

# A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood (2019)



Fred welcomes Lloyd to his set at Pittsburgh's WQED's studio. (c) TriStar Pictures

Director Marielle Heller's long anticipated Fred Rogers film is even better than I had anticipated. It is not a biography of the famed children's advocate (we already have last year's wonderful documentary [Won't You Be My Neighbor?](#) for that), but rather, the story of a healing friendship. The script, by Noah Harpster and Micah Fitzerman-Blue, is based on writer Tom Junod's 1998 story for *Esquire* titled "[Can You Say...Hero?](#)" As you see in the film, the journalist, renamed Lloyd Vogel (Matthew Rhys), was supposed to write a brief profile (about 400 words) for a Hero issue of the magazine, but wound up eventually turning in a 9000-word thoughtful piece that became a cover story. Last year Marielle Heller, in her film [Can You Ever Forgive Me?](#), memorably dealt with a writer of a very different stripe, the real life literary forger Lee Israel, played by Melissa McCarthy. In the new film Lloyd Vogel seeks to expose, rather than to deceive, but his flaws are almost as damaging to himself as Lee Israel's were to her.

(There is a prologue that I was going to pass over, one in which Fred Rogers' wife Joann says that Fred regarded the

space between a TV set and the viewer as 'holy ground,' but a commercial just came on our TV set in which several of the Muppets and a spokesman are touting the advantages of an insurance company, prompting me to say to my wife, "Fred would not have liked this!" This is but one of a host of Muppet commercials selling us various food products and even a car brand, the presence of the funny creatures ensuring that we watch the commercial. This commercialization of characters beloved by children was something Fred deplored, and indeed, which when he was fresh out of college and intending to go to seminary, motivated him to go into TV and stand against the exploitation of children in order to sell a product. For more on this, see the above-mentioned documentary.)

The film is cleverly set up as if it were a typical Mister Roger's Neighborhood episode with Fred (Tom Hanks) coming through that familiar door and changing into his cardigan sweater and deck shoes as he talks to the audience about the large board with small doors next to him. He opens a couple doors at the bottom to show pictures of two of his puppet characters, then opening one that shows "my friend" Lloyd, whose face is battered. The host explains that his friend is troubled.

That opening of an imaginary episode is preceded by a shot of the model of Fred's mythical neighborhood, set in Pittsburgh, with its familiar red trolley running back and forth between the Neighborhood and the Land of Make Believe. The camera pans over to a similarly built model of Manhattan where we meet Lloyd, a deeply troubled writer. He is coping with being a new father while at war with his own father Jerry (Chris Cooper). Never having gotten over his anger at his father's abandoning him and his sister when their mother was dying years ago, Lloyd is so resentful over her including their father in her wedding that he provokes a fist fight with the old man. This embarrassing outburst strains his relationship with his wife Andrea (Susan Kelechi Watson), as well as his sister, and, we

will see, even infect his writing.

At work his editor assigns him to write a short profile of Rogers for the upcoming Hero issue. Skeptical that anyone could be as good as Rogers appears to be, he says "No," asking to be allowed to interview one of the other "heroes." The editor insists on this one, informing him that the others had specifically asked not to be interviewed by him because of so many savage remarks he had made about the subjects of his past interviews. Lloyd is one of those iconoclasts who seem to enjoy pulling back the curtain and revealing the flaws of the rich and the famous. And so, with great reluctance and skepticism, it's off to Pittsburgh for Lloyd.

When he enters the studio at WQED, Fred is on the set talking with an autistic boy and his parents. The youngster is reluctant to talk. This bothers the parents, but not Fred, as he continues to probe, successfully using the puppets the boy was familiar with. Afterwards, Fred devotes his full attention to his visitor, though his schedule is so tight that at the present he can give him just a few minutes of his time. It is evident that Fred is as interested in interviewing Lloyd as the journalist is in talking with him. I am not sure if it was at this point or later that Lloyd asked, "What's it like to be famous?," to which Fred replied, "Fame is a four-letter word. What matters is what we do with it." The rest of the film demonstrates that Fred Rogers used his fame well, being as interested in others as they were in him.

