

“Is “Lord of the Rings” OK for Christians to Read?”

Some young people in our church are reading some books called *Lord of the Rings*. Are these books suitable for Christians or are they ungodly books like that Harry Potter series? Apparently the teens think they are “harmless entertainment” from what I understand and they really enjoyed the Trilogy (read all 3 books). Please give me at least a sort of detailed explanation on where you all stand one way or another.

Dear _____,

We really ought to have an article on the Lord of the Rings trilogy. . .

It was written by a solid Christian, J.R.R. Tolkien, with a strongly Christian worldview. It is a tremendous blessing that something so biblical in its understanding has received the attention from Hollywood and the movie-going public that this trilogy has, and it has triggered further interest in reading the books that inspired the movies. We are completely behind the *Lord of the Rings* books.

I would like to point you to a helpful article by one of my personal heroes, Gene Edward Veith, who wrote an essay on LOTR in *World* Magazine:
www.worldmag.com/world/issue/12-08-01/national_1.asp

Hope this helps!

Sue Bohlin
Probe Ministries

Published July 2004

Addendum, Feb. 2013:

Our friends at LeaderU.com created a marvelous Special Focus with the release of the LOTR movies that features links to excellent articles:

[Lord of the Rings: True Mythology](#)

Is *Lord of the Rings*, the most popular in the UK of all works in England's great literary legacy, based in pagan myth or Christian themes—or both? Dig into the story behind the stories and their master storyteller in our Special Focus.

12 Films of 2003 – A Christian Reviews Key Movies

Lord of the Rings, Whale Rider, and Winged Migration

This year the first of twelve films from 2003 that were especially notable is the final installment of Tolkien's trilogy *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson. The conclusion of the final installment is structured around the hobbits Frodo (Elijah Wood), and Sam (Sean Astin) as they attempt to return the Ring to Mount Doom where it can be destroyed and save Middle Earth from those who would use the Ring for evil.

Gollum, the grotesque creature who was once a hobbit, continues to struggle with his dual nature; he loves both Frodo and the power of the Ring, but can only have one or the other. This is a valuable lesson for all persons who must make

decisions which will affect their lives for eternity. Unlike Gollum, Frodo, Sam, Gandalf, Arwen, and Aragorn are heroes who overcome great difficulties and extraordinary odds to do the right thing. They all simultaneously attempt to avoid the temptation of the Ring, and instead take the long road toward righteousness. Throughout all nine hours of the trilogy, and especially in this last installment, the epic battle in the heart of man and his nature to embrace evil instead of good serves as the thematic backdrop for some of the most amazing visuals in the history of film.

Those who enjoyed the *Lord of the Rings*, should also like *Whale Rider*. *Rider*, directed by Niki Caro, was the winner of audience awards at both the Sundance and Toronto Film Festivals. This film falls into categories of both coming-of-age films, and those which emphasize the triumph of the will. A young New Zealand girl named Pai (Keisha Castle-Hughes) is the surviving twin of a difficult birth which also claimed her mother's life. Koro (Rawiri Paratene) is the tribal chief and grandfather of Pai. Koro is a traditional male in a traditional New Zealand tribe, and Pai is a less than traditional young girl who challenges the accepted way of thinking and dares to believe that she can become the next chief.

Third in a series of extremely good films which can be recommended to all audiences is *Winged Migration*, a documentary about birds directed by Jacques Perrin. The birds in this film are all flying long distances for the winter, either north or south depending upon their hemisphere of origin. The entire picture is like a nature documentary on steroids; it has all of the wildlife footage one would expect, coupled with seamless shots from ultra-light planes and balloons. This is state of the art documentary that allows the viewer to experience the lives of birds as never before seen.

Luther and Bonhoeffer

A second group of notable films for 2003 is *Luther*, a dramatic rendering of one of the greatest of the sixteenth-century reformers, and *Bonhoeffer: Agent of Grace*, a historical documentary style drama about the German theologian who worked against the Nazis, and posthumously became one of the most important voices in twentieth-century theology.

