

Visual Parables

Film & Faith in Dialogue



*From Upper left, clockwise: TILL; TAR;
Amsterdam; & The Piano Lesson*

Also Inside:

**The Piano Lesson; Ticket to Paradise; Smile;
Bros; Advent/Christmas Films;
& more**

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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 viewers some idea as to why a film is rated R, PG-13, PG, or G.

TILL

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY



Emmett Till goes to Bryant's Store to buy some candy. © United Artists

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hour, min. 10. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep, O Lord?

Awake, do not cast us off forever!

Why do you hide your face?

Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?

For we sink down to the dust;

our bodies cling to the ground.

Rise up, come to our help.

Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

Psalm 44:23-26

Director Chinonye Chukwu's film of the life and death of Emmett Till exposes the ugly face of Jim Crow America, a face even more grotesque than the battered one that the world saw when Jet Magazine printed a photo of his disfigured face. The story of Emmett Till and his mother Mamie Till Bradley, though it unfolded 67 years ago, is still urgent because the hate-filled racism that poisoned his murderers is undergoing a resurgence in our nation today.

The film begins in Chicago in 1955 where the Black

fourteen-year-old Emmett Till (Jalyn Hall) lives with his mother Mamie Till Bradley (Danielle Deadwyler). His father had died during WW 2, and Mamie had remarried and then divorced, and now she is engaged to Chicagoan Gene Mobley (Sean Patrick Thomas). The boy is getting ready for an August vacation with his uncle Moses Wright (John Douglas Thompson) and other relatives in her home state. We see that he likes to dress well and has a lively personality—just as his former classmates testify in the excellent PBS documentary that ought to accompany the dramatic feature, *The Murder of Emmet Till*. Mamie is trying to get him to take seriously the very different—and to a Black person dangerous—racial mores in the Magnolia State. When she says that he must act small down there, the boy hunches up his shoulders and stooping down, walks around the room as he laughs. Several times she tries to instill in him the necessity of being careful. He tells her he knows, but it is obvious he has no inkling of the danger to a Black person raised in the North trying to act the his customary way in Mississippi.

Emmett gets his first taste of the difference when, as the train approaches the Mississippi border, all the Black passengers

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TILL

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY

Continued



Mamie's family gathers around her. © United Artists

have to get up and move back to the “colored” car. At his uncle and aunt’s home just outside of Money, Mississippi, he enjoys himself the first few days with his young cousins, though not at all liking to pick cotton. Ominously, shortly before Emmett’s arrival farmer Lamar Smith and minister Rev. George Lee, both civil rights activists, were murdered in separate shootings, with none of the killers being brought to justice. On August 24, 1955 Emmett went with several other boys to buy candy at Bryant’s Store where Carolyn Bryant (Haley Bennett) waits on him. He admires her beauty, and when she takes offense, shows her the picture of a movie starlet that came with his wallet, to which he had compared her. He leaves the store, and she follows him out, whereupon he turns and whistles at her. The other boys immediately realize the danger and hustle Emmett into the car and drive off, while the angry Mrs. Bryant seeks her husband.

Back at Moses’ shack everyone tells Emmett what a mistake he has made. However, nothing happens during the next few days, until the night of August 28, 1955. Carolyn’s husband, Roy Bryant, and his half-brother, John William Milam, bang on the door of the shack. The boys had gone to bed, and Moses tries to forestall the abduction, pleading that he is just a boy. They brush aside all his pleas and, aided by some African American employees, take off with Emmett bundled in the back of the pickup truck. The filmmakers chose not to show the actual beating, torture and shooting, but they do show a Black man Willie Reed (Darian Rolle) who sees the men with Emmett and hears his screams.

When news of Emmett’s abduction reaches Mamie in Chicago, her divorced parents, John Carthan (Frankie

Faison) and Alma Carthan (Whoopi Goldberg), help her contact a cousin, Rayfield Mooty (Kevin Carroll), employed by the N.A.A.C.P. , telling her that the organization will contact high officials, including the mayor of Chicago and the governor of Illinois, to help find Emmett. Then comes the dreadful news of his body, fastened by barb wire to a heavy cotton gin fan, being found in the Tallahatchie River. Mamie insists that the body be returned to Chicago. As she stares in horror at the disfigured body of her only son, the camera slowly moves up, showing us also how his face had been destroyed by the beating and gunshot, his whole body bloated from being in the river.

Outside the church where the funeral is to be held, Mamie speaks passionately to the press and crowd: “That smell is my son’s body, reeking of racial hatred. Now I want America to bear witness.” She beckons to a Black news photographer (Noel Sampson) to come in and take pictures of her son. She has made the controversial decision to have an open casket funeral, and is in full accord with the pictures being published in JET Magazine. Tens of thousands file by to view the disfigured body. Mamie’s aunt does not want to look at her nephew, no doubt there being guilt over her and husband Moses not being able to protect him, but Mamie tells her she has go to.

The movie moves on to the farce of a trial when the culprits are arrested. Mamie’s reputation is smeared because of her two marriages and pending one. And the defense will be that the body is not that of Emmett, even though the corpse is wearing his father’s ring. Instead, the lawyers charge that the mother and the NAACP have concocted a lie, that the boy is alive and well in Chicago. Thus, Mamie’s decision to journey to Mississippi to testify in person is her second act of courage, following her open-casket decision. Her divorced parents John and Alma Carthan (Frankie Faison and Whoopi Goldberg) are against her going because of the danger, but she insists. Fiancé Gene Mobley wants to accompany her, but gives in when she says their being together could be used against her.

She is welcomed by her hosts in Mississippi, headquartered safely in the all Black community of Mound Bayou (a remarkable community I visited while working in that state during Freedom Summer). Among those advising her are Medgar Evers (Tolsin Cole)

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TILL

BASED ON THE TRUE STORY

Continued

Myrlie Evers (Jayme Lawson), who themselves will be enveloped in death and grief eight years later.

The trial of course goes nowhere, the whites in town looking at her with contempt and hatred. Jim Crow reigns, with Black reporters segregated to a small area. After its predictable outcome of acquittal, Mamie returns to Chicago where she begins speaking out against racism. She and her backers discover that her grief and rage at the horrible injustice meted out to her son have turned her into an eloquent civil rights activist. She does enjoy a long marriage with Gene Mobley and a distinguished career as an activist. Her advocacy on behalf of her son helped to spark the civil rights movement due to the shocking pictures of her boy's face, revealing the horrible face of Jim Crow. In the PBS documentary about her we learn that a hundred days after the murder Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat, thus launching the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the beginning of the end of segregation laws in the nation. Elsewhere I have read that Ms. Parks has said that she was thinking of Emmett Till at that time of her famous bus ride.

Actress Danielle Deadwyler is a marvel at expressing grief and then rage and determination, frequently going against everyone around her. I suspect she will be among the Oscar contenders for this year. However, I wish the script writers, Chinonye Chukwu, Michael Reilly, and Keith Beauchamp, had given her even more to work with. For some reason they leave out what could have been a powerful scene—that of the opening of the nailed coffin. You see, the Mississippi officials were reluctant to ship Emmett's mutilated corpse back North because of the bad image it would cast on the state. Thus, when the family insisted, they made the mortician promise he would not unnailed the lid. When it arrived, Mamie asked to see her son's body, and the mortician told her he had signed an agreement not to open the casket. She replied that she had not signed or promised any such thing, and thus asked for a hammer to open it herself. This was the beginning of her acts of courage, culminating in the decisions to keep the casket open for the funeral and to publish the pictures in a magazine so all of the world would share in the horror.



Mamie becomes an effective speaker & activist. © United Artists

Whoopie Goldberg's part is small, but she too has her affective scene of great pain and grief over the death of her beloved grandson. I was intrigued to see that civil rights icons Edgar and Myrlie Evers are shown giving much needed support to Mamie during her time in Mississippi. It is interesting that the actress in 1996 played Myrlie Evers in [The Ghosts of Mississippi](#), a film about the widow's seeking justice for the murder of her husband.

Film has the power of immediacy in bringing the past alive again. This is important because when we read about such a racial atrocity as the murder of a Black boy way back in 1955, it seems like such a long time ago, but watching it unfold on the screen forces us to confront it more directly. "Black Lives Matter" is not just a slogan, but a vital movement to combat the dark force of racism still infecting a large segment of our population. The murders of African Americans by whites the past few days might not be as garish as that of Emmett, but they are just as lethal. *TILL* is a movie that matters, one that can inspire us to do whatever we can in the endless struggle to root out all forms of racism that still infect our society.

Just as I finished the above I learned that a statue of the boy martyr has been unveiled—in Greenwood, Mississippi! The [9-foot-tall bronze statue](#) shows him in slacks and tie, his left hand touching his hat, and a smile on his face. Mamie is long gone (2003) but a cousin who was present the night of his abduction was there to represent the family. There is good reason to cheer this, but news of another development (this past August) moderates this considerable. It concerns

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Medgar Evers advises Mamie in Mississippi. © United Artists

Carolyn Bryant, the woman whose anger against Emmett Till fueled the murder of the boy. When an unserved warrant against her was found in Leflore County' courthouse, it was taken to a grand jury, which then decided not to charge her. So, though the boy's death had a great effect on the civil rights movement, the last opportunity to bring about justice for the Till family has passed.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What kind of a person does Emmett Till seem to be, judging by what you see of him? In what ways would his experience be different, being raised in Chicago rather than his mother's home state of Mississippi? Such as addressing a white person or passing by one on a sidewalk? (Note, this is well covered in the PBS film I recommend as a companion piece, *The Murder of Emmett Till*.)
2. Why did Mamie Till leave Mississippi? In what ways was life better for African Americans "up North"—and yet, in some ways the same as in the Jim Crow South?
3. When Emmett addresses Carolyn Bryant in her store, describe the two interpretations of his words of admiration for her beauty. How did she interpret his words? What was he trying to do by taking out his wallet and showing her the picture that had come with it?
4. What does Moses Wright try to do when the angry whites invade his home?
5. What had happened in Mississippi not long before Emmett's murder? How was this a pattern whenever a Black person failed to stay in their "place"? And this included those who tried to get ahead economically, as well as those who tried to vote. (A good example is Danny Glover's character in *Freedom Song*.)
6. Why did the authorities nail the casket shut and make the Chicago mortician promise not to open it? What does Mamie's insistence that the casket be open at the funeral reveal about her character? How does this, and her agreeing that the pictures be taken and published, transform her private grief into a means of indicting racism?
7. When the camera reveals the boy's mutilated face, how did this deepen your feelings about his murder? Had she not acted as she did, do you think the nation would have taken any notice of the killing? (Note that similar sentiments were held nine years later when three civil rights workers were murdered at the start of the Mississippi Summer Freedom Project—that if at least one of the dead had not been white, the nation would not have been as aroused as it was because the Northern press would have ignored the event.)
8. What do you think of Mamie's courage in deciding to return to the state to testify at the trial? Why did she think this was necessary? And why refuse to allow her fiancé to accompany her?
9. How is she regarded and treated by the whites at the courthouse? What is the sheriff's attitude?
10. Who supports her, and why is Mound Bayou a safe place for her to stay? (Medgar & Myrlie Evers—who were they and what happened to them eight years later? *See For Us the Living: The Medgar Evers Story* and *The Ghosts of Mississippi*.)
11. How is the jury's verdict indicative of Mississippi justice at the time? (And later at the trial of the murderers of the three 1964 martyrs?)
12. What is the legacy of Emmett and his mother Mamie? Why is 1955 such a notable year?

TÁR

Rated R. Running time: 2 hour, 38 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 4.

I will break your proud glory, and I will make your sky like iron and your earth like copper.

Leviticus 26:19

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Lord Acton

Director Todd Field's latest film, acclaimed by many as "a masterpiece," is but the third film that he has made—I reviewed favorably (in issues before those posted on line, sorry), both his 2001 *In the Bedroom* and his exciting dystopia-set but hopeful 2006 *Little Children*. And now, 16 years later, he directs the first for which he has written the script. And what a script, filled with a vast knowledge of classical music and those who compose and conduct it! And what a brilliant cast and star to bring it to life. Cate Blanchett's performance will be the benchmark with

which to compare all other nominees for "Best Actress" this year. The following lengthy examination necessarily contains spoilers, so you might want to see the film before reading on!

