

# Loving (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 2 hours 3 min.

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

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!  
For your love is better than wine...*

*I am black and beautiful,  
O daughters of Jerusalem,  
like the tents of Kedar,  
like the curtains of Solomon.*

*Song of Solomon 1:2-5*

*From one human being he created all races of people  
and made them live throughout the whole earth.*

*Acts 17:26 (GNT)*

When I first heard of this film I thought the title referred to the relationship between the inter-racial couple that was deemed illegal by the state of Virginia. Of course, it is about Richard and Mildred *Loving* (Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga), whose last name gives the title its double meaning. Director Jeff Nichols is also the writer, basing his script on Nancy Buirski's 2011 documentary *The Loving Story*. His film is the story behind the 1967 Supreme Court decision of *Loving v. Virginia*, a momentous decision that swept aside the numerous state laws, mostly, but not all, in the South. Racial intermarriage was no longer a criminal offense.

By focusing on the backstory, the filmmakers follow a different path than do most Civil Rights films—there are no demonstrations or marches, and we barely see the inside of a

courtroom. We hear just a snatch of what must have been stirring speeches by the Loving's two lawyers. This is appropriate, in that the pair were not activists seeking societal change. They were just a blue-collar couple in love who wanted to be left alone.

The film begins one night on a porch in the midst of their love story—no account of how they met, nor any scene of their families reacting to their going together. Mildred quietly informs Richard that she is pregnant. The camera closes in on his face (as it does so many times throughout the film, and on hers as well). Obviously mulling over the news, he slowly smiles and says that this is good.

At a rural drag race, over which Richard presides, we see that segregation in Virginia in the mid-1950s was not total. The small crowd and the two drivers are racially mixed, and when the black driver wins, there is no animosity, the losers, whites and blacks gamely handing over their money to the winners. As had happened in the past decade in baseball, sports led the way in this low-key mixing of the races. However, when Richard and Mildred openly embrace, the facial expressions of a group of young whites show their disapproval.

The couple travel to Washington DC to make their marriage bond legal. Richard continues his work as a brick layer but keeps a low profile as far as their marriage is concerned. Of course, their relationship cannot be kept secret for long in a small community, and thus one night two cars park down the road, and out of them emerge sheriff Brooks (Martin Csokas) and a couple of deputies. They break into the Loving's bedroom and haul them off to jail. Richard is freed on bond, but Mildred is kept in jail over the weekend despite his pleas—an especially bad ordeal because the sheriff had not allowed her to dress but hauled her away in her bathrobe. Frank Beazley (Bill Camp), the lawyer Richard hires, explains to them that the judge will find them guilty and sentence them to one year in jail or an exile from the state for 25 years if they agree to

leave and not return together during that period.

This is what happens. With tears, the couple say good bye to their families. Mildred's sister Garnet (Terri Abney) is upset at Richard because, as she says, he has caused unnecessary grief to their family. Richard's tight-lipped mother Lola (Sharon Blackwood) apparently feels the same, saying that he should not have married the girl. When he replies that he thought she liked her, she replies that she has liked a lot of people.

The couple find lodging at a black home in D.C., and Richard's construction skills land him a job. But they miss the country and families. Mildred says that she had hoped that his midwife mother would have delivered their baby. So, they sneak back into her family home one night, and Lola delivers their baby. Again, someone betrays them, and the sheriff hauls the couple off to jail. Then, in a Christ-like gesture, their lawyer tells the judge that the couple had returned due to his mistaken advice and therefore should be excused. The judge probably knows that this is a lie, but he accepts the excuse and frees the Lovings, on their promise to leave and never return during the next 25 years. Richard thanks the man, but the lawyer simply walks away while telling them not to do this again.

Several years pass in Washington, with more children arriving—the Lovings now have two boys and a girl toddler. More than ever, the parents miss their families and Virginia with its green fields to play in. The boys and their friends have to play their ball games in a street. When one of their sons is slightly injured by a car, Mildred decides it's time to pack up and move. Richard is surprised at her unusual assertiveness, but he returns with them to Virginia where they live in a small apartment, and then with her family on their farm.

It is now the early 1960s, and the family watches Dr. King and

Civil Rights demonstrations on TV. When her cousins suggest that she get help fighting Virginia's miscegenation law, Mildred writes a letter to Attorney General Robert Kennedy. Meanwhile Richard is almost paranoid about being arrested again. When he sees a speeding car approaching their farmhouse, he starts to hide. However, it is just Mildred's brother. Later on, he will find a note wrapped around brick in his truck informing him that the writer knows what he has done. All the way home he is convinced that he is being tailed, but the truck he watches anxiously in his rear-view mirror continues on after his last turn off the highway.