The film titled simply *Luther* begins with the young reformer bargaining with God and vowing to enter the monastic order if his own life will be spared. He soon become the chief voice standing against the Holy Roman Church's practice of indulgences and overall spiritual blindness. The indulgences are a major form of income for the Catholic church, and Luther (Joseph Fiennes) finds himself in a kind of David and Goliath position. One of Luther's chief opponents was Leo XII (Uwe Ochsenknecht), who took the young monk's teachings and sermons to be a personal attack upon authority, as well as a financial threat to the empire. Fredrick the Wise (Peter Ustinov), the prince of Augsburg, begins to side with Luther's teaching, and a full scale religious schism erupts.

The film captures Luther's life from his call to become a monk through twenty five years of debate and persecution at the hands of the Roman Catholic Church, and ends with the start of what would become the Protestant Reformation.

Bonhoeffer: Agent Of Grace is a film about the life of Dietrich Bonhoeffer from the late 1930s to his death in Germany at the end of WW II in 1945. Bonhoeffer is in America observing the African-American style of worship when the film opens. America would be a safe place to sit out the war, but Bonhoeffer returns to Germany and begins a rhetorical campaign against Hitler, the Nazi party, and even the leaders of the church for their role in the rise of the Third Reich and of the persecution of the Jews.

Bonhoeffer joins the resistance movement when he returns to Germany, and soon he is being watched by the Gestapo. As the “final solution,” the extermination of the Jews during the Holocaust, is implemented, he is arrested after a failed attempt on Hitler’s life. Bonhoeffer’s prison writings are very pragmatic, but they are also the reflections of a devout Christian who is wrestling with ethical dilemmas arising from the war. During times of war and great political evils, Christians must struggle with how much violence and evil can be used to resist an ultimately evil person or situation. Bonhoeffer was eventually executed in 1945 at the age of thirty-nine believing that there is a difference between the “cheap” grace we lavish on ourselves, and the more “costly” grace which may demand a man’s life.

Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World and The Station Agent

Our list of notable films from 2003 continues with *Master and Commander*, an epic sea adventure set in 1805 when the British boasted that the sun never set on their empire. The film is based on the novels of Patrick O’Brian, and does for the early nineteenth century what *Saving Private Ryan* did for WW II; the film really makes viewers feel as though they are sailing the high seas in search of adventure.

Set on the *HMS Surprise*, the plot line follows the *Acheron*, a French warship, as it tries to catch the *Surprise* which is commanded by Capt. Jack Aubrey (Russell Crowe). Aubrey is contrasted with his friend, Stephen Maturin, the ship’s surgeon. Capt. Aubrey is a pragmatist who pursues noble adventure and a life of war upon the sea. Maturin is a very introspective intellectual who travels with the British warship so he can collect animal and biological specimens. The contrast is highly textured and extremely well developed, affording the viewer a rare insight into the psyche of two

very different, if not totally opposite, men. All of this and high sea adventure involving very violent war scenes make for a thoroughly delightful film.

Another fairly accessible film, but not one recommended for those under seventeen, is Thomas McCarthy's film, *The Station Agent*, which is centered around a dwarf named Finbar McBride (Peter Dinklage). McBride has a passion for trains, and uses that passion to protect himself from those who would mock and pester him. His devotion to all things relating to trains is fully realized when he inherits an old run-down train station in the town of Newfoundland, New Jersey when his only friend in the world, Henry Styles (Paul Benjamin), dies. Finbar moves into the train station seeking peace and solitude from a world that has a hard time understanding someone who appears to be so different, but who is actually more human than those people who intentionally and unintentionally persecute him.

Finbar's hope for solitude is first interrupted by Joe Oramas (Bobby Cannavale), who drives a coffee truck and is always willing to give unsolicited advice to others. Finbar's solitude is further disrupted by Olivia Harris (Patricia Clarkson), a divorced woman who is working through the death of a child. Olivia almost hits Finbar with her car as he is coming and going from a nearby convenience store, presumably to emphasize his near invisibility to others. Like a good Flannery O'Connor short story, *The Station Agent* closes with a scene that will cause all viewers to examine their attitudes toward people who are different.

