

Roy M. Anker. *Of Pilgrims and Fire: When God Shows Up at the Movies*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. 264 pages. \$17.99.

My shelves sag under the weight of books that expectantly wade into the depths of secular media looking for signs of latent theological import. Especially abundant are books examining theological content in films. Contemporary mainline religion seems to have failed to capture the imagination of the culture in which it resides. Decades ago postmodernism announced the loss of metanarratives that once held things together but are now all but gone. As a result, the culture at large has wandered elsewhere to find explanations for why the world is in such turmoil, searching for signs of hope. So where to look? Films.

Of Pilgrims and Fire is a worthy addition to the inventory and apparently a follow-up to his earlier *Catching Light: Looking for God in the Movies*. Indeed, I think *Of Pilgrims and Fire* should be placed on the top shelf of such efforts. Having read many examples of this genre, I suppose I have gotten jaded, longing for something new, with different insights, less heavy-handed. Anker fills the bill. I would gladly use this as a text along with the examined films. While a few of the films Anker examines could mercifully be set out to pasture (*Shawshank Redemption*, for example), Anker adds new films to the mix and resuscitates a few of the more frequently used examples. He does this without any overpowering ideological slant in place. The book is not preachy.

The book is organized around six sections or themes, each of which has several of the examined films. The sections are “The Gift of Splendor: ‘All Things Shining,’” “Wrestling with Angels (and Demons): The Collision of Morality and Belief,” “The New Life: the Surprise of Love,” “Facsimiles of God: The Whys and Whos of Incarnation,” “The Feast of Love,” and “Signs and Wonders.” In the introduction, Anker explains the title to the book, which, even after the explanation, I find a stretch, but no matter. Anker also provides a series of 12 tips for watching the films; all helpful and not overly arcane or pretentious. Each of the chapters has the same format: A list of key figures in the production of the film, General Comments, Things to Look For, Post-viewing Comments, Post-viewing Questions, Critical Comments [comments by critics]. Each chapter closes with a list of related films that might be of interest either because of the topic or because of the people involved in the film. The films covered are *American Beauty*, *The Thin Red Line*, *The Color of Paradise*, *Decalogue I*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *The Godfather: Part III*, *Wide Awake*, *Tender Mercies*, *The Shawshank Redemption*, *Dead Man Walking*, *The Mission*, *The Apostle*, *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial*, *Superman: The Movie*, *Millions*, *Places in the Heart*, *Grand Canyon*, *Babette’s Feast*, *Magnolia* and *Heaven*.

What I especially appreciated in this book is the enthusiasm the author brings to the task. It is well written: careful, vivid, not obscure or pedantic. His goal does not seem to be to prove how insightful he is but to enable the reader/viewer to enjoy the films as much as he did. Many of Anker’s “competitors” tend to smother the films with their analysis, so that a legitimate deconstruction devolves into demolition with the result that I no longer want to see the film. Not so with Anker. After reading the post-viewing sections for each of the films, I wanted to go see films I had not yet viewed and see again films with which I was familiar.

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