

Make believe

by [John Petrakis](#) in the [March 27, 2002](#) issue

I recently took my five-year-old son to see *Return to Neverland*, the sequel to the classic 1953 Disney animated film *Peter Pan*. The story is similar to the original, except that this time around it is Wendy's daughter, Jane, who takes the magical journey to help Peter and Tinkerbell fight Captain Hook. (Not surprisingly, the war-painted Indians, led by Princess Tiger Lily, are missing from this version. My son wanted to know where they were, which led to our first discussion on political correctness.) Afterwards I asked him why he thought that Jane had gone back to Neverland instead of Wendy. "Because Wendy's a grown-up," he replied. "So?" I asked, egging him on. "So, grown-ups don't believe," he responded.

Actually, in the film, Wendy does believe in Peter Pan--it is she who urges the overly serious Jane to get in touch with her childish side. But I understood what my son meant. Wendy believes only because she has seen Peter and the gang, albeit many years earlier. Most children would not need such tangible proof.

This issue of hard evidence versus blind faith is also at the heart of *Stolen Summer*, the first feature by writer-director Pete Jones. It's about the tricky issues of heaven and heavenly reward as seen through the eyes of two young boys.

The tale, set in 1976, centers on the elder of the two, eight-year-old Pete O'Malley (Adi Stein), who lives with his fireman father, homemaker mother and seven siblings in a cozy Chicago bungalow. He is a hard-working student in Catholic school, but the independent streak that seems to be getting wider the older he gets has him in trouble with Sister Leonora Mary. The no-nonsense nun warns him that unless he changes his rebellious ways over the summer vacation, she foresees big trouble for him down the line, both in terms of school and his eternal soul.

Taking this warning to heart, Peter decides to save the soul of seven-year-old Danny Jacobsen (Mike Weinberg), the son of a liberal rabbi, who has leukemia.

Once the quest is on (it's sort of a Holy Decathlon, complete with feats of strength), spiritually tinged subplots begin to roll in involving the relationship between Pete's

father (Aidan Quinn) and the rabbi (Kevin Pollak), the unconditional love of Pete's mother (Bonnie Hunt) for her family, and the struggle of Pete's older brother, Patrick (Eddie Kaye Thomas), to get a better life than that of his stubborn father, whose mantra seems to be, "There's nothing wrong with a city job!"

Despite these accouterments, *Stolen Summer* is first and foremost a tale of one child's unwavering beliefs, and how they are strong enough to fight off and eventually overcome a flock of doubting Thomases. To that end, he exhibits the bravery (chutzpah?) to steal a few communion wafers from under the nose of Father Kelly (Brian Dennehy), Pete's stern but understanding parish priest, whose observation that "they're not consecrated" doesn't bother Pete, who seems to understand that God wouldn't let such a minor detail prevent Danny from getting into paradise.

What makes *Stolen Summer* ultimately so effective is the way it conveys how children's lives require everyday acts of faith. Parents, teachers, clergy and family are constantly giving them information and advice (from "Eat it, it's good for you" to "You need to say your prayers") which they are supposed to accept as gospel. "Blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed," the Bible says. That's pretty much the situation of childhood.