The film begins with a view of text messages on a cell-phone, a hint of the danger that the subject of the film is currently unaware, and therefore all the more dangerous. The persons posting the message clearly are not among the admirers of conductor Lydia Tár.

In a long sequence the real life reporter for *New Yorker* Adam Gopnik introduces his guest Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) by giving a revue of her credentials: she's a world-famous symphony orchestra conductor of the Boston Symphony and the New York Philharmonic (among other major orchestras), and for seven years she has led the Berliner Philharmoniker. She's that rare living EGOT winner, and her mentor in conducting was Leonard Bernstein, who was a superstar transcending the classical label. Her being an out of the closet lesbian has not been much of a problem due to her genius. The two converse knowingly about music, conducting and philosophy before a large, adoring audience. She is about to return to Berlin to prepare her orchestra to record Mahler's Symphony No. 5, a

Continued on next page



Lydia Tár pours everything into her conducting. © Focus Features

TÁR

Continued



The conductor is interviewed before a large NYC audience of admirers. © Focus Features

notoriously difficult work. This will complete her Mahler cycle. She speaks knowingly of its composer Gustav Mahler and his wife and the process of conducting. Also of her mentor Leonard Bernstein. Gopnik is surprised that his guest downplays her role as “first female conductor” by praising the many pioneering women who came before her.

However, in subsequent sequences we see that she is anything but a humble person. Rather, one who is at the peak of her power and who knows how to use it—for good and ill. It is the latter that will cause the trouble foreshadowed by that glimpse of text messages, suggesting that social media can be even a greater power than fame and wealth—witness the case of the once powerful movie mogul Harvey Weinstein. And of Lydia Tár, whose last name even will be used against her by detractors because it conveniently can be reversed to “rat.”

Early on, an ardent fan Whitney Reese (Sydney Lemmon) engages her in a conversation while Lydia’s assistant Francesca Lentini (Noémie Merlant) hovers by, soon reminding her boss that she must move on.

We will see the multitasking Francesca interacting with Lydia throughout the film, treated like she was just a tool, and finally turning against her when her hopes for advancement are dashed—but that is later on. For now, Francesca guides Lydia to her luncheon meeting with Eliot Kaplan (Mark Strong), a wealthy banker who supports her Accordion Conducting Fellowship, as well as an amateur conductor himself.

They gossip and she refuses his request to see her conducting notes on a score. The ACF program they have set up is a scholarship designed to discover and assist promising young women conductors. One of these, named Krista, we will see just briefly, has been the partner in one of Lydia’s many sexual trysts, and is trying to reconnect with her for help in her faltering career.

After her lunch Lydia is teaching her master conducting class at Julliard, and this is where her descent will begin, though it will be a long time before she is aware of it. Aspiring student Max (Zethphan Smith-Gneist), who identifies as BIPOC pangender, has just finished conducting, and Lydia launches into her critique, which becomes sidetracked when he expresses disdain for Bach because he is an old dead white composer and misogynist. She launches into a defense of Bach as an artist desperate from the man that changes into a withering attack on the student. It is so virulent that even the wonderful explanation she gives at the piano of that composer’s Prelude in C Major from The Well-Tempered Clavier cannot soften the harshness of her take-down of the fragile young man, one of whose leg shakes uncontrollably. He is so debased that he gathers up his score and papers and stomps out of the auditorium, yelling at her as he exits. Later camera footage of the episode, secretly recorded against the rules, will surface on the internet, perhaps by the person whose phone screen we saw at the beginning of the film.

Flying back on Eliot Kaplan’s private jet to Berlin, Lydia reunites with her wife Sharon (Nina Hoss), the orchestra’s concertmaster, but not in the warmest of ways, instead criticizing her for keeping too many lamps on and wasting electricity. They are raising a little Syrian girl named Petra, upon whom Lydia dotes. At one point, after the daughter reveals she is being bullied by a girl at school, Lydia again reveals her abuse of power—instead of going to a teacher or the girl’s parents, she walks up to the little abuser herself and, like a mafia Godfather, tells the girl she is Petra’s father and that I will “get you” if ever she bullies her daughter again. She adds to the warning that she is an adult and that no one will believe her if she goes to a teach-

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TÁR

Continued

er to tell on her.

We see Lydia's power on the podium, completely commanding the different instrumentalists how they should play and when to come in. She will tell little Petra, who arranges her many stuffed toy animals into an orchestra configuration, that not every musician can be the conductor, that "an orchestra is not a democracy." Hers certainly is not, even though she maintains good will by conversing in German with the members. However, she manipulates matters to ease out her assistant director Sebastian and replace him with a person of her choice. She has been leading Francesca to believe that she will be raised to that position, but informs her that she chosen someone else.

Francesca had earlier asked what to do with the many emails former lover Krista had sent pleading her cause. Lydia not only had told her to delete them, but had also sent out a "do not hire this person" to various groups, her blacklisting effectively ending the girl's hope for a musical career. In despair the girl had committed suicide, and others on the internet pick up those email. Francesca has ignored her boss's order to destroy the emails, instead apparently sharing them out of anger and spite.

Meanwhile, we see another abuse of power by Lydia—in effect, a refusal to pay it forward—when during a blind audition for a position in the orchestra she detects by the sound of high heels that one auditioner is a woman, so she lowers the score on her score sheet. Also, during a rehearsal she announces that for the second piece on the Mahler concert they will play a cello piece and that they will not go outside the orchestra for a soloist, everyone is pleased. They assume that the soloist will be their own first chair cellist, but Lydia will disappoint them. She has become fixated on a gifted Russian cellist Olga (Sophie Kauer) whose video she has seen. Even though the girl is not yet a member of the orchestra, Lydia finagles things to have the musician of her choice. The cellist becomes her new fling, which will threaten her relationship with Sharon.

The dark cloud on Lydia's horizon is foreshadowed by the screams and noises that she hears at various times, often at night, such as when she is awakened



Personal assistant Francesca Lentini. © Focus Features

by the sound of her metronome. Earlier a mentor had said to her "Schopenhauer measured a man's intelligence against his sensitivity to noise." If this is true, then Lydia must be very intelligent."

The cloud really descends when the orchestra's board meets with her to deal with the internet posts accusing Lydia of abuse of power. A highly edited version of her tirade against the Black Julliard student is making the rounds. The number of her detractors, accusing her of causing Krista to commit suicide because of her blacklisting is growing too large to be ignored or explained away. Lydia tries to fight back, confident and arrogant in the belief that her genius excuses everything.

Her rapid fall finds her at the end in an unspecified "East Asian" country where she practices with an orchestra, then seeks a massage, which does not end well (note the number of the dozen or so available massagers that she chooses!), and in the last scene she is conducting an orchestra whose audience has a very unusual form of concert attire. The screening audience I was a part of roared with laughter as the screen went black and the credits rolled.

What a comedown for the mighty! Todd Field's cancel culture film does not demonize its wielder of power—at first we are led to admire Lydia Tár as a genius who has accomplished great things. But then we are given glimpses of how she treats others who are just beneath her, such as Francesca, whom she treats like an embodied Siri or Alexa. We wonder about her reduced

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TÁR



Lydia looking over record covers as she plans the one for her Mahler recording. © Focus Features

status in the end. She is not sentenced to prison, like Harvey Weinstein. She is still in charge of an orchestra, albeit a very different one than the major one on the other side of the world. She might remind you of J.K. Simmons's Terence Fletcher, a jazz teacher in the 2014 film *Whiplash*, except that her cruelty is more refined, and also has a sexual dimension.

Field's film leaves us with questions about Lydia Tár's present and future. What has happened to her relationship with the adopted daughter—her relationship with Sharon might be over, but what about with Petra? Will she ever be able to return to a classical music career? And we might wonder whose cellphone screen we saw at the beginning; and who took the

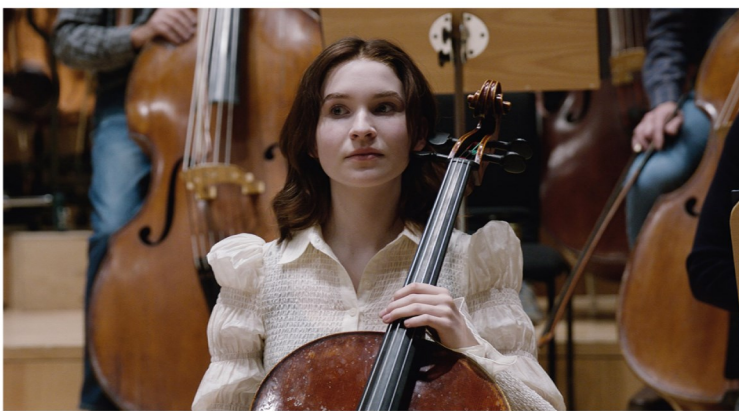
video of the incident at Julliard?

Lord Acton, a great lover and historian of liberty, would have enjoyed this film as a study of the influence of great power upon one's character. Although as an orchestra conductor Lydia Tár's power would never equal that of Macbeth's in scope, she does become the murderer of the career of the young Krista whose attempts to get back in touch with her were

bothersome. Krista may have died by her own hand, but that hand was controlled by a mind crushed by the cruelty of the woman she had admired and loved. Furthermore, who knows what has happened to the Julliard student Max, a fragile soul whom she had treated so cruelly! What future in music could he hope for after having exited her class so tumultuously?

However we regard Lydia Tár or think Todd Field does, the film's creator, teamed with the brilliant Cate Blanchett, has given us one of the most memorable films of the year, centering on a complex person who is neither all-heroine nor all-villain. Every single moment the great actress is on screen she compels attention, even the rise of an eyebrow, the tilt of her mouth, or some little business with something, such as bread in one scene, conveying volumes. There are several moments when she is finishing conducting a session in which everyone has been inspired by her to give their best, we can almost feel the joy she is feeling, and which the others feel as well. She may be a moral monster, but she can lead others to create sublime moments of beauty for everyone to experience. In her private life she has misused her power to get others to serve herself, but on the podium she is able to do what her mentor Leonard Bernstein had taught her is her role, namely, that the conductor's role is to serve the music of the composer.

You will want to see the film, for it's insights and ideas. The question of separating the artist from the person's great work will always resonate—remember the great film about Mozart *Amadeus*, a film about grace in which the more moral and sedate Amadeus was angry with God



The Russian cellist Olga whom Lydia chooses over the orchestra's present first chair celloist. © Focus Features

more moral and sedate Amadeus was angry with God

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TÁR

Continued

because he had blessed the boorish Mozart with far greater talent than himself? Or, within recent memory, the refusal of many to watch a Woody Allen film because of his betrayal of Mia Farrow and seduction of her daughter—does this cancel the greatness of *Crimes & Misdemeanors*, *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, or *Hannah and Her Sisters*? Also, in order to weigh in on the conversations that will issue forth from Hollywood during the Oscar buzz season, this is a “must see” film. Indeed, like myself, you probably will want to see it more than once, so rich and full is it.



The multi-talented Lydia also is a composer. © Focus Features

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What purpose does the opening interview interview serve?
2. When did you first see/feel that there is a dark side to Lydia Tár? What apparently was her relationship with Krista, the young musician trying to contact her?
3. How has her personal assistant Francesca Lentini almost completely given up her personal life?
4. In the scene set at Julliard how does Lydia Tár show her mastery of music, technique, and history? But does she use it to build up and encourage the student or to tear down one who dares to oppose her?
5. Yet, in that scene what do you think of Tár's separating the sublime works of Bach from the composer's human failings? How is this necessary if we are to go on to enjoy their worthy works? For example, would you give up *Annie Hall*, *Manhattan*, *Crimes & Misdemeanors*, or *Hannah and Her Sisters* because of Woody Allen's betrayal of Mia Farrow?
5. How do we see Tár's power or control over the orchestra and also behind the scenes in her maneuvering to oust the current assistant director Sebastian? How is Lord Acton's famous dictum applicable in her case?
6. At what points do we see Tár using people as if they were things, merely components of her career?
7. Compare Tár's fate as a result of “cancel culture” with that of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein and James Levine, director of the Metropolitan Opera music whose professional reputation was ruined after a series of women accused him of sexual assaults?
8. What is Lydia Tár's fate, and why is it so funny? How is this in keeping with what the Scriptures tend to say about the proud and powerful? In addition to the above passage, check out Mary's Song in Luke.
9. What do you think of cancel culture, and what might be its dangers?