Our film story takes place long after Fred had ceased production of the Neighborhood series and had moved on to other projects, some of which were aimed at adults, whose influence he knew could have a great effect upon children. Fred by now has piqued the interest of the jaded reporter, and so during Fred and Joann Rogers visits to Manhattan where they maintain an apartment for use during business trips, the reporter and the TV host meet several times. Lloyd has been told that Fred is especially drawn to "broken people." At

times he calls Lloyd, knowing full well that the man is deeply troubled. In one dramatic encounter he asks if Lloyd had any special friend as a child, and after a moment or two, Lloyd mentions there was a toy rabbit. My favorite NYC scene takes place on the subway when a group of children recognize Fred and start singing "It's Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood." Soon everyone is joining in, including the two cops next to them. Fred smiles and thanks them by saying, "That was wonderful!"



When they spot Mr. Rogers,  
a group of children start  
singing his theme  
song. (c)  
TriStar Pictures

Scriptwriters Micah Fitzerman-Blue and Noah Harpster have carefully worked in another of Fred Rogers insightful songs, "What do you do with the mad that you feel?"\* Designed to help a child become aware of and handle the anger that so often wells up almost every day, it applies to Lloyd as well. His anger lingers even after the fight with his father at the wedding. Lila (Jessica Hecht), Jerry's second wife, is apparently a compassionate woman who wants her husband to reconcile with his son, so when Lloyd returns home one day, she and Jerry are sitting with Andrea at the dinner table awaiting him. Thus, she unconsciously is Fred's ally in forcing Lloyd to deal with his anger and resentment and getting Jerry to take responsibility for his past misdeeds. Lloyd is not at all pleased with what he regards as an intrusion, but after much struggle and support from the gentle

man who now is his friend (and even Fred's wife Joann enters the picture), there emerges a reconciliation that is beautiful to behold—and, as it turns out, not a moment too soon. Thus, Marielle Heller has crafted not a hagiographic film about a beloved figure, but rather a story about the healing relationship between Fred Rogers and a hurting man.

Bringing in Joann Rogers (Maryann Plunket) helps Lloyd (and us) see Fred not as a “living saint,” but as a man with his own problems that he too struggles with. Tom Hanks, as everyone seems to agree, beautifully captures the essence of Fred Rogers, the man's slow-paced, soft-voiced speech and intense concentration as he listens to other persons. Due credit also must be given to Matthew Rhys, who convincingly displays the anger and anguish of Tom Junod (Lloyd Vogel in the film). The man may be a famous writer for a top magazine, but at heart he is still the angry boy deeply hurt by, and thus resentful, of his father. When Fred's agape form of love, so beautifully described by the apostle Paul, envelopes him, he begins to change as he rediscovers the hurting child buried deeply in himself. A broken man learns that he does not have to stay broken.

I responded personally to the film, having met and written about Fred Rogers several times, delighting at several similarities between Lloyd's first encounter with Rogers and my own. When I entered WQED for my first interview, I too was greeted by Speedy McFeely, a.k.a., David Newell, and who escorted me back to the studio. And as with Lloyd's visit, Fred was talking with a child, actually, two children, though not on camera. (For more on this and my other encounters, see my tribute article following Fred Rogers' death in 2003, [“Wasn't It Nice in the neighborhood?”](#)) As did Lloyd, when these children proved too shy to respond, I saw him skillfully draw them out by taking out his puppets and having the three of them talk through them (Daniel Tiger, of course, was his spokesman). And when the two children left, Fred was

interviewing me before I could get very far into my list of questions. Unlike Lloyd, I did not mind my host changing the focus of the conversation, much of it dealing with questions about my children.

The film, as far as I can remember, does not mention that Fred Rogers was an ordained clergyman, a Presbyterian at that, same as myself. Nor does it bring God in until later in the film, when Fred asks Jerry to pray for him. Pause and think about this request—most clergy would have told the dying man that he (the clergy person) was praying for him, but this humble man asks for a prayer! What a way to empower and dignify a man who felt powerless due to his terminal illness! If ever there was a man who fulfilled Micah's dictum "to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God," it was the man at the center of this beautiful film. What a wonderful gift it is to a disillusioned public so badly in need of kindness and humility!

*\*This is the song that Fred Rogers quoted in his Senate Committee hearing so effectively that the chair of the committee moved from skepticism over PBS funding to whole-hearted support of it. See the documentary referred to in the review.*

<p><i>This review will be in the December issue of VP along with a set of questions for reflection and/or discussion. If you have found reviews on this site helpful, please consider purchasing a subscription or individual issue in The Store</i></p>
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