as "my summer family."

All this Ben explains to Lindsey at the beginning

of their relationship, but she does not really comprehend how his baseball religion controls his relationships until he turns down her invitation to meet her parents or accompany her on an unexpected trip to Paris because of conflicts with “big games.” She has tried to fit in by attending games with him, but her own career, which includes a possible major promotion, need attention, causing her to draw back some (members of Ben’s summer family are not pleased when Lindsey brings her laptop to work on).

The breaking point arrives when Ben skips a game so that they spend an evening in bed together. The Red Sox are given no chance of making the pennant playoffs, but then they do the impossible by scoring eight runs in the last inning, beating the Yankees—and Ben cries out in frustration that it is the worst night in his life. Weeks later, after realizing how much he misses Lindsey, he shows up at her apartment to find that she is working with several office colleagues. She does not think they have a future together because of his obsession, so she turns him away.

The Video Scene

On DVD Scene 24 “Making History” Time: 1:25:00—1:34:00

Lindsey is in a restaurant with her friends when a colleague rushes in to announce that she is wanted back at the office because Lindsey has won the promotion for which she has worked so hard. As she is leaving she hears one of her friends say that Ben is selling his tickets to her husband Chris for over a hundred thousand dollars. At the ballpark Ben and Chris are seated together. His friends voice their disappointment and criticism that Ben should even think of selling what they regard as his family inheritance..

At her office Lindsey is sipping Champaign and receiving the congratulations of her colleagues, but her heart is not there. Realizing the enormity of what Ben is about to do, Lindsey rushes out the door. In Ben’s section his “summer family” continue to scold him, but he determines to sign the papers that Chris has drawn up. Outside the stadium Lindsey negotiates the sale of tickets from a scalper, but to her distress, discovers that she will be seated across the field from Ben, and the guard will not allow her to enter the higher priced section. She tries to reach Chris on his cell phone, but he hangs up as he eagerly urges the hesitant Ben to sign the papers. Frantic, Lindsey drops down onto the field and, despite the orders from guards, starts to run across it, shedding her high heels along the way. Ben is starting to sign when the announcers comment on the fan running across the field, and Lindsey’s image is displayed on the stadium’s huge screens. She dodges and pushes past those who try



Lindsey reaches Ben to dissuade him from selling his beloved Red Sox season tickets. (c) 20th century Fox

to intercept her, finally arriving at the section where Ben awaits her. On the soundtrack we hear the song “It’s Not Over.”

Lindsey breathlessly tells Ben that she came to stop him, that he loves these seats, and that these people are his “summer family.” Ben replies that he loved these seats as a 7 year-old because he had nothing else, but that now that he loves her, “I don’t need this. I don’t want this!” He starts again to sign the papers. “Wait, wait!,” Lindsey yells. “Wait, wait! You love me enough to sell your tickets. I love you enough not to let you. What do you say we try to do all of it? “ By now the police have arrived to arrest her, but Ben gets them to wait long enough for an embrace and kiss.

Reflection on the Scene

Of course, the two of them go to St. Louis to watch the miracle of what is now *their* team achieve what has taken several lifetimes of Red Sox fans to obtain, the winning of the World Series—but we know that for them they have won something far more precious.

This delightful story might remind one of O’Henry’s great short story “The Gift of the Magi,” only with a happier ending. Lindsey and Ben learn that real love involves sacrifice. Although a pale reflection of Christ’s “emptying himself” upon the cross, Lindsey and Ben show that their love for each other is great enough that they are willing to give up what they once had valued the most. Ben especially learns the wisdom of the words of the apostle Paul: “It (love) does not insist on its own way...When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways.” No doubt he will have to struggle to prevent his old obsession from re-emerging and taking control of his life (It would be fun to

Continued on next page

Praying the Movies

see a scene of he and Lindsey deciding on how they will decorate their new home after their marriage!), but the two will always have the memory of that wonderful moment in the ballpark to guide and inspire them to do the right thing by each other.

Fever Pitch will probably not enter the pantheon of romantic classics such as *Casablanca*, and yet like that great film, it shares the theme that real love means putting the needs and welfare of the beloved before one's own. Thus for us believers the film is a visual parable that can enlighten our own paths, serving as an example of love at its best. Although Ben's obsession is magnified for comic effects, he serves as a challenge for us to look at our own values and thus how we organize our own lives—for ourselves, or for others.

Further Reflection

- 1) What has been the idol or obsession in your life?
- 2) How did it hinder or get in your way?
- 3) When did you recognize it and begin to place something higher at the center of your life? How does our confession that "Jesus is Lord" affect our hierarchy of values?
- 4) What would cause you the most pain or regret to give up? For what would you do so, and why?

Hymn: "Though I May Speak" or "At the Name of Jesus"

Prayer

Gracious God, we call your Son "Lord," and we pray that we show this in our lives. Help us to continually evaluate our values and the choices that we make, lest we make a mockery of our confession. Through the indwelling of your Spirit, may we empty ourselves of all ambition and other forms of self-centeredness so that we can truly pray, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done." Amen



Ben and Lindsey together cheer the Red Sox WS victory in St. Louis. (c) 20th Century Fox



Sweet Resources

Two things occurred on February 23 that are connected. The first event took place two hundred years ago in 1807. The second occurred this year when the movie *Amazing Grace* opened on 791 local theaters. The film was number ten on *Variety's* weekly box office report. The three other films that opened that same weekend managed to secure more theaters and thus placed second (*The Number 23*—2,759 theaters), fourth (*Reno 911: Miami*—2,702 theaters), and ninth (*The Astronaut Farmer*—2,155 theaters) on the list. However, in terms of the weekend gross per engagement, *Amazing Grace* ranked third behind the top two films on the *Variety* report, *Ghost Rider* and *The Number 23*. Ed McNulty and I both agree that there is little likelihood that *Amazing Grace* will drop off of our top ten films for 2007.

William Wilberforce as a child had met John Newton, the author of the hymn, *Amazing Grace*. They had become reacquainted as Wilberforce was giving serious consideration to a life in politics. In 1788, William Wilberforce, as a member of the British Parliament, made his first motion to abolish the slave trade. His impassioned speech had convinced the local papers that the Bill would be passed by Parliament. However, Wilberforce lost the first of many votes on this crucial issue. Every single year, for the next seventeen years, his motion would be defeated.

On February 23, 1807, after eighteen years of hard work, Wilberforce finally got his Bill passed abolishing the slave trade in England. It was a historic



Wilberforce makes an impassioned plea to Parliament. (c) 2007 Walden/Roadside Attractions

Sweet Resources

and moral victory. William Wilberforce continued the struggle to abolish slavery until finally, in 1833, the House of Commons passed a bill abolishing slavery in the British Empire. Wilberforce died three days later on July 29, having witnessed his life-long dream become a reality.