Lydia's partner Sharon. © Focus Features

AMSTERDAM

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours, 14 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

*They lay crafty plans against your people;
they consult together against those you protect.
They say, "Come, let us wipe them out as a nation;
let the name of Israel be remembered no more."
They conspire with one accord;
against you they make a covenant—*

Psalms 83:3-5

Director-screenwriter David O. Russell combines murder, inter-racial romances, a little madcap comedy, and a possible coup attempt by Fascists to take over the American government in this period piece that jumps back and forth between the early Thirties in New York and 1918 Belgium and Amsterdam. It sports a large cast of A-level actors that make about every minute a lot of fun to watch, though admittedly you might be momentarily confused keeping up with their names. If you have read one of the negative reviews, disregard them—I am astonished at how much some have missed in this delightful film that combines entertainment with social justice issues.

The film begins in New York in 1933 when buddies from WW 1, Dr. Burt Berendsen (Christian Bale) and attorney Harold Woodman (John David Washington), are tending to the needs of fellow veterans who have fallen on hard times. Berendsen is a doctor specializing in plastic surgery and Woodman is a lawyer, so the two work among the slums and streets of the city, the first providing medical care and prosthetic limbs, and the other legal assistance to the needy ex-soldiers.

We see in a long flashback to 1918 how the two had been brought together by General Bill Meekins (Ed Begley Jr.) in France. The African American Woodman had been complaining about the racist treatment by an officer, and so the General had replaced the man with Berendsen, the two being members of the famed 369th regiment where they become fast friends, Berendsen serving as their medic. Although we see none of the bloody action of the trenches, we are shown its horrible results, both friends bleeding and scarred from the shrapnel of an artillery shell and sent to a Belgian field hospital with hundreds of other wounded men. The blast had also taken out one of Berendsen's eyes. Here nurse Valerie Voze (Margot Robbie) tends to their wounds with her tweezers, dropping each fragment, not into a pan but a small box, apparently with the intention of saving the fragments. An amusing set piece is that in which a French cleric, Bible in

hand, and two lackeys admonish her to stop saving the shrapnel, and the two soldiers join her in forcing the intruders to flee down the hallway.

Back in 1933's New York General Meekins' daughter Liz Meekins (Taylor Swift) contacts Berendsen and Woodman concerning the suspicious death of her father, the general who during WW 1 had brought Berendsen and Woodman together. She wants the autopsy that has been denied because she thinks her father has been murdered. This leads to another murder, with our two heroes accused of the killing. They flee, but do manage to conduct the autopsy with the help

of morgue nurse Irma St. Clair (Zoe Saldana), and sure



Our heroes join forces with Gen. Dillenbeck to foil a coup attempt.

© Disney

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AMSTERDAM

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enough, Berendsen finds evidence of poisoning. The pair, Berendsen sporting a glass eye, enter into a series of escapades, dangerous but also often funny because of some of the bizarre characters involved. And that glass eye is constantly being knocked out by Berendsen's being hit or falling down.

Although the bulk of the film takes place in America, a flashback lasting about a half hour justifies the name of the film. For our two heroes, led there by Voze, Amsterdam is almost a Utopia. For Berendsen because he is free from his unsympathetic socialite wife Beatrice (Andrea Riseborough) and her snobbish parents; the latter upset that their daughter married a half-Catholic/half-Jewish doctor. In bohemian Amsterdam Woodman is free from the racism of the States, so as he falls in love with Voze, there are no societal repercussions. Valerie Voze turns out to be a wealthy heiress-artist, her rooms strewn with paintings, prints, and mixed media works. This is why she had been saving the shrapnel and bullets, turning lethal bits into small life-affirming sculptures and mixed media pieces. The three revel in Amsterdam's night life and events, forming a threesome comparable to the Three Musketeers. She introduces them to a master glass-eye craftsman named Paul Canterbury (Mike Myers), who's also a British intelligent agent in partnership with Henry Norcross (Michael Shannon), an American agent. These two, always fun to watch, will be important later on in the convoluted plot back in America.

In 1933 Manhattan another pair of characters amusing to watch are the bumbling cops in pursuit of our heroes Detective Lem Getweiler (Matthias Schoenaerts) and his not too bright partner Det. Hiltz (Alessandro Nivola). We also meet Valerie's brother Tom Voze (Rami Malek) and his wife Libby (Anya Taylor-Joy), who treat Valerie like a mental patient. The latter has re-entered the picture after being left behind in Amsterdam by her two friends. Her brother and sister-in-law will turn out to be as sinister as they are quirky.



Burt Berendsen & Harold Woodman & their nurse Valerie Voze.

© Disney

Also entering the film at last is Robert De Niro, who plays the dead Gen. Meekin's good friend Army General Gil Dillenbeck. After many rebuffs because so many people are seeking his favor to suit their own ends, the General finally agrees to meet with them. When they arrive at the General's house they discover a messenger with a bag of money sent by a group of wealthy businessmen who want the General to make a speech at an upcoming veteran's reunion. The messenger will not reveal who sent him. After meeting with our trio first, the General agrees to make the speech, but it turns out not to be the one written for him.

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Robert De Niro portrays Gen. Dillenbeck, based on a real person. © Disney

AMSTERDAM



Harold & Valerie become a couple. © Disney

The event is a gala one of veterans once under the General's command. The microphones will carry his voice to his immediate audience and also to a nationwide one. General Dillenbeck meets three of the anti-semitic industrialists and financiers who had provided the money and speech designed to rally an army behind the General. They admire Mussolini and Hitler and thus believe America needs a strong leader rather than "that cripple in the White House." The fourth conspirator in on their plot, they reveal without naming him, is an inventive auto mogul, obviously meant to be the virulently Jew-hating Henry Ford.

From this point the film emulates Hitchcock's *The Man Who Knew Too Much*," with Dillenbeck delivering a

speech that *he* has written. This is highly displeasing to those in his audience who have arrived in their brown shirts, the uniform of the American Bund, the real life group that pledged their allegiance to Hitler during the 30s. The Hitchcockian touch is the killer in the rafters poised to shoot the General—he is the same man who had committed the murder our heroes are falsely accused of. Will he succeed again?

This part of the film justifies the filmmakers beginning the film with "A lot of this actually happened." There really was a "Business Plot" of wealthy Americans wanting to replace President Roosevelt with a dictator, and Gen. Smedley Butler was the man whose character Gen. Dillenbeck is based on. As in an earlier flashback in the film Gen. Dillenbeck did, so also Gen. Smedley showed up at the famous Soldiers Bonus March on Washington in 1932 and spoke to the veterans. The men were demanding that they be paid a promised bonus for their service because they were in such great need due to the Depression. And the wealthy plotters did try to ensnare Gen. Smedley in their plot with a promise of a huge army of veterans to back him. And he did make the speech seen and heard in the film exposing the plot—only it was to a Congressional Investigative Committee. At the end of the film during the credits there is a split screen showing de Niro giving that speech and alongside him the real General, their voices blending to show us that the scriptwriters had merely adapted the real speech for their film.



The era of the 30s are effectively captured. © Disney

It is rare that a filmmaker can so skillfully mix comedy with social justice issues—I think of Spike Lee's delightful [Bamboozled](#)—but David O. Russell ably does so in this film. He reminds us that protofascists coup attempts are not new, that groups like today's Proud Boys have been foreshadowed by the shadowy group of wealthy Americans who tried to enlist Gen. Smedley in their plot—known as "[The Business Plot](#)"—to replace Pres. Roosevelt. As in the movie, there was no prosecution of the conspirators, their illegal acts fading into history. In the sequence of Gen.

Dillenbeck's speech look out for the brown shirted veterans standing as a group, members of the pro-

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AMSTERDAM

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Nazi American Bund that was growing in strength at that time. Their culmination in power is shown in the short (7 min.) film *A Night at the Garden*, when about 20,000 people attended a pro-Hitler rally at New York's Madison Square Garden. If you watch this little documentary, you will see that the giant picture of George Washington that Russell uses in *Amsterdam*'s rally scene is a replica of the one actually used in the (later) Madison Square Garden Bund rally!

Russell's film also reminds us that racism also has long been an infection spoiling American society. The racism that confined African Americans to a segregated regiment and allowed only white officers to command them would continue in the Second World War as well, with such movies about the Tuskegee airmen as *Red Tails* and *The Tuskegee Airman* depicting the racism faced by African Americans during that period. America's racism, which made Valerie and Berendsen's love affair a dangerous one, was a prime reason for the two friends to linger so long in Amsterdam. It is a delight that later, when the latter is freed from his snobbish wife, that Berendsen too enters into such an affair with—well, I should let you discover her identity. I've already perhaps revealed too much, although I do want to mention that the film, in one brief scene, even reveals the practice of forced sterilization of "undesirables" that took place during the 1920s and 30s.

In light of the above, I think this film, written off by too many, is one that should be seen by as many movie lovers as possible. It is not only a lot of fun, but it is a movie that matters as well.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What are Dr. Burt Berendsen and attorney Harold Woodman doing when we first see them? What does this reveal about their characters?
2. How did the white man and the African American meet? What was the status of Blacks in the US Army in WW 1 (and unfortunately still, in WW 2)?
3. Although a member of the wealthy class, what is Valerie Voze doing when we first meet her,



This is a photo of the real American Bund rally in the 1930s—note the big picture. © Disney

and what does this suggest about her character? What do you think of her use of the bullets and shell fragments she saves? A bizarre form of turning swords into ploughshares?

4. Besides Valerie, why do the two men stay in Belgium rather than returning right after the war to the States—especially Woodman?
5. If you are unfamiliar with what is known as "*The Business Plot*," check it out. Why were so many business leaders and manufacturers opposed to Pres. Roosevelt? And admirers of Adolph Hitler and Mussolini?
6. Compare the fictional Gen. Dillenbeck with Gen. Smedley Butler. Note that often in our history it has been military leaders who have emerged as strong defenders of democracy during times of crises, as during the waning days of the previous federal administration.
7. What relevance do you think this film has to current events?

BROS



Bobby (rt) & Aaron meet at a club. © Universal Pictures

Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 55 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 0; Language 4; Sex/Nudity 7.

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.

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10

Directed by Nicholas Stoller and written by Nicholas Stoller and Billy Eichner, *Bros* is the first gay romantic comedy from a major studio featuring an entirely LGBTQ principal cast to be released widely. Unfortunately it drew in less than half its production cost during its opening weekend, despite many glowing reviews. It really is as good as the critics claim, so I urge you to see it soon if you want to enjoy it on a big screen before it is dropped.

Billy Eichner plays the Jewish Bobby Leiber, a popular podcaster dealing with queer history. Living alone, he is against long lasting romantic entanglements. And then at a club he spies Aaron Shepard (Nicholas Stoller), a lawyer with a remarkably buffed body. Though thinking Shepherd shallow at first, Bobby soon enters into a series of on-off again romantic entanglements with the attractive dude.

Bobby is head of a group raising capital for New York's

first L.G.B.T.Q.+ museum. They have a building with work on the galleries proceeding well, but differing on Bobby's proposal that one gallery be dedicated to Abraham Lincoln. He is obsessed with the idea that Lincoln was gay, even though his fellow board members point out the lack of evidence. The board is still short \$5 million, so Bobby sets out to visit prospective donors, which will take him and Aaron to Provincetown..

The museum board is made of a delightful variety of queer people, including a butch lesbian, a belligerent bisexual, a Black trans woman, and a nonbinary person. Although none of them have enough screen time to emerge as rounded characters, the presence of such a wide spectrum of gays at least educates us straights to the fact that being gay, or queer, is not monolithic.

As a straight person I am sure that a lot of the gay humor passed over my head, but there is still so much that evoked my laughter, such as the running gag about our lovers watching "Hallheart Channel" movies and then realizing that Luke Macfarlane, who plays Aaron Shepard, starred in 14 Hallmark movies. Actor Bowen Yang is a hoot as wealthy museum benefactor Lawrence Grape whom our heroes call on in Provincetown during Gay Pride Week. Bobby flubs his appeal during their brief audience, but Aaron unexpectedly steps in, achieving a rapport with Grape when the latter suggests the museum include a carnival-like "gay trauma coaster."

Just as the romance between the two men is at its height, a rupture occurs when Aaron and Bobby have dinner to meet the former's family, and Aaron tells his friend not to be so gay. Bobby is hurt by this, and it appears their relationship is terminated, especially after he argues with Aaron's mother..

