



Worlds of light and shade

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Film title: Bridge to Terabithia

Tagline(s): Discover a place that will never leave you, and a friendship that will change you forever.

Director: Gabor Csupo

Screenplay: David Paterson, Jeff Stockwell

Starring: Josh Hutcherson, AnnaSophia Robb, Zooey Deschanel

Distributor: Buena Vista Pictures (USA); Icon Film Distribution (UK)

Cinema Release Date: 16 February 2007 (USA)
4 May 2007(UK)

Certificate: PG (UK and USA)

Warning: This article contains plot spoilers

Every day before catching the bus to school Jesse Aarons (Josh Hutcherson) puts on his worn out sneakers and runs around the field by the house where he lives with his parents and four sisters. Jesse's family is poor and, as the only boy, he also has a list of chores to complete before school each day. His relationship with his father

is tense and he is never praised or encouraged. School is a place of further anxiety. Jesse is picked on by the other boys in his class for having to wear his sister's hand-me-down pink trainers, and the whole school lives in fear of Janice Avery (Lauren Clinton) who spends her lunch hour standing guard over the toilets in order to extract an entrance fee from younger children. Jesse's escape from the drudgery of his life is his ability to draw and he finds solace in a world of characters and stories. One day, however, his life is transformed by the arrival of Leslie Burke (AnnaSophia Robb), an only child whose literary parents have bought the neighbouring property to the Aarons' home. Leslie can outrun Jesse and has a huge imagination. After a shaky start, Jesse and Leslie become friends and spend the long summer afternoons in the woods over the creek where they create an imaginary kingdom, Terabithia. In Terabithia, they overcome all adversities and reign fearlessly. Events there mirror those in the real world and, when a terrible tragedy occurs, Jesse finds that he needs the strength of character he has developed as king of Terabithia to help him cope with loss and guilt.

Walden Media's website proclaims the fact that it aims to capture imagination and rekindle curiosity. With previous adaptations for screen including *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe* and *Charlotte's Web*, they have built a reputation for producing thought-provoking, family-friendly films. *Bridge To Terabithia* does not disappoint on either score, although the film suffers from the fact that it has been wrongly promoted as a fantasy adventure. In fact, it is more of a rite of passage story, a pre-teen version of *Stand By Me*. The story is set in that same familiar world of rural America. Each afternoon, freed from school and parental authority, children have the opportunity to discover who they are and try to figure out their place in the world. In the case of Jesse Aarons and Leslie Burke this freedom gives rise to an imagination-fuelled adventure whose unexpected consequence is all too real.

It seems idyllic, yet *Bridge To Terabithia* does not present a romanticised version of childhood. The film does not shy away from the harshness of the world that Jesse and Leslie inhabit. It deals with bullying, family tension, death and loss in an uncompromising, if at times emotionally

manipulative, way. The willingness to confront reality is rooted in an underlying belief that good will prevail over evil. The world, this story implies, is a cruel place where random accidents lead to death, regret and unanswered questions, but it is also a place of exquisite beauty where human imagination knows no limits. Rich fare for a family-friendly movie? Perhaps, but children are more resilient than we give them credit for, and we do them a disservice when we allow them to be exposed only to a watered-down version of reality. Besides, as this film demonstrates, the world our children inhabit in the school playground is most likely a lot crueller than we care to imagine.

Until Leslie enters his life, Jesse has always been a loner. Shunned by the other boys in his class and despised by his older sisters, his closest friend is his younger sister, May Belle (Bailee Madison), and the only person who understands his artistic nature is the part-time music teacher, Ms Edmonds (Zooey Deschanel). Leslie teaches Jesse that his imagination is not something to be suppressed in favour of 'serious' things. In class one day, Jesse is captivated by her description of scuba diving in deep, blue water and shimmering light. Later, he discovers that Leslie has never been scuba diving and asks her why she has lied in her essay. She responds that making something up is different from lying and points out that he has not seen everything that he draws. Over the creek in the woods they create the magical land of Terabithia together, and there she encourages him to use his imagination and develop his skills as an artist. Her advice to 'Close your eyes, but keep your mind wide open' sits in stark contrast to his dad's warning to 'Get your head out of the clouds and do as I say'. Leslie represents for Jesse that crucial stage in growing up where we move away from the unquestioning acceptance of family mores, and begin to choose how we will live our lives.

What prevents this film from becoming a predictable battle between imagination (hurrah!) and hard work (boo!) is Leslie's sudden death near the end of the film. Jesse has accepted Ms Edmonds' last-minute invitation to accompany her to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington (incidentally, this scene is the only one which sits uncomfortably with a contemporary audience. In our age of parental consent forms

and Child Protection Policies, it is unthinkable that a part-time teacher would call a pupil up and offer to take him to a museum for the day). Jesse is thrilled to be invited by Ms Edmonds, on whom he has a huge crush, and decides not to ask if Leslie can accompany them. The trip to the Smithsonian is eye-opening for Jesse, and he returns home full of wonder at the colour and beauty that he has witnessed. As soon as he enters the house, he realises that all is not well. His family is waiting in the sitting room, anxious about his whereabouts and distraught over the news that the rope swing over the creek has snapped and Leslie has fallen to her death. The news hits Jesse like a punch. Unwilling to accept the fact that, while he was enjoying a day out with Ms Edmonds, Leslie was dying alone in the creek, he turns and runs. His father sets off in pursuit and, on catching him, embraces him for the first time in the film, perhaps even in years. Jesse pours out his feelings of guilt, anger and sense of blame, and his father at last discovers how to communicate with his son. It appears that even in dying, Leslie has brought light into the darkness.