John Newton (July 24, 1725—December 21, 1807) wrote the words to *Amazing Grace* during the last half of December 1772. On Friday, January 1, 1773 John Newton preached a sermon on I Chronicles 17:16—17 as his text. “He began his sermon by stressing the importance of being grateful to God for guidance.” (Steve Turner, p.81) During the service, Newton would have introduced his congregation to his new hymn as a way for the congregation to retain the essence of his sermon. Turner notes that there would not have been musical accompaniment for several reasons—Newton was not a musician and his church did not have an organ since this was one of John Calvin’s forbidden musical instruments.

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Three books will assist you in processing the new movie, *Amazing Grace*. Eric Metaxas tells the remarkable story of the life of William Wilberforce (August 24, 1759—July 29, 1833). Wilberforce “...changed the world. Before Wilberforce, few thought slavery was wrong. After Wilberforce, most societies in the world came to see it as a great moral wrong.”

Bruner and Ware’s book looks at both Newton and Wilberforce and structure their book around grace—nine chapters for each man focused around eighteen types of grace. (Newton: Maternal Grace; Warning Grace; Restraining Grace; Afflicting Grace; Preserving Grace; Illuminating Grace; Delaying Grace; Growing Grace; Long-Suffering Grace. Wilberforce: Sufficient Grace; Intervening Grace; Gifting Grace; Changing Grace; Calling Grace; Disturbing Grace; Persistent Grace; Generous Grace; Compelling Grace.)

Steve Turner’s book looks at both the man who created *Amazing Grace* and the history of the hymn. (Turner was able to see the original document in



*Albert Finney plays the great author of “Amazing Grace.”
(c) 2007 Walden/Roadside Attractions*

Lambeth Palace Library and for the first time, was able to accurately date the composition and the first time the hymn was sung.) Judy Collins contributes a forward to the book and there are three insightful Appendix’s—“Amazing Grace” Lists; Selected Discography; and Who’s Who. Movie fans will appreciate the first list in Appendix 1: “Ten Films Featuring ‘Amazing Grace’.”

Take your Church groups to see this film, preach on Wilberforce and Newton during one of these above-mentioned dates in history, add these books to your church library, and make sure that William Wilberforce and John Newton become household names.

Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery

by Eric Metaxas (HarperCollins Publishers, 2007, 284 pages).

Finding God in the Story of Amazing Grace

by Kurt Bruner & Jim Ware (Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2007, 172 pages).

Amazing Grace: The Story of America’s Most Beloved Song

by Steve Turner (HarperCollins Publishers, 2002, 266 pages).

Doug Sweet

dsweet@ecr.net

Sweet Resources

Building Your DVD Library—New Releases

The following titles have been scheduled for release and may be of interest for your personal, or church library.

Coming Soon: *Charlotte's Web* (4/3); *The Last King of Scotland* (4/17); *Notes on a Scandal* (4/17); *Freedom Writers* (4/17); *Little Children* (4/24); *Short Films—A Collection of 2006 Academy Award Nominated Live Action and Animation Short Films* (5/1); *Apocalypto* (5/22).

Special Editions:

Say Amen, Somebody (3/6) two-disc set with CD, 25th Anniversary Edition of the documentary that explores the pioneers of modern gospel music; *Walt Disney's Peter Pan Platinum edition* (3/6); *The Natural—Director's Cut* (4/3); *Night at the Museum—two disc special edition* (4/24) single disc edition also available; *Deliver Us From Evil* [nominated for best documentary in 2007 about pedophile priest Father O'Grady] (5/8); *True Grit* (5/22); *Roots: 30th Anniversary Edition* (5/22); *Pan's Labrynth—2 Disc Platinum series* (5/15) also available in a single disc edition; *Dreamgirls Showstopper Edition* (5/1) also available in a single disc edition.

DVD TV Titles:

Dinosaurs—The Complete 3rd and 4th Seasons (5/1); *The Odd Couple—First Season* (4/24).

Recent Releases: *Fast Food Nation* (3/6); *Rocky Balboa* (3/20); *Blood Diamond* (3/20); *Eragon* (3/20); *The Nativity Story* (3/20); *The Pursuit of Happyness* (3/27); *Children of Men* (3/27); *Happy Feet* ((3/27).

Academy Award Best Picture Films: Three of the nominated films (*Little Miss Sunshine*; *Babel*; *The Departed*) are available on DVD. *The Queen* has a release date of April 24 and I'm sure we will soon have a date for *Letters from Iwo Jima* including a deluxe package deal that will include *Flags of Our Fathers* (currently available). A two-disc special edition of the Best Picture for 2006, *The Departed*, has been released as well as a one-disc movie edition. The feature "Scorsese on Scorsese" makes it worth buying the two-disc version if you are collecting Best Picture winners.

Doug Sweet

dsweet@ecr.net

Happy Feet DVD:

Special Features

The Oscar-winning animated film about an Emperor penguin who cannot sing like all the rest, but can dance like a combined Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers (see the Winter VP for the theatrical review) is now available on DVD with some wonderful "Special Features." There are two music videos and two additional sequences to the film. The best of the latter shows Mumble heading north to try to communicate with the humans who are upsetting the environment of Anarctica. He encounters a huge blue whale, bigger than anything he has encountered before, and which communicates in its own deep way. the animation is awesome.

Dance lovers will enjoy the "Private Dance Lesson With Savion Glover," upon whose fleet foot movements Mumble's animators depended. He goes through his tap dancing routine with incredible precision and fleetness, and then is joined by Mumble, reminding one of a Disney cartoon in which Gene Kelly danced with a cartoon character. Pure delight.

But my favorite is the inclusion of an old WB Short Subject, "I Love to Sanga," which is the perfect short subject to accompany the feature film. Chuck Jones is one of the two animators who depict Prof. Owl, whose sign advertises "Music Lessons," but beneath this the warning, "No Jazz." Mrs. owl sits on four eggs, but nothing happens each time the anxious pair checks. Finally the eggs do hatch, one at a time. The first little owl sings like Caruso; the second plays a classical violin piece; the third a flute solo; and then out hatches the fourth. he sings a jazzy pop tune, "I Love to Singa" as he does a shuffling dance. He tries to sing the traditional song his parents want, but he cannot help breaking into his own song at intervals. he is thrust out of the house by Pappa. Soon he is part of a long line of hopefuls trying out on radio for the Jack Bunny Amateur Hour. Within a few bars of each song, the bored Jack hits a bell with a mallet, which triggers the trap door, through which the hapless would-be musician falls. Can you guess what happens when our little owl, who bills himself as Owl Jolson, takes his turn?