There are some tender moments amidst the jokes and one-liners that add heart to the proceedings. At a beach Bobby shares his past history in high school and college when he was criticized for either being too gay or not gay enough. At the dedication of his museum Bobby stands up front with his board members and reminds the audience that not all of their friends had

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BROS

Continued

been able to survive to see this great day, a tender scene referring to the terrible period in the 80s when so many gays died, victims of AIDS, and our society and the federal government ignored the disease. You might want to look up the lyrics of the song “[Love Is Not Love](#)” that Bobby sings to his lover, because they sum up an argument he has made earlier that gay love is not the exact equivalent to heterosexual love.

The film is full of amusing cameos by Debra Messing, Ben Stiller, Jodie Foster, Amy Schumer, Guy Branum, Ts Madison, and others. The sex scenes, though not fully nude, will be too much for some, but for most of us, this is a film that can be very instructive, as well as hilariously funny. Bobby’s journey from self-centeredness to acceptance of others and a sense of solidarity with other outsiders is well depicted. The issue of when to teach children about sexual differences is also dealt with—it comes up when Aaron introduces Bobby to his parents at a dinner in a restaurant and the former becomes upset by Bobby’s insistence, based on his personal family experience, that grade school children are not too young to be introduced to the subject. Aaron’s mother Anne Shepard (Amanda Bearse) is a teacher and strongly disagrees. Still another factor I liked is the follow-your-dream theme—Aaron enjoys making chocolate delicacies but sees no future in it, whereas Bobby encourages him in his interest—perhaps another example of the Proverbs teaching that “Two are better than one.”

I hope this film eventually draws a larger audience than it is currently attracting! You can make that happen, and you should.

For Reflection/Discussion

It will be obvious to gay readers that these questions are mainly for so-called “straight” readers. Well, because that adjective infers that others are “crooked,” let me say, readers not LGBTQIA members.

1. Describe Bobby and Aaron. How are similar yet different from the usual Hollywood romance couples?
2. What do you think Bobby means by his strong assertion that love is not the same for gay



The Board of the LGBTQ+ Museum represent a wide variety of the gay community. © Universal

couples? Check out his song for more on this.

3. What did you learn about the gay community from seeing the museum board members? How has society tended to see gays as a monolithic community, similar to the mistake of regarding African Americans in this way?
4. At what moments in the film did you feel uncomfortable? Why?
5. What has been your experience in your understanding and view of homosexuality? How has the Bible influenced you? Has a modern approach—looking at the milieu of the writers and the actual meaning of the Hebrew and Greek words—changed the Bible from a club into a means of liberation?
6. What do you think in regards to teaching children about sexuality in all of its many forms? Of politicians trying to prevent this?
7. How have you thought and felt about the rapid turn around of our society in regard to same sex marriage? Have you noticed that some commercials now include same sex couples: see if anyone can recall which ones.
8. How did you feel at the end of the film? How was the somber remembrance of those who did not make it a good addition? Thus far the film has not become a hit: why do you think this is so, and what can be done about it? For lyrics to “Love Is Not Love:” [Billy Eichner – Love Is Not Love Lyrics | Genius Lyrics](#).

THE STORIED LIFE OF A.J. FIKRY



A.J. Fikry runs a bookstore on a New England island. © Vertical Entertainment

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour, 45 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 2.

...for from my youth I reared the orphan like a father...

Job 31:18a

Director Hans Canosa's film set in a charming island village should warm the hearts of romantics, especially those who love books. Based on a New York Times best seller, the book's author Gabrielle Zevin also wrote the screenplay. I became completely engrossed in it—well, drawn in, finding its tale of an orphaned girl raised by a lonely bookstore owner enjoyable, but engrossing says too much, because I could not quite shake the sense of the story's artificiality. And yet, having been a lover (and haunter of) bookstores since my grade school days, I fell in love with this film.

Indonesian American A.J. Fikry (Kunal Nayyar) runs a bookstore on the fictional Alice Island, a ferryboat ride from Cape Cod. I would revel in exploring it, but he himself is far from amiable, rebuffing the eager Amelia (Lucy Hale), a sales rep who lives far away in Providence, Rhode Island when she pays a visit to his store to interest him in new publications. We wonder how they will ever come together—but after all, isn't it a romantic trope that when Boy dislikes Girl at first, it

means they must be destined to find each other?

A.J. has turned to alcohol to help him deal with the sorrow over the tragic death of his wife a couple of years before. Two events bring him out of his alcoholic doldrum. His slim first edition of Edgar Allan Poe's *Tamerlane* is stolen, and a mixed race toddler named Maya is left in his store. It will take several years before we learn the secret of these mysteries. In the meantime, the local cop Lambiasi (David Arquette) called in to investigate becomes a supportive best friend, and that sales rep will return to the island again and again, until... There is also a local novelist residing on the island Daniel Parish (Scott Foley). A.J.'s sister-in-law, Ismay (Christina Hendricks) and her husband, Daniel (Scott Foley), will help him to raise the girl. We will encounter Maya at three stages—at, age two played by Charlotte Thanh Theresin; at age six by Jordyn McIntosh, and as a teenager Blaire Brown. All are delightful, with the teenager aspiring to be a writer.

Who stole the book and why, as well as who left the baby and why, and how they are related, we will learn as the film unfolds. There will be a suicide and another death, so the film contains plenty of sorrow—keep that handkerchief close by.

As a book lover I thoroughly enjoyed this heart-tugger. It is a good film for families with middle school children with characters one comes to appreciate as they meet the challenges hurled their way.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Describe A.J. and Amelia: how are they alike and yet very different? What is the main thing they have in common?
2. How is the way in which A.J. has been dealing with his grief too typical? (Note how in Hollywood movies through the decades alcohol is the go-to method for characters facing stress, grief, and other emotional problems!)

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Rated R. Running time: 1 hour, 55 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 6; Language 5; Sex/Nudity 2.

Fear and trembling come upon me, and horror overwhelms me.

Psalm 55:5

Directing his own screenplay, Parker Finn has produced one of the most creepiest horror films that I have seen. Totally opposite of the myriad of those in which lustful teenagers or young adulterers do stupid things, this one centers on a therapist with a troubled past involving her mother. It unsettles you throughout its length, and even more so at its end.

Dr. Rose Cotter (Sosie Bacon) is a therapist at a large hospital where she is experienced in dealing with people in crisis. But nothing prepares her for the young traumatized woman who, while smiling, breaks a flower vase and after hesitating a moment, starts slashing her face with a shard, stopping only when she has cut her throat and falls to the floor as her blood flows outward.

Rose's fiancé Trevor (Jessie T. Usher) at first is sympathetic and supporting, but as her brittle mental state deteriorates while she suffers from—well, are they hallucinations or some form of actual evil that inflicts a curse on its victims? Her supervisor and colleagues of course think it is the former, as does her mentor and former therapist Madeline (Robin Weigert) and her sister with whom she has a restrained relationship, but the more Rose learns, the more she believes she is under a curse. There is a bizarre, shocking moment at the birthday party sister Holly (Gillian Zinser) hosts for her son that ruptures Rose's relationship and convinces everyone she is mentally deranged.

Rose goes to the police detective, Joel (Kyle Gallner), she had once had a relationship to help track down some of the people she had found on the internet, a whole series of people who had killed themselves in



Rose & one of her patients. © Paramount Pictures

ways similar to the young woman she had been with. Joel is worried and puzzled by her, but agrees to help. She visits one person in a state prison with disastrous results.

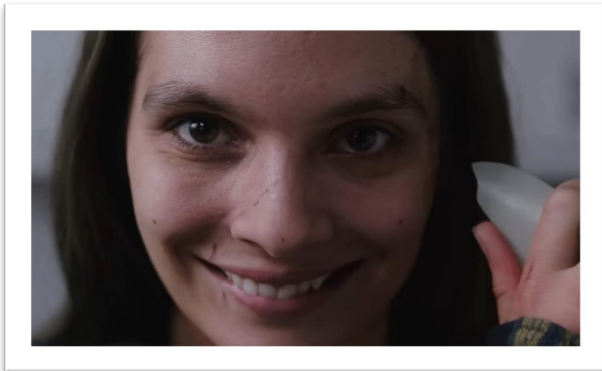
With everyone thinking she is mentally ill because her story is too fantastic to believe the film suggests that most of us are so trapped within the box of rationality that we refuse to consider an alternative explanation of a puzzling situation. The climax in which Rose faces her mother and the deeply embedded guilt over what she (Rose) had done when the ill woman needed help is not reassuring about our world. This is a disturbing film providing escape from the humdrum for those willing to enter into the pain and fear of the protagonist. This is horror at its best, but it is best seen in the company of another, with whom afterward you can come back down to earth and talk about the experience, and I do mean "experience," and not just the film.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Why is the smiling in the film so unsettling? What do we usually associate smiles with? Is this part of the reason?
2. What do you think of Trevor and what he does in regard to Rose?

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© Paramount Pictures

3. How is the accepted “scientific” world view of the characters a closed box? How does this determine the reaction to Rose’s story of her supernatural (metaphysical) experiences?
4. In categorically denying the possibility of a “super” (In the sense of above or beyond) world, how are Rose’s associates and family actually being unscientific?
5. How did you feel about the ending of the film? Different from the older horror films where balance was restored to the characters and their world?

THE STORIED LIFE OF A.J. FIKRY

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A.J. & becomes the guardian of little Maya. © Vertical Entertainment

3. Amelia has a favorite book *The Late Bloomer*: from what we learn about its contents, how does her embracing it reveal something of her character? Do you have a favorite book, and what is it? What is A.J.’s reaction to the book, at first and then later on? Have you returned to a book that you had dropped and found it now interesting? What might contribute to it being the “right time” for a book to engage you?
4. How must young Maya be shaped by her upbringing?
5. What do you think of the policeman Lambiasi. How does he become a supportive friend to A.J.? What do you think of his story about the truant boy? What does this reveal about the man?
6. What do you think of the way various incidents—Maya’s entrustment to A.J., the theft of the Poe work, the novelist Daniel Parish’s fate, and Maya’s reading her story—and the way in which they are linked together?
7. What do you think of the scene in which the author of Emily’s favorite book *The Late Bloomer* speaks at the Island Bookstore? What might this suggest about separating the author from his/her work? (Note, this crops up in *Tár* also.)
8. How did you feel during Maya’s reading her story? Did she win First Place? How does this show a touch of realism? What does her aspiring to become a writer say about her upbringing or her environment?
9. How is the book store in a way a character in the film? How did you feel at the end of the film?

TICKET TO PARADISE

Ticket to Paradise

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour, 44 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 0; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1.

*Oh, I know your thoughts
and your schemes to wrong
me.*

Job 21:27

Director Ol Parker provides a nice es-

cape from reality in this old fashioned romantic comedy. The main reason for seeing it is to watch two pros, Julia Roberts and George Clooney, go through their paces in a story about as believable as anything from the Brothers Grimm.

Like some of the screwball comedies of the 30s and 40s, David (Clooney) and Georgia (Roberts) are bickering exes who have split up after a five-year marriage. We're supposed to believe that by coincidence they are seated next to each other at their daughter's law school graduation and later on the airline trip to Bali their assigned seats are next to each other. Of course, if they hadn't been, we would have missed the delightful zingers they fire back and forth.

They're headed to the paradise of the title because their daughter Lily (Kaitlyn Dever) and best friend Wren (Billie Lourd) have been vacationing in the island nation and while swimming far out to sea had been left behind by their boat. (Yeah, sure.) Then came along the incredibly handsome Gede (Maxime Bouttier) in his motorboat to pluck them from the water, and—yes, love at first sight. He is a Balinese seaweed farmer and we are supposed to believe that True Love will overcome their cultural and educational differences. The parents are upset by their daughter's sudden abandonment of a law career—who *wouldn't be?*-- to become a—what?

So, between insults, the parents agree to sabotage the wedding and return Lily both to her senses and the States. Their scheme is to seem to go along with Lily's



David & Georgia arrive on Bali, pretending to be in favor of their daughter's marriage to a Balinese. © Universal Pictures.

wishes while concocting a plan to prevent the wedding. Lily is aware of "Trojan Horsing," so she is on her guard. And Gede may be a seaweed farmer, but is no dummy. When the parents manage to slow things down by stealing their ceremonial rings, he realizes they are the cause of their disappearance.

