

# PULP FICTION (1994)

Rated R. Running time; 2 hours 34 min.

Our content rating: Violence 8; Language 9; Sex/Nudity 3.

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*I will execute great vengeance upon them with wrathful chastisements.*

*Then they will know that I am the Lord, when I lay my vengeance upon them*

*Ezekiel 25:17, similar to what Jules quotes*

I was prepared by all the critical raves to enjoy Quentin Tarantino's excellently made film, and was braced by their warnings for the brutal violence, vulgar language and free use of drugs by the characters. But what I was not prepared for was a cinematic theological probe of God, miracles, grace, and a divine call. The script is not only filled with brilliant repartee and delightful mundane observations – such as what a Big Mac is called in Europe – but resembles something novelist Flannery O'Connor might have written had she collaborated with Woody Allen! (A *The Violent Bear It Away Meets Crimes and Misdemeanors*)

The circuitous structure of the film weaves the young robber couple at the beginning of the film with the two hit men from the second vignette in a finale that will have you on the edge of your seat, and one which actually takes place before the central episode of the film. Vincent and Bible-quoting Jules (John Travolta and Samuel L. Jackson), on their way to wreak vengeance on a group of young entrepreneurs who have cheated their boss Marsellus Wallace, talk and bicker as if they were on their way to pick up their dry cleaning instead of on a

killing mission. Before we see all that occurs during their violent rendezvous, the film switches to Butch (Bruce Willis), a washed-up boxer ordered to take a dive so that Marsellus can win big on his fight. But Butch, disappointed that his career has been controlled and ruined by gangsters, pulls a fast one, hitting his opponent so hard that it kills him. His carefully arranged escape plans, however, take several unexpected, and violent, detours when he has to return to his flat to retrieve a precious watch heirloom – resulting in a fate actually better than even what he had planned.

Then, when we return to Vincent and Jules in their violent confrontation with the cheaters, something strange happens that one of them interprets as a miracle from God, a sign that there are divine plans for him that require him to leave his deadly profession so as to be open to a new call. The other, of course, shrugs off what has happened as just a freak occurrence (miracles in the Bible, such as the crossing of the Red Sea in Exodus, often can be interpreted in naturalistic, as well as divine, terms). The two argue about God, miracles, and a call, until the final confrontation in the restaurant where the film began, an encounter that would have been resolved far differently if the miracle/coincidence had not occurred.

Not since *Crimes and Misdemeanors* and *The Fisher King* have we been treated to such an incredibly well made film that speaks to the mind and soul as well as taking us into such a dangerous and lurid world. (And, by the way, be sure to notice the name of the chopper bike on which Butch and his lover escape. This is like Tarantino and co-writer Roger Avery visually underlining their theological point!)

*Pulp Fiction* might not be for everybody. Like a similarly theologically-informed film *The Bad Lieutenant*, it is filled with vulgar language and vile violence, as if its makers are daring us to believe that there could be any hope or redemption for its low life characters. And yet that is just

what the film affirms, but in a way scarcely recognizable to the clean living suburbanites who make up many of our congregations. (I'm sure Methodist minister Don Wildmon and the "Morality in Media" folk will condemn the film without hesitation.) *Pulp Fiction* is probably too far out to be included in the Oscar nominations – but if it is not, it will probably be the most talked about omission since the Pre-Schindler Spielberg, for it leaves in the dust virtually anything else made during the past year.

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