Short Videos

William Wilberforce

*This is a modified version of the review of this documentary film that appeared in the Jan. 1993 issue of VP. Originally on VHS, it is now available in DVD. It is short enough to form the basis for a church school class, perhaps before or after the group goes to see the feature film *Amazing Grace* at the theater.*

Vision Video has a veritable library of biographical films of important leaders in the history of the church, to which this new one makes a fine addition. Few people realize what a tremendous contribution this fighter for the abolition of slavery in England made to our civilization. Once the friend of Prime Minister William Pitt (the Younger), Wilberforce loved a good time. When he became a Christian, he almost decided to quit politics. Fortunately his pastor John Newton (writer of “Amazing Grace”) was able to convince him that he was in the position in which he could do the most good for God.

Once he saw for himself how horrible slavery was, he deduced himself to its destruction, a seemingly impossible task in a society so enriched by the sale of human beings. During the latter 18th and early 19th centuries the British slave ships annually transported 70,000 Africans across the Atlantic. Thus Wilberforce found himself opposed by some of the most powerful men in the land. The video follows him through all the daunting years until near the end of his life his impossible dream is achieved.

Through art work, over which the camera pans and moves in and out, the film tells the exciting story of this great man. A good film for youth and adults,



it could be used in a series of “Heroes of the Faith” (Since this was written VV has released three 30-minute animated DVDs for children, the series entitled “The Torchlighters: Heroes of the Faith”—on John Bunyan, William Tyndale, and Jim Elliot.)—VV has plenty of others, such as *Martin Luther; Merton: A Film Biography; Dietrich Bonhoeffer*; and many others. Some of these are feature length: all of them providing opportunities for your people to discover the great heritage of the Christian faith.

Length: 35 min. Price: \$19.99 DVD #500953D. VV also offers for \$5 an issue of *Christian History Magazine* devoted to Wilberforce. Although I have not seen this particular issue, the ones that I have are well written and embellished with color illustrations.

Order online, by phone, or surface mail at:
www.visionvideo.com; 1-800-523-0226; Vision Video, PO Box 540, Worcester, PA 19490

No Greater Love

No Greater Love hauntingly tells the story of an American journalist in Austria, wanting to report on the Hungarian refugees fleeing the Soviets who have taken over their homeland.

The story itself is a parable. The American reporter is drifting away from his wife and children. He has left his family behind to get the “big story.” His life’s focus is on his career.

But while searching for his story, the American witnesses a kind of love he has never imagined—or perhaps he has only forgotten that kind of love. He watches as a Hungarian father carries his family one by one across a freezing river, keeping them warm and dry, but freezing to death himself.

The American is amazed at this. He helps the Hungarian family to safety, carrying the father, nearly dead, on his shoulders. He has come to realize what is truly important in life.

This film is only 16 minutes long, but the production
Continued on next page

No Greater Love

Continued

tion quality is excellent, making it perfect for an adult Sunday school class, Bible study, or small group.

Some questions for discussion might include:

- 1) Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). How did the Hungarian father demonstrate that kind of love?
- 2) Have you ever lost or been close to losing a relationship due to misplaced priorities?
- 3) What risks have you taken in order to care for or help those you love?
- 4) Where might you be misplacing your priorities right now?
- 5) What changes do you need to make to begin to focus on what is truly important?

Reviewed by Markus Watson, Assoc. Pastor, Union Presbyterian Church, Union, Kentucky



Length: 16 min. Price: \$14.99 DVD #500953D. As of this writing, VV offers a discount webprice, plus a real deal if you buy this in combination with another excellent film *The Touch of the Master's Hand*, a film about the value of each life and the possibility of renewal by the hand of the Master. Order online, by phone, or surface mail at: www.visionvideo.com; 1-800-523-0226; Vision Video, PO Box 540, Worcester, PA 19490

Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman, Vol. 1



I am writing this in anticipation of the release of Vol. 1 of what I still think is one of the funniest TV shows of all time. The brainchild of Norman Lear (*All in the Family*; *Maude*) the satirical humor of *Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman* was so biting, so ahead of its time (1976-77) that all three networks passed on it, forcing Lear to send it into immediate syndication. Fortunately for us Lear fans, stations throughout the land bought the series, five shows at a time, although because of the controversy surrounding it, they broadcast it late at night, often at 11 PM. If you have not seen this series, I suspect that you will soon feel that *Desperate Housewives* is a pallid, one-note show (sex) once you see the misadventures of naive Mary Hartman and her wacky family and neighbors living in the fictional town of Fernwood, Ohio.

A parody of TV soap operas, the series featured Mary and Tom locked into a stagnant marriage and beset by really weird relatives. Mary faces such major problems as "yellow wax buildup" on her floors, "The Fernwood Flasher," and the fear generated by a mass murderer in her town—because she innocently accepts all TV ads as gospel truth, she's clearly more bothered by the former.

Her friends Loretta and Charlie dream of a recording career in Country Western music despite Loretta's mediocre talent, and later in the series they actually set out for Nashville. However, as happens so often in the series, fate (or God?) intervenes, in this case a crash with a station wagon full of nuns. During the dispute over blame, the nuns are sure that it could not be them, as they were singing a reli-

Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman, Vol. 1

gious song at the time. As I recall (it's been years since I was able to watch the series), God is brought into the discussion, as the Deity is in a number of episodes. As in *All in the Family*, theology plays an important part in the conversations and ruminations of the various characters.

Much of the humor consists in the illusions harbored by the naive denizens, clung to in spite of the "reality" that stares, no, *slaps*, them in the face. I was saddened when the show was eventually cancelled because its star Louise Lasser left the series, partly because I had written a feature magazine article exploring the ways in which religion played a factor in the show, its publication being canceled upon receipt of the bad news. Thus I am looking forward to being able to see the episodes once more. If they hold up as well as I think they will, you will be reading more about MH, MH. The episodes are short enough (40+ minutes to fit into a TV hour with commercials) to provide material for a delightful series at church.. From what I have been able to find out there will be 25 episodes included on the 3-DVD set. There is a lot of information about the show, cast, and the episodes at TV.com. Type in:

<http://www.tv.com/mary-hartman-mary-hartman/show/53/summary.html?tag=tabs;summary>

Check out VP's website:

visualparables.net

A number of changes have already been made, such as the addition of a search engine and "Film Capsules."

More are on the way, such as a "Sample Issue." This will be necessary because the "Current Movies" soon will be accessible only to subscribers--we have to raise money somehow now that VP is an on-line only publication.

