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A Little Prayer

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A Little Prayer

Abstract

This is a film review of *A Little Prayer* (2023), directed by Angus MacLachlan.

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Author Notes

Chris Deacy is Reader in Theology and Religious Studies and former Head of Department of Religious Studies at the University of Kent in Canterbury, UK. His PhD (University of Wales, 1999) was in the area of redemption and film, and Chris has published monographs which include *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (Oxford University Press, 2016); *Screening the Afterlife: Theology, Eschatology and Film* (Routledge, 2012); and *Screen Christologies: Redemption and the Medium of Film* (University of Wales Press, 2001). Chris also writes regular film reviews, is writing a book about nostalgia and religion and has been hosting a podcast since 2018 called *Nostalgia Interviews with Chris Deacy* - <https://audioboom.com/channels/4956567>



A Little Prayer (2023), dir. Angus MacLachlan

This very slow-moving but enriching family drama comes from the same writer who brought us *Junebug* in 2005, and it is a carefully wrought slice-of-life, small scale study of the ways in which we try, often in vain, to fathom the roots of dysfunction and betrayal within a set of characters related to each other by blood or marriage but where the surfeit of secrets and lies make it impossible for anyone to really offer or find closure. We see the ties of different generations and the ways in which interventions, even when earnestly or sincerely meant, come at a price. There are suspicions of adultery and the patriarch, Bill (David Strathairn), has good reason to suspect that his son is having an affair with a work colleague. But the question for him is whether to say something about it is going to comprise an admonishment and bring further division rather than bring the broken family unit back together. This has the feel of a Sam Shepard play, and it certainly takes its time to unfold, gently inebriating us in the Southern ways, but this film packs a punch,

albeit a soft one, in which Bill reflects on whether there is something in the way he brought up his children that is to blame for the ways in which they are prone to stray and fail to take responsibility.

The title would appear to reference the way in which Strathairn's character wants to hope against the odds that things will work out okay, but he is old enough to know that simply handing over a check to his troubled daughter, who has come to stay while fleeing an abusive husband, is not exactly the answer to his prayers. His children are now grown up and he knows that to an extent he needs to step back and allow them to sort out their own lives, but he cannot bring himself to stand on the sidelines while they mess up lives for which he feels at least partly responsible.

The ratio is close to 4:3, and this gives the film a boxed-in dimension, where the pain and recrimination feels especially claustrophobic. Here are characters who have a chance to appreciate and find comfort within the bosom of the family, but the tightness of the bonds is also an impediment to wellbeing, with characters not thinking through the consequences of their behavior, not just for themselves but for those close to them who suffer vicariously. In truth, this film does take a while to reveal quite where it is heading, but when it does so it works, like a missile, in getting to the hub of a family in freefall, but held together by the glue of Bill and his wife of many years, played by veteran character actress Celia Weston.

The film's cinematography is rich, and the film also gives us during the opening scenes the disembodied voice of a woman singing a hymn; this grounds *A Little Prayer* in the traditions, wisdom and indeed voices of the past. It also invites the question as to what will happen when Bill is no longer around to support or meddle with (depending on one's point of view) the lives of his children—one of whom comically (or tragically, depending on your point of view) turns up unannounced with a metal detector which she uses to, it would seem, see if she can claim buried treasure in the garden of the family home.