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A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood

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Abstract

This is a film review of *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* (2019), directed by Marielle Heller.

Keywords

Fred Rogers, Children's Television

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.

Mr. Rogers seems to be having a moment, sixteen years after this death. Last year, the documentary about his life, *Won't You Be My Neighbor*, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and then went on to receive excellent reviews and distribution, earning 22 million dollars at the box office.¹ That film did a fine job of telling the story of Fred Rogers and how he became the iconic and surprising low-key celebrity of children's television for over three decades. It also showed some of the ways that his Christian faith informed his sense of vocation as an educator and child advocate, including his dogged focus on the inherent value and goodness of each individual that deserves to be nurtured and supported. There are, in fact, many people who share these values, but he was unique in the ways he applied them to the realm of media, working against the tide of fast paced consumerist television that was on the rise when he began his work, and which shows no signs of slowing down in our own era.

Marielle Heller's film *A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood* is made in the same spirit as an effort to depict Fred Rogers and his effect on others, told through the story of his encounter with fictional reporter Lloyd Vogel. The film was inspired by journalist Tom Junod's piece on Rogers, "Can You Say... Hero?" which was published in *Esquire* in 1998. That the character of the reporter in the film does not bear Junod's name is significant: there are enough details that differ from his life that he asked the filmmakers to distinguish them. And this is actually my biggest problem with the film. A fictional story runs through it, about Lloyd's anger at his estranged father who abandoned the family when Lloyd's mother was dying. Now repentant and dying himself, Lloyd's father seeks his son's forgiveness, and Lloyd's connection with Fred Rogers proves the catalyst for their reconciliation. This story in itself makes me wince with its clichés, but the fact that it was invented for the film bothers me more. I spoke with Tom Junod, and he believes that the film captures well the personality and impact of Fred Rogers on him, and he even found the

portrayal of Lloyd (by Matthew Rhys) to be an accurate representation of his own brokenness and frailty when he met Rogers, in spite of the film's deviation from his own life. Filmmakers do change factual details of "true" stories all the time, I know, but somehow I expected a film about Fred Rogers to not be centered on a plot that is almost entirely fictional. In fact, it does not really intend to be a biopic, but an homage to the person Rogers was, told through a parable of his impact on one man. Having already seen the documentary about his life, I had hoped that this film might dramatize much of the same material, with actual examples of what he said and did on and off camera; but that is not what the film attempts to do, in spite of its interpolation of some "real" Rogers remarks and stories along the way.

It is true that Tom Hanks captures the essence of Rogers well, and this seems to be universally agreed upon by everyone who has seen the film, including Junod and Rogers' widow, Joanne. One sees the strength as well as the gentle humility of Rogers in his portrayal, and for many viewers this will give some apparent insight into the "real" Rogers that existed off camera. In truth, however, Rogers always played himself on the show, and the film illustrates that creatively by configuring the entire film as an episode of *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, about Lloyd Vogel. This never collapses into full-on meta, however, for we don't see Rogers breaking the fourth wall and speaking to us when he's off set; he's not Deadpool, after all. At one point, Vogel hallucinates that he is in The Land of Make Believe, but this is mainly a plot device rather than any postmodern self-referentiality within the film. In spite of its slow pacing, it remains traditionalist cinema in its narrative form and subject matter. Perhaps this is appropriate; Rogers was not Ernie Kovacs, and had no desire to experiment with television. He sought to use the medium for simple purposes, and he succeeded. Whether this film does so, is another question.

Many of us remain oddly drawn to Fred Rogers at this particular moment in history, and it is worthwhile to consider why. There is a romantic wistfulness in our desires to return to his gentle patience, even while we refuse to do so. In this, I agree with Junod, who believes that social media has led us to think that “incivility equals resistance” and that insults are the best response to injustice—hardly in tune with Fred Rogers. Junod believes we need another Mr. Rogers in the media, but also that we are not likely to get one. Rogers fought against the “orchestrated loss of attention” and the worship of distraction and consumerism, even though he did not defeat them, and perhaps sensed the futility of his efforts. I might have liked to see more of that side of Rogers in the film, but because he was a very private person, that may be a story no one can tell.

We do need stories that inspire us to be better, as Fred Rogers knew so well. The Land of Make Believe functioned that way in his original show, and everyone knew it was pretend, but it dealt with real issues. This film may function that way for some viewers, reminding them in spite of its fictional nature of the need for acceptance, love, and forgiveness. It is my hope, however, that viewers will not reduce the relevance of those concepts to the realm of “personal” relationships, as so many religious conservatives do, and as this film might seem to do. We live in a time in which we cannot afford to forget the political relevance of these values. Rogers never shoved politics down his viewers’ throats, but he did respond to racial prejudice and fear of the “other” in his own inimitable way. We do need Fred Rogers now, more than ever.

¹ See my review here: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1996&context=jrf>