

# Labor Day (2013)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 51 min.

Our content advisories (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2;  
Sex/Nudity.

Our star rating (1-5): 3

*Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;  
according to your steadfast love remember me, for your  
goodness' sake, O Lord!*

*Psalms 25:7*

*Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or  
boastful or arrogant...It bears all things, believes all  
things, hopes all things, endures all things.*

*1 Corinthians 13:4-7*

If you have seen the trailer of director/writer Jason Reitman's adaptation of Joyce Maynard's novel, then you know the basic outline of the film, the trailer giving an honest picture of the story. It is what happens between all the trailer's snippets that sets this film apart from most other romantic films about "true love." What could easily have been a syrupy, maudlin story of love and redemption is saved by the restraint of Reitman and the consummate acting of all three principal actors. People of faith will see and appreciate the theme of steadfast love, even when experienced over just a weekend, can make a difference in a person's life—and from an unlikely source at that!

Tobey Maguire, who plays the adult son at the end of the film, narrates the story, relating that his mother Adele Wheeler

(Kate Winslet) and himself (a wonderful Gattlin Griffith as a 13 year-old) are alone, His father's leaving some years before was not as much of a loss for her as losing love itself. Hands shaking, her sense of self worth destroyed by a series of traumas shown in brief flashbacks, Adele goes through the motions of living, but is too wounded to engage in it. Her house becomes as run down and messy as her psyche. Henry, about to enter 7<sup>th</sup> grade, has become the caretaker, even helping her to put their car in reverse when they leave the sanctuary of the house, the shopping trip being the only time she goes forth, and then only with his accompaniment. Borderline agoraphobic, she has Henry do their banking and other out of house chores.

Then, in 1987, when escaped convict Frank (Josh Brolin) forces himself into their lives, the world of both mother and son is changed forever. Although he had given them no choice about taking him home with them from the discount store where they had been shopping, he does ask if he can stay until the night. He ties Adele up, telling her that thus she can tell the police that she had been kidnapped and forced into helping him. He cooks a chili or stew, but instead of digging in himself, he takes a steaming hot bowl over to her and spoon feeds her, making sure that each bite has cooled off so as not to burn her lips. During all of this Henry is watching, making no attempt to escape or use the telephone.

With the police passing by and his face on TV newscasts, Frank stays the night, but puts his time to good use. He washes the dishes, sweeps and mops the floor, and the next morning has breakfast for them. Of course, by now he has untied Adele. Each hour seems to bring on another act of kindness— fixing a step on the basement stairway, oiling a squeaky door hinge, crawling under the family station wagon to fix it and change the oil, and cleaning out a leaf-clogged gutter on the roof.. As the long Labor Day weekend passes, Adel and he are drawn together, as is Henry, discovering a father's care that he had

longed for. Frank talks with him and shows him how to hold and throw a baseball and how to hold the bat to hit it. The two, and then Adele, play ball in the backyard. With Frank's admiration of her and his tender, never aggressive care, Adele begins to blossom. As the adult Henry observes, "They were two people who could not go out into the world, so they made a world with each other."

There are some tense moments when neighbors drop by, the man across the street with a large bucket of peaches from his tree, a woman with a severely handicapped son who desperately needs Adele to watch him while she rushes off for a day to tend to an unnamed emergency. The peaches prove to be very important, both to the moment and to a day in the distant future. When Adele observes that there far too many peaches to eat so that some will rot away, Frank sets to work. Under his tutelage all three peel and pit the fruit, chopping them into a large pile. Then he takes out a sack of flour and other ingredients to make the pie dough, explaining as he helps them knead the dough that it is very forgiving, even if they do something wrong. He places the rolled out dough into the bottom of the pie pan and then dumps the peaches atop it, last of all helping them place a second rolled out piece on top of the pie. There is so much fruit that the middle bulges up like a small mountain. The edges are a bit ragged, and he does not worry about evenly spacing the small air holes he forms with a fork. (In the interview with author Joyce Maynard on the movie's film site she says that she did want this to be a "Martha Stewart pie.") Perfect it is not, but *beautiful* it is, not physically, but spiritually—I thought of the glorious meal made by Babette Hersant in *Babette's Feast*, a meal made by love for love. And then I thought of my maternal grandmother who *always* baked for me whenever I visited her (from childhood through adulthood) a black raspberry pie because she knew how much I relished it, which made the pie all the more a gift of love.

Interspersed are harrowing scenes from the past and from the present. We see why Adele has become almost comatose, and thus why husband Gerald (Clark Gregg) felt he had to leave, and why Frank had decided to stay with his mother rather than to go with his father. And we see too in scenes with his father, 2<sup>nd</sup> wife, and half brother that Gerald is not a villain, but a weak man who still loves Henry but has never known how to relate to him. Also, Henry meets a new girl in town, the precocious Mandy (Maika Monroe), who is his age and thus will be starting school in his class. She thinks she knows more about sex than he does, and during their several conversations plants a doubt in Henry's mind. Having told her the bare minimum about his mother's new relationship, she warns him, based on her own experience, that he will soon be displaced from home, shipped off to his father. When the weekend passes and Adel decides to go along with Frank's desperate plan to emigrate to Canada and start over again with new names, Henry is not aware that he is included. How he learns of their true intentions makes that scene second only to the pie sequence in emotional clout. Thus, this film becomes a coming of age film, as well as one of the power of abiding love.

The maker of *Thank You for Smoking*, *Juno*, and *Up in the Air* demonstrates again his capability of directing such diverse types of films, ranging from satire to comedy to drama.. The three main actors perfectly capture the yearning for a love that seems impossible, given the odds stacked against them. Frank is a great example of restrained love, never pressing Adele more than she can stand. No ripping off of clothes and jumping into bed (or upon a table or the floor) for them. These are adults who truly care more for the welfare of the other than their lusts. And, as is finally revealed, it is a love that can withstand disappointment and the separation of time and physical absence. It is as close as human love can be to what the Scriptures call "abiding love."

And yet in spite of all of the above, I have to raise the

question of the reality of the story, namely could all of this happen over just one weekend? Could a woman so emotionally damaged be drawn out of herself so soon, or a boy transfer his longing for affection so quickly from his birth father to this stranger? And when Henry goes to the library to get some books on Canada for Frank, how come it is open on a Sunday morning? No library in any of the four small towns I have lived in would have been open then, especially on a national holiday weekend. (Nor do we hear any church bells or see anyone church-bound, which would be the case in a real small town.) Come to think of it, the bank was open too when Adele forced herself to go with Henry to withdraw her funds for their planned trip. So, despite my initial embracing of this tale, I have to raise the believability factor.

There is a lot to like in the film, but also plenty to make one draw up short and question the whole enterprise. This seems to be a case in which the excellent performance of the cast—without words at times each of the three main actors are able to express through a facial expression or small gesture a longing for a loving relationship that is just beyond their reach—overcomes flaws in the script, leading viewers to believe in the story. Until we emerge from the theater and think about the film. Despite this, I like the film and want to believe in its premise that steadfast love does indeed change things, for the recipient and for the giver.

*This review plus 9 discussion questions is included in the Feb. issue of Visual Parables, which is available to subscribers (go to The Store for subscription information). The journal also includes an extensive (over 10 pages—180+ films) annotated list of films on racism that could prove helpful for those wanting films for Black History Month.*