

The Beaver (2011)

Rated PG-13. Our Ratings: V-4 ;L -1 ; S/N -1. Running time: 1 hour 31 min.

*A cheerful heart is a good medicine,
but a downcast spirit dries up the bones.
Proverbs 17:22*

Jodie Foster's newest turn at directing might remind you of Meredith, Walt, and Beaver Lars and the Real Girl because of its bizarre premise, in this case a severely depressed man engaging in self-therapy by means of a child's large beaver hand puppet, hence the title. She was brave in casting Mel Gibson as the almost catatonic Walter Black because of his notoriety—and yet it is the actor's real-life instability, added to his great thespian ability, that makes his performance so compelling. The script by Kyle Killen will seem far out to many, requiring a similar suspension of belief as in the case of Lars..., but for those who can do so, the film will be a richly rewarding experience.

We first see Walter on a float in his pool with his arms stretched out to his sides. Yes, I know, filmmakers have used this crucifix posture a lot, from *Whisper Down the Wind* and *Cool Hand Luke* to *Gran Torino*, but as a symbol of intense

suffering it reinforces our feeling for this man no longer able to cope with life. The only reason he has not lost his job as the head of a once thriving toy company is that he is its CEO, the company being a family-owned one. Because he has scarcely spoken to them in three years Walter has lost the support of his wife Meredith (Jodie Foster) and the affection of his oldest son Porter (Anton Yelchin). Walter tries yoga, meditation, group therapy, self-help books, but nothing works. (Odd that in this purported "Christian" land we do not see him trying the church, prayer, or reading the Psalms, many of the latter written by depressed souls.)

Unable to bear watching him deteriorate before her eyes, Meredith orders him out of the house. When he checks into a motel he tries to hang himself by his necktie tied to the shower curtain bar. This gives way, and we are tempted both to laugh and to feel concern as he drags around behind him the bar with the shower curtain still attached. Outside, he drops some of his possessions into a dumpster, and then returns to pull out a large hand puppet in the form of a beaver. When Walter puts the puppet on his left hand Beaver starts talking to him in a cockney accent, telling him to get a grip on himself. "I'm here to save your g.d. life," it asserts. "The question is, do you want to get better?" During all the rest of the scenes of Beaver taking charge the filmmakers make no attempt to have Gibson cover his lips so as to produce a fantasy that Beaver is really alive, and not a tool for ventriloquism.

Returning home, Walter makes contact with his youngest son Henry (Riley Thomas Stewart), the boy happy that his father has joined him in numerous woodworking projects. Meredith is dubious about the puppet, but takes Walter back anyway, only partially satisfied by his claim that his therapist has recommended a new regimen of puppet use. Only oldest son Porter refuses to have anything to do with him.

At work, Walter calls everyone together so that Beaver can

announce that he is now in charge. There are a lot of befuddled looks, but the Beaver's plans of producing a series of toy woodworking kits, complete with tools, wood, and a replica of the Beaver, carry the day with them. His Vice President (Cherry Jones), energized by the new project, comes up with marketing ideas, with the result that the project is quickly produced and sent out to toy stores. The public enthusiastically buys up the kits and the Beaver puppets for their children, this now being the must have plaything. Now the Beaver-directed Walter is a success at home (except with Porter) and at work, his toy being so popular that his picture graces the covers of various magazines, and Matt Lauer interviews him on the Today Show.

However, Meredith wants Walter without Beaver. There is a funny love scene (you're right, this is not a film for children) in which Beaver is right in bed with them, never leaving Walter's hand. When Meredith insists that they dine out and leave Beaver at home, the puppet takes on a dark aspect. In an intense scene Walter even physically wrestles with and tries to strangle the domineering puppet. This sequence calls to mind the apostle Paul's description in Romans 7 of his inner conflict. Thus Beaver becomes a part of Walter's illness, a menace as much as a help.

I should also mention that almost half of the screen time is taken up by Porter's relationship with his high school class's valedictorian Norah (Jennifer Lawrence). He has written term papers, for a hefty price, for a number of his less talented classmates, so Norah, under a lot of pressure at home and school, approaches Porter for his services. She wants an ovation-inducing address for commencement. During the period of getting to know each other, the two feel a growing attraction, this portion of the film reminding me of another son and popular girl, Ricky Fitts and Jane Burnham in American Beauty—and in which Jane's father Lester is also a very depressed man. Thus Walter's story is mirrored in the story of

his son, and their relationship echoes that of the father and son in a certain story of Jesus, with them both being prodigals. The consequences, bad and good, that result are moving, perhaps even tear inducing, at least for those willing to go along with the script's bizarre premise.

For Reflection/Discussion

1. We are not given much of Walter's history showing causes of his depression, but do you think this is necessary? What do you think Meredith has had to put up with for so many years? How is drinking an escape and a major part of his problem?

2. How might you "explain" Beaver? The saner inner voice of Walter, arising from his unconscious self? An intervention from beyond himself, even from God?

3. Compare Beaver's question "Do you want to get well?" with that of Jesus in John 5:2-18. Why is this question important? Do you think that there are some sick folk who actually do not want to get well, and if so, why would they not want to be cured?

4. And yet also what is the darker aspect of Beaver? How is Walter's struggle with Beaver similar to what the apostle Paul describes in Romans 7?

5. How is the acceptance of Beaver by Meredith and the toy company's Vice President and staff a matter of grace? Perhaps because of their affection for him? Compare this to the way the doctor, his family, and the church members accepted Lars and his relationship with "Bianca" in Lars and the Real Girl.

6. Why do you think Porter posts all the notes on the ceiling of his room? What is his biggest fear, one that drives him away from his father? How is his story similar to that of

Ricky's in American Beauty—even to the point that each of them uses dubious means to acquire substantial amounts of money?

7. Depression is a major ailment for 15 million Americans. The best review of this film that explores this aspect is by long-time colleagues Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. Their wonderful review, with their usual quotations from poets and authorities, can be found on their Spirituality and Practice website at:

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/films/films.php?id=2108>

2. You owe it to yourself to go and read it.

8. In the opening sequence, what does Walter do in his attempt to cure himself of depression? Why do you think that the resources of the church and Christianity are ignored? Because director Jodie Foster is an atheist, or—? (I don't know about th

e beliefs of the scriptwriter.) How does his use of Beaver show that Walter seems aware that he needs something or Someone outside himself?

9. For a few of the Psalms in which the author seems depressed, read: Psalms 68; 88; 130; 137. What resource does the writer have for coping? How might an immersion in the Psalms help Walter deal with his problem? What has been your experience with depression, or with others faced with this problem?