There are a lot of shenanigans, but it is a far-gone conclusion how this kind of a movie will end. It is a fun ride to get there, with few if any real surprises, except one. It is the fun of watching two fine actors move from hostility to second-thoughts to reviving their original feelings for each other that created the warm feeling at the end of the film. The filmmakers also deserve credit for seeming to present the Balinese wedding in an authentic way, with no one stage whispering an explanation. It appears that Lily has no Christian beliefs, apparently deciding to "go native" for her husband and new family—the latter have accepted her with no qualms. (At least none are shown.)

However, what we don't see, and this is a legitimate parental concern, is what in Gede makes Lily decide on such a drastic change in her life. Do they share a love for literature, music, or art—what beside physical attraction do they share? Is it enough to keep them together so that they will live "happily ever after"?

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STARS AT NOON

Rated R. Running time: 2 hour, 15 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 8.

Director Claire Denis' murky film, set in Nicaragua early in the Covid pandemic, might remind one of a Graham Greene novel with its flawed heroine and mysterious oil man lover and intelligence agents from the US and Costa Rica. The novel by Dennis Johnson that it is based on was set during the Sandinista era, so the politics of the film are shadowy—just that the country is a police state with soldiers wielding automatic rifles stationed on every block or patrolling the streets.

Trish (Margaret Qualley) is a journalist whose passport has been confiscated by the authorities, her dollars traded for almost worthless Cordobas, and thus desperately wanting to get out of the country. The cause of her mistreatment apparently some articles about war crimes she was researching. Her long distant call to a New York editor whom she pitches a Costa Rica travel article is coldly turned down, the heartless man ordering her not to call him again. She has been reduced to selling her body for dollars from minor government officials and cops and an occasional businessman. This pays for her food and lodgings at a dingy motel that she calls a "cesspool."

One night in the bar of the Inter-Continental Hotel she spots Daniel (Joe Alwyn). He is dressed in the kind of suit associated with imperialists, white and well cut. He claims to be a British oilman with a wife at home—though the latter does not keep him from accepting her advances. She charges \$50 for their tryst, and seeing him the next day talking with a man she thinks is a Costa Rican spy, she enters into a torrid affair with him. And I do mean torrid, this film at one time probably would have been designated NC-17, with so much flesh bared to the camera.

As the days go by they copulate and over indulge in drinks. In one sequence they are followed by an agent trailing them. It becomes obvious they must flee the country because of danger—a taxi driver they had employed is found dead, his mouth crammed with a mobile phone. They leave the city and head cross country



Trish & Daniel, caught up in intrigue in Nicaragua. © A24

to the border. This is where the American CIA agent (Benny Safdie) encounters them. He seems to know everything about the pair and wants Trish to sign some papers that, well, something to do with Daniel. Everything is murky in this tale that has reminded some of *The Year of Living Dangerously*, except that Trish seems to have no concern for politics or the poor citizens of the country. Just as murky for me is the significance of the title—we do see stars in a daylight sky in one brief shot, but why I have no idea. The movie was shot in Panama, so the scenery is lovely, and for those who enjoy artfully shot sex, the film will have its pleasures. Beyond this it has little to offer despite the international reputation of its director.

No questions for this film.

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One more observation: like those old romantic comedies, the characters are from the 1%. David is a very successful architect, Georgia owner of a hugely prosperous art gallery, and Lily has a law degree. A month's vacation in an exotic land is no financial problem for them, and apparently seaweed farming will provide enough income to satisfy the American born Lily. So, we might ask, why do we care about these wealthy people. I suppose the answer has already been given—the fun of watching two A-list stars cavort (there's a silly drunken dance scene) on the big screen, so, "Pass the popcorn."

No questions for this film.

THE PIANO LESSON

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour, 35 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 2.

The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; I have a goodly heritage.

Psalm 16:6

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses...

Hebrews 12:1a

August Wilson's wonderful play is currently in a Broadway revival, but for those of us unable to travel to New York, there is the excellent Hallmark TV version broadcast in 1995, now available on DVD. (I bought my copy at one of those Big Lot-type stores for \$2! It is also available on Prime Video.) The play is No. 5 in his 10-Play Cycle, all but one of which is set in Pittsburgh, hence the name The Pittsburgh Cycle. We have reviewed two others of the Cycle that have been made into movies, *Fences* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Adapted for the Hallmark TV series in 1996 by the author, this play is set in 1936 at a home of African Americans who have left Mississippi for better opportunities in the North. The plot centers on a brother-sister dispute over an heirloom elaborately carved piano. The brother is looking ahead and little interested in the past, and the sister is partially stuck in past traumas while trying to get by in the present. It turns out to be a ghost story, in both the figurative and a literal sense.

The story begins as Boy Willie (Charles S. Dutton) and Lymon (Courtney B. Vance) are traveling north with a load of watermelons in Lymon's rickety truck. It is 5 A.M. when they arrive at the Pittsburgh house of his Uncle Doaker (Carl Gordon). Willie's sister Berniece (Alfre Woodard) is a widow living with their Uncle and her 11-year-old daughter Maretha (Zelda Harris). She is still asleep when Doaker goes downstairs to answer the door. Boy Willie takes no notice of the older man's complaint about the early hour. Bernice is clearly not



The talented cast of The Piano Player. © Hallmark Hall of Fame

pleased to see her brother when she finally does join the three men, even though it has been three years since she had left their home state.. She probably knows why her brother has sought her out, and it is not just to sell a truck-load of water melons.

Willie reports that Sutter, owner of the farm where the Charles family had been enslaved, has died, and that the heir has promised to sell the land to him. All he needs is the revenue from selling the watermelons and his half from the sale of the family piano to add to his savings, and he can buy the land. Throughout the

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Doaker stands as he recites the history of the piano & its African-style carvings. © Hallmark Hall of Fame

Continued

THE PIANO LESSON



The 4 men sing a prison work song that evokes the pain of an oppressive white society. Screenshot

film he will affirm his belief that a man with land will be respected, even by White Mississippians*. Berniece declares that she will not sell, and goes upstairs to bed. As the men continue to talk there is a scream upstairs, Berniece claiming to have seen Sutter's ghost and that her brother probably has killed him. Boy Willie denies this, saying that Ghosts of the Yellow Dog killed the man and that Sutter haunting her is another reason to sell the piano. A little later she will also accuse her brother of being responsible for her husband's death when the two of them were involved



Winning Boy plays a lively tune that sets the other men to dancing.
© Hallmark Hall of Fame

in a caper together.

How the two continue to interact, and how the ghost helps resolve their dispute is fascinating to watch. There is also a suiter seeking to relieve Berniece's lingering sorrow: Avery is a gentle soul hoping to become pastor of a church. Later his attempt to exorcise the ghosts will partially help Berniece to deal with her ancestors represented by the carvings in the piano.

Especially powerful is a sequence beginning just before the 31-minute mark that is bookended with music. The four men—Boy Willie, Lyman, Uncle Doaker, and Winning Boy (Lou Myers), an impoverished musician/gambler—are sitting at a table drinking and talking when one mentions and starts singing, much to the embarrassment of Lyman. It is "Berta, Berta," a song they learned when they were prisoners at the brutal Parchman Prison Farm. One by one they join in, tapping their feet rhythmically, the song taking the form of a slave/prison/work song. The men become lost in the song as bad memories are conjured up, Willie even mimicking using a sledge hammer or pick. The song overflows with energy at its height, the quick camera cuts jumping from their faces to their feet to their hands, and then a long shot of all four. Then one by one, the voices cease unto just Doaker's bass voice remains, until he realizes the others have stopped. Willie and Lyman talk again about selling the piano, and it is then that Doaker tells them why Bernice will not sell it. Accompanied by flashbacks to the slave

plantation how the white Mr. Sutter family acquired the piano for his wife from a man in Georgia. They had little money, so they let the piano owner choose a slave and a half—their grandmother and her boy, thus cruelly separating the family. Years pass, and when Mrs. Sutter grieved over her two missing slaves, Mr. Sutter asked his carpenter father, also named Willie Boy, to carve the faces of the departed father into the piano. He not only did this, but also carved their wedding and a birth in the end panels, and sculpted the legs as well. He goes on to relate the history of the piano, how it led to the deaths when the Charles family stole it when they were freedmen.

Thus, carved in African style, the piano embeds the bloody history of the family, something which Ber-

Continued on next page

Continued

THE PIANO LESSON

niece cannot let go. The sequence ends with Winning Boy giving in to entreaties to play the piano. He pounds out a lively juke joint song, then men breaking into dancing, Willie Boy surprisingly lithe and dexterous. Then Berniece returns home from shopping.

The story is a memorable tale of family conflict and coming to terms with the past. As Doaker says at one point, neither brother nor sister is in the right. Both have legitimate claims to the piano—he for wanting to sell it so he can acquire land and a sense of dignity and security; she for not wanting to play it or sell it because of the family’s bloody history embodied in it—as well, as seemingly the ghost of the long dead white oppressor within it. The way by which she is able to make peace with their ancestors celebrated by the carvings you will remember for a long time. And yes, Willie Boy too will come to a far deeper understanding of their heritage.

*While writing this review I have been reading Kim Lacy Roger’s book about the aftermath of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, *LIFE AND DEATH IN THE DELTA: African American Narrative of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change*, affirming Willie’s belief. The author asserts on p. 74, “It is difficult to over emphasize the self respect and psychological freedom that landownership gave to African Americans in the delta.” This is repeated numerous times in the chapter about Bolivar County.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What is the source of contention between the brother—Willie Boy—and sister—Berniece? How are their views of their past and their heritage the polar opposite?
2. Why won’t Berniece play the piano? How does this affect Willie Boy’s reasoning for selling the piano?
3. Other than the piano, what does she hold against her brother? How does Willie Boy and Lymon’s story



Berniece takes care of but does not play the piano, her family’s heirloom.. © Hallmark Hall of Fame

surrounding the death of her husband Crawley give a different picture from hers?

4. Describe the other characters and how they contribute to the plot.

Doaker Lymon Winning Boy Avery
Maretha

5. How is music important in the play, especially the work song that Wilson wrote, “Berta, Berta.” What does this reveal about the men and their experience in Mississippi? What is the other song like that Winning Boy plays—how does African American music exhibit both sides of life? (Blues, jazz, Spirituals)
6. How does Berniece react to Avery’s suggestion that she needs a man to protect her? How have Black women especially struggled for their place in a patriarchal society?
7. How is Sutter’s Ghost the dark side of the Charles family’s heritage? What ultimately is able to exorcise it? What does this say about the role of ancestors in the lives of their descendants?
8. You can go back to scenes showing the piano and stop to see the carvings: what do they depict in a very African way? Birth, marriage (what are the characters doing?), the separation of the family, death.
9. What do you think of the conclusion of the play? What actually exorcises the Ghost? Though it might seem to be part of African spirituality, how might this also relate to the Christian belief in the Communion of Saints, as expressed in the Hebrews passage?

I KILL GIANTS



Despite Barbara's strangeness that makes her an outcast, new student Sophia is drawn to her. © RLJE Films

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour, 46 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 2; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

There is nothing better for mortals than to eat and drink and find enjoyment in their toil. This also, I saw, is from the hand of God
Ecclesiastes 2:24

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.



School counselor Mrs. Mollé is concerned about Barbara.
© RLJE Films

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."
Matthew 5:4-10

This family-friendly story of a young outsider was adapted from a graphic novel by its author Joe Kelly and directed by Anders Walter. Young Barbara (Madison Wolfe) is a delightful resourceful girl using her imagination to cope with a trauma too great to confront directly, hence her creation of a vivid mythical world

which she feels called upon to protect against threatening giants by magical means.

12-year-old Barbara Thorson almost promotes the ridicule and bullying at school by her appearance—she wears large bunny ears and glasses and always has on hand her purse in which she carries a storm hammer to strike any of the giants or titans whom she believes are about to appear. Once a fan of D&D, she now plays out her fantasies in the real world of her small Jersey shore town. Her older sister Karen (Imogen Poots) works overtime at a demanding job to earn a living for the two of them, so she is seldom present to listen to or supervise the girl. Her teen brother (Art Parkinson) is so self-centered and nasty that he just increases her sense of isolation.

