

The Giver (2014)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 34 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 4; Language 2; Sex/Nudity 1.

Our star ratings (0-5): 4.5

You have turned my mourning into dancing; you have taken off my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

Psalms 30:5

Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has comforted his people, and will have compassion on his suffering ones.

Isaiah 49:13

I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

John 15:11

Director Phillip Noyce's film about the teenaged Jonas (Brenton Thwaites) is based on Lois Lowry's 1993 Newbery Medal-winning novel. At first it reminded me of the story of the Indian Prince Siddhārtha Gautama, as portrayed by Keenu Reeves in *Little Buddha*. Both lived in blissful comfort, and upon discovering a world of pain and deprivation, each gave up his comfortable security to follow a very different path.

Of course, the world of Jonas, set in the future when most of humanity has been destroyed by some catastrophe referred to as "The Ruin" is very different from that of ancient India. There is no poverty, race-based segregation or war in The Community, which in aerial shots looks like one of those dream developments situated atop a giant mesa surrounded by perpetual clouds. Everyone dresses alike; there are no

celebrities or advertising to entice people to want to get ahead of their neighbor by buying the latest or most expensive gadget. It first seems like a utopia, with society presided over by the Council of Elders, headed by the Chief Elder (Meryl Streep).

Everyone takes an injection each morning, which controls (or covers up) emotions that might stir up trouble with others. Sexual feelings also are controlled, just enough to insure the procreation of children, but then the new-born is taken and raised by a different family, thus assuring that birth-family ties will not divide The Community. Everyone has a place in society, assigned to individuals when they reach the age of 16 (12 in the novel—as in *Ender's Game*, the age has been raised a notch). Obedience and conformity are taught as the top virtues.

On their 16th birthdays Jonas and his best friends Fiona (Odeya Rush) and Asher (Cameron Monaghan) take their place with other candidates amidst the gathering of the Community. Chief Elder, unable to be present due to duties in other Communities, announces through a hologram the assignments. She includes brief personal comments about the candidate as she moves down the list of names. The three friends wait expectantly as she moves along. Asher is assigned to become a defender, piloting a fighter jet, and Fionna is to be a Nurturer, one who cares for the newborn children. Jonas is passed over, and dozens of other persons are called out and assigned their positions. Finally, the Chief Elder returns to Jonas, assuring the audience that she has not made a mistake. Because he has been found to possess equally the qualifications for all vocations, he is called to the rarest of all positions; he is to become a Receiver of Memory.

A Receiver is to learn all of the past history of the Community so that someone will retain knowledge of the awful past, the details of which not even members of the Council of Elders are privy to. Thus Jonas is sent to the imposing house

of *The Giver* (Jeff Bridges), the interior looking like is a section of the New York Library, its two-storied bookcases, lining every wall running from floor to ceiling, crammed with books. As Jonas enters and gazes at the unfamiliar objects, the Giver informs him that they are “books”—and of course, being a sci-fi fan, I was reminded of Ray Bradbury’s *Fahrenheit 451*, in which firemen are employed to burn all books, lest they upset people.

Over the next few days The Giver lays hold of the hands of the naïve Jonas and introduces him to the history prior to the establishment of the Communities. Like the ancient Prince Siddhārtha the young man is shocked to learn of the poverty, crime, and violent warfare that led up to The Ruin. And yet, under The Giver’s tutelage, he also becomes aware of the cost of their present day security and serenity, the loss of the emotions that made us human. Pain and hatred are but one side of the human equation. Love and joy are the other.

In a colorful sequence of dancing at an ethnic wedding, Jonas becomes aware of love and joy. Introduced when The Giver sits before the unfamiliar (to Jonas) grand piano and plays a measure from a song, the hitherto black and white photography changes to bright colors. The Community has been devoid of both color and music. This film technique, also well used to great effect in the 1998 film fantasy about conformity, *Pleasantville*, adds greatly to the effect of the film. Over the ensuing days as his mentor leads him, Jonas decides he wants his friends and his family to become aware of what he has learned and now feels. This leads both him and the Giver into conflict with the Chief Elder, the latter arguing with the worried leader that the old, suppressed emotions were precious, even though they often led to hatred and violence. He argues that humans could learn to choose to use them for good, but the Chief Elder counters with, “They always choose wrong!”

How all this comes to a head and an ambiguous ending that begs

for a sequel makes for fascinating viewing. The story is not nearly as violent as the other recent dystrophic films, nor is this a copy of them, as we might think due to its coming after *Ender's Game*; *Snowpiercer*, *Divergent*, and of course, *The Hunger Games*. According to the studio, Jeff Bridges optioned the novel right after it was published in 1993, but could not get the studio to back the production—until other films proved that there was a market for dystrophic films. I wonder what that film would have been like had it been made then, in that he had wanted his father Lloyd bridges to play the part of the Giver.

The most moving part of the film for me is the montage of shots that we see when the Giver takes Jonas' hands in his and says that he wants to impart strength to him. The shots include people engaged in extreme sports, such as shooting a rapids, followed by demonstrations against tyranny, chief of which is the lone man in Tiananmen Square standing before the tank. The last image is the face of the man who came to embody the struggle against apartheid, Nelson Mandela. Truly a thrilling moment!

Once again a science fiction story is in alignment with the Hebrew prophets crying out for justice, as well as the Galilean Rabbi who spoke of coming to bring joy. The solution in the story, of sacrificing freedom of choice and the emotions for safety and harmony, is one embraced by many people and government leaders today. Thus film is as relevant as the headlines about government information gathering and the debates about security versus privacy and freedom of choice. A youth group could have quite a good time seeing and discussing this film. And because it is so well done, so could older adults.