

Movies Are Prayers: How Films Voice Our Deepest Longings
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The Seething, Rejoicing, Reconciling Prayers of Cinema

Josh Larsen, co-host of the WBEZ/NPR podcast *Filmspotting*, brings his cinematic expertise to a new book with InterVarsity Press titled *Movies Are Prayers*. In his role with *Filmspotting* and as editor of *Think Christian*, a digital magazine on faith and culture, Larsen has influenced the minds of moviegoers on the applicability of stories to real life, spirituality, and faith for years.

“Films and faith have been intertwined in my head since childhood,” Larsen said. “As a practicing film critic, I hope to encourage other Christians in a nuanced, aesthetically focused, and theologically rooted exploration of the art of cinema.”

Movies Are Prayers explores how modes of prayer — praise, confession, lament — are modeled by all types of films. In this fashion, the book illuminates the richness of both cinema and prayer.

“Josh’s cinematic knowledge is astounding, as regular listeners to his popular *Filmspotting* podcast well know,” said Helen Lee, marketing director for IVP. “In his forthcoming book he will combine his insights on film and faith in a unique way, helping readers to see movies as representations of different kinds of prayers to God. Whether you are a serious cinephile or just someone who appreciates quality film, you will be captivated by what Josh has to offer in this book.”

Some of the films Larsen covers include: *Children of Men*, *The Tree of Life*, *Casablanca*, *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Dark Knight*, *12 Years a Slave*, *Fight Club*, *Taxi Driver*, *Toy Story*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Where the Wild Things Are*, *Rocky*, *The Master*, *Amélie*, *The Muppets*, and many others.

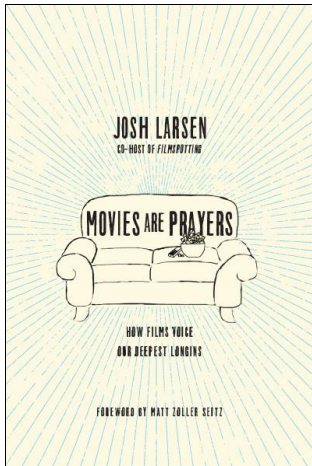
“When Spike Lee exhales, we get *Do the Right Thing*,” Larsen writes. “When Roman Polanski and Robert Towne and Jack Nicholson exhale together, we get *Chinatown*. When the Beatles exhale and Richard Lester is there to capture it, we get *A Hard Day’s Night*. Each of these films, in their own distinct way, offer a response to the two great existential questions that we ask of God almost every day: What do I make of this place? Why am I here? *Chinatown* answers with a lament. *A Hard Day’s Night* rejoices. *Do the Right Thing* seethes, then unexpectedly reaches for reconciliation. Each offers a prayer.”

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“Going far beyond a simple assessment of Christlike martyr figures (the movies are lousy with ‘em), Josh Larsen’s passionate and movingly reflective new book makes an inspiring case for treating a provocative variety of films as prayers for all seasons. He writes on everything from Terrence Malick’s *The Tree of Life* to Michael Haneke’s *Amour*, teasing out the filmmakers’ insatiable desire to wrestle with the unknowable. But his democratically theological approach to the medium he loves brings into play unexpected gems: Polanski’s *Chinatown*, or Demme’s *The Silence of the Lambs* (to which Larsen took his future wife on a date). ‘Many films,’ he writes, ‘even the challenging ones, are capable of functioning as messy, mixed-up, miraculous prayer.’ I’ve long been engaged by Larsen’s film criticism on *Filmspotting*, but his book seeks and finds a higher power and a more mysterious set of concerns, somewhere out past the lobby.”

— **Michael Phillips**, *Chicago Tribune*

“There’s a lot of writing on film and theology, but a perspective like Larsen’s — fresh, insightful, and interesting for anyone — is a rare gift to cinephiles and more casual movie viewers alike. In *Movies Are Prayers*, Larsen encourages us to rethink movies as not just vehicles for content, but as actual expressions of the heart’s deepest longings, readjusting the way we think about both films and their creators — and, by extension, ourselves as viewers and critics.”

— **Alissa Wilkinson**, film critic, *Vox.com*, associate professor of English and humanities, The King’s College

“This is one of the best books on film and theology I’ve ever read. By conceiving of and engaging with movies as ‘prayerful gestures received by God,’ Larsen guides the reader in a study that is itself a reverent, prayerful gesture. Packed with insights into how both the content and the form of films can mirror prayer, *Movies Are Prayers* is a must-read for anyone who has ever felt the pangs of transcendence in a movie theater. Yet this is a book as much about prayer as it is about pop culture. Readers will gain not only new language with which to understand movies, but an enlivened paradigm for understanding prayer.”

— **Brett McCracken**, film critic for *Christianity Today*, author of *Gray Matters* and *Hipster Christianity*

“Larsen pulls on the complexities of the prayerful posture — yearning, lament, confession, joy, and more — that bring us closer to the self as recipient of film than previous comparisons of the movie theater with church and sacred space. Joining the breath of a movie with the breath of prayer, he teaches us anew. This vision of presence and the movements of prayer at



ENDORSEMENTS

the movies are offered through profound films often ignored by the Christian public, making the book a needed addition to the library of the prayerful, reflective, movie-loving Christian.”