Barbara's nemesis at school is the larger girl Taylor (Rory Jackson) who enjoys tormenting her whenever possible. Barbara does attract one friend, Sophia (Sydney Wade), a new girl who has just moved to America from Leeds, and is curious about the unusual student. Barbara rebuffs Sophia's first attempts to connect, but the English girl's persistence melts Barbara's icy reserve, though she warns her, "People close to me get hurt." This will turn out to be right.

Barbara does have a concerned advocate in the school's therapist Mrs. Mollé (Zoe Saldana) who strives to get her to open up and share her thoughts and feelings. Barbara resists and spends most of her spare time on the beach and riding her bike into the nearby woods to set up intricate traps for the giants

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I KILL GIANTS

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when they come to attack the town. She currently has made bait from jam and gummy bears.

At first we are taken in by Barbara's sincerity about the giants and titans, so we expect this to be a magic realism film. However, the filmmakers are not interested in making a fantasy movie but something rarer, a movie about fantasy. We eventually learn why the parents are absent and what traumatized Barbara has done to save herself. And also, we learn that fantasy can be a teacher. In one scene of *Barbara's* a Titans tells the girl, "All things that live in this world die. This is why you must find joy in the living, while the time is yours, and not fear the end. To deny this is to deny life." He, or Barbara who conjures him, must have read the Book of Ecclesiastes.

It is almost a crime that this film of rare insight into childhood and grief and trauma did not receive the promotion that it deserves. The cast is excellent, with young Madison Wolfe pitch perfect as the grief-stricken daughter trying to cope with life in the ways that she learned from her immersion in *Dungeons and Dragons*. We enter into the creative mind of a girl traumatized by grief that she creates a fantasy world more real to her than the daily one tainted by classmates who bully her. This is a film families should take to heart, offering parents (or grandparents) an opportunity to talk about death and grief and coping. It would be hard to find a better film for a junior high youth group to watch and discuss. Although it probably never made it to your local theater, it is available on DVD and Tubi.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What sets Barbara apart from her classmates that some of them bully her? What is she coping with in her young life?
2. Why isn't her older sister or brother able to help the troubled girl?
3. How do we see in Barbara the power of imagination?



A giant as Barbra sees it, showing the power of her imagination.
© RLJE Films

4. What do the giants represent in the girl's life? Have you felt at times you were facing "giants," and if so, what were they?
5. How are Sophia and Mrs. Mollé important in Barbara's life? Who have been your friends and mentors that have helped you face the giants? How can they be especially helpful when one is overwhelmed by grief?
6. Barbara seems to lack a church and faith: how might these have helped her confront death?
7. Reflect upon/discuss what is told Barbara near the end of the film: "All things that live in this world die. This is why you must find joy in the living, while the time is yours, and not fear the end. To deny this is to deny life."
8. How might the Beatitudes apply to Barbara?

THE SCHOOL FOR GOOD AND EVIL



Rated PG-13 Running time: 2 hour2, 27 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

O let the evil of the wicked come to an end, but establish the righteous, you who test the minds and hearts, O righteous God.

Psalms 7:9

Director Paul Feig's long film is based on a young adult fantasy adapted by its author Soman Chainani and David Magee. Partially set in an 18th century village called Gavalton, most of it takes place in a fairytale world consisting of the two academies of the title. The latter is a Manichaean-type world where Good and Evil are supposed to exist in perfect balance and the Academy students are taught how to be good or evil characters in fairy tales. In fact, it begins at the academies where twin super powerful brothers Rafal and Rhian (both played by Kit Young) who share in the rule of the realm are fighting. Their mock dual turns deadly when Rhian uses "blood mag-

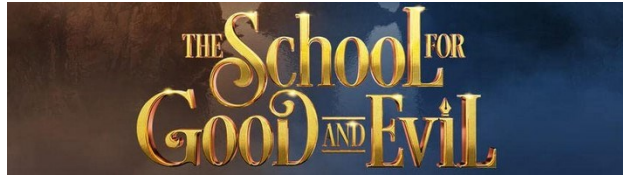
Rafal off the cliff, supposedly killing him.

Meanwhile, narrator Cate Blanchett's tells us, "Many years later, in a land far away, a story was unfolding ..." in Gavalton two girls, friends almost from birth, are scorned as outcasts, both being readers. The orphaned Sophie (Sophia Anne Caruso) and Agatha (Sofia Wylie) are very different in appearance and character. Golden-haired Sophie is a seamstress, dreaming to escape her humdrum life to become a princess. Her late mother had told her she was destined to "change the world." Wild-haired Agatha has an offbeat mother who just might become a witch. Sophie wears frilly dresses, whereas Agatha favors boys' duds. They share a love of reading, often visiting the Storybook Shop run by Mrs. Deauville (Patti Lupone) together. It is here that they learn about the School for Good and Evil and Sophie decides to write a letter seeking admission and place it in the Wishing Tree.

Agatha does not want her friend to leave, but of course, Sophie is dragged off and then carried aloft by

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a winged creature, as is Agatha. Sophie is shocked, however that the creature drops her off at the School for Evil, whereas her friend is deposited at the School for Good. There follows a complicated series of adventures with some surprise reversals amidst violent battles that erupt.

The School for Evil is run by the glamorous and sharp-tongued Lady Lesso (Charlize Theron), the School

for Good, presided over by the bubbly Professor Dovey (Kerry Washington). The Headmaster is Rhian (now that he is much older, played by Laurence Fishburne). Sophia protests that she was placed in the wrong school, but is assured that no mistakes are made at the School. Later, Rhia will tell her that she can change only if she finds her True Love and gets him to kiss her.

Called "Nevers" (Evil) and "Evers" (Good), the other students are offspring of famous heroes and villains, such as Tedro (Jamie Flatters) son of King Arthur; and Hort (Earl Cave) of Captain Hook. Agatha encounters the same kind of snobbery and exclusion by the girls of The School for Good as she did back at the village, so it makes us wonder what is so good about them?

There's a lot of camp in much of the dialogue and acts of the characters—we often hear someone remark "Cool," plus a lot of non-bloody violence, so parents of preschool children will want to beware. Middle school girls will appreciate the friendship of Sophie and Agatha, and especially the latter's standing by her friend even when Sophie turns against her. Sophie provides a good example of how a good person can be perverted by wrong-headed desires and temptations that threaten her very soul. And yet in the end love wins out, with Sophie making a sacrifice to save her friend.

The old fairytale romance is subverted by the girl's friendship, and gay viewers can read much by the penultimate scene in the film, though one might question this by the very last scene in which Storian says, "This is only the beginning." Is this setting us up for a sequel in which romance again rises up?

Believers in the Abrahamic faiths will reject the Mani-



Sophie & Agatha, lifelong friends, are both village outsiders because of their love for reading. © Netflix

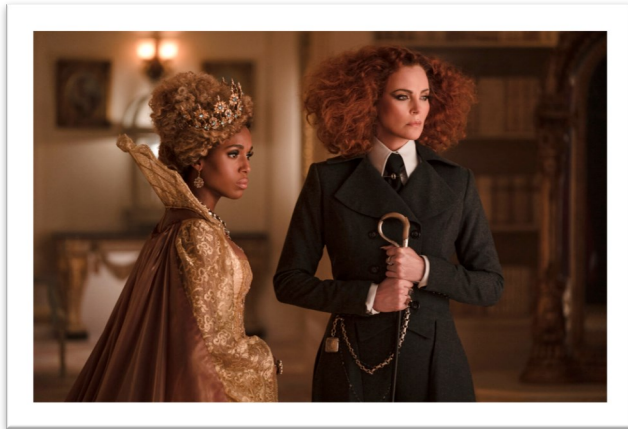
chaean premise of the fairytale. These three faiths all reject the idea of a balance between Good and Evil, teaching rather that traditional t a Good God will vanquish evil and establish justice and love throughout the universe.

The film, which has reminded many of Hogwarts in the Harry Potter movies, never rises to the height of that series, but is nonetheless entertaining. It's subversion of boy-girl romanticism in favor of friendship or sisterhood is fun to watch, and our daughters will be glad to see females who are more than the objects of rescue by a prince. However, I doubt adults will be as charmed by the film as we were by the Potter tales. Too many implausibility's. Also, the film might be far too long for younger members of the family: it probably would have been better had it been made as a three or four-part limited series of 40 minute segments.

Along with gorgeous costumes and thrilling special effects, the saving factor is the cast. The two leads, Sophia Anne Caruso and Sofia Wylie, are very likeable. And the supporting cast, consisting of such stars as Kerry Washington, Charlize Theron, Michelle Yeoh, Laurence Fishburne, and even Patti LuPone and Rachel Bloom are a lot of fun to watch as they come and go. No classic here, but still enjoyable family viewing--

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THE School FOR GOOD AND EVIL



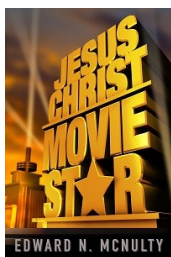
Prof. Dovey (rt) presides over the School of Good, & Lady Lesso, the School of Evil. © Netflix

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Compare Sophie and Agatha. Which fits the traditional Princess image and why?
2. Why are they considered outsiders in their village? In your own experience what makes readers different from non-readers?
3. Were you surprised that the girls were dropped in schools that were the opposite of Sophie's expectations? What does this reveal about a person's "goodness"—can it be known just by outside experiences?
4. Do the girls in the School of Good act good in regard to Agatha? Do you think the name of the School of Good is a misnomer? What really constitutes a good person? If they were good, how would Agatha be treated?
5. What is Sophia centered on during most of the film. At what point does the good emerge in her?
6. How does the film affirm the power of love?
7. What do you believe about the struggle between Good and Evil? A matter of balancing the two, or one in which the Good will emerge victorious and resurrect those martyred in its cause?

A Good Christmas Gift

Peter Wallace wrote about this book



"Ed McNulty has been a major part of my enjoyment of movies over the years...His new book is certain to provide countless groups, including yours I hope, with helpful guidance and insight into a wide range of wonderful films. You'll find your enjoyment and appreciation of these diverse movies expanding exponentially as you share with others what you learn from them about faith and life. And who knows, you may even grow closer to the living, loving creative God, who so often surprises us in the most unexpected places." Check its contents out at Amazon Books



Check its contents out at Amazon Books.

Hard Lessons

(a.k.a. The George McKenna Story)

Not Rated. Running time: 1 hour, 40 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 1; Sex/ Nudity 0.

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. People do not light a lamp and put it under the bushel basket; rather, they put it on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. 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 5:13-16



The new principal on his first day at school. © Artisan Films

This “true story” movie opens in 1979 with McKenna arriving at Washington High School in South Los Angeles on his first day as principal. I have always been drawn to the caring teacher film genre, and this one proved no exception. Though there are no real plot surprises, it is still worth watching, one of its attractions being that you can see Denzel Washington near the beginning of his marvelous career.

McKenna in his new position as principal, of course, meets resistance right off the bat. The students are unruly in the hallways; the teachers are so burnt out that they are coasting through their work; and a belligerent activist parent Margaret Wright (Virginia Capers) warns him that she is keeping her eye on him—“I got you hired, I can get you fired.” (She is no made-up Hollywood character, but like McKenna, a real person. See the article about her “[Rosie the Riveter for President](#)—this remarkable woman deserves her own bio film!)

The school building itself reflects the chaos of its inhabitants—the walls covered with graffiti, the floors littered with papers, its hallways crowded with students ignoring social courtesy, all too many belonging to belligerent gangs. One teacher (Richard Masur) who does not want to be stirred from his cynical with-

drawal from his teaching responsibility becomes McKenna’s dedicated enemy, even reporting him to higher ups in an attempt to discredit and get him fired. Most teachers just shrug their shoulders, believing nothing can be done to improve matters. Slowly, though, McKenna, through his kindness and innate courtesy and insistence on fair rules, makes headway, despite gang violence in which a teenager dies, and continued pushback from some of his faculty. That he succeeds is due to his steel-willed determination, but he pays a high personal price for success due to his continual absence from home.

Aired on TV in 1986, the film was released on home video after Washington came to prominence in *Cry Freedom* and *Glory*. Although I wish some of the students and especially activist Margaret White had been given more rounded characterization, the film is a good tribute to a deserving educator. George McKenna lives up to the challenge of Christ to be “salt,” to make a difference by determination and kindness. This is an older movie still worth seeing, and thanks to [YouTube](#) you can.

