

# The Lovely Bones (2009)

Rated PG-13. Our ratings: V-7 ; L-6; S/N-4. Length: 2 hours 15 min.

*They sit in ambush in the villages;  
in hiding-places they murder the innocent.  
Psalm 10:8*

In his latest film Peter Jackson  
leaves Middle Earth and returns  
to a theme similar to his  
earlier film *Heavenly Creatures*,  
one involving young girls and murder and death. His screenwriting collaborators Fran Walsh and Philippa Boyens have adapted Alice Sebold's novel, the result being an uneven film many critics have decried and a few have applauded. Best part of the film is the young Oscar-nominated actress from *Atonement* Saoirse Ronan, who plays the 14 year-old girl Susie Salmon. She narrates the film after she is murdered on Dec. 6, 1973 near her home in Pennsylvania. As she says, "My murderer was a man from our neighborhood. I took his photo once; he stepped out of nowhere and ruined the shot. He ruined a lot of things." Indeed he did, including the marriage of her father and mother.

2009 DreamWorks SKG

Even though we know that the story is being narrated by a murdered girl, the filmmakers manage to maintain suspense in two key sequences. First is the series of scenes leading up to the actual murder—we are kept wondering when this terrible event will take place. Even when, while taking a short-cut home from school through a cornfield and she meets the creepy George Harvey (Stanley Tucci), we realize that the moment has arrived, there is the long drawn out suspense as he entices her to take a look at the underground chamber he has allegedly built for the neighborhood kids. And then later, when the dead girl's sister Lindsey (Rose McIver) decides to break into the suspected killer's house to find the evidence the police say is required before they can do anything, and the killer returns just as she has discovered the notebook in which he has written and drawn the incriminating evidence.

A number of ghost stories are built around the idea that ghosts linger around because they have unfinished business. This is certainly true for Susie as she watches her parents, sister and friends from an in-between state that she calls "the blue horizon between heaven and earth." This is depicted as a beautiful place of golden grain waving in the wind and distant mountains, a place where she meets another murdered girl named Holly (and numerous other victims of the serial killer) who seeks to lead her onward. But Susie observes, "Holly said there was a wide, wide heaven beyond everything we knew; where there was no cornfield, no memory, no grave... but I wasn't looking beyond yet, I was still looking back." Yes, she is looking back to earth because earlier, in her opening statement she had said, "I waited for justice, and justice did not come." Those who have read the novel say that the filmmakers have sanitized it considerably by just hinting at the brutal rape and murder, rather than showing it. Indeed, the depiction of the murder is so swift that I was not aware that Susie had been raped until reading about the film and book. Susie, looking down upon her family, seems so calm and unaffected by her horrible demise as she talks to us. Although

in a way I was glad not to be subjected to such a horrendous scene, I cannot but help think that the almost total omission of this turns the film into a sort of pastel-tinted New Age tract that says, "Don't worry what happens to you. It does not matter. There's a bright future ahead." Similar to what we Christians say about those who want to rush by and forget agony and pain of Good Friday in order to arrive at the joys of Easter. There is much to think about and to discuss in the film, but it leaves much to be desired for a serious study of violence, death, and the life to come.

For Reflection and Discussion Contains spoilers.

1. Who seems to be most affected by Susie's death—her father Jack, or her mother Abigail? Susie says, "There was one thing my murderer didn't understand; he didn't understand how much a father could love his child." How do we see this in the way that Jack develops after her death?

2. Some have said that the film focuses too much on killer George Harvey, chillingly played by Stanley Tucci. What do you think?

3. Susie's first kiss with the boy Ray was interrupted. What do you think of the way this was resolved later on? Susie says, "Always, I would watch Ray; I was in the air around him, I was in the cold winter mornings he spent with Ruth Connors; and sometimes Ray would think of me, but he began to wonder maybe it was time to put that memory away, maybe it was time to let me go." 4. Most reviewers have seen Susan Sarandon's Grandma Lynn as the character injected just for some comedy to relieve the serious tragedy. And yet who is it that brings order to the chaotic household, and what do you think about her statement to Jack that there is a tomb in the middle of the house?

5. Who are the characters who need to "move on" with their lives? And yet can one so easily do this if a great injustice

has not been resolved?

6. What do you think of the way in which justice does eventually catch up with George Harvey?

7. What do you think the afterlife, or heaven, or the kingdom of God will be like? How has heaven been depicted in such films as, *Defending Your Life*, *Stairway to Heaven* and *What Dreams May Come* 8. Did Jesus say much about the afterlife? Or the apostle Paul, other than to say that the resurrection would result in our having "spiritual" rather than physical bodies? Scan through the Book of Revelation and see what the author says about the City of God, his images finding their way into some of our hymns, such as "Holy, Holy, Holy."