



Journal of Religion & Film

Volume 16
Issue 1 April 2012

Article 12

5-25-2012

The Descendants

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Recommended Citation

Blizek, William (2012) "The Descendants," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol16/iss1/12>

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The Descendants

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Descendants* (2011), directed by Alexander Payne.

Author Notes

William Blizek is the founding editor of the Journal of Religion and Film, and is Professor of Philosophy and Religion at University of Nebraska at Omaha. He is also the editor of *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film* (2009).

People interested in religion and film will find Alexander Payne's latest film, *The Descendants*, well worth watching. *The Descendants* is not about some formal or organized religion, but it takes up issues that religions around the world deal with as a matter of course—love and death, who we are and how we ought to live.

Real estate magnate, Matt King, finds himself facing death—not his own death, but the death of his wife, Elizabeth, who is in a coma as a result of a boating incident, a coma from which she will never recover. Her own advanced directives require that she not be kept on life support and that her organs be donated to others. Before he knows that Elizabeth will not recover, Matt tells her that she has gotten his attention and that he will be a better husband and father. There is nothing like death to get us to pay attention to how we have lived our lives.

Before Matt can deal with the death of his wife (and help his children deal with the death of their mother) there is a twist. It turns out that Elizabeth has been cheating on Matt with another real estate magnate. Now Matt has to deal with not only death, but also with love and betrayal. But this too requires Matt to question how he has lived his life. Did he spend too much time at work? Did he hoard his money? Did he keep his feelings hidden? What kind of person was Matt, that Elizabeth would seek the attention and affections of another man? There is nothing easy about asking these questions of ourselves.

So, both death and love (or, in this case, betrayal) require us to consider how we have lived our lives and how we ought to live our lives. If Margaret Miles is correct, then the very questions asked by Matt King are the questions central to religion, where religion is understood not as an institution, but as a world view. "If religion is centrally about relationships, about a

network of connections,” Miles says in her book, *Seeing and Believing*, “then religion is also centrally and essentially about the values according to which people conduct their relationships.”

While most of the movie focuses upon death and love, there are two small religious themes that run through the film. The movie is set in Hawaii, sometimes called paradise. But paradise is also a place we go after we die—the ultimate vacation destination. The paradise in which Matt King lives, however, is not the kind of place we usually associate with paradise. Matt’s life in Hawaii is complicated, difficult, painful, and messy. Maybe there is no paradise, no happy place we go after we die. Maybe this life is all we have and we had better live it well or we will have wasted the only opportunity we get to “live life.”

Finally, the title of the film refers to the fact that Matt King must decide whether or not to sell a large parcel of land that has been passed down to him from earlier generations. All of the other members of the family want to sell the land because it will make them rich. But, as Matt notes, they have not done anything to deserve the land. They have been given the land to protect. In the end, Matt decides not to sell the land. He has seven years in which to figure out how to keep the land as it is. We are all descendants, of course, and this feature of the movie brings to mind the growing interest among various religious groups in being good stewards of the land that we have inherited—rather than ravaging the land for our own personal gain.