The contrasting threads of light and dark are woven through the film. Jesse's home is always shown as a dark place, where a poor family struggles to make ends meet and live respectably. In contrast, Leslie's open-minded liberal parents live in a home full of light and colour. It seems that whenever we see Leslie she is radiant with life and light. This is partly due to the captivating luminosity of AnnaSophia Robb, but is undoubtedly used by the director as a means of drawing our attention to the contrast between her life of freedom and creativity and the efforts of the Aarons' family to be good and make ends meet. The point is most obviously made in the scene in the church. Leslie has persuaded Jesse to allow her to accompany his family on their weekly trip to church. He warns her that she won't enjoy the experience. The congregation sings 'The Old Rugged Cross' and Leslie joins in enthusiastically, her attention caught by the sunlight twinkling through the stained glass window creating a beautiful atmosphere of warmth and light. The children discuss their attitude to faith as they travel home in the back of the pick-up truck. Leslie contends that she is glad that she came and that 'that whole Jesus thing is really interesting'. She has found the account of Jesus' death and resurrection beautiful, while May

Belle insists that it's 'just scary' and that points out that you have to believe in the Bible because 'otherwise God will damn you to hell'. Leslie finds this hard to believe as she thinks that God is too busy 'running all this' [the world]. She cannot reconcile her idea of a God of love with May Belle's God of Judgment. She finds it interesting that, 'You have to believe it and you hate it – I don't have to believe it and I think it's beautiful.' This conversation takes on an extra poignancy and pertinence for Jesse after Leslie's death. He is tortured by thoughts of what might have happened to her after her death. It is his father who helps him work out an answer by telling him, 'I don't know everything but I do know he wouldn't send that little girl to hell'.

The question is one that will be familiar to anyone who has experienced the sudden death of someone close. Regardless of our faith tradition or philosophical view, the question of what happens when we die is one that can only be answered by someone who has experienced death itself, and of course this is impossible. The type of theological teaching understood by May Belle that God will 'damn you to hell' if you don't believe in the Bible, is often perceived as the full Christian perspective. Indeed, the Bible is uncompromising in its teaching on death and judgment. Death came into the world as a result of sin – rebellion against God – and the only means by which human beings can be rescued from the consequence of their wilful rebellion is by trusting in the only person who ever lived a life free of sin – Jesus:

But now God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. (Romans 3:21-24, NLT)

By believing in his sacrificial death and subsequent resurrection, the Bible says people can find forgiveness for their sin and the promise of life forever:

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:23, NLT)

So, in one sense, May Belle's assertion is correct. There is judgment after death, and what we believe in this life does have an eternal consequence. However, it is not a fingers-crossed, hope-against-hope belief in a book that saves a person from hell, rather a belief in the ultimate sacrifice made by an all-loving God that brings salvation. Earlier I asserted that no one had ever returned from death to provide the answer to what happens when we die, yet the heart of Christian teaching is the belief that a man, Jesus, did return from the grave, and that he put an end to the curse of death that hangs over every human being.

And just as each person is destined to die once and after that comes judgment, so also Christ died once for all time as a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people. He will come again, not to deal with our sins, but to bring salvation to all who are eagerly waiting for him. (Hebrews 9:27-28, NLT)

In that regard, Leslie's view of God as the one who is 'busy running all this' and too full of love to want to condemn people to hell is also true. Christians believe that God is still in control of his creation, and that he is consumed with love for the people he has created to inhabit his world (Colossians 1:15-20).

The paradox of a God of both love and judgment is not one which will be understood by watching a film about two children who invent a fantasy kingdom, but there is something in the character of Leslie which is reminiscent of John's statement about Jesus that he was 'full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). Leslie is a storyteller who weaves truth and freedom into her inventions, and through this she brings light and grace to the lives of others. Although her life is short, her legacy is to leave those whose lives she touches changed for the better.

In the final pages of Katherine Paterson's book, Jesse realises the impact Leslie has made on his life. He also recognises the importance of how he must choose to live now that she is gone. 'Now it

was time for him to move out. She wasn't there, so he must go on for both of them. It was up to him to pay back to the world in beauty and caring what Leslie had loaned him in vision and strength.' If children, and adults, who view this film grasp something of the power of imagination, then it appears that Walden is achieving its goal of capturing imagination and rekindling curiosity. If they also experience something of the power of grace, then perhaps they will feel better equipped to face life's darkest moments.

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