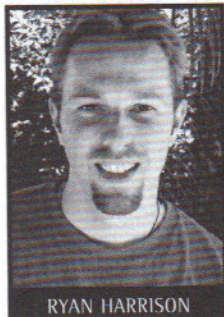


Seeing God in *The Help*

I saw *The Help* soon after it hit the screens. I nestled into my comfortable, reclining, cup-holding seat in a relatively new art house theater in a privileged college town. I found myself pleasantly pliant to the film's touch, captivated by a strong script, an excellent cast, and a very compelling story. I rooted for the heroine and knew that when I felt that telltale heart-constriction against the antagonist, I was morally justified... and it was satisfying to think that everyone else around me felt the same way. By the end of the film, my friend was crying next to me and I was genuinely, emotionally stirred. I left the theater anticipating that it would win at least one Academy Award. We'll see.



RYAN HARRISON

I'm white, and I'm male. As clear as that may be from my picture, it needs to be said. When I was asked to review *The Help*, I wanted to carefully consider what it could mean for me to review a film about African-American women stuck in a class structure maintained by others who self-righteously used and abused them.

Well, from my perspective, there are a lot of wonderful things about the film, which tells the story of a young Southern white woman who bucks societal convention by gathering a community of African-American maids and nannies to tell their unabridged and shockingly candid stories, and then publishes them in a book that starts a sort of quiet social revolution. There is a delightful amount of humor that ranges from silly to crude. (Warning: do *not* have pie before you see this film!) There are several non-conformist relationships of such warmth and compassion that you'll really need to work on your humanity if you're unmoved. And there are moments that lead naturally to soul-searching questions about how we can be so terrible toward each other and what it takes to recognize our interconnectedness.

But let's be clear: this movie is fiction. As charming and evocative as it may be, it isn't a true story, and its plot does not portray how civil rights were actually fought for and won. (For that, I highly recommend a 1987 PBS series titled *Eyes on the Prize*.)

Understandably, this film is not without controversy. Some have written that *The Help* unintentionally paints a picture that is rosier than it should be, and that people—

like me—might indulge in feeling right by siding with the protagonist, when history shows that people—like me—were just as likely to be class-A oppressors.

Can an outsider of an oppressed, wounded, unjustly treated group of people ever truly understand its loss, sorrow, despair, pain, and injury? Probably one of the least thoughtful things a person could suggest after seeing *The Help* is, "Now I understand, and I'm so glad that this is behind us!"

To use today's youthful parlance: "Really?"

In my book, it never hurts to show a little respect to people whose life experiences lie far outside of my own personal reality. And so, in the spirit of balance, I share some concerns about *The Help* that have been widely voiced by some African-American females. These include:

- The over-stereotypical nature of the film;
- The protagonist being a young white woman;
- The African-American domestic workers being used as props for the white heroine; and
- The downplaying and absence of the *real* threats to African-American lives: rape, lynching, and the burning of communities.

All this said, is *The Help* worth seeing? I believe so, yes. There is more going on in the film than the story on the surface. There are deeper themes to consider and to learn from, which are beautifully portrayed: the boundary-breaking power of friendship; the truism that love can reach across even rigid lines; and the necessity of the soul-supporting strength of community.

Let me end with this: The final dialogue at the end of the film was, for me, one of the most poignant moments. That's when actor Viola Davis confronts the antagonist and utters such precise, meaningful, and truth-hurts words of wisdom that the recipient is left speechless, utterly revealed, and on the verge of (what I would imagine would be) cathartic tears. It was such a vivid example of speaking truth to power, and one that I will not soon forget. I felt God in that moment, controversial fiction or not. **M**

Ryan Harrison attends the La Verne (Calif.) Church of the Brethren where he started and led monthly Spiritual Cinema Circle gatherings for more than five years. He now teaches "Spiritual Cinema" at the University of La Verne, and is currently pursuing a PsyD degree at the University of the Rockies.

ABOUT THE MOVIE

Title: *The Help*. **Rating:** PG-13. **Director:** Tate Taylor. **Running time:** 2 hrs, 17 minutes. **Theater release:** August 10, 2011. **Notes** (adapted from Yahoo.com): At the dawn of the civil rights movement, three Mississippi women are about to take one extraordinary step. Skeeter, 22, has just returned home after graduating from Ole Miss, and her mother won't be happy until she finds a husband. Aibileen, a wise African-American maid and caretaker, suffers after the loss of her own child. And Minny, Aibileen's sassy best friend, struggles to find and hold a job. Seemingly as different from one another as can be, these women will nonetheless come together for a clandestine project that will put them all at risk.

