

How To Eat Fried Worms (2006)

Rated PG. Our ratings: V-2 ; L-1; S/N-1 . Running time: 1 hour 38 min.

O Lord, who may abide in your tent?

Who may dwell on your holy hill?

*Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
and speak the truth from their heart...*

Psalms 15:1-2

You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

Matthew 5:43-45

Director/writer Bob Dolman's *How To Eat Fried Worms* film is far better than I had anticipated, ending on a high note that could have come out of the teachings of the apostle Paul or the Sermon on the Mount. Based on the popular book by Thomas Rockwell (son of artist Norman Rockwell), this is the story of new kid at school Billy Forrester (Luke Benward), 11 years old and in the 5th grade. Although there is a token girl Erika (Hallie Kate Eisenberg), who becomes one of Billy's first friends, and offering a key piece of advice near the end, her main role at times seems to

be the repetition of the observation, "Boys are so weird." Billy's father Mitch (Tom Cavanagh) is also starting out at a new job, so there are some parallels between him and his son—and some good scenes of the two interacting. But Billy is a kid, not an adult, and so he dreads going to school, whereas his father looks forward to his new work.

Billy's dread proves to be well founded. At school Joe Guire (Adam Hicks) and his cronies single him out with a hostile stare before he enters the building. They steal his lunchbox long enough to stuff a mass of wiggling earthworms into it. Trying to remain cool in the lunch room, Billy flips one away, and it lands smack in Joe's face. Not a good move for Billy. Dubbed "Worm Boy" by Joe, later Billy standing his ground rashly says that he eats earthworms all the time, that they're really quite good. And thus ensues the bet with Joe that drives the rest of the story. Billy makes an agreement with Joe that he can eat ten worms in a day. Now we have already been shown that Billy has a weak stomach, unable to watch his spoiled little brother Woody (Ty Panitz) eat his gooey Italian food or survive the first curve during a car trip without having to throw up. How will he ever rise to meet such a challenge? If he loses, he will have to endure the penalty of walking down the main hall at school with his pants stuffed full of worms.

The separateness of children from adults is emphasized in this film, Billy never telling his parents or his caring teacher what is happening. There is one amusing scene in which Mitch comes upon all the kids. Joe and his gang had just been tormenting Billy, but when Mitch asks what they're up to, all

respond, "Just having fun." But fun is the last thing Billy is having as the appointed Saturday approaches, when he must eat ten worms by seven that night or lose any hope of gaining acceptance at school. He does have Erika and a couple of other outcasts in his corner, but they can give only minimal support. Comes Saturday, and we see that the members of Joe's group must have watched the Food Network at times, because they cook the worms in a variety of ways, with such names as "Burning Fireball," the "Greasy Brown Toad Bloater Special," and the "Barfmallow." No matter how they label the concoctions, they all know that the basic ingredient is a worm. The meal becomes a movable feast because of adults who pop up, forcing them to hide what they are doing and moving on to another site.

Erika's comment about the weirdness of boys is true. I can remember the fun we boys had at school lunch in trying to make girls feel nauseous by describing the ingredients of their spaghetti or chili in the grossest of terms, or by singing about "Great big gobs of greasy, grimy gopher guts." This film plays on that tendency of boys, though thankfully it omits the fart jokes of so many childhood films. The child actors are totally believable, with the two playing Billy and Joe especially talented. To the film's credit Joe is not a one-dimensional bad guy—in a brief scene we see that he also is a victim of a bully, his older brother (even as Billy is on his way to becoming one to the little brother whom he despises). In adult films we are led to cheer as the hero demolishes the bully, often in an orgy of violence, but not so here. The ending is as satisfying as those for *Akeelah and the Bee*, *The Ant Bully*, *The War*, or *Cars*. This has truly been a good summer for children's films that offer non-preachy moral lessons, in this case, standing up for oneself, honesty, and reconciliation with one's enemy.

For Reflection/Discussion

Note that there are spoilers in the last few questions, so you

might want to wait until you see the film before reading further.

1) Recall when you were the “new kid”—or new adult at work: how did you feel? Who befriended you, and who turned your experience into an ordeal? How? When and how did you emerge from this period?

2) How is Billy’s father in a similar situation? Yet how is Billy right in not believing that they are as similar as his father thinks?

3) How do the children, especially Billy, put up a defensive façade? From the brief scene with Joe’s brother, what must Joe’s life be like at home? How does this, and similar stories of childhood, dispel the myth of the innocence of children? (Peanuts fans might share instances of how Charles Schultz’s characters do the same.)

4) Although a minor character, how does Erika play a key role on Saturday?

5) Did you suspect what lies behind Billy’s question to his father about telling the truth even if no one else is aware of a falsehood? How does Mitch’s answer show parental wisdom? How does Billy show that he is following the dictates of the author of Psalm 15?

6) How do most movies portray a bully, especially Westerns and adventure films? What usually happens to the bully? How is this one different? How have we seen that Joe also is the victim of bullyism? How does Billy fulfill the Biblical mandate (See Psalm 72:4 and Isaiah 1:17) to defend the oppressed, or Jesus’ teaching about loving an enemy?