Keep up between issues by going weekly to the "New in Theaters," "Still Playing," and "Continuing Interest" sections.

VP Editor's New Book Films and Faith



For veterans and novice users of film, the WJK book is divided into two sections. Part 1 explores a theology of film as visual parables and then offers a myriad of details in choosing films, how to lead a discussion, and much more.

Part 2 consists of 27 film discussion guides, some of the films well known, toehsr little gems that deserve a wider audience. Include are:

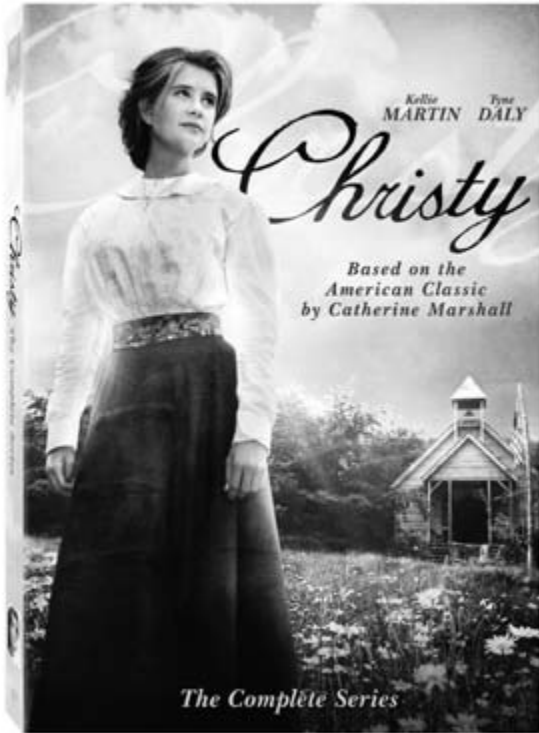
American Beauty; Amistad; Babe: Pig in the City; Beyond the Sea; Chocolat; The Color Purple; Crash; Dogma; Erin Brocovich; Final Solution; The Grapes of Wrath; Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone; Hotel Rwanda; The Insider; The Iron Giant; Les Miserables; The Matrix; Million Dollar Baby; O Brother, Where Art Thou?; Pieces of April; Road to Perdition' Shawshank Redemption; The Spitfire Grill; Tender Mercies; The Thin Red Line; To End All Wars; Walking Across Egypt.

Also included is a reprint of the author's article on arranging for a film series in a movie theater.

Available at Cokesbury and other book stores. For a discounted price from VP, contact VP at

mcnulty@fuse.net

FILM GUIDE



In recognition of the Christy series being released as a boxed set of DVDs we are reprinting from the Dec. 2002 issue the discussion guide of the premiere film. You might be interested to know that the producer for the CBS series was Ken Wales, interviewed elsewhere in this issue as producer of Amazing Grace. We should also point out that Christy's director Michael Rhodes (who won some Emmys for his direction) is a good friend of VP and producer of the "Film Clips" cassettes.

Not Rated (TV film)
V-2 ; L- 1; S/N-1

Our content rating:

Released: 1994
minutes

Running time: 110

Directed by Michael Rhodes **Screenplay by**
Patricia Green, adapted from the novel by

Catherine Marshall .

Main Cast & characters: Christy Huddleston (Kellie Martin); Alice Henderson (Tyne Daly); Rev. David Grantland (Randall Batinkoff); Fairlight Spencer (Tess Harper) Miss Ida Grantland (Annabella Price); Dr. Neil MacNeill (Stewart Finlay-McLennan); Ruby Mae Morrison (Emily Schulman); Little Burl Allen (Andy Nichols (II)); Mountie O'Teale (Alyssa Hmielewski); Sam

Houston Holcombe (Kyle Hudgens)

Themes: Service to others; the cross in serving; courage & dedication; standing against the wrong; poverty; Appalachia

Scriptures: Isaiah 11:6c; Matthew 4:5-7 & 5:38-48; Romans 12:9-21.

Catherine Marshall first became well known as the guardian of the legacy of her husband Peter Marshal. Her book *A Man Called Peter* told the story of the ambitious Scot's coming to America, becoming a Presbyterian clergyman and rising to the position of U. S. Senate Chaplain. She collected and published his sermons and prayers in *Mr. Jones, Meet the Master*, this book joining her earlier one on the religious best seller list. The 1955 movie made from the first book did quite well at the box office, despite fears in some quarters that audiences would not sit still for preaching scenes, no matter how much they were shortened. (The film was quite an inspiration to budding theologues such as myself.)

In 1967 Marshall followed up these books with her novel *Christy*. The book quickly became a best seller, running through almost 90 printings and reaching over 30 million readers. In 1994 producer Ken Wales brought the story to CBS television with this two-hour film that became the first of seven one-hour presentations. Despite protests, the network dropped the series. And yet the series' legacy lived on, paving the way for the longer-running series "Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman." Built on similar themes and principles of service, that series would not have been possible, I have heard *Christy* producer Ken Wales say, if his film had not paved the way. Even more recently, I just learned from doing a Google search for "Christy," three new two-hour films were aired on the Pax Network in the summer of 2001. (If any of you saw these, please let us know, as I missed hearing anything about them at the time!)

Although written as a novel, Catherine Marshall based her story on the life of her mother Leonora Wood, who came to Tennessee's Cocke County in 1909. She taught in a mission originally founded by Moravians and then taken over by Presbyterian missionaries concerned for the impoverished families in
Continued on next page

Christy

Continued



Christy meets Miss Alice.
(c) 20th Century Fox

the mountain community. Our heroine in the film arrives at the fictional Cutter Gap in 1912—well, she arrives at the train station of another town, and discovers that the site of her mission school is quite a hike up the mountainside! This is but the first of a number of surprises that the idealistic, but naïve, young woman will face. Christy's faith will be challenged and enlarged by the events of her year at the school, and she will find that resiliency and persistence will be necessary handmaidens to faith, if she is to help rather than hinder the people whom she has come to serve. Beautifully photographed and filled with memorable characters, the film chronicles a significant journey of faith and service.

Christy is available at many religious bookstores, along with the set of seven one-hour sequels. It is suitable for a family audience at a retreat or special showing. It would be a wonderful film to show to members of a service team about to embark on a work project, whether to Appalachia or some other Third World country. It should help participants deal with their paternalistic “do gooder” feelings or assumptions. Very important are Christy's words spoken at the beginning of the film: “When I left my city home to be a schoolteacher at a backwoods mission, I dreamed of adventure. I wasn't ready for the real challenges of life in these mountains. I'd have given up, if not for the children. I came to Cutter Gap to teach but they show me everyday I'm here to learn.” As one who has led a number of service/work projects, I cannot emphasize enough how important this insight is. Thus, Christy is full of life-lessons, as well as a highly entertaining film.

