

# Boyhood (2014)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hour 45 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 2; Language 5; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (0-5): 5

*Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.*

*Proverbs 22.6*

*Don't become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You'll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you.*

*Romans 12:2 (The Message)*

You might at first think that this new film by Richard Linklater (*Bernie, Before Midnight*) is gimmicky. Shot over a period of 12 years so that he could record the same child actors progressing from grade school through their entrance into college, he took a big chance: What if something should happen to any of them, or the children turned out to have no talent or appeal in their teen years?

Fortunately for us viewers, his gamble paid off handsomely. I have seldom felt so much like an eyewitness to the story, feeling at times that I was an eavesdropper sitting in on real family trials, squabbles and celebrations. There are some good insights into parent-child relationships and the struggle to discover one's path in life in this film. Had the director/writer possessed more spiritual insight, I would say

to him, and his characters, echoing the words of the Galilean rabbi to a wealthy countryman, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

When we meet the characters in 2002, Olivia (Patricia Arquette) and Mason Evans, Sr. (Ethan Hawke) are in their mid to late 20s. Their two children, Samantha "Sam" (Lorelei Linklater) and Mason, Jr. (Ellar Coltrane) are 7 and 6 respectively. Sam loves to torment her brother, and then when he yells so that their mother comes into the room, she convincingly pretends that Mason started it all. Mason collects arrowheads and joins with his buddies in spraying graffiti on the walls of an underpass or ogling the pictures of women modeling underwear in a catalog.

In 2003, not long after breaking up with a boyfriend, Olivia moves with the children to Houston where her mother lives and she can pursue her education. Mason, Sr. returns from a year and a half stay in Alaska driving his dream car, a GT0,. Genuinely missing the kids, he overcompensates, like so many absentee fathers by bringing gifts and playing as if he were a kid, thus making Olivia the harsh taskmaster. The kids hope for a reunion, but their mother has moved far beyond Mason: At college, she studies psychology and becomes interested in one of her professors, also a divorced parent raising his children alone.

In 2004, when Olivia takes Mason to class one day and introduces him to Professor Bill Wellbrock (Marco Perella), he seems charming, revealing that he also has a son and daughter about Mason's and Sam's ages. The pair starts dating, with his two children staying over at the Evans with Sam and Mason. The four children get along fine, and the next year Olivia and Bill marry. Bill proves less charming and far stricter afterwards, frequently getting on Mason for not finishing chores or homework. He also turns out to be a drinker, keeping his liquor hidden at first, but then as time goes by, drinking openly. We soon see that Olivia has made another bad choice

that will affect her children whom she has been struggling so hard to raise to be caring people.

The film is crammed with fine scenes in which we see that Mason, Sr. is also maturing along with his children. He does enjoy playing with them and talking about how *Return of the Jedi* was effectively the end of the Star Wars franchise, and I think it was he who took them to the bookstore where a crowd of children were costumed like Harry Potter characters so that they could buy their copy of *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* and then taking them to an Astros baseball game. But he also wants a real relationship with them, so when they respond to his questions about their past week with noncommittal remarks, he pulls the car over to the curb and asserts that they have to open up more, telling them that he is concerned about the details of their lives. One of them says that he needs to do the same for them. He concedes. Their relationship deepens so that one night young Mason shows that he is passing from trusting childhood into questioning adolescence when he asks his father if he believes there is magic in the world, or are elves just make believe. The elder Mason struggles for a proper response, saying that there are miracles in the world, such as whales that use sonar to navigate and communicate. It is a tender moment, and both we and they sense that something is being lost in this transition.

As the years pass, Mason, Sr. remarries. He and his new wife Annie (Jenni Tooley) producing a son, Cooper. She and her parents are evangelical Christians, and we hear the cynical Sam state that she hopes he is not going to be one of "those God people." Sadly, the subject of family and faith is left there, the filmmaker choosing not to explore this any further. (Or maybe, hopefully, the response was edited out, to be restored in a director's cut edition.)

For a while, Olivia puts up with the alcoholic Bill's abuse. She finally leaves after one of his mealtime tirades when she realizes that her children are in danger. She becomes a

teacher, a very good one, a student tells young Mason at a party hosted by his mother. Eventually she marries one of her older students, Jim (Brad Hawkins), a veteran of the Afghanistan/Iraq War. He too becomes a strict stepparent, though not an abusive one.

There are no title cards to tell the separate years, just references to such things as the Iraq War and the Obama-McCain Presidential Campaign—and, more telling, the changes in young Mason, from moppet boy to gangling teenager with a deepening voice. We see him bullied at school; first noticing and then dating girls; and continually beset by the adults trying to shape him in their image of what a man should be. The latter includes: his teacher in high school, noting his by then strong interest in photography that has led him to neglect the rest of his studies; the stepfathers telling him he must be more responsible; his boss at the restaurant where he washes dishes. And of course, Olivia and Mason, Sr.

One of the funny scenes in the film is the elder Mason trying to explain sex to his highly embarrassed adolescent children. He is concerned that they know how to avoid an unwanted pregnancy, probably because that had led to his own first unhappy marriage. Another scene is when on his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday each of Mason's step-grandparents (Annie is their daughter) give him a present, she a Bible with his name printed on the cover "and the words of Jesus printed in red." Granddad gives him the shotgun that his father had bequeathed him. No one sees the irony of the contrast in the gifts—were Mason to read them, the red-lettered words of Jesus clearly going against the violence represented by the gun.

Buffeted about as he was during his boyhood, Mason manages to avoid what the apostle Paul called becoming "so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking." (Or as the Phillips translation puts it, "squeezed into the world's mold.") However, despite his stepmother Annie's faith

he has not "fixed" his "attention on God. He has indulged in pot and sex, though not to the extent of others. The advice he has received from his father is a mixture of the mundane and the insightful, an example of the latter being the father telling him that to win a girl he must ask her a lot of questions and really listen to her answers. Indeed, by the end of the film we see that father has matured along with son, Mason Sr. even selling his prized muscle car to buy a more practical van to accommodate his family.

This is a film that bears watching more than once, so full of warm scenes, despite the conflicts and divorces. As a child of divorce, back in the days when marriage breakups were uncommon, I really resonated with certain scenes in the film. Pervasive throughout it is the assurance that a child can emerge from such buffeting still loving his parents and with his inner self strengthened by all of his experiences, good and bad. The last scenes of Mason meeting his college roommate and a young woman who seems as insightful as he is a great way to end the film.

My main hope for Mason is that one day, maybe while taking a college religion or philosophy course, he will remember that Bible his step-grandmother had given him, and take it out and read it. Certainly he needs to move beyond that conversation with his father in which he asks about life, "What's the point?" to which Mason Sr. replies, "I sure as shit don't know. We're all just winging it." Whereas I appreciate the honesty of the father's response, I would hope that they both discover that we are not alone "winging it" in the universe, that there is One who can give us wings to fly toward that destination called the kingdom of God.

*A set of Reflection/Discussion Questions will be included with the review in the Sept. 2014 issue of VP.*