Elephant and Thirteen

Two films from 2003 that deal with teenagers are *Elephant*, from Gus Van Zant, and *Thirteen*, directed by Catherine Hardwicke.

Elephant's title comes from the familiar reference to an

elephant being in the room, and everyone pretending that it is not there. The film is a chronicle of one day in a Columbine-like high school, and the complete inability of those involved, as well as those viewing the film, to comprehend what is happening. The camera simply tracks the activities of the killers and their victims in the hours that lead up to the massacre. Then the viewer gets a front row seat to the killings that any reporter would love to have for a spot on the evening news. Van Zant is uses violence to protest violence, presumably believing that much of the violence we have in this country is due to not understanding how pervasive and real such violence is, or that it could happen to anyone.

The killers laugh and carry on in such an unconcerned manner that the viewer cannot believe they would strike out against their world by shooting their classmates. Christian viewers, however, should be able to watch the film knowing that the explanation for such behavior rests in the doctrine of original sin and man's fall from grace. It can also remind people that things happen that do not always follow our expectations.

In *Thirteen*, another film dealing with teenagers, the emphasis is on the difficulties faced by many adolescent girls. Evie (Nikki Reed) is a wild child who loves to flirt with danger, and is exactly the kind of girl you would not want your daughter to have as a friend. She is popular, sexually experienced, and lives without shame or worry. Evie's character is a sharp contrast with that of Tracy (Evan Rachel Wood), the good and unassuming girl who just wants to be cool and hang out with a more popular crowd. Evie begins to relate stories of sexual conquests and shoplifting sprees that are particularly impressive to Tracy. It seems as though Evie wants to clone herself as many times as possible.

Melanie (Holly Hunter), Tracy's mother, is a divorcée and recovering alcoholic who can barely make ends meet. She is a little naïve concerning her daughter's behavior, but begins to

have suspicions when Evie comes to live with them. Evie's behavior goes from bad to worse until a culminating scene where her lies are exposed, and Tracy begins to see the wisdom of her mother's advice.

Both *Elephant* and *Thirteen* are films which should be approached with caution. And while they are not for everyone, some people will find them to be among of the best examples of teen angst in recent years.

Mystic River, Stone Reader, and Finding Nemo

The last three films recommended as notable features from 2003 are *Mystic River*, *Stone Reader*, and *Finding Nemo*. *Mystic River* is Clint Eastwood's twenty-fourth film, and one of the handful he has directed but not also starred in. The story is centered around the lives of three boyhood friends who grow up, get married, and live normal if not boring lives.

The three friends, Jimmy, Dave and Sean (played by Sean Penn, Tim Robins and Kevin Beacon respectively), have tried to forget the time when one of them was molested by a man in their Boston neighborhood. The emotional trauma the young boys suffered is revisited when Katie, Jimmy's daughter, is brutally beaten to death. The two main suspects are Brendon, Katie's boyfriend, and Dave, who came home mumbling about beating up a mugger and was covered in blood.

Jimmy takes the law into his own hands when he believes he has discovered Katie's murderer. There is a connection between the revenge Jimmy executes and the molestation the men witnessed when they were young. There is a "mystic river" that flows in a man's life, and rarely is the destination reached the same as the one hoped for. *Mystic River* finishes as a meditation on time, growing old, and the way in which the past continually affects the future.

Stone Reader, a documentary by filmmaker Mark Moskowitz, opens with a search for Dow Mossman, an author who wrote a single novel only to “retire” and disappear into obscurity. There are plenty of films based on books, and others with authors as major or minor characters, but there are very few films so purely about books, authors, editors, and the difficult task of seeing even a single novel through to publication.

Editors and publishers provide some of the most interesting dialogue, discussing everything from the difficulties of publishing, to the classic, but real, anxiety of the author, and the plight of the one-novel wonder.

The documentary is also a quest and road film. It is a kind of odyssey for anyone who has loved a particular novel or its author, and wondered what became of them years later.

