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Uncle Frank

John C. Lyden

Grand View University, Des Moines, Iowa, johnclyden@gmail.com

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Uncle Frank

Abstract

This is a film review of *Uncle Frank* (2020), directed by Alan Ball.

Keywords

LGBTQ, Gay rights

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.



Uncle Frank (2020), dir. Alan Ball

Alan Ball's latest feature film tells the story of Frank (Paul Bettany), a 46-year-old gay man who is a professor of literature at New York University, in 1972. When his father dies in South Carolina, he is forced to confront his family and his painful past as he returns home. The narrator of the story is Beth (Sophia Lillis), his niece, who Frank encouraged to go to college, and who has just begun her first semester at NYU when Frank's father dies. Their road trip home, accompanied by Frank's partner Wally (Peter Macdissi), creates the space and time for their character interactions and revelations for all three of them.

Beth has always liked her Uncle Frank, the only one in the family who really listens to her and shares a love of literature—but when she comes to New York, she is surprised to find that he is gay, and even more so that he has hidden Wally from his family for ten years. Still, she accepts the situation quickly and without judgment, in spite of her relative naivete and lack of experience. She gets to know Wally, a Muslim and an immigrant from Saudi Arabia, which broadens her

worldview further. Wally left Saudi Arabia to avoid prosecution as a homosexual, for which he could have been beheaded. His father has already died, and his mother and the rest of his family think that he is married to a woman. Frank and Wally's friend Charlotte, who is a lesbian, has acted the part of "wife" for both Wally and for Frank, the latter ruse occurring when Beth's parents first brought her to New York. Wally urges Frank to use this trip home as an opportunity to come out to his family, but Frank is terrified at the prospect: Wally cannot understand this, as Frank will not face the sort of consequences he would have in Saudi Arabia, but there are ghosts in Frank's past he is not ready to confront.

Through flashbacks, we learn that Frank's father rejected him when he caught him in a sexual encounter with another boy at age sixteen. His father believed his son would go to Hell for his sexual behavior, and was never able to accept him—a rejection that is reinforced for Frank after his death. Frank also bears guilt about other events in his past that are revealed which have contributed to his own alcoholism. The family is finally asked whether they can accept Frank for who he is, which their father never could—but Frank also has to accept himself.

It is interesting that Ball sets the story in 1972, just a few years after the Stonewall riots which initiated the Gay Rights movement in Greenwich Village, where Frank lives. His relatives live in a conservative Christian world that has no tolerance of homosexuality or even awareness of what have come to be known as LGBTQ identities. Wally, even as a religious Muslim who says his daily prayers, is able to believe that God accepts them as they are—but most American Christians had a long way to go in 1972 to get to that point, and many still do. This story is not then just of historical relevance, as LGBTQ people are still told that they are damned and rejected, that they are sinful, that they do not deserve rights, and suicide rates among LGBTQ remain considerably higher than the average. As a gay man who grew up in Atlanta, Alan Ball is familiar

with his subject matter, and the continuing reality of prejudice, especially from conservative Christians. But this story provides some measure of hope not only in Wally's claim that God accepts them, but also in the members of Frank's family who are able to reconcile their faith with a loving acceptance of their family member as he is. Let us hope that this fictional story, set half a century ago, can provide a model for how religious people of our time can do the same.