For Discussion/Reflection

- 1) Think about Christy's opening words: how important is her insight for those who would try to help “the less fortunate”? If you have participated in a service project, whether local or far away, how have you seen this work out?
- 2) How does Christy show both naiveté and pluck after she gets off the train? Have you had a similar experience of let-down when you arrived at an anticipated destination? How did you cope?
- 3) When Christy's trek to Cutter Gap is interrupted by the discovery of the injured man, she hears his brother say, “Life and death are in the hands of the Lord.” How is this true yet not the whole truth? How is the attitude of the women who over-rule him closer to faith than his? How is his initial decision almost a tempting the Lord (see Matt. 4:5-7)?
- 4) How would you answer Miss Alice's question to Christy, “Why are you here?” Why have you participated in a service project—or at least have seriously considered doing so? How are our motives usually very mixed? What did you give—and what did you receive?
- 5) The character of Miss Alice shows how important a worthy mentor can be in our lives. Who has taken on this role in your life?
- 6) Miss Alice tells Christy to “hold onto joy.” How is this good advice—and what works against it in their circumstances? Have you felt something akin to joy while serving others? Calvin Laufer's great hymn captures something of this—see “Christ of the Upward Way.” How is joy “a great gift”? Have you seen sometimes that those in the service professions sometimes become too serious because of the many difficulties they encounter? How does joy, and its “kissin' cousin,” a sense of humor, provide both a deeper and a broader perspective for those combating social ills?
- 7) When Christy first meets one of her pupils, how does she greet the little boy? How do most adults greet small children? What does her kneeling down to his level reveal about her, and convey to the boy? How might this make him feel? (This scene struck me because once a wheel-chair bound woman told a friend that she appreciated my stooping down and talking

Christy

Continued

with her at her eye level.)

- 8) How is Christy's reaction to the poverty of the people, especially when she visits the O'Teale home, fairly typical of us middle class folk? What similar experiences have you had with the smells and sights of poverty? How is little Mountie O'Teale's inability to talk a good symbol of the plight of her family? How do we see in Christy's dealings with the little girl that good intentions are not enough?
- 9) What do you think of the way in which Miss Alice deals with Christy's confession "I don't belong here"? How is Christy's prayer the right one for that moment?
- 10) What do you think of the hopes and dreams of the children when they read their assignment, "What I want to do when I grow up"? How can people like Dr. Neill MacNeill be a guiding light for such children? Why did the doctor return, rather than accept a lucrative city practice? Why is he critical of Christy and Rev. David Grantland?
- 11) What do you think of David's approach to the moonshine problem? What is the doctor's view? (Note: his telling of the famous Whiskey Rebellion in the 1790's accurately reflects the economic reality of many other areas as well—I once served a church in Western Pennsylvania where during that period the minister and his elders were on opposite sides of the conflict, the elders, being farmers, finding that the only way they could earn money was to convert their grains into whiskey that could be transported easily on mule and horse-back across the mountains to the east.) How is the minister probably regarded by the Cutter Gap people? How do you think he might have better dealt with the problem?
- 12) What does Christy learn about Lundy when she treks up to confront his father Birdseye Taylor? How must the father view her? How is the boy torn two ways?
- 13) How does Miss Alice go against her principles when she confronts Taylor at the party? What do you think of her confession to Christy? How is this important so that we can have a realistic view of our mentors? How do we tend to "put them on a pedestal"?
- 14) Why do the children stay away from school? How is this an important test of Christy's perseverance? Why does the one mother eventually bring her children? What must this have taken for her to go against her neighbors?
- 15) How is the vandalizing of the school almost the final straw for Christy? Who is it that reminds Christy of a basic teaching of her faith? A case of "a little child shall lead them"?
- 16) When Christy returns to Lundy's home, what book does she find that he has been reading? How is the Dickens novel an appropriate one in his case? What does his eventual reaction to her efforts teach us about our efforts in helping people? How will you feel when you are not successful? How can we accept failure and go on?
- 17) How does Christy react to the burning of the school? What was she doing when she first heard noises outside? How does this show that prayer is not a device to get our way with God? Contrary to claims of some TV evangelists, and those in charge of "scientific" experiments with prayer, can prayer be measured by results? What is its purpose?
- 18) How is the burning of the church a test of a basic tenet of Christy's faith, as well as her resolve to stay in Cutter Gap? What do you think of what Miss Alice says to her? How is "breaking the cycle" the only Christian response? See the summary of Jesus' teachings on this in Matthew 5:38-48, and the apostle Paul's midrash on this in Romans 12:9-21. In what situations today do you see cycles of hatred and violence that need to be broken? (Years ago, in a Mississippi church that still bore the blackened marks of a fire bomb above its doorway, I heard one of its members, Fannie Lou Hamer, speak about "not becoming like the white man, so filled with hate," but that "we must love him in the way that Jesus taught us to do." This made even more of an impression on us Northerners when we learned how savagely she had been beaten by a state policeman when she had been arrested for her Civil Rights activities!)
- 19) What is it that leads Christy to decide to stay in Cutter Gap? How does little Mountie contribute to this? How did you feel while watching this final scene? What have you learned from the film? That "doing good" is not enough, that we must do good "well", which is never easy? How to help others without harming their self-respect? Or—?

Lectionary Links

Film Scenes for Preaching/Teaching the Lectionary

June 3, 2007, Trinity Sunday Rom 5:1-5

The peace and the “boasting in our sufferings” that the apostle Paul writes about were no academic matter for the apostle who had been beaten, shipwrecked, and imprisoned—nor was it for Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the courageous theologian who stood up to Nazi lies and cruelty. Imprisoned for his role in the German resistance movement, he poured out his heart and thoughts in a series of letters and papers that he smuggled out to his parents, fiancé, and, most of all, to his friend Eberhard Bethge. In his now famous letter of July 21st 1944¹ Bonhoeffer declares that Christians are not saints of the traditional type or especially religious but are person of faith who throw themselves “utterly into the arms of God and participate in his sufferings in the world and watch with Christ in Gethsemane.” That the theologian did this is well depicted in the film biography shown on PBS television, *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace*. During his last year of confinement when the Allies were bombing Germany so fiercely, Bonhoeffer’s calm demeanor during the raids helped reassure his fellow prisoners, most of whom lacked his faith. From his letters we know that he continued to reassure his loved ones that he was fine, even though at times he underwent brutal interrogations. With the peace that only Christ brings, he walked to the gallows, declaring that for him this was the beginning.