Finally, no list of notable films from 2003 would be complete without *Finding Nemo*, the animated film from Pixar, the studio responsible for *Toy Story*. In *Nemo*, the action is centered around an overprotective father and his son who are both fish. As in *Toy Story*, where the world of toys were brought to life, the Pixar people take viewers into the highly colorful world of the ocean. The viewer will be rooting for little Nemo as he is caught by a diver and is pursued by a loving father.

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Five Films from 2002 – A

Christian Critic's Review

2002 was a fantastic year for the cinema, so let's review a few notable features.

Lord of the Rings

J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy continues with the second installment, *The Two Towers*, directed by Peter Jackson. The trilogy as a whole follows the struggle for possession of the One Ring created by the Dark Lord Sauron, which, if returned, will enable him to enslave the entire world.

The first film ended with the apparent death of Gandalf who was assisting the hobbits in their quest to destroy the ring. Another key figure, Boromir, who was assisting the hobbits, also died, compromising the strength of the fellowship which then splintered into three groups. In *The Two Towers*, Frodo and Samwise are in possession of the ring and are on the way to Mordor, while Aragorn, Gimli, and Legolas is attempting to save Merry and Pippin as the elves wrestle with the question of whether they should intervene on behalf of mankind or leave them to suffer whatever fate should befall them. An additional character, Gollum, a loathsome creature (created as a completely digital character) who made only a brief appearance in the first film, becomes the most prominent feature of the second as an antagonist who vacillates between his conviction to help the hobbits and his urge to kill them and take the ring to fulfill his own selfish desires.

The film as a whole is a masterpiece of technical genius and creativity. One should not, however, get lost in the digital effects and panoramic landscapes and forget that at the heart of the story is an epic struggle between good and evil. Tolkien, a devout Christian, believed in the power of epic narrative to stir the soul to a greater understanding of life and man's place in the universe. The *Rings* trilogy is not a

close allegory of the Christian narrative, but plays on the tension of the great cosmic battle taking place in all men which is being fought with high stakes and eternal consequences.

In one scene, Sam pleads with Frodo to continue their mission and destroy the ring in order to save man from a terrible fate. He says, "There is good in the world, and it is worth fighting for." This is a reminder to all, especially the devout followers of Tolkien, that we too are in the midst of a great battle and everyone must do his part or evil will triumph.

One of the great values of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy can best be understood in light of Tolkien's understanding of the fairy tale.

"The realm of the fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with so many things: all manner of beasts and birds are found there; shoreless seas and stars uncounted; beauty that is an enchantment, and ever present peril; both joy and sorrow as sharp as swords."[{1}](#)

The *Rings* trilogy is not a "fairy-story" in this sense, however it does contain a fairy-story in the background (*The Hobbit*) that challenges the reader to suspend his or her disbelief and entertain ideas of magic, miracle, and unseen powers and forces. In doing this, one is indirectly prepared to entertain the gospels which are filled with accounts of beings who come down and intervene in the affairs of men (angels), a virgin birth, nature miracles, resurrections from the dead, and ascensions back to heavenly realms.

The Two Towers concludes with a cliffhanger that should be resolved in the third and final installment, *The Return of the King*, next year. In the meantime it is advisable to read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy in order to better understand the true grandeur of Tolkien's visionary masterpiece.

Far From Heaven

Todd Haynes' *Far From Heaven* portrays the lives of a typical, upper-class Caucasian family of the 1950s that by all outward appearances have a life made in heaven. Upon closer view we see that, in reality, their lives are far from paradise. This story is not intended as entertainment for the masses. Everything does not work out well and no one lives happily ever after. In modern American culture we often tend to idealize past times and places, remembering them the way we wish they had been, and forgetting the darker currents that made up that particular era. *Far from Heaven* is stylistically a tribute and homage to the Technicolor films of the fifties with a serious examination of post-war American life with all of its blemishes in which Haynes accurately creates a picture of a culture turning away from tradition, family, and church.

