



January 2021

## CODA

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### Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2021) "CODA," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/3>

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## CODA

### Abstract

This is a film review of *CODA* (2021), directed by Siân Heder.

### Keywords

Deaf culture, Music

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### Author Notes

John Lyden is Professor of Religious Studies and the Blizek Professor of Religion and Film at University of Nebraska-Omaha. He was been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. 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 also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservatism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



**CODA (2021), dir. Siân Heder**

CODA is the abbreviation for “Child of Deaf Adults,” but it is also the musical term for a concluding passage of a piece. This film plays with those two meanings of its title through a story of a young woman who is the only hearing person in her family, and who is torn between her loyalty to them and her calling to be a singer as she moves into adulthood.

Ruby Rossi (Emilia Jones) plays a shy student who has trouble fitting in with her peers at her Gloucester, Massachusetts high school, as she experiences stigma due both to her working-class status and to the fact that her family is Deaf. She rises at 3:00 AM each day to go fishing with her father Frank (Troy Kotsur) and brother Leo (Daniel Durant) before going to school where she often falls asleep in class. She is embarrassed not only by her class background but also by her often inappropriate parents, who seem oblivious to some social norms not necessarily because they are Deaf but because they are totally uninhibited. Ruby’s mother Jackie is played by veteran Deaf

actor Marlee Matlin, who brings her usual infectious brand of energy and humor to the role. Kotsur and Durant are also Deaf actors, and as a family they project an authenticity and warmth, discussing topics like sex with a lack of embarrassment that creates further social awkwardness for Ruby.

Ruby joins choir because she has a crush on fellow student Miles who she sees signing up, but she has never sung in public. She sings while fishing, but as her family cannot hear, she has never had an audience. But Mr. Villalobos, the exuberant choir director, sees talent in her which he nurtures, encouraging her to audition for Berklee College of Music in Boston, along with Miles. Their teacher asks them to work on a duet together of the Tammi Terrell and Marvin Gaye hit, “You’re All I Need to Get By,” which is awkward for them as they are actually attracted to each other, but in the end the romantic song allows them to connect and share their emotions. Her family is at first unaware of Ruby’s new passion for music, and has difficulty understanding and appreciating it. As the family business relies on Ruby as an interpreter to the hearing world, they fear that they cannot survive economically as fishermen if she leaves.

All this could be very familiar fare for a teen dramedy, and it is, but this film brings some originality to the concepts through the juxtaposition of Deaf culture with music. At one point, Ruby’s parents come to a concert, and we briefly experience it as they do, with no sound—they can only see the happy faces and clapping of audience members, which lets them know that Ruby’s singing is effective but in a way that they can never experience for themselves. In a climactic scene, however, Ruby signs her singing so that her family can know the words, and her expressive gestures in American Sign Language only enhance her emotional performance for them. Director Siân Heder has said that she views ASL as being like music; perhaps because, like dance, it can be a language of grace and emotion that conveys things in a way mere spoken words cannot. When

her teacher asks Ruby to express what she feels when she sings, she signs the answer, and even without knowing ASL, we and her teacher understand her answer as she indicates the way it transports her to a higher level.

This is a “feel good” movie, as the family finds a way to be supportive of and share in Ruby’s music, and they also realize they can grow beyond dependence on her. Deaf people do not need to be stigmatized or marginalized or viewed as disabled, and the film teaches that as well. But it is also a movie that points us to how we can experience the world differently, and see and hear transcendence through means such as music or sign language—two languages that connect us to the mystical dimensions of life that evade words, but often express the most valued parts of our lives.