The ending of the 1953 film *The Robe* demonstrates the peace that Christ brings to believers. Based on a novel by Lloyd Douglas, the film is a mixed bag that includes the usual clichés of toga films and some fine moments. Marcellus is the Roman tribune in charge of the detail that carried out the crucifixion of Christ. He wins Christ’s robe in the game and turns it over to his slave Demetrius. Back in Rome he is tormented by nightmares of the crucifixion, so, resolving to find out more about the man he had crucified, he sets forth on an epic journey to Judaea. He meets various people, including the lovely Diana, who of course, is a Christian. Although his slave Demetrius is converted to the new faith, Marcellus holds out, but eventually accepts it. The mad Emperor Caligula, who had commissioned Marcellus to spy on the new sect, condemns Marcellus and Diana to death. The film shows the

couple, hand in hand leaving the court as they cheerfully go to their martyrdom. Caligula is shocked by their peaceful demeanor and cries out that they are going to a better kingdom. Alfred Newman’s glorious music builds to its climax, signifying who really is the winner and who the loser in the confrontation between emperor and believers.

For those preaching on John:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth.” These words of Jesus could apply to Afrikaner Gerrit Wolvaardt in the film *Final Solution*. During the apartheid era in South Africa Gerrit is a university student who firmly believes that his hero Adolf Hitler had the right idea in dealing with the Jews, and that South Africa also should adopt the Nazi’s Final Solution in regard to blacks. Gerrit’s Boer grandfather had been executed by the British for his resistance to British rule. His legacy to his son was the admonition to see the truth. Thus, when Gerrit meets fellow student Celeste and black pastor Rev. Peter Lekota who challenge his racist views, he turns to the Bible to prove the truth of his racist views. However, he is led to passage after passage that reveal the deep love of God for people of all races and nations. The book that Celeste has challenged him to read, Alan Paton’s *Cry the beloved Country* also begins to work its magic upon him, once he lays aside his sneering comment that it is “Communist rubbish,” and begins reading its story of reconciliation between two grieving fathers, one white and one black. Slowly, often struggling against the Spirit’s pull, Gerrit is guided into the truth.



Gerrit sits next to Celeste, who is holding Alan Paton’s novel *Cry the beloved Country*.

¹ Pp.124-125, Letters and Papers from Prison. London: S.C.M. Press & Fontana Books, 1959.

Lectionary Links

Martin Luther King, Jr. always taught the way of non-violence and trust in God in fighting for social justice, rather than relying on weapons, as many of his followers would have preferred. Thus many viewers were surprised to learn when they watched the TV film *Boycott* about the Montgomery Bus Boycott that there was a moment when Dr. King gave in to his fear and bought a gun to protect his family. His home had been bombed, and just about every day threats would come in over his telephone. For a time it seemed that the only protection he could count on would come from having a gun close at hand. However, his trusted adviser Bayard Rustin was a committed pacifist, and he confronted Dr. King with the contradiction between what he had been preaching and his buying the gun. It was not long before the gun was out and the great leader's trust in God and the teaching of Christ was restored.

June 10, 2007, 10th Sunday in Ordinary Time Ps 146

In the CBS miniseries *JESUS* there is a moving scene in which the priests of the Jerusalem temple show that they take Ps. 146:3 to heart. Pontius Pilate, just arrived to take up his duties as governor of Judea, leads his soldiers into the temple courtyard, along with their standards emblazoned with pagan images. The crowd is upset because such images go against the prohibition of any graven image in the temple area. Caiaphas the high priest emerges from the inner temple along with his fellow priests. He bids welcome to the governor, but when the Roman tells him that he is posting soldiers in the temple to guard against revolt, Caiaphas, kneels to the ground and offers his neck to the Roman sword, showing that he would risk death rather than agree to Pilate's orders. The other priests look at each other with astonishment, but then follow their leader's example. There is a long silence as a hundred or more priests offer their lives in defense of their faith. Pilate is taken aback. A Roman adviser reminds him that Rome would not be pleased by the blood of so many murdered Jews. Without a word, the Governor turns around and leads his men away. Caiaphas might later be the instrument for condemning Jesus, but at the outset of this film he is honored as a man who trusts in God, as he understands him, and not in princes, especially Roman ones.

**June 17, 2007, 11th Sunday in Ordinary Time
I Kings 21:1-21a**

The story of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel is very much like a Hollywood film noir of the classic period, 1940-1960. Indeed, it would make a good basis for such a film, somewhat similar to the classic *The Postman Always Rings Twice*. Like that film, it would be shot in black and white, with the lighting effects showing the contrast between the evil royal couple and the innocent Naboth, whose vineyard the king covets. Jezebel would make a suitable femme fatale, much like Lana Turner's Cora. King Ahab is like the character played by John Garfield, the malleable Frank, a drifter who falls in love with Cora and then succumbs to her plot to kill her older husband Nick. Nick, of course, is like poor Naboth, the obstacle standing in the way of those who want to take over what he owns, in this case not a vineyard, but a small restaurant. The unmasking of the murderers is more complicated in *Postman*, but justice is just as relentless in catching up to the pair, as it was with Ahab and Jezebel. Those who give in to evil, sooner or later, will pay the price, whether in America of the 1940s or in Israel almost three thousand years earlier.

**June 24, 2007, 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 8:26-39**

For those preaching on the Galatians lesson:

Afrikaner Gerrit Wolfaardt (see June 3 Illustrations "For those preaching on John" for background) was raised in a church that taught that whites were superior to blacks. Indeed, blacks were regarded as little more than animals, so it was all right to treat them thus by totally separating them from their masters. In college he was attracted to a girl reading Alan Paton's novel *Cry, the Beloved Country*. She challenged him to read the anti-apartheid novel, but he dismissed it as "Communist rubbish." During an argument with her friend, a black pastor, Gerrit claimed that the Bible taught that blacks were inferior. Called on this, Gerrit tried to find the passage, but could not. Later he goes to the library and starts scouring the Bible, but still is not able to find such a passage. Instead, he reads in the Book of Acts that God has made all humanity one—and then he comes upon this passage from Paul. Although he has a long way to go, this challenging passage from Galatians marks the beginning of Gerrit's journey from the darkness of racial hatred into the light of the gospel.

