

A View from the Pew

by Deacon Greg Kandra

To Heaven and Back

Enjoying a rare day off following the Triduum marathon, I took my wife to see *Heaven Is for Real* at a Monday matinee.

I'll be honest with you: I wasn't expecting much. The result could have been awful, a preachy mess. The fact that it isn't—in fact, a lot of it is awfully satisfying—is a testament to the good taste and storytelling skills of Randall Wallace, the director who shepherded this best-selling book from the page to the screen. Wallace knows his way around big stories with inspirational themes; he wrote *Braveheart* and directed *We Were Soldiers* and *Secretariat*. He has given this true-life story of four-year-old Colton Burpo's journey to heaven something remarkable: He's made the implausible plausible, and transformed what might have been a treacly Lifetime melodrama into an altogether engaging and even inspiring tale of resilience, struggle, community and faith.

If the story is extraordinary, it becomes believable because of the ordinary—and that is the secret of the film's success.

The first 45 minutes or so are devoted to the mundane episodes of family life. We meet Todd Burpo—contractor, volunteer firefighter and part-time Protestant minister in the unending flatness of Imperial, Nebraska—and get to know his wife and two small children and the town they call home. Wallace manages to keep all this real and interesting and believable, which makes Colton's near-death experience after a bout with appendicitis all the more surprising and involving. The boy's parents are as skeptical as anyone, and you see Todd wrestling with demons of doubt; at one point, he rails at God and can't quite comprehend what has happened to his life.

The movie is also very good at showing both the cohesion and tension that exist in a close-knit community. When Colton's life is hanging in the balance, his mother picks up the phone and begins calling friends, family, neighbors, anyone—and the movie then shows the widening circle of prayer that embraces the Burpo family and the people in Todd's congregation. It's one of the most affecting moments in the movie—in part, because by this point,

Wallace has made us really care for the Burpos. (It doesn't hurt that Greg Kinnear and Kelly Reilly play the parents with a chemistry that carries just enough sizzle and snap. When a fire alarm interrupts an intimate moment, Todd tells his wife, "I have to go put out a fire. I'll put out this one when I get back.") Once people in the town get wind of Colton's story, they're incredulous, even cynical. That helps give the movie some much-needed grit.

When the movie clings to what is real and tangible and recognizable, it clicks; it's when it journeys with little Colton to heaven that it runs off the rails.

Some things, I think, are best left to the imagination, and that includes cinematic renderings of Paradise, a place that here isn't quite as inviting or beautiful as you might expect. It looks like a suburban backyard; evidently, they have a lot of gifted groundskeepers who take care of the grass. Jesus wears a nicely laundered caftan. You don't see his face (though you do hear his voice—which, for once, doesn't have a British accent) and you do glimpse a rendering of the Son of God created by a girl in Lithuania who had an experience similar to Colton's. The presence of singing, giggling angels, depicted as gauzy winged creatures fluttering across an azure sky, doesn't really add much, either.

But as much as this is the story of Colton's journey to heaven and back, it's also about his father's journey to doubt and back. The son is saved and so, in a way, is the father. This is what makes the movie so gripping and engrossing.

I came away believing that heaven is for real—but I didn't need persuading to begin with. I imagine it will be that way for most viewers, many of whom have embraced the book and are eager to see it reflected on the screen. They won't be disappointed. And in a movie marketplace teeming with big, loud, violent, shrill blockbusters, it's a blessing to be able to take in a movie that isn't aiming to bust blocks, but touch hearts.

Heaven Is for Real does that. For moviegoers craving stories that uplift and inspire, this movie will be an answered prayer.

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