

Mr. Church (2016)

Rated PG-13. Running time: 1 hour 44 min.

*Our content ratings (1-10): Violence 1; Language 2;
Sex/Nudity 3.*

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.

1 Peter 4:10

Eddie Murphy gets a chance to display his acting rather than his comedic skills in Bruce Beresford's latest film. Although savaged by many critics, I enjoyed the film, so this could be called a guilty pleasure. Maybe it is because the first quarter of the film reminded me of one of my favorite foreign films, [Babette's Feast](#), so despite its flaws, I was hooked by Susan McMartin's script—in a title card at the beginning she tells us that it is inspired by a true friendship.

In Los Angeles one morning 10 year-old Charlotte (Natalie Coughlin), enters the kitchen and quickly runs into her single mother Marie's (Natascha McElhone) bedroom, exclaiming that there's a black man cooking eggs in their kitchen. Apparently Mom had neglected to inform her daughter that her recently deceased wealthy lover had willed the man to cook for them, Mr. Church (Murphy), for a period of time. She also has not told "Charlie" that she has breast cancer and is expected to live just for another six months. Not only are Mr. Church's services been paid for, but also there was a provision in the will for all food and medical costs.

Charlie is not happy at what she sees as an intrusion into her life, and so she rejects the delicious dish Mr. Church has prepared, telling him she wants Apple Jacks. He tells her he has not heard of this food, and she adds scorn to her nasty reaction. She determines to reject his food, but the food is so savory in smell and looks that with each passing day her

resistance weakens—just as in *Babette's Feast* the strict church members are won over by the female chef's sumptuous French cuisine. The girl's attitude toward Mr. Church changes as well, the black man becoming a surrogate father to her. Six months pass, and Marie is still alive. It might partly be Mr. Church's magical food, though her strong maternal desire to see her daughter grow up is also an important factor.

Six years, pass, and Mr. Church is still cooking and taking care of shopping and other household chores. By this time Charlie (now played by Britt Robertson) is well aware of her mom's disease, because it has turned her almost into an invalid, her portable oxygen tank always close at hand. Relationships with Mr. Church are close, but, as from the start, he keeps his private life a secret.

Charlie has developed an interest in literature and writing, thanks to the paperback books their cook brought to their house. Stacking them in a nearly empty bookcase, he gives Charlie what amounts to a library card, telling her to fill it out for any book she borrows. Because at that time she was still hostile, she tears it up, but later tapes it back together so she can access the books. Through the next few years she reads many of the great novels of American and European literature—though strangely, given their owner's race, there is nothing by Richard Wright, James Baldwin or any other black author.

The years pass with sorrows (Marie lives long enough to see her daughter through most of her daughter's high school days), triumphs (senior prom), defeats, and the growing importance of two minor characters—one who had befriended the young Charlie on her bus ride to school, and the other the boy with whom she had attended her high school senior prom. Mr. Church continues to keep his night-time private life a secret, including what he does at a night spot called Jelly's Place.

Charlie's dream to attend Boston University is made possible by Charlie, who gives to her at her high school graduation an envelope stuffed with money. It seems that he had stashed away the savings from all those food coupons Marie had given him

during the years she had sent him shopping. And so it is off to the other side of the country for Charlie, and we wonder what will happen to her relationship to Mr. Church. Not to worry, of course.

There are some hard to believe things in the film, such as being able to save enough from grocery coupons to be able to afford one of the most expensive colleges in the country. And we wonder why race never seems to be much of a bother—though there is a tender moment when the frail Marie and Mr. Church embrace each other and slow dance together, a scene that seems to crackle with sexual potential. Charlie's college life is dealt with in a sequence not much longer than two minutes, ending with something for which no details are given, and causing her to return to L.A.

Despite its flaws, I think this is a far better film than most critics believe. The love that Marie exhibits toward her daughter, even early on when she behaves like a brat toward Mr. Church, is beautiful to see. And I have already mentioned the power of food theme akin to that of *Babette's Feast*. Critics have compared the film to the directors' 1990 hit *Driving Miss Daisy*, deriding both as *Noble Negro Serves White Person Loyally*. There is some truth to this charge. A long list of such films begins with those starring Sidney Poitier, *A Patch of Blue*, *Lilies of the Field*, *The Slender Thread*, *Edge of the City*, and *To Sir With Love*. However, as I mentioned, the film I thought of earlier on was *Babette's Feast*—both protagonists are talented cooks, and their savory dishes transform the consumers from a narrow self-centeredness to an other awareness person.

The script might have filled in Mr. Church's character better. The mystery of not only how he spends at the jazz club is left hanging. When he occasionally returns home drunk there are hints in his angry rants of a childhood marred by an abusive father, but we learn nothing of this, or how he became so skillful at cooking, reading, playing the piano, and even dressmaking. Yes, this guy is even skilled at using a sewing machine.

As it stands the film should be named Charlie because the film is really about her. Mr. Church never changes much during the film, but she moves from selfish brat to a mature young lady, being cared for, to herself providing care for the man who had become her surrogate father. It is good to see Eddie Murphy is indeed good in drama as well as fast-paced comedy. His performance here reminded me of female comedienne Whoopi Goldberg's unexpected sober demeanor in the splendid Civil Rights film *The Long Walk Home* in which she played a maid walking across Montgomery Alabama during the famous bus boycott in the 50s. You might have to look for this film at an art house theater, or wait for it to come to video. It is well worth the wait.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the October issue of *Visual Parables*.