



The Blind Side

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Blind Grace

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Film title: The Blind Side

Director: John Lee Hancock

Screenplay: John Lee Hancock, based on the story by Michael Lewis

Starring: Sandra Bullock, Tim McGraw, Quinton Aaron, Kathy Bates

Distributor: Warner Bros.

Cinema Release Date: 20 November 2009 (USA); 26 March 2010 (UK)

Certificate: PG-13 (USA); 12A (UK) Contains infrequent moderate violence, language and sex references

[Image]

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Big Mike walks as though every step is an effort. Head and shoulders taller and a good few inches broader than everyone he passes, dressed in dirty shorts and a T-shirt despite the cold, he carries all of his worldly possessions in a plastic bag. That this timid misfit could ever go on to become one of American Football's biggest stars seems far too good to be true. But the extraordinary thing about *The Blind Side* is that this apparently fanciful fable is based on a real-life story.

When drifter Michael Oher (Quinton Aaron) is

accepted into Wingate Christian School, it is the beginning of a chain of events that will turn his life around. The affluent Tuohy family, led by tough matriarch Leigh Anne (Sandra Bullock, in the role for which she won an Oscar), encounter him one chilly night as he searches for a place to sleep and invite him into their home. But what begins as a small, impulsive act of generosity soon escalates. Discovering the truth about Michael's devastating situation piece by piece, Leigh Anne takes him under her wing as a surrogate son.

Faced with the bafflement of their friends and relatives, the Tuohys proceed to formally adopt Michael and to include him in every aspect of family life. While little SJ (Jae Head) takes eagerly to his new 'big brother', teenage daughter Collins (Lily Collins) is slowly won over by his gentleness. Though school is a struggle at first, Michael's passion for protecting those he loves leads him to discover a talent for American Football. Suddenly in demand from some of America's top colleges, he is led to question the extraordinary change in his life and the motives of those who made it possible. Did they really do it for him? Or did they do it for themselves?

The Blind Side ambles along with the same slow placidity as its protagonist, but while shying away from conflict may be an endearing quality in Michael it is a weakness in the film itself. The odd perilous moment aside, everything feels a little too comfortable, events carried by an almost ceaseless upward momentum as Michael overcomes one obstacle after another. The Tuohy family, whilst undoubtedly admirable, never quite become real to us. There is little sense of who they really are behind an amicable and united front, and it would perhaps have been more interesting to glimpse them in moments of irritability and weakness as well as generosity and strength. Portraying the Tuohy family home as a sort of glossy utopia into which Michael is integrated with barely a hiccup is neither dramatically interesting nor a believable reflection of reality. All families have their failings, and taking a stranger into your home – though undoubtedly immensely rewarding – must also be costly and difficult. The film might have delivered its message with more power and integrity if it had acknowledged this fact.

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The film is nevertheless lent a credibility it might not otherwise have had by the knowledge of the real events that inspired it, and perhaps the most genuinely moving moments it offers are the photographs of the real Michael and the real Tuohys that appear over the closing credits. Beneath the Hollywood sheen is a story that, whilst undoubtedly a great deal messier and far less straightforward, is a testament to the sheer power of practical grace. Permeating our culture is a system of achievement-based merit that dictates the worth of the individual on the grounds of their performance or background, and despite its alleged Christian ethos, Wingate School is shown to only consider new students 'based on their records'. Initially hesitant to accept Michael because of his pitifully poor academic history, the teachers grudgingly concede that to be Christian means a little more than having the word painted on the school crest. But just being let in through the doors isn't enough for Michael. At a crippling disadvantage in a system that insists on constantly testing and measuring certain kinds of 'potential', he is in deep and desperate need of unconditional acceptance before he can truly blossom.

What the Tuohys offer Michael amounts to far more than material security. Central to his pain is the sense of being a non-person, of walking through a world which seems to have no place for him and holds no answers when it comes to the question of who he is: *'I look in the mirror and say, this is not Michael Oher.'* Leigh Anne in particular is concerned with drawing Michael out of his shell, trying to break down his barrier of silence to find out what really makes him tick. *'Tell me one thing I need to know about you'*, she asks him, and in response to his request she drops the nickname that the world has labelled him with, 'Big Mike', and begins to call him by his real name. This symbolises her recognition of the valuable individual beneath an exterior which has so often been dismissed as being of little worth. By looking at Michael through eyes that see his value as a human being rather than his past or his limitations, the Tuohy family are practicing, counter-culturally, the kind of unconditional grace that Jesus taught and lived.

In this respect the story told by *The Blind Side* cuts to the very heart of true Christianity. Before a perfectly holy God, according to the Bible, our accomplishments and moral record come to nothing. If he, like the teachers at Wingate School, were to scrutinise a record of our achievements and use this as the basis of his treatment of us, then we would be left outside in the cold. But the Bible tells of a God who, even when we had done nothing to deserve it, sent Jesus to die for us so that we could be invited into his family. Our relationship with him is not determined by what we are able to offer him, but whether we accept what he is prepared to give us on the basis of his goodness and generosity. Adoption is a picture used at various points in the New Testament to emphasise God's care for those who come to him with empty hands: *'So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him "Abba, Father."* (Romans 8:15)

Just as Michael's acceptance by the Tuohys enables him to blossom, discovering his calling in life, God's offer to 'adopt' us when we accept his forgiveness is just the beginning of the story. To enter a relationship with God is to discover what we were truly meant for, and to begin a process of change. If we understand that God has loved us enough to die for us, it transforms the way we see ourselves. If we accept God's offer, we don't need to live good lives *in order* to be accepted, but we want to live lives worthy of the high price that he has set on us. And such a life, as the Tuohys demonstrate, ought to include doing for others what God has done for us.

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