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Hard Lessons

(a.k.a. The George McKenna Story)

Continued



McKenna meets with activist Mrs. Wright on his first day. © Artisan Films

For Reflection/Discussion

1. What is the school like when you first see it? Describe it physically?
2. What do we learn about George McKenna from his conversation with Margaret Wright? The film reveals very little about her national prominence—what was it? Click onto "[Rosie the Riveter for President](#)."
3. What had happened to most of the teachers who remained at the school? Why were some of them so opposed to the new principal?
4. What did George McKenna have to turn the school around that his predecessors did not?
5. What did his dedication to the school and the students cost him?
6. Which student stories impressed you most, and why?
7. What does this story that took place 40 years ago have to do with us and our schools today?



I saw on the same day two very different films, and yet similar in that in both a young white boy fails to stand up for his Black friend who was being assault ed by racist white kids.

Armageddon Time—A wonderful coming of age story of a 12-year-old Jewish boy who befriends an African American boy at a Queens NY school during 1980 when school busing was being used to integrate schools.

Paul's Promise—In North Little Rock ,Arkansas a white firefighter ignores a former African American friend & struggles against the wishes of his dying mother who prays that he return to the church. Based on a true story

The **Murder** of Emmett Till

Not Rated. Running time: 53 min. Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 3; Language 1; Sex/Nudity 1.

And the LORD said, "What have you done? Listen, your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!"
Genesis 4:10

*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.*

...

Their mouths are filled with cursing and deceit and oppression

sion;

under their tongues are mischief and iniquity. They sit in ambush in the villages;

in hiding places they murder the innocent.

Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless; they lurk in secret like a lion in its den;

they lurk that they may seize the poor;

they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

From Psalm 10:1-2; 7-9

Director Stanley Nelson's 2003 documentary aired on PBS takes on even more relevance as trailers of the upcoming film *Till* air on our TV sets. This older film is still available on PBS, and so would be either a good follow-up or preparation for the theatrical film. Indeed, not only is the film available, but PBS has also just posted "A Timeline for Emmett Till" that also would be helpful in preparing for the new feature film. Emmett Till's name is familiar to all with even a slight acquaintance with the history of the civil rights movement. That a teenaged boy would be subject to such horrific torture and murder merely for allegedly whistling at a white woman seems unbelievable today, but it really happened. Through some Africa Americans the film sets up the viewer for understanding Mississippi society in 1955. A man informs us that if a Black person saw a White man approaching, he was expected to step down. This was totally alien to young Emmett Till, growing up in Chicago, still segregated, but compared to the South, offering Blacks relative freedom.

In the film several friends talk about the boy, how he



Emmett Till was just 14 years-old when he went to Mississippi. © PBS

loved jokes and was a lively focus of interest. His mother Mamie talked to him about Southern mores, but the boy did not take her too seriously. What happens as a result of the boy not being careful around Whites is well known. Her controversial decision to open his casket so the world could see the horror of racist hatred is the first of thousands of courageous decisions that African Americans like her will make to fight back against their oppressors. Fifty thousand Chicagoan lined up to pay tribute, and millions more around the world saw the faceless corpse when JET Magazine ran the story and pictures.

The trial of the murderers-- J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant--attracted international attention, the defense's argument being that the faceless body was not that of Emmett Till. This despite the ring of his father on the

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Mamie Till grieves for her son. © PBS

The **Murder** of Emmett Till



Mamie Till speaks out in the film. © PBS

corpse's finger. Of course, the all White jury agreed with the defense, stalling for a few minutes, and then after one hour, re-entering the courtroom to deliver their heinous verdict. The killers got off free and even had the audacity to write an article for LOOK Magazine, explaining in detail how they kidnapped and murdered the boy. Handsomely paid, they had no worries because they could not be prosecuted a second time. The only glimmer of light in the dark sordid affair was that the Bryants' store went out of business because local Blacks boycotted it.

Up North Mamie spoke frequently about her experience, even traveling to Washington to try to get the federal government to investigate the case. Both Pres. Eisenhower and FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover refused to take any action. The President, we are informed,

did not even deign to respond to the telegram she sent him. The film, however refuses to end the true story on a note of defeat, but points out that contributions to civil rights groups began to pour in. 100 days after the trial Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on a bus, and thus began the Montgomery Bus Boycott, this epic collective effort by Blacks launching the national civil rights movement that would shake the foundations of America. Mamie says, "Emmett's death was the opening of the civil rights movement. He was the sacrificial lamb of the movement."

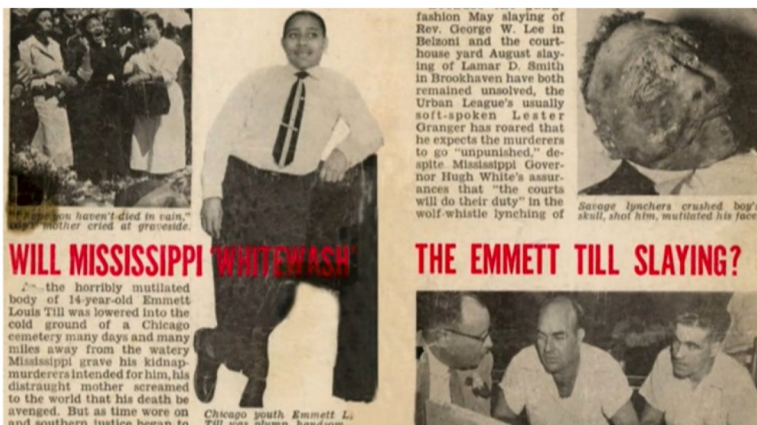
The film, narrated by actor Andre Braugher, skillfully uses a vast amount of newsreel footage, front pages of newspapers, archival photos, and interviews (both from the 50s and from participants who are still living). The interviewees include the mother, Mamie, a couple of trial witnesses, former classmates, residents of Mississippi, several journalists, the mortician, and the reformist former governor of the state William Winter.

The documentary makes a wonderful companion film to *Till*, and I suspect provides some details that had to be left out of the dramatic film. I am presuming that *Till* focuses on Mamie Till, who conducted herself throughout the ordeal with courage and a boldness that kicked over the bounds that society set for a grieving mother. I urge you to take advantage of this documentary and share it with your friends and colleagues.

Watch The Murder of Emmett Till | American Experience | Official Site | PBS

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Most of the questions for *TILL* can be used with this film.
2. In addition, what further details does this documentary add? Why is it important that we know that Mamie had to go against the funeral director in order to see her son's body, something the bio film leaves out?
3. What does this film add to the urgency of today's fight against racism and far right extremists?



The JET article that showed the world Emmett's face. © PBS

Becoming Harriet Beecher Stowe

Not Rated. Running time: 30 min.

Our Content ratings (1-10): Violence 0; Language 0; Sex/
Nudity 0.

Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out; judge righteously;
defend the rights of the poor and needy.
Proverbs 31:8-9

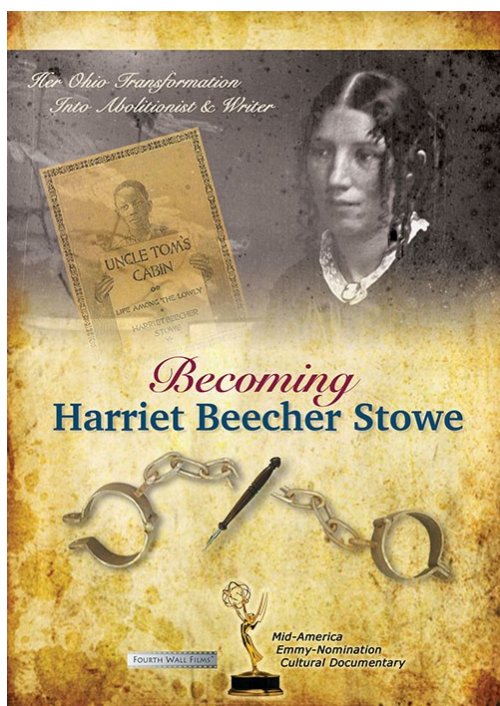
This is welcome documentary on a woman who prior to the Civil War might be called the most famous female in America—Southerners would change that to “infamous.” Created by the same filmmakers who gave us *Sons and Daughters of Thunder*, Kelly and Tammy Rundle, it expands upon their feature film, which dealt mainly with the Beecher family’s years at Cincinnati’s Lane Theological Seminary between 1832 and 1850.

Born in Litchfield, Conn., in 1811, Harriett was one of 13 children sired by her father, Lyman Beecher (1775-1863) who was the most famous Congregational-Presbyterian clergyman of the pre-Civil War period.

Her mother died when she was 5, and her father remarried. The family moved to Cincinnati in 1832 when he was invited to be the president and theology professor at the new Lane Seminary. The Rundles’ feature film does well in depicting the famous antislavery debates conducted by the students there, but leaves out the many other activities Harriett was involved in at the time. Much of these activities are covered in the documentary—her joining a literary society; her writing of articles; a visit to Kentucky where she witnessed the horrors of slavery first-hand; friendship with famous Underground Railroad conductor and Presbyterian minister John Rankin (we see his famous home/slave sanctuary perched high on a hill above the Ohio River in Ripley Ohio); Harriett’s friendship with Elizabeth, wife of Lane Prof. Calvin Stowe and the former’s sad death from cholera in 1834; her subsequent romance with Calvin and their marriage in 1836, and then their participation in the Underground Railroad; and her giving birth to six children. Cholera would again invade her life when one of her sons died from it, along with almost 3000 others in the area. The film points out that this loss of a child sensitized the future author to the daily losses that Black mothers endured when a child was torn from them and sold at an auction.

Cincinnati was home to many proslavers, so she was disturbed by their 1836 riot in which many African American buildings were burned and several Blacks were killed. Then, after almost 20 years in the river city, the Stoves moved to Maine where Calvin joined the faculty of his alma mater, Bowdoin College, in Brunswick. Harriett was pregnant with her seventh child. It is a wonder that she could find the time to continue with her writing, but she was disciplined enough to carve out some writing time amidst all of her domestic duties.

She was so upset by the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act that increased the penalties for those charged with aiding a runaway slave that she determined to make the largely disinterested public feel its horrors. Harriett’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* first appeared in 41 weekly installments in the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era* between June 5, 1851 and April 1, 1852, and later as a book, which soon sold 300,000 copies, and even-



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Becoming Harriet Beecher Stowe

Continued

tually translated into 75 languages. She based its hero Uncle Tom on a real person whom she had met. Southerners hated it, accusing her of falsifying the facts, so she wrote another book, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in which she cited specific cases upon which her book was based.

In the North the majority of the apathetic public was won over to the side of abolition, adding to the conflict with the South.

The documentary features writers, historians and storytellers — including Joan Hedrick, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of “Harriet Beecher Stowe: A Life. The latter states, “The Cincinnati years, I think, profoundly affected her. Her early marriage, her early motherhood — I think it was hard for her to leave that sacred ground. When she moved there, she was a New Englander, but when she went back East 18 years later, she was an American.”

The Director of Cincinnati's Harriett Beecher Stowe House, whom I recently interviewed, Christina Hartlieb, was at the Cincinnati debut of the Runkle's *Sons and Daughters of Thunder* to which this documentary is a companion. Among her many comments about Harriett, I found this especially interesting, “She was the social media of her time, the ability to change public opinion.” Pointing out how the novel fell from favor in the 20th century, people turning “Uncle Tom” into a pejorative, she reminds us that in the novel Uncle Tom is a far more heroic figure than is recognized. To Hartlieb Uncle Tom is “a Christ-like martyr figure” who sacrifices himself. “He lets himself be sold, purposely does not run away, so his wife and children don't get sold.”

Along with the interviews of numerous academic Stowe experts the documentary includes clips from *Sons and Daughters of Thunder* and archival photographs and publications of the day, thus making every single minute of this 30-minute documentary informative and thrilling. I appreciated the moments given to Stowe's friend Presbyterian minister John Rankin, one of Ohio's most prominent Abolitionists and conductors of the Underground Railroad, having preached in his church at Ripley and visited his home at the top of the hill overlooking the Ohio River.

This fast-paced documentary belongs in the library of every social justice advocate, its relatively short length making it easy to incorporate in a class or group program. It is available on DVD at this [website](#). The same

filmmakers' feature film *Sons and Daughters of Thunder* is available at Fourth Wall Films.