Cathy Whitaker (played by Julianne More) is a classic "June Cleaver" housewife and mother of two in the mid-fifties with a seemingly typical husband, Frank (played by Dennis Quaid), who may be compared with Thomas Wrath, the character played by Gregory Peck in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. Neither is quite comfortable in his job, home, or marriage to an idyllic fifties housewife. However, while Wrath returns in the end to family, tradition and home, Frank begins to exercise his latent homosexual tendencies and is caught by his wife in a passionate embrace with another man. Frank agrees to attend counseling, but continues to engage in this adulterous affair and in the end leaves his family. The film tragically concludes with a scene of Frank at peace with himself and his male lover in a hotel room.

When Cathy, who is a Caucasian American, cannot confide in her daiquiri-drinking, bridge-playing socialite friends about her homosexual husband, she seeks solace in her gardener Raymond (played by Dennis Haysbert) who is African-American and a single parent. Soon Cathy and Raymond are seen walking

together in public, and on one occasion dancing and drinking in an exclusively black bar in a town that will tolerate a discreet affair, but not inter-racial relationships or homosexual adultery. Meanwhile the children fade into the background, cast aside like so many unused lifestyle accessories that, while once cherished, now seem more of an inconvenience.

As the film concludes, the lights go down on a family and a community in the early postwar decades that would soon become more promiscuous and sinful. *Far From Heaven* should be viewed as a kind of history lesson, a reminder of the far-reaching consequences of the moral decline of the last half of the twentieth century.

A Walk To Remember

A welcomed surprise in our list of notable films for 2002 is *A Walk to Remember*, based on the novel by Nicholas Sparks and directed by Adam Shankman. The film begins with a painfully stock set of characters, but moves beyond the formulaic to create a story that is not only a pleasant surprise, but is truly inspirational. Landon Carter (played by Shane West) is the obligatory renegade cool guy at his school. When he participates with friends in a prank that results in the serious injury and near death of another student he is sentenced to tutor younger students at the school on Saturdays and act in the annual school play.

As Landon is no Laurence Olivier as an actor, he reluctantly but desperately enlists the help of Jamie Sullivan (played by pop singer Mandy Moore), a conservative and rather plain-looking girl who seems to be the antithesis of what he and his friends consider to be cool. She lives quietly with her widowed father, the town minister. Jamie, who wears plain clothes and the same drab sweater every day, is immune to the taunts of her peers and rides the school bus with her Bible in her lap. Her confidence is drawn from a very mature faith in

God, and from wisdom gained from facing some very adult situations early in life.

Despite Jamie's warning, Landon falls in love with both her simple charm and the strange confidence she possesses. His friends, who seem to be opposed to any form of spiritual pursuits, shun him for his association with someone who so fearlessly lives a Christian life. Reverend Sullivan, Jamie's father (Treat Williams), is not impressed with his would-be son-in-law. He sees the union between Jamie and Landon as impulsive and non-scriptural. Landon's mother (Daryl Hannah) is also doubtful about her son's relationship, but appears to lack the spiritual depth to understand or guide him. When Landon confronts his estranged father who has remarried the conflict grows to the point of crisis. This misguided young man can find no one to support or direct him.

Before wedding bells can ring, Jamie must reveal a secret that will change the course of everyone's lives. Even after Jamie's devastating revelation, Landon decides he cannot pass up a once in a lifetime opportunity to marry this remarkable Christian girl and discover a spiritual side to himself he did not know existed. In the end, her influence challenges and alters his life in a miraculous way as her source of strength becomes his. Landon finds healing for relationships and hope for a future that he had previously been unable to conceive.

A Walk to Remember offers a positive portrayal of Christians and well developed characters that struggle with very mature issues.

My Big Fat Greek Wedding

My Big Fat Greek Wedding, the low budget independent film directed by Joel Zwick that celebrates all things Greek, crossed over into the main-stream movie market and became a favorite of both critics and audiences in America. Toula Portokalos (played by the film's writer Nia Vardalos) is the

film's central character: a 30-year-old Greek woman who feels that she is at least ten years past the date for meeting her family's matrimonial expectations, and with no prospects on the horizon. The family will not let her forget that Greek women are on the earth for three things: to find a Greek husband, to have Greek children, and to feed everyone until the day they die. This light-hearted comedy tells the story of Toula's quest for a husband and her transformation from a rather drab old maid into a truly beautiful bride.