July 8, 2007, 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary Links

Luke 10:1-11, 16-20

In the Lukan passage Jesus gives his disciples power “over the enemy,” which includes demons, as he sends them forth to announce the coming of the kingdom. When they report back to him that their trip has been successful, it seems that they have experienced little difficulty with the demons. How different this is from the experience of demonic possession in Hollywood films. In the classic *The Exorcist* the demon-possessed little girl and the priests who try to aid her go through hellish experiences, the girl’s body even levitating; her head spins around; and she spews forth vomit during various phases of the battle. Finally it is only when one priest sacrifices his own life that the girl is released from bondage.. In *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* it is the girl who sacrifices her life, and the priest who tried to help her is put on trial for negligent homicide. To the world, as represented by the court in the film, the exorcism is a failure, poor Emily Rose a victim of an incompetent clergyman. But in her letter which the priest reads to the court, Emily Rose is not victim but victor because she chooses to remain tormented because the Virgin in her vision had given her a choice of instant release through death or lingering suffering so that the skeptical world would come know there were spiritual powers contending against each other. With little hesitation the devout young woman chose the way of suffering, thus making her one of the many unsung martyrs of the faith.

July 15, 2007, 15th Sunday in Ordinary Time



*Derek is a loner in prison in American History X.
(c) New Line Cinema*

Luke 10:25-37

In *American History X* the character Lawrence makes for a surprising “Good Samaritan,” especially for the man whom he helps so greatly, Derek Vinyard. Edward Norton superbly portrays a blue collar worker consumed so much by hatred and his hardscrabble life that he joins a Neo-Nazi party, a group that answers all his questions as to why he and his family are poor by blaming everything on blacks and Jews. In prison for stomping to death a young black who had vandalized his car, he is assigned to the prison laundry where he is paired with Lawrence, a black man. Lawrence is cheerful and tries to talk with Derek, but the white man wants nothing of him. Derek tries to stay aloof from all the groups among the prisoners, including the Neo-Nazis. The black militants hate him because he has a swastika tattooed on his body, and the group to which he might have been attracted, hate him because he will not join them. The latter corner him one day in the shower and brutally rape and beat him. Lawrence, meanwhile, refuses to be put off by Derek’s hostility, continuing to talk to him and showing him the routine of the laundry and the prison system. Slowly Derek’s reserve melts, and the two become friends. After Derek’s sentence is up, he thanks Lawrence, especially for what he thinks is the reason that he was not attacked again, either by the Neo-Nazis and the militant black group, Lawrence’s putting out the word on his behalf. Lawrence does not take any credit as he wishes his companion well out in the world. Derek enters society with a newfound mission, the saving of his younger brother Danny, who has become as racist as the older brother whom he has long idolized.

July 22, 2007, 16th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 10:38-42

The movie *A Price Above Rubies* tells the story of a woman married to a Hasidic scholar and who refuses to stay in the role of Martha in the kitchen. Renee Zellweger plays Sonia, daughter of a Brooklyn diamond merchant. She shows great interest and talent in the trade, but her father sends her instead into an arranged marriage with Mendel. Her husband insists that their new-born son be named after the head of their sect, rather than, as she would have preferred, after her beloved brother who had died when they were children. Mendel neglects her for his studies and prayers, and when he does engage in

Lectionary Links



Miss Potter and her editor look over proofs.

love, he turns off the light and reflects upon Abraham and Sarah, rather than in his or his wife's pleasure. Mendel's older brother Sender, learning of Sonia's restlessness and of her expertise in the gem trade, allows her to manage his store—and also demands from her body a terrible price for his support. In the incident in Luke's gospel Mary incurs the disapproval of her sister Martha by taking the male position of a student by sitting at Jesus' feet, but Sonia pays an even higher price for her going against the culture of her family—Mendel divorces her and takes custody of their son, the rest of the family and sect members treating her as though she were dead. However, she emerges as a stronger person, and, this being a Hollywood film, finds true love with the Puerto Rican jewelry maker she has met.

Whereas a casual reading of the Peter Rabbit books would never lead us to think of their author as taking the side of Martha's sister Mary, the film *Miss Potter* shows us how iconoclastic Beatrix Potter actually was concerning the role that her society deemed appropriate for a woman. Her mother fretted over her still being single even though when the film begins Beatrix is in her thirties. Not that Mrs. Potter had not tried: we see a series of suitors, none of whom would have supported Beatrix in her pursuit of her art and story telling. Beatrix had turned all of them down, at one point declaring to her mother that she would not marry a man just because it was expected of her. The one passion that Beatrix follows, her art, is regarded as child's play by Mrs. Potter, but Beatrix keeps at it. Her search for a publisher is finally rewarded when two brothers accept her "little book," not out of believe in its possible success so much as out of a desire to find a project for their new brother who has just joined the firm. They take a dim view of Norman Warne and believe that Miss Potter's book project will do the least harm to their publishing house should he fail. Norman, however, turns out to have a keen eye for

publishing and for design and printing. Working closely with Beatrix, he guides the book through the design and printing process, the book emerging as the colorful work Beatrix had dreamed of—and selling beyond her wildest dreams. Even in all this Mrs. Potter had opposed her daughter's plans, complaining that Beatrix, when Mr. Warner called at their home to work with her on the book, was bringing mere "tradesmen" into their house. Beatrix stands her ground, attacking the snobbery of her mother. And, in true storybook fashion, falling in love with Warne. Beatrix Potter was a woman who would have understood Mary's desire to break out of the confines of society's expectations and lay aside her cooking pots to sit at the feet of the visiting Rabbi.

July 29, 2007, 17th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 11:1-13

The character known only as "Donkey" in the animated film *Shrek* would be good company for the man knocking on the door of the neighbor late in the night in Jesus' parable. Shrek is an ogre who is all too well aware of how society regards his ugliness. Shrek wants just to be left alone so that he will not be insulted or snubbed by others. Donkey, however, gets it in his mind that the two should become friends. Time after time Shrek rebuffs him, even moving to a swamp where he thinks no one will bother him. However, Donkey persists. Wherever the ogre goes, the donkey follows. No matter how many times Shrek insults his would-be friend, and even bluntly tells him to go-away, Donkey sticks around—until at last Shrek's hostility is weakened, and he needs some help. The persistent Donkey is on hand to provide it.

August 5, 2007, 18th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 12:13-21

Ben Franklin wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* that the man who believes that money can do everything might very well do anything to obtain money. That is the case with the characters in the films *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and its counterpart for the late 20th century, *A Simple Plan*. In both films people who are just getting by but want more find themselves descending a slippery slope of greed that leads to stealing, suspicion and violence. In the older film a man named Dobbs joins up with two other Americans in Mexico to prospect for gold, and when they find it, begins to suspect that the

Lectionary Links

others want to rob him and that he should do them in first so that he can have it all for himself. In *A Simple Plan* a store owner, against his better judgment, gives in to his brother and a friend's desire to keep for themselves a bag of money that they find in a small airplane that has crashed in the forest where they were hunting. As with Dobbs, human greed and mistrust lead to terrible consequences unforeseen in their "simple plan" of hiding and dividing the money among themselves. In both films, none of the persons are depicted as bad at the start of the story. They are human beings who succumb to great temptation, becoming in the process greedy, and then, consumed by their greed, willing to do anything, even commit murder, to attain their goal of becoming wealthy.