There is a good article on the filmmakers and their work at [New Harriet Beecher Stowe Documentary From Quad-Cities Filmmakers to Screen on Feb. 18 | Quad Cities > QuadCities.com](#)

For Reflection/Discussion

1. Why was the Beecher family in Cincinnati in the 1830s? Who in the Beecher family was already famous? (Dr. Lyman Beecher, Pres. Lane Seminary, Katherine Beecher, older sister & educator; Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, brother & most famous preacher in later 19th C. America.)
2. What two events in Cincinnati raised her awareness/concern about slavery? (Her trip to the slave state of KY and the Lane Debates. For more on the latter see the review of [Sons and Daughters of Thunder](#).) Also, it has been pointed out that the death of her son sensitized her to how Black mothers felt when separated from their children at slave auctions.
3. Another great influence because he visited the Beechers was Abolitionist the Rev. John Rankin: check him out on [Wikipedia](#)—he should be better known than he is.
4. How did her book advance the cause of Abolitionism? A great example of the power of story? Before her book there were accounts of life in slavery by numerous ex-slaves, but why did they not sway opinion in the North? Who was the greatest of these freed slaves, who wrote an account of his life and then rewrote it two more times? (Frederick Douglass.)
5. Do you find it ironic that “Uncle Tom” has been transformed into a pejorative? How is he depicted in the novel? In what ways does he emulate Christ?
6. What is new that you learned from this film? What might be your favorite thing about her?

War Prayer

1. War Prayer (2007)

*The righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance done;
they will bathe their feet in the blood of the wicked.
People will say, "Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
surely there is a God who judges^[a] on earth."*

Psalms 58:10-11

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'"⁴⁴ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you...

Matthew 5:43-44

Directed by Michael Goorjian and adapted by Marco Sanches from Mark Twain's "The War Prayer," this 2007 almost 10-minute film stars Jeremy Sisto as The Stranger, Tim Sullivan as The Preacher, and Thomas Dekker as The Singer. It is set in modern times in a super church where the pastor is leading a rally for a country going to war. There are flags and a cheering crowd, among which we see many men in military uniforms. Cut to a littered alley where a man is stirring from his sleeping place beside trash cans. At the church he enters as the preacher prays for victory. Then, amidst surprised silence of the people and preacher, he assumes the spotlight and utters the fierce prayer that Mark Twain wrote in 1905. It reminds people that when they pray for victory, they are praying for far more than they realize. As the Stranger leaves, the Preacher lamely tries to bring back the congregation by inviting them to sing a hymn.

To watch it, log onto <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yruRt7mQWgg>

2. A [10-minute version](#) on PBS .

This was part of a 1981 longer production of Twain's "A Private History of a Campaign That Failed", appearing at the end of the work as an epilogue. Edward Herrmann as The Stranger delivers with ferocity the prayer, ending with the most savage-sounding "Amen" that I have ever heard. The characters and congregation are set in the period in which Twain wrote the indictment of war, and the [Philippine-American War](#) in particular.



Screenshot from 2007 with Jeremy Sisto in center.

3. A [semi-animated](#) 2007 film by [Markos Kounalakis](#), PhD, 14 minutes long. Peter Coyote narrates the film, the text of which differs slightly from the shorter films. Beat poet [Lawrence Ferlinghetti](#) is the Minister and Eric Bauersfeld as the Stranger. The illustrations by Akis Dimitrakopoulos are in black & white, with the notable exceptions of civilians being gunned down against a wall or shot beside deep pits, their blood being shown in brilliant red.

4. A words-only version from the DVD "Peace" by [Willie Nelson, Family and Friends](#). It is good to see the words on the screen, to better absorb them. Thus a good companion film to show with one of the above.



Screenshot of animated War Prayer.



The *Sunday Parade* insert for September 4, 2022 featured *M*A*S*H* turning 50 and included eight things you didn't know about the show and an interview with Alan Alda.

Peggy Herz has called *M*A*S*H* "the most moral show on TV." During my seminary days my classmates gathered in the commons area to watch the show. Over the 11 seasons we all came to have our favorites. The following site ranks 100 favorite episodes: [Ranking the Best MASH Episodes of All Time | Stacker](#). It probably comes as no surprise that the number one favorite episode is the third season finale, air date March 18, 1975, "Abyssinia, Henry." Other top ten episodes: #2 "Tuttle" (1/14/73); #3 "Sometimes You Hear the Bullet" (1/28/73); #4 "Adam's Ribs" (1/26/74); #5 "Welcome to Korea" (9/12/75); #6 "Good-Bye Radar, part 2" (10/15/79); #7 "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen" (2/28/83); #8 "Deal Me Out" (12/8/73); #9 "Dear Sigmund" (11/9/76); #10 "Life Time" (11/26/79).

Also, check out IMDb's top ten *M*A*S*H* episodes: [10 Best M*A*S*H Episodes, According to IMDb \(screenrant.com\)](#)

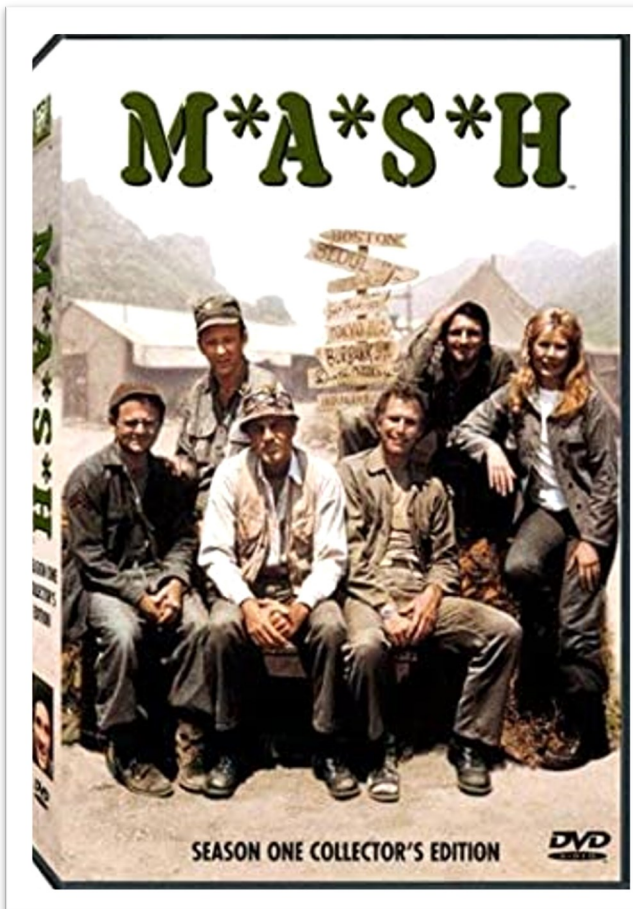
There site also lists what they consider the ten worst episodes.

Episodes that would make my top ten were: "Death Takes a Holiday" (12/15/80); "Movie Tonight" (2/22/77); "Change of Command" (9/19/75); "Dear Dad" (12/17/72); "Tuttle" (1/14/73); "Dear Sis" (12/18/78); "Old Soldiers" (1/21/80); "Morale Victory" (1/28/80); "Goodbye, Farewell, and

Amen" (2/28/83); "Abyssinia, Henry" (3/18/75).

M*A*S*H Quiz Questions:

1. What episode was the first hour long episode of the series?
2. The most watch finale episode in TV history was the two-hour episode of *M*A*S*H*. Commercials sold for more than the Super Bowl rates that year. What was the name of the final episode?
3. What message had B.J. spelled out for Hawkeye to see?



4. Before Harry Morgan played Col. Potter he starred in what episode on September 10, 1974?

5. Who wrote "The Trial of Henry Blake" (11/3/73)?

6. Who said the following: "Henry, you have no idea what it's like sharing a tent with a guy who thinks he's all twelve disciples!"

7. What episode was done entirely in black and white?

8. What actor appeared in all the *MASH* episodes?

9. Of the original cast members which actor appeared in the fewest number of episodes?

Name your favorite guest star on the *M*A*S*H* TV show?

CBS showed the *M*A*S*H* episodes beginning with the first episode from season one on September 17, 1972. The show lasted for eleven seasons and Hawkeye and Margaret were the only two regular cast members for all eleven seasons. However, Klinger and

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Continued

Father Mulcahy each had recurring seasons (Klinger seasons 1-3; Mulcahy seasons 1-4) before they became regulars. Frank was part of seasons 1 through 5, and Trapper John was seasons 1 through 3. Radar was a part of seasons 1 through 8.

The following web sites will provide you with additional information:

[M*A*S*H \(TV Series 1972–1983\) - IMDb](#)

[M*A*S*H - Wikipedia](#)

[M*A*S*H \(TV series\) - Wikipedia](#)

Books, magazines, DVD's for additional M*A*S*H material are:

MASH A Novel About Three Army Doctors by Richard Hooker (c. 1968)

*The Complete Book of M*A*S*H* by Suzy Kalter (c. 1988)

*M*A*S*H (TV Milestones series)* by David Scott Diffrient (c. 2008)

LIFE MASH (single issue magazine) October 16, 2020

*M*A*S*H: The Exclusive, Inside Story of TV's Most*

Popular Show by David S. Reiss (c. 1983)

*Watching M*A*S*H, Watching America: A Social History of the 1972–1983 Television Series* by James Wittebols (c. 2003) Includes episode listing and brief plot outline, title and dates.

*All About M*A*S*H* by Peggy Herz (c. 1972)

*The M*A*S*H Trivia Quiz Book* by Cristopher and Ryan DeRose (c. 2019)

DVD: *M*A*S*H: The Complete Collection* (TV shows)

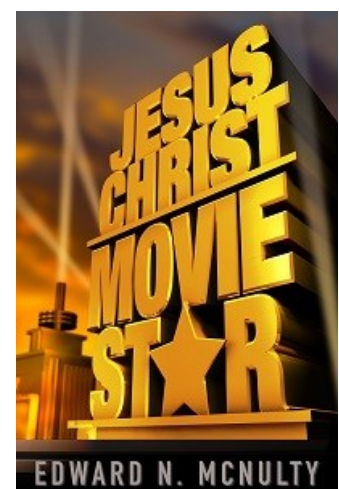
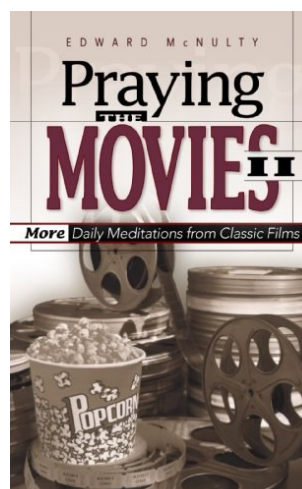
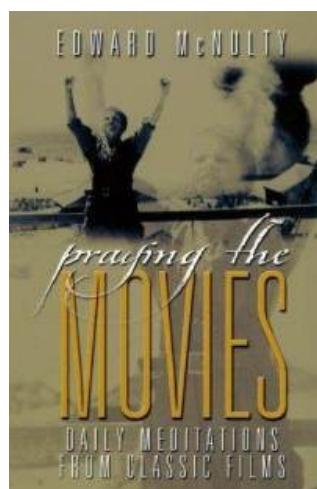
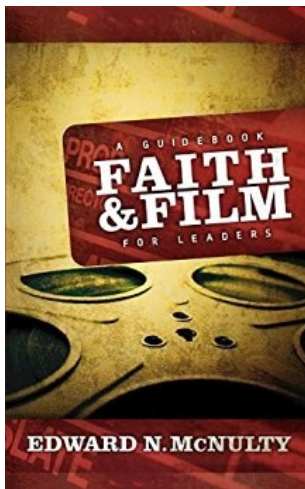
DVD & Blu-ray: *M*A*S*H* (1970 movie; different DVD's have different special features)

Quiz Answers:

1. Welcome to Korea (season 4, episode 1;
2. "Goodbye, Farewell, and Amen";
3. Goodbye;
4. "The General Flipped at Dawn";
5. McLean Stevenson;
6. Hawkeye;
7. "The Interview";
8. Alan Alda (Benjamin Franklin "Hawkeye" Pierce;
9. McLean Stevenson (Henry Blake);
10. My favorite is the episode Ron Howard appeared in, "Sometimes You Hear the Bullet." I also liked the George Lindsay episode, "Temporary Duty".

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For Your Christmas Giving



You can read the Contents Page and a few others at [Amazon Books](#).

Good gifts for family & friends who want more than just entertainment from films.