As the film opens, we meet Toula, a "seating hostess" (which she insists should not be confused with a mere waitress) at the family restaurant that is appropriately called *Dancing Zorbas*. One day Ian Miller (played by John Corbett), a kind of hipster vegetarian, sees Toula, and there is a natural mutual attraction that soon leads to full blown love and one very big fat Greek culture shock for Ian and his family. Before her family will bless the marriage, though, there is a last ditch effort to match Toula with a genuine Greek man that results in one of the most hilarious parade of fools ever assembled. Having done their best to preserve the purity of their Greek bloodline, the family gives in and begins to warm up to Ian.

Ian watches in amazement as his soon-to-be father-in-law, Gus (Michael Constantine), uses Windex to cure everything from minor cuts and burns to arthritis and sore ligaments. Another Greek custom that is extremely foreign is the practice of spitting on a bride for good luck, an act that disgusts the middle class parents of the groom. When Ian's parents bring a bundt cake to a family party, the Greeks cannot understand why someone would make a cake with a hole in the center. The cake reappears later with a potted plant in the center for presentation. Misunderstandings between two very different families are the driving force behind hilarious cultural awakenings. However, their desire to understanding one another makes the characters both endearing and truly human. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is a great example of how the differences we

have with one another can be overcome by true love and a recognition of the greater number of similarities we share as human beings.

Kandahar

Kandahar is a hybrid of documentary, historical, and biographical narrative, that is based on the real-life situation of Nelofer Pazira who plays Nafas, the lead character in the story. Mohsen Makhmalbaf (best known for *Gabbe* and *The Apple*), directs the film that was shot just prior to September 11 without professional actors and literally in the minefields of the Iran-Afghanistan border. Makhmalbaf has been directing films for almost twenty years, and *Kandahar* is his best work to date.

Nafas is a female Canadian journalist who is returning to Afghanistan because the sister she left there was maimed by a land mine and is threatening to commit suicide during the final solar eclipse of the twentieth century. The film simultaneously navigates through themes of the oppression of women, widespread poverty and hunger, and the ever-present realities of landmines in one of the most war-torn regions of the world.

It is not exactly clear on which of these themes Makhmalbaf would have the viewer concentrate, but this becomes a strength rather than a weakness. *Kandahar* is a kind of slow walk through the unseen side of Afghanistan before the West knew very much about it, and before it had been labeled an “evil empire” by those who only learned about it after September 11th. The Afghanistan we see in the film is the one where someone has died every five minutes in the past twenty-five years from land-mines, wars, famine or draught. It is a region in which young girls must be trained not to pick up the dolls that have been placed over the mines as bait for young children.

Nafas's effort to return behind the Muslim Iron Curtain takes her through a land of refugee camps that are populated almost exclusively by amputees. In one of the many surreal scenes, hoards of one-legged men run a foot race across the desert to retrieve prosthetic legs that are parachuting from the sky. The limbs, referred to simply as "legs," are coveted items that had been ordered a year earlier; such items rarely find their way back to the originally intended patients. This scene and many others remind the viewer of what daily life in a war-torn third world country is like.

America is now winding down a war with a middle eastern people that few of us understand with great clarity, and many view with nothing but bewilderment. Many people believe that we will be rebuilding Iraq soon, and that there may also be opportunities to participate in a dialogue with them concerning spiritual values, worldviews, and religion. *Kandahar* is a film that offers us an opportunity to understand people who have vastly different worldviews. Before we can presume to minister to a people, or to criticize them, we should look at the world from their perspective and at least make some effort to understand their plight. Many countries throughout the world have welcomed the liberation and freedoms that followed American intervention and occupation. *Kandahar* allows us to see the plight of people who need someone to hear their cries and identify with their pain; a people desperately in need of help.

Nafas serves as a kind of poster-child for the millions of women who live in exile behind the veil of the burka—a symbol now used world wide to plead the case of oppressed women. *Kandahar* may serve as a valuable lesson for many who would like a different look at the problems of Afghanistan.

Notes

1. "On Fairy-Stories", *The Tolkien Reader*, Ballantine, 1966.

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