One day Mildred answers the phone, and a woman tells her that the ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union) would like to take her case. She explains that Kennedy had forwarded her letter to the office, and when Mildred objects that they cannot afford the cost, the caller says there would be no charge. Bernie Cohen (Nick Kroll), the ACLU lawyer meets them and explains that their trial was too long time ago to be reopened, so that it would be best if they submit to re-arrest. Then the ACLU could prosecute the case through the Virginia system and then to the Federal courts, eventually winding up in the Supreme Court. Richard is dead set against this. He just wants to be allowed to live in peace with the woman he loves. Backing off, Cohen says that he will come up with something else.

I will let you discover how Cohen does get the Lovings to cooperate more fully, though by now Mildred takes the lead, with Richard more a bystander. Cohen is joined by a lawyer more experienced in Civil Rights cases than he, Phil Hirschkop (Jon Bass). The shy Lovings even agree to allow Life Magazine photographer, Grey Villet (Michael Shannon), to spend time in their home. He wins Richard's trust right off by speaking knowledgably about the car engine that Richard is working on when he arrives. The photographer relates well to the children, and by using a camera with high speed film so that a

flash is not needed, he obtains some candid shots, chief of which is one of the two sitting on their couch as they watch TV, Richard's head lying in her lap.

A celebrity, once the article and pictures are published, Richard wants no part of the limelight. It is Mildred who meets with the reporters and calmly answers their questions. During one interview that is being filmed Richard stands off to the side. The lawyers excitedly report that the Supreme Court will hear their case, but Richard says that he does not want to attend. This time Mildred goes along with him. During the one minute or so scene at the Supreme Court we hear just a sentence from the presentations of the two lawyers. The back of their heads is filmed in such soft focus that the judges facing them (and us) are completely out of focus—one more example of the director de-emphasizing the courtroom drama.

Joel Edgerton and Ruth Negga are excellent as the lovers who will not bend to the will of their racist society. Their dialogue is sparse, neither accustomed to expressing themselves in multiple-syllabic words or run-on sentences. But from the many close-ups of their faces we can understand their emotions—their love for each other; their perplexity at the hostility that their love arouses in others; and their fear of how that hostility might destroy their marriage. They are like Tony and Maria in [Westside Story](#) who sing “There’s a place for us/Somewhere a place for us.” Both couples want “a new way of living.” Sadly, the Puerto Rican and Italian lovers’ story ended in tragedy, but not this story of a black woman and a white man. Though they are reluctant participants in a Supreme Court decision that is as important as that of 1954, their love story has impacted thousands more such couples achieve their marital dreams—and in turn, as the song says, help our nation find “a new way of forgiving.”

I am sure that the inclusion of more of the Supreme Court trial would have been welcomed by viewers who enjoy court room drama, but director Nichols is more interested in the love

story than one about lawyers—a love story, of course, that had a huge impact upon the nation. His treatment reminds me of the 1990 film [The Long Walk Home](#) that dealt with the Montgomery Bus Boycott by focusing upon a simple black family rather than Martin Luther King, J., Ralph Abernathy, or Rosa Parks. By showing how a lowly black mother who had to walk across town to her job as maid and cook at a white home, the film vividly showed us the unsung but brave souls who made possible the success of their famous leaders.

There is one moment in which we see the ridiculous way in which religion was used to support the hateful Jim Crow laws. In upholding the conviction of the Lovings, a Virginia judge piously referred to the Bible as the basis for the miscegenation law. He claimed that “Almighty God” created the races white, black, yellow, Malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents. If men had not upset his arrangements to keep the races geographically separate, there would be no need for such a law, one that clearly is in accord with his desire to keep the races separate.

One final observation concerns the development of Mildred from meek housewife “I’ll see what my husband says” to the one taking the lead later when the members of the press want to talk with them. She is struggling not only against racism, but a patriarchy that was hindering many of her black sisters in the Civil Rights movement. Their female struggle would break forth into the open in the next decade.

This is another movie that matters, one that will entertain as well as provide a good opportunity for religious groups to watch and discuss issues that still divide our country.

If you enjoyed this film, you might want to see the 1949 film, also based on a true story, [Lost Boundaries](#) about a light-skinned black man who passes as a white and marries a white woman.

*This review with a set of questions is in the Dec. 2016 issue of VP.*