

Akeela and the Bee (2006)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V- 1; L - 3 ; S/N - 1. Running time: 1 hour 52 min.

*Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life,
but one who rejects a rebuke goes astray.*

*Proverbs 10:17 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,
but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let
each of you look not to your own interests, but to the
interests of others.*

Phillipians 2:3-4

Eleven year-old Akeelah Anderson (Keke Palmer) is in danger of becoming the neglected flower that springs up amidst the rubble of a vacant lot. Bright and especially adept at spelling, she is picked on by two older girls, so stung by their taunts that she is a "brainiac" that she tries to hide her intelligence. Her widowed mother Tanya (Angela Bassett) has little time for her, with a hospital job and worrying over Akeelah's older brother in the Air Force, another daughter with a child, and a teenaged son enamored by the gangstas and their drug-supported lifestyle. Thus when Akeelah wins the Crenshaw School spelling bee, Mrs. Anderson scarcely takes notice. Akeelah herself had not been interested

in the contest at first. It was her principal Mr. Welch (Curtis Armstrong) who urged her to enter, but she had refused, until that night, when she stumbled upon a cable program showing the national contest that aroused her interest.

Mr. Welch had invited retired UCLA professor Dr. Larabee (Laurence Fishburne) to come and observe the precocious student. After Akeelah wins the bee, Larabee asks her to spell several difficult words, and when she succeeds, he agrees to mentor her. However, Akeelah, not convinced that she needs his help, replies him in her ghetto talk and sassy manner. Only later, when she realizes that she does need help, do they get back together and begin to bond, a relationship that might remind you of that between the boy and the karate teacher in *The Karate Kid*—or maybe, more likely, between the Mr. Fishburne's chess player character and the boy in *Searching For Bobby Fischer*.

When Akeelah advances to the city spelling bee, she encounters two contestants who will assume important roles in her life, Javier (JR Villarreal), the friendly Hispanic boy who had placed 13th in last year's national contest, and Chinese-American Dylan (Sean Michael Afable), whose humorless father drives him relentlessly to do better than the past two year's second place. Javier invites Akeelah to come up to his school for a study club, the boy not realizing what a long, complicated commute it is for the girl from her ghetto home to the posh section of Los Angeles. Dylan, a student at the same school treats Akeelah with disdain, and when the girl is late returning home because of the long trip, her mother angrily dumps on her, telling her that she should give up the spelling bee. Thus Akeelah later feels compelled to forge her dead father's signature on the permission slip required for

entrance into the state and national contests.

Some critics have commented on the formulaic plot, which does follow the usual pattern of the lowly, scoffed-at character (or team in sports films) fighting an uphill battle, but then we arrive at an ending that adds a new, inspiring twist, one that beautifully fulfills the apostle Paul's advice to the Christians at Philippi. Young Keke Palmer should emerge as a major star, so convincing is she in the title role, and Laurence Fishburne, Angela Bassett, and the supporting cast totally convince us that we are not just watching another contrived screen tale, even though the community-wide support given Akeelah in the last portion seems a bit Hollywoodish (I still loved it, all the variety of folk helping Akeelah reminding me of the African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child." This is a film that every school in North America would do well to set aside a morning or afternoon and take the entire student body to the theater. The film not only affirms good spelling and hard study, but offers important life lessons as well.

For Reflection/Discussion

This may include spoilers at the end, so wait until you see the film before reading beyond question 2.

1) Why do the older girls pick on Akeelah? How widespread do you think is the practice of smart students covering up their academic achievements in order to fit in? Have you experienced or seen this?

2) What did you think at first of Akeelah's mother's lack of interest in her daughter's achievements? What did you learn that modified your opinion of her? How does this shed light on the lack of parental support that so many children in ghetto schools experience?

3) This film is a grace-suffused one. What "moments of grace" did you see?

a. Principal Welch's encouragement of Akeelah, despite her record of skipping classes. How does he continually support her?

b. Prof. Larabee's giving of his time to Akeelah? How is he like a "wounded healer"? How does his grace come back upon himself?

c. Javier's welcoming Akeelah and extending his friendship to her.

d. Juavier's risky stalling at the state spelling bee so that there will be time for Akeelah to return to the stage.

e. Akeelah going to her friend Georgia when the latter had written her off as a friend because Akeelah had been so engrossed in preparing for the National.

f. Dr. Larabee's gift that enabled friend and family to accompany Akeelah to Washington.

g. The remarkable act, of both Akeelah and Dylan, at the conclusion.

4) What do you think of the quotation that Dr. Larabee has Akeelah read, the beginning of which is, "Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure"? How or why can we be afraid of the potential within us? How does Akeelah show that this was true of her? Have you felt that way about yourself? (Credit is not given in the film, but according to Roger Ebert Marianne Williamson is the author. To see the full quote go to:

<http://skdesigns.com/internet/articles/quotes/williamson.html>) How is her statement "And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same" similar to what Jesus said in Matthew 5:14-16?

5) Although Akeelah is greatly helped by her mentor and principal, what does the film show about the need for

discipline and hard work in order to achieve success?

6) How does the public achievement of one person affect her school and community as well?