

Trusting and believing

By [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

A pair of British imports explores faith of different kinds. *Millions*, directed by Danny Boyle from a script by Frank Cottrell Boyce, is by far the slicker of the two. It is chock-full of glitzy visual effects, something to be expected from the man who directed the kinetic drug film *Trainspotting*.

The story concerns Damian, seven, who has moved to a new housing development with his father and nine-year-old brother, Anthony, after the death of his mum. Though the clever Anthony is quick to adapt to his new surroundings, the shy Damian has trouble. Seeking divine help, he has long conversations with his favorite saints—Nicholas of Myra, Francis of Assisi and St. Peter himself—who show up in glowing costumes with neon halos to give him advice (while boasting a bit about their own accomplishments).

Things get even more surreal when Damian is bopped on the head by a bag of money—hundreds of thousands of British pounds—that falls from the sky. Serious believer that he is, Damian figures that the money is from God, and he decides to give it to the poor and needy. This Christlike approach doesn't sit well with Anthony, who has his own ideas on how to spend it, nor with the shadowy figure who threw the money off a passing train.

As the story plays out, including a romantic subplot involving Damian's good-hearted dad and a woman who may be a con artist, we contemplate the depth of Damian's faith—not just his faith in God, the saints, miracles and good deeds, but also his faith in angels, forgiveness and eternal life, as represented by the memory of his dead mother.

Unfortunately, the filmmakers don't have much faith in their own story. Instead of burrowing deeper into Damian's spiritual world, and into the workings of a seven-year-old trying to cope with fear, confusion and loss, the film piles on more subplots (involving Mormon neighbors and random robberies) and plot twists (about the introduction of the Euro, and charities that line up at the door) than this delicate tale can support. It all leads to a heavy-handed and predictable climax.

The kind of faith addressed in *Dear Frankie*, the feature debut of photographer Shona Auerbach, based on a script by Andrea Gibb, is far more subtle, but the result is more rewarding. This story also centers on a young boy with a single parent. Frankie, nine, is deaf, and lives in a seaside town in Scotland with his well-meaning but confused mother, Lizzie. Frankie believes that his father, whom he has never met, is a sailor traveling the world who will someday come back to live with them. This faith is based on the long letters he receives from his dad, letters describing far-off places that Frankie marks with pins on his faded wall map.

The letters are actually written by Lizzie, who is unable (until the movie's third act) to tell Frankie the truth about his father. When the ship that the father is supposed to be on docks in town, she feeds the lie by hiring a man to play the father for a weekend.

Though the storyline may sound forced, it works surprisingly well. Unlike *Millions*, this movie has believable characters and is willing to allow them to dictate the action. It also serves up some real moral dilemmas and confronts sticky questions of truth. It isn't until late in the film, when Frankie has embraced the stranger who may or may not be his dad, that we realize that Lizzie's lie was not just a way to satisfy Frankie but also a way to compensate for her lack of faith in herself.