

Films of challenge and hope

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [September 23, 1998](#) issue

The text for this first-ever column in its new location is taken from the first chapter of John Irving's novel *A Prayer for Owen Meany*: "I am doomed to remember a boy with a wrecked voice--not because of his voice, or because he was the smallest person I ever knew, or even because he was the instrument of my mother's death, but because he is the reason I believe in God; I am a Christian because of Owen Meany." Not every one of these biweekly columns will begin with a text, but it is appropriate in this case, because I am just back from my annual trek to the Montreal World Film Festival where a film version of Irving's novel, titled *Simon Birch*, premiered to cheers from the audience for director Mark Stephen Johnson and the young star, 11-year-old Ian Michael Smith.

Irving did not allow Johnson to use the names of any of his characters, hence Owen Meany becomes Simon Birch and Owen's best friend, John, the narrator of the story, becomes Joe. The story is drastically compressed and given a new ending.

The theology of the book is also truncated. The film leaves out Irving's rich depiction of clergy who don't believe in God and who don't know what to do with a young boy who not only does believe in God but knows he is on a mission from God. *Simon Birch* only occasionally does justice to the novel's claim that the dwarf-sized Simon has a clear vision of God's purposes and of his role in that purpose.

There is one moment that does properly represent both Simon Birch's awful pain and his recognition of what he must now do to assuage this pain. His best friend's mother is dead, and Simon has been the instrument of her death. He runs along a dock that extends out into a lake, stops, lifts his arms into the air and cries, "I'm sorry." This is his confession to God, and it is followed quickly by Simon's exchange of gifts with Joe. Each boy gives the other his most cherished possession: baseball cards from Simon, a stuffed armadillo from Joe. They do so as acts of penance, knowing, with the wisdom and hope of 11-year-olds, that God's wisdom is greater than theirs, and that because God is merciful they will each get their gifts back.

The film's ending is overly dramatic and not in keeping with earlier scenes and certainly not with Irving's vision. The film omits Irving's subtle and funny description of the difference between Episcopalians and Congregationalists, and while it does reproduce the famous Christmas pageant in which Simon plays the baby Jesus, it does not remotely begin to grasp Owen Meany's understanding of Christmas and his anger over the failure of the churches to proclaim that understanding.

Notice too that in the movie, when the adult Joe, played by Jim Carrey, says he believes in God because of Simon Birch, he does not add that he is "a Christian" because of Simon Birch. As Owen Meany reminds us in the novel, we live in a culture that thinks it is appropriate to show *The Ten Commandments* at Christmas. But hey, nobody's perfect, except maybe Owen Meany. And if this movie sends a new generation in search of *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, I am all for it.

When I go to festivals I try not to demand perfection, but to greet each cinematic experience with hope and support. This year's offerings were far from perfect, but there were moments that encouraged hope for an art form that continues to be victimized by commercial interests. In *Two Seconds*, a superb first film by Canadian director Manon Briand, a cyclist named Laurie freezes for an agonizing two seconds before starting downhill, which is just long enough for her to lose the race and her job as a professional racer. Briand cuts between Laurie's sweaty face and the face of a clock ticking in slow motion, depicting the two seconds that will change her life.

Hauled before her boss, Laurie is told that she is too old to race anymore. "When you get older, you think before you act," and that, he says, is bad for a competitor. Trouble is, Laurie, who is only 28, loves cycling, so she returns to Montreal and finds a job as a bicycle messenger. *Two Seconds* is one of those little pictures that could, with the right distributor, become this year's *Il Postino* or *The Full Monty*--a non-U.S. film with a humane vision that finds a grateful American audience.

At the center of the film is the relationship between Laurie and a 60-year-old retired Italian cyclist who now works in a bike repair shop, brooding over memories of his early glory and a decision that cost him his chance for love. He inspires Laurie to make her own life-changing decision. The film's surprise conclusion is an affirmation of love, a sweet baptism of hope for every person who has discovered his or her first gray hair.

Full Moon, directed by veteran Swiss filmmaker Fredi M. Murer, opens with a small girl walking slowly along another boat dock with her eyes closed. She stops just before stepping into the water and then goes in to talk to her mother, who is too engrossed in her work to notice her daughter's arrival. A few minutes later, the mother discovers that her ten-year-old son, Toni, has disappeared. The daughter knows what has happened to her brother, but no one will listen to her--an indication that we are in a film about parents who ignore their children.

Toni and 11 other children all vanish on the same day. A detective investigating the case slowly realizes there are patterns of behavior in each family that suggest this is not a case of kidnapping or murder. It is a disappearance with a purpose. A small black child is seen in a restaurant putting stamps on letters; the detective looks at him with amusement until he looks again and realizes he has missed a clue. Soon all the parents receive the same letter, warning that if they continue to fail their children, they will not see them again.

Murer told me that the families in the film are from different sections, economic levels and language groups in Switzerland. They have only one thing in common: each lives on the lake which beckons the children into a future which they want to improve. Murer hopes to make a second film that will tell the story from the perspective of the children rather than the adults, but he has been unable to secure funding.

Some members of the audience were troubled that Murer left the mystery unresolved, with the children still demanding that their parents repent of their selfishness treatment of the children and their environment. I told Murer that the religious seminar group I was with had also voiced that complaint. Apparently accustomed to such concern, he smiled, and repeated a phrase I had heard before from Krzysztof Kieslowski, the late Polish director: "I don't give answers; I only ask questions."

The film ends with a stormy confrontation between the families and the detective who has "changed sides"--rather than trying to solve the crime he wants to persuade the parents that they must accept responsibility for the loss of their children. This confrontation takes place in a live television broadcast so chaotic it seems unreal--until you remember the kind of things shown on *The Jerry Springer Show*.

I left the theater wondering what Owen Meany would make of this story, and recalled that, in playing the role of the baby Jesus in the Christmas pageant, Owen

had told the parents who rejected him that they had to leave the church, because they didn't deserve to be there. I decided Full Moon is a movie that Owen would endorse.