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Come Away

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Come Away

Abstract

This is a film review of *Come Away* (2020), directed by Brenda Chapman.

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.



Come Away (2020), dir. Brenda Chapman

Brenda Chapman, acclaimed co-director of such children's classics as *Brave* and *Prince of Egypt*, now offers this life action children's film which creates an origin story for the fictional characters of Peter Pan and Alice in Wonderland, who are here siblings in 19th century England. As they experience the death of a beloved brother, they see their parents express grief through the sort of unhealthy escapes that adults often practice, including alcohol and gambling. The children's own efforts to process their grief results in the creation of their separate magical worlds, Wonderland and Neverland. As children often understand life better than their parents in such films—especially through their ability to use their imaginations—they are able to bring some measure of peace to their family, through fantasy.

This is a lovely premise, and provides a real-world connection for the fantasy worlds of these classic children's books. The White Rabbit, the Mad Hatter, Tiger Lily and the Lost Boys all make appearances, along with the Red Queen and Captain Hook. We see how the children imagine things in contrast to how they actually are, much like in Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth*

(2006), with the difference that in this film, it seems like some things that the children imagine maybe are actually happening and that their fantasies can *affect* reality—whereas del Toro always kept the harsh realism of our world present and more or less dominant. Magical realism turns to actual magic at a certain point in *Come Away*, however, so that the resolution of the film leaves unclear exactly how it is that things end up as they do. Perhaps that is not crucial, but it leaves a sort of ambiguity in the film that leaves one wondering how to interpret it. I heard one person leaving the screening remark: “That was too dark for children, and too whimsical for adults.” Real pain and suffering is found in children’s movies, of course—death actually happens *more* in children’s films, believe it or not—but here it isn’t totally clear whether the children have saved the adults, or just themselves, through the actualization of their fantasies. One difference between the stories of Alice and Peter which the film makes clear is that Alice comes home, while Peter does not, as we all know—and yet Peter doesn’t abandon his family in this film, in spite of his revolt against adulthood, providing a nice corrective to the “heartless” Peter of the book.

I have always liked Chapman’s work in children’s films, whether as writer or director, and I am pleased to see her serving as sole director of a film for the first time, as well as a live action film with some big name actors (David Oyelowo and Angelia Jolie in particular). She was fired from *Brave* midway through, although she provided much of that story; here, the story was already written by Marissa Kate Goodhill, and Chapman’s vision of the story is imaginative and evocative. The bi-racial cast, and some nods to the prejudices of classism in the script, also show greater appreciation of diversity than the children’s books which inspired the film. I don’t know if this will become a classic filmic *midrash* on Pan or Alice (in the style of Steven Spielberg’s *Hook*), but I will await with interest anything directed by Brenda Chapman in the years to come.