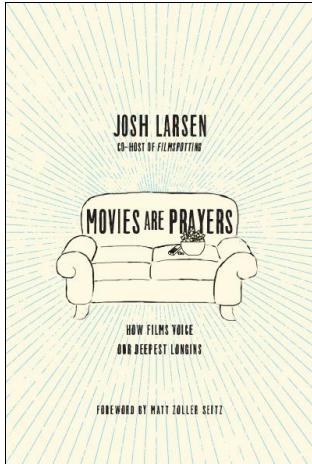
—**Rebecca Ver Straten-McSparran**, director, L.A. Film Studies Center

“I’m about as far removed from religion and spirituality as one could possibly be, and yet *Movies Are Prayers* opened up for me an entirely new way of appreciating the movies I love and the art of filmmaking as a whole. As Larsen points out, it’s so easy for even the most obsessive cinephiles among us to fall back on viewing cinema through the cynical lens of commercialization or a frothy lens of mere escapist entertainment. By reexamining an array of movies, including the ostensibly secular (*Trainwreck*, *The Muppets*), via the language of prayer, this engagement with the medium uncovers a different and fascinating approach to film theory.”

—**Aisha Harris**, *Slate* culture writer, editor, and host of the podcast *Represent*

“With a rich understanding of film history and the Scriptures, Josh Larsen’s *Movies Are Prayers* provides a revelatory look at how movies — their messages, their characters, and even the process of making them — can serve as acts of worship. Larsen’s readings of films are welcoming, accessible, and insightful. *Movies Are Prayers* will help Christians everywhere look at film in a whole new light.”

—**David Chen**, editor-at-large, *Slashfilm.com*



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“If you build it, he will come.”

It is popular cinema’s most familiar command, perhaps even more so than Charlton Heston’s Moses demanding, “Let my people go!” Standing in his cornfield, surrounded by lush green leaves and the warm embrace of an early evening sun, Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) hears a whisper: “If you build it, he will come.”

Field of Dreams, in which Iowa stands in for heaven, depicts one man’s spiritual journey of prayerful obedience. Given a vision of a baseball diamond, Ray decides to build a full-scale field on his farm, complete with bleachers and lights. Doing so is a considerable sacrifice, considering corn could be grown on the land, yet Ray obeys. “I have just created something totally illogical,” he says, surveying the perfectly manicured grass and straight white lines with a grin. His neighbors aren’t as amused, and their disdain is a reminder that Christian obedience often doesn’t make sense to an outside world that operates on a different set of rules.

Eventually, someone does come: Shoeless Joe Jackson himself (Ray Liotta) along with a number of other players who were banned from baseball after being accused of throwing the 1919 World Series. Having been stuck in some sort of purgatory, they find freedom on Ray’s field, able to play their beloved sport once again. Director Phil Alden Robinson lends a hushed holiness to these scenes as the men reverently toss a ball back and forth under the soft glow of the field’s lights, a deepening dusk rising from the surrounding cornfields. It’s a magical moment. Even if you don’t care a bit for baseball (and I gave up the game around age ten, when it consisted of long, lonely stretches in right field and being beated at the plate by errant, pipsqueak pitchers), *Field of Dreams* makes you feel what one character describes as “the thrill of the grass.”

Later in the film Ray receives other commands: “Ease his pain.” “Go the distance.” Following each one leads to a certain peace for others, as happened with Shoeless Joe, while Ray plays the part of accidental guru. As the bills pile up and the potential farm land remains unused, though, he begins to wonder if he should have left well enough alone, if it was worth putting his farm and family at risk. It comes to a boiling point when he asks Shoeless Joe if he can go with the players into the cornfield to see what lies beyond but is told that he’s not invited. “I have done everything I’ve been asked to do,” Ray responds in exasperation. “I didn’t understand it, but I’ve done it. Now, I haven’t asked what’s in it for me. . . . [But] what’s in it for me?”

“Is that why you did this?” Joe responds. “For you?”

Obedience doesn’t work like a rigged slot machine, though, where you put your acts of observance in and a reward comes spitting out. It is instead an expression of living within



BOOK EXCERPT

“Going far beyond a simple assessment of Christlike martyr figures (the movies are lousy with ‘em), Josh Larsen’s passionate and movingly reflective new book makes an inspiring case for treating a provocative variety of films as prayers for all seasons. He writes on everything from Terrence Malick’s The Tree of Life to Michael Haneke’s Amour, teasing out the filmmakers’ insatiable desire to wrestle with the unknowable. But his democratically theological approach to the medium he loves brings into play unexpected gems: Polanski’s Chinatown, or Demme’s The Silence of the Lambs (to which Larsen took his future wife on a date). ‘Many films,’ he writes, ‘even the challenging ones, are capable of functioning as messy, mixed-up, miraculous prayer.’ I’ve long been engaged by Larsen’s film criticism on Filmspotting, but his book seeks and finds a higher power and a more mysterious set of concerns, somewhere out past the lobby.”

—Michael Phillips, Chicago Tribune

the reward you’ve already been freely given. In the Heidelberg Catechism, question 86 asks the same thing Ray does — “Why then should we do good works?” — and offers a four-part answer: “So that with our whole lives we may show that we are thankful to God for his benefits, so that he may be praised through us, so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and so that by our godly living our neighbors may be won over to Christ.” By following the voice, building the field, welcoming the Black Sox, and enriching the lives of others, Ray Kinsella goes 4 for 4.

— Taken from chapter eight, “Movies as Prayers of Obedience”