

Bernie (2012)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V -2; L -1; S/N -2.

*Those with good sense are slow to anger,
and it is their glory to overlook an offence.*

Proverbs 19.11

*So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is
wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.
For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an
eternal weight of glory beyond all measure...*

2 Corinthians 4:16-17

At last Jack Black gets a chance to act in this dark dramedy. Elderly widow Marjorie Nugent becomes dependent upon Bernie.

based on a true crime story that appeared in a Texas magazine. © 2012 Millenium Entertainment

Director Richard Linklater and scriptwriter Skip Hollandsworth use a mock documentary format to bring us a true tale set in the small town of Carthage, Texas. The story unfolds through supposed interviews of those who knew and loved Bernie Tiede (Black) as a mild mannered small town assistant funeral director whose compassion earns him the love and respect of the whole town, especially of its widows whom he looks in on long after a coffin is buried and their tears have dried. Blessed with a good voice, Bernie sings in the church choir and also in musicals which he directs and

stars in. The men like him, even though some suspect him of being gay—after all, he talks a bit funny, likes art and music, and wears sandals. The ladies staunchly defend his reputation, one saying, “How could such a good Christian man be gay?” adding, “Our Lord wore sandals, and he wasn’t gay!” Everyone is surprised when he befriends Marjorie Nugent, about whom there is no division of opinion. “She is the meanest woman in town,” born, people assure us, “with a prune face.” □ Delightfully played by Shirley MacLaine, the wealthy woman mellows for a while, thanks to Bernie’s kindness to her. She grows to like him so much that she lures him away from the funeral parlor to work for her full time. He becomes her constant companion, accompanying her on lavish vacation trips, locally and overseas. Bernie takes care of her financial matters and, even though she has a grand-daughter, he becomes her closest confidant, the grand-daughter having had little contact with her.

However after a while Marjorie’s meanness surfaces again, she becoming especially possessive of Bernie, demanding he be at her beck and call every moment of day and night. Matters come

to a head when shoots her, stuffing her body in a well, just wait and see. Bernie is able to cover up her disappearance for several months, until—and even though he is obviously guilty the town stands by him. I love the scene in which the D.A. (Matthew McConaughey) is standing on the church steps and Pastor Woodard (Larry Jack Dotson) asks if Bernie can be let off in some way. In his sermon the Reverend says that God and the church will not abandon him.

This delightful look at small town life and values will remind some of Christopher Guest's satirical films about quirky people and their foibles, but this story is not fiction, based as it is on a true crime story published in a Texas magazine. Director Linklater could easily have poked fun and demeaned these characters, but, like Christopher Guest, he stops short of doing this, the characters (and some of them are actually Carthage residents who knew Bernie) being likeable as well as quirky. Bernie in a way reminded me of the Apostle in Robert Duvall's film of that name: Bernie's choir singing and Sunday School teaching was not a show, but an expression of faith. In prison he organizes and teaches a Bible study and a cooking class. Bernie might be down, but he is not out.

Note: Discussion questions are available with this review for those subscribing to the Visual Parables journal. The journal also includes many extras—book reviews, the use of films for church seasons, a lectionary related column, and more. Hundreds of old reviews are also available in the subscribers; section. Check out the [sample issue](#).