

Wonder (2017)

Rated PG. Running time: 1 hour 53 min.

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

Our star rating (1-5): 5

*He was despised and rejected by others;
a man of suffering and acquainted with infirmity;
and as one from whom others hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him of no account.*

Isaiah 53:3

*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility
regard others as better than yourselves.*

*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the
interests of others.*

Philippians 2:3

In director Stephen Chbosky's Outsider Story about a boy with a disfigured face I would not push the analogy too far between Auggie and the Suffering Servant described in Isaiah—although by the end of the film we do see that Auggie has indeed been a blessing to those who encountered him. I doubt that either the director, his two co-screen writers, or novelist R.J. Palacio, whose book is the film's source, were thinking of the above passage when they were producing their work, but the boy did indeed have "nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Isa. 53:2b

As the film begins Auggie Pullman (Jacob Tremblay) certainly does not feel he is a blessing. Far from reaching out to others, he prefers to withdraw into the safety of his toy NASA

helmet with its dark visor preventing the world from seeing his disfigured face. His dream is to become an astronaut, one who attracts rather than repels people. Several times in the film we see him reveling in full astronaut regalia as a symbol of his inner satisfaction or joy.

Up unto now he has been home-schooled by his mother, Isabel ([Julia Roberts](#)), in their spacious Brooklyn home. For the sake of her son she has put her own doctoral thesis plans on hold. Born with a congenital disorder, Auggie has endured almost thirty operations that has left his face a scarred mass that has distorted it into that of a gnome or troll. But now that he's 10, she and his father, Nate ([Owen Wilson](#)), decide it is time for him to go to middle school and mingle with other children. Such subjects as science, in which he is very interested, are beyond her.

At Beecher Prep School the principal Mr. Tushman (Mandy Patinkin) tries to put the boy at ease by joking about the Tush in his own name, and we soon see that his hip science teacher Mr. Browne (Daveed Diggs) is also very supportive. It is another matter with the other children, who dub him, after a Star Wars character, "Barf Hideous." Even when eventually one of them, Jack Will (Noah Jupe), his science-class partner, does extend to him the hand of friendship, the friend betrays him. Auggie overhears Jack go along with his old friends when they belittle "the freak."

Not everything is about Auggie, making the film even a richer experience than expected. Auggie narrates sections of the film, and then several others add their comments in other portions. Auggie's high-school sister, Via (Izabela Vidoovic) obviously loves her brother, but at the same time ruefully speaks how he has always monopolized the attention of their parents. She feels neglected, her own problems hardly ever given attention. One of those problems is the sudden coldness of her best friend Miranda on their first day back at high school. The two had very close, with Miranda ([Danielle Rose](#)

[Russell](#)) often staying over at her house. Now she avoids Via, turning her back on her and sitting with other girls during lunchtime and never responding to phone calls or texts. Fortunately, a new boy, Justin ([Nadji Jeter](#)), befriends her as she is deciding about joining the drama group, which later will be putting on Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*. Via's unfolding story thereafter is also a compelling one as it intertwines with that of Auggie's.

Even Miranda is given her due in the sequence that she narrates. We learn the reasons for her breaking with her long-time friend, as well as some details of her home life and past involvement with the Pullmans. And best of all, in a sacrificial act of love on behalf of Via, she more than makes up for her ill-treatment of her friend.

Jack did not know that Auggie had overheard him going along with his friends' ridiculing his friend, so he is perplexed with Auggie's refusal to talk with him. He tries to re-establish their relationship several times, and then returns to his old snobbish group, the most extreme member being the wealthy Julian (Bryce Gheisa).

Once more Auggie eats alone in the cafeteria—until the shy Summer (Millie Davis) joins him one day. She comes out of pity at first, but soon is taken by his humorous wit and smartness. It is she who will be the means for reuniting Auggie and Jack.

Bullying assumes a personal face in that of Julian and his followers. When Auggie can take no more, he hits his tormentor while they are in the hallway between classes. The way that science teacher Mr. Browne and Principal Tushman handle the situation is exemplary. Not so! Justin's father and mother, used to getting their way and convinced their son can do no wrong. They refuse to recognize that the fight was the result of bullying, and even threaten the Principal, but he refuses to be intimidated. As the parents leave his office in a huff, there is a positive note that Julian at least might be

changing for the better.

I was pleased to see in the Cincinnati area busloads of children being taken to see this film. Not only does it impart a great lesson on bullying, but it shows how a loving family strives to support a child faced with a great physical problem. As in *Beauty and the Beast*, young viewers learn the old lesson that inner beauty is far preferable to outer beauty. Auggie, once his classmates get to know him, is fun to be around, smart and caring. He embodies the Wayne Dyer quote that Mr. Browne prints on the blackboard and discusses with the class, "When given the choice between being right or being kind, choose kind."

It is so good, after enduring so many inane comedies in which all the adults are bumbling idiots acting as wet blankets to the kids who merely want to have a good time (remember *Ferris Buehler's Day Off*?) to see a film in which most of the adults are sincere caregivers, and prey effective ones at that. Well, maybe not always understanding or able to help, but always trying. If the film can be faulted, it is perhaps that its makers go a bit overboard for a happy ending. However, most of the audience will feel so good by this time that this is a minor quibble.

There are many "moments of grace in Stephen Chbosky's film, as there were also in his earlier film about outsiders, [*The Perks of Being a Wallflower*](#). If you enjoyed that film, you will no doubt be enchanted by this one, too, and want to discuss it with other viewers. It is worthy to be set alongside the similar-themed *The Elephant Man* and *Mask*, directed respectively by David Lynch in 1980 and Peter Bogdanovich in 1985.

Although the film's title might well refer to Auggie's sense of wonder at the star-studded universe we see in the scenes when he is cavorting in his space suit, it actually derives from his mother's loving comment to him, "You are a wonder."

Indeed, he is. For further exploration of the title you might want to see how the song of that title has led to the novel, and then the novel to the film. Natalie Merchant has reported that she was inspired to write in 1995 her song "[Wonder](#)" by her experience of working at a summer camp for special needs children. The song inspired writer R.J. Palacio's 2012 novel of the same name, and his book has led to Stephen Chbosky's film. Art inspires art.

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