I read somewhere that Ben Franklin wrote in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* that the man who believes that money can do everything might very well do anything to obtain money. That is the case with the characters in the films *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and its counterpart for the late 20th century, *A Simple Plan*. In both films people who are just getting by but want more find themselves descending a slippery slope of greed that leads to stealing, suspicion and violence. In the older film a man named Dobbs joins up with two other Americans in Mexico to prospect for gold, and when they find it, begins to suspect that the others want to rob him and that he should do them in first so that he can have it all for himself. In *A Simple Plan* a store owner, against his better judgment, gives in to his brother and a friend's desire to keep for themselves a bag of money that they find in a small airplane that has crashed in the forest where they were hunting. As with Dobbs, human greed and mistrust lead to terrible consequences unforeseen in their "simple plan" of hiding and dividing the money among themselves. In both films, none of the persons are depicted as bad at the start of the story. They are human beings who succumb to great temptation, becoming in the process greedy, and then, consumed by their greed, willing to do anything, even commit murder, to attain their goal of becoming wealthy.

August 12, 2007, 19th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Heb 11:1-3, 8-16

Eric Liddell was both a man of faith and a superb athlete, his story being well told in both the book *The Flying Scotsman: A Biography* and the Oscar-winning film *Chariots of Fire*. That it was a strong faith is

well documented in the incident in which Eric, upon learning that his race was to be run upon a Sunday, refused to do so. Castigated in the English newspapers for being unpatriotic—he was favored to win—he refused even in the presence of the Prince of Wales to compromise his belief that he should engage in no form of work on the day that should be devoted to the Lord. Eric's running style, with his head thrown so far back that he could not see the track was totally unorthodox. That, along with the flailing of his arms should have cost him so much time that he could not possibly compete successfully. And yet he did, winning race after race—so many that he was dubbed "The Flying Scotsman." Observer after observer credited his faith as being the factor that transformed him into a winner. During the crisis over his refusal to run on Sunday someone pointed out that what now seemed such a liability, Eric's faith, was actually at the very

August 19, 2007, 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Luke 12:49-56

The terrible family divisions over him that Christ predicted can be seen in the film biography of social activist Dorothy Day, *Entertaining Angels*. During her days as a radical reformer living in Greenwich Village she had become drinking pals with such intellectuals as John Reed and Eugene O'Neill. Also among them was Forster Batterham, with whom she began an on again off again love affair. Like her friends, Dorothy, whose parents had been active in a Protestant church, had dropped out of what they regarded as a bourgeoisie institution uninterested in helping the poor. Earning enough money from her brief stint as a Hollywood scriptwriter, Dorothy bought a beachfront cottage on Staten Island to which Forster and her friends frequently came for parties. During one of her strolls she encountered a Catholic nun who ran a soup kitchen. Dorothy is drawn to both the nun and her work because here she sees someone actually doing something for the poor, and not just discussing them as a topic, as her friends were doing. When she becomes pregnant with Forster's child, she desires a more settled life for herself and the child. Forster resists, especially Dorothy's desire to join the church and have their new daughter baptized. They quarrel, he leaves, returns, and as he leaves for what turns out to be for the last, tells her that he will not be pinned down, nor put up with going to church. Dorothy takes her daughter to be baptized, but without Forster. Her family gathered around them are the homeless people

Lectionary Links

ministered to by the church.

August 26, 2007, 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time
Hebrews 12:18-29, Luke 13:10-17

Just as Jesus said to the woman with the bent back, “Woman, you are set free from your ailment,” so, at the end of her missionary service in China, Gladys Aylward would be able to repeat this to the women whom she watched over in her district. With Jesus it was a misshapen back, with Miss Aylward it was misshapen feet. Part of her story is dramatized in the film *Inn of the Sixth Happiness*, and all of it is told in Alan Burgess’s book *The Small Woman*. Against great odds this London parlor maid had battled to become a missionary to China. With little money and no official backing she managed to cross Russia and Siberia by train to join another woman ministering among the Chinese as an independent missionary. She turned a rundown house into an inn where she engaged the imaginations of the travelers who stayed there by telling gospel stories. A series of adventures followed, including her quelling of a prison riot and the conversion of the local Mandarin to Christianity. It was he who appointed her as Foot Inspector, after she had continuously complained to him about the painful and time-honored custom of binding the feet of girls. This cruel custom was a part of the patriarchal system that had sought to keep women in their place for so many centuries, though ostensibly it was because women with small feet were considered more attractive. Gladys Aylward was horrified at the sight of girls and women painfully taking small, mincing steps around their houses, and unable to venture forth very far into the outside world, hence her persistent advocacy on their behalf—which eventually led to the Mandarin ordering the practice stopped. At last this small woman from London was able to set free women who literally had been in bondage.

Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery

Continuud deom p. 6

and of the development of Wilberforce’s character over the years. The reader will be truly amazed by

Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery

the grace of God who packed so many great gifts into such a small and sickly body, surrounding Wilberforce with so many devoted friends. History lovers will appreciate the account of the religious revival led by George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers, the author relating that the last known letter written by the dying John Wesley was to Wilberforce, encouraging him to fight on against the slave trade. The book also clearly demonstrates that Wilberforce was no one issue man: he was deeply involved in virtually every progressive cause of the time, affecting child laborers, prisoners, and even animals (he helped found the SPCA). Using the nicknames used by his friends, the book easily could have been entitled *AMAZING WILBER*.

Media Meaderings

This is the second on-line issue of VP, a few days later than intended, but still far closer to schedule than during the frantic days of the print issues when we were always scrambling to garner funds to pay off the last issue before sending the new one to the printer. I hope that you have been exploring the revamped VP website and are finding “Film Capsules” useful. Below is some information about upcoming wVP workshops.

April 21- “Media With a Creative Edge”

Ed McNulty will keynote and lead a film workshop at this half-day ecumenical event, sponsored by the Media Comm. of E. Ohio Conference, UMC, Hey, it’s free! For brochure log onto: http://www.eocumc.com/mediacenter/mc_workshop_0407.pdf

April 25 - NCCL Natl. Columbus, Ohio

Catholic readers might be interested to note that McNulty will offer a workshop at the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership on the afternoon of Wed. April 21, 3:15-4:30 PM. For more info go to:

<http://www.nccl.org/mc/page.do>