

Editor in Chief Brad Jersak speaks with Paul Young about the movie adaption of his award winning bestseller, *The Shack*.

PAUL: Fire away!

CWR: First, for people who have never read *The Shack*, those coming in cold, what's the theme? What are we to expect from this story?

PAUL: It's a mystery-suspense wrapped in a "what if." It's a very human story about loss and tragedy and the "what ifs." What if in the middle of our losses and tragedies there is actually a God who is good all the time? And how would that change everything? So the story line is about a father who goes camping with his kids, something that he

fiction, but they are absolutely true. When you deal with fiction versus non-fiction in general terms, fiction actually creates more space than it uses up, whereas non-fiction is an attempt to reduce space. In non-fiction, I'm trying to get my space to match yours and yours with mine. We do that through argumentation and logic and everything else. It might resonate in the head but often has very little impact anywhere else.

Fiction is about building and crafting a space. People who read Lewis or Tolkien or Madeleine l'Engle—they go into this space, and they hear for themselves whatever they hear. So fiction wants to craft a place where people can hear for themselves. I think it does a magnificent job. Music does that too, or any creative sort of art.



The Shack

Interview with W. Paul Young

Official movie poster, © Lions Gate, Summit Entertainment

obviously does normally, and he experiences a great tragic loss. And it's about the struggle with his sense and perception of himself, who God is and what this means. God begins to dismantle his world and rebuild it around something very new for him, and we get to go along on the journey.

CWR: You like to talk about how fiction can deliver truth. Is that what you're talking about here?

PAUL: Yes, fiction has a way, I think, of delivering truth. When you think about it, nobody would argue that Jesus' parables were not true. They are

I love how film does that. Most successful movies—I think it's 65%—are based on fiction books or adaptations of one sort or another. It's respectful as long as it's not propaganda, because you can use fiction to create propaganda. But when it's respectful and it's exploring, especially if it's exploring questions, which is what I do, stories open up a respectful space for the other to hear for themselves. It doesn't have an agenda to make you think like I think, or for you to think that I must be right, either.

CWR: This is fascinating: fiction can be a delivery

system for the truth you've lived, Paul, but also for the guy on death row who's reading *The Shack*, someone who may never see grass or the night sky. There's a truth in it for him as well.

PAUL: Correct. Our participation and co-existence with God, who is a creative Being, means that creativity emerges from that source. Our tendency is to attach creativity to darkness. And then we begin to imagine things based in fear, rather than exploring the creative reality of truth and goodness and kindness, and how that interrelates with darkness.

You've just alluded to a story I've shared where *The Shack* had a massive impact on a man who's been on death row in Tennessee—I was able to visit him recently. He's in a very small cell and hasn't been able to step on grass for 33 years. It's one of his great longings and desires. But inside a story, he is not bound by those four walls or concrete and tile, and God meets us in that space.

So yes, I'm able to explore my own story and wrap it in a way that gets past "our watchful dragons" (as Lewis would say). Fiction is powerfully able to do that for us.

We have our theology and we have our philosophy and our certainties, but when you interact with someone's story, and it's relational, you're interacting with them in another form.

So when I meet people like Terry on death row, he already knows me to some degree.

CWR: Now there are also folks who have read your book once or twice or five times, and they've been transformed.

But a movie adaptation can be

scary for them. Some worry the film might not do justice to the book. Are you able to reassure them? How do you feel about the movie compared to the book?

PAUL: Great question. Let me jump on one thing that you said in the process of asking the question. I have friends that have read the book a dozen times, and their response is, "I didn't see that even on the twelfth time!" Well, it's because you were a behind a tree last time.



There's this incredible dynamic that when you read a story, you hear what is relevant to you in the world that you occupy at that time.

It's like looking at a mountain. If you're in the valley, the mountain looks like this. But if you're on another mountain, it looks like this. Or if you're on the other side it looks like that.

CWR: Or if you're looking at it through a "knothole of pain"?

PAUL: It looks like that, right! That's the beauty and the wonder of the how the Holy Spirit is able to meet us in the place we're at. But we're the ones that are offering our participation in that.

As to the comparison, the movie is a faithful adaptation. A lot of folks get very nervous, and I understand that, rightfully so.

On a technical level that you are dealing with two very

different genres. And it is quite a chore to move from the written word to a visual expression, especially if the written side is highly dialogued, which *The Shack* is. And just like people who listen to the audio book; they hear it differently than when they read it. We read differently than we listen. We tend to skip stuff and we don't

even realize we skip it, but then we hear someone speaking it and engage with it differently.

It's the same with visual imagery. The big challenge, I think, for the producer, the director and the crew, is how to take this from the written side and put it on the screen in such a way that those for whom *The Shack* was massively significant are not betrayed in the process.

And there is also a special challenge when you're dealing with faith components.

How do you not turn that into propaganda? Most of us have grown up where (how do I put this kindly?) "Christian art" wasn't [art], generally speaking.

Modern Christian art too often becomes a means to an end, rather than an exploration of space.

As a result, you feel like you've gotten hooked, and we're back into transactional theology. You've now got to pray this magic phrase in order to be in the "in-group," and to escape becoming "toast."

So one challenge is how to keep this from becoming propaganda, and the other challenge is how to avoid making it so esoteric that it becomes rather meaningless. How do you avoid changing the story into something it was never meant to say? You've seen some movies where you ask, "What book was this exactly?"

But with *The Shack*, the movie did a good job of riding that line. I didn't have any creative control at all, but unexpectedly, I was enfolded into the process in a significant way. They constantly asked me for input and let me look at the script.

So there are some things you're going to watch in the movie that weren't exactly like

they were in the book, but the intent was there. Sometimes they framed it in a different way, but everything that matters is in there. It is solid, strong, orthodox.

CWR: A final question just for fun. How did the cast do? Who are the cast?

PAUL: Octavia Spencer (who won an Oscar for "The Help") plays "Papa," the maternal Papa.

So Papa already knows the kitchen, knows how to bake pies—for those who have seen "The Help," that's an inside joke. I tell you, Octavia knocked it out of the park, and that was the sense of everyone who came to it.

The paternal "Papa" is played by Graham Green, the Canadian First Nations actor from "Dances with Wolves."

Sam Worthington (from "Hacksaw Ridge") not only did a really great job as "MacKenzie," but he engaged with Kate (Megan, who plays

the daughter). She's a young actress and Sam was really able to help her emerge inside that character.

Then you've got Radha Mitchell, who's amazing anyway. And Avraham Aviv Alush is, I believe, the first actual Jew to play Jesus in a major motion picture. Sumire Matsubara plays the Holy Spirit. If you have an imagination of Sarayu, she's there. She's Japanese-Hawaiian who fits the character very well. "Sofia" [Alice Braga Moraes] is one of the top actresses in Brazil—very present, very powerful. And Tim McGraw—he's a natural. He brings a presence, and he was sort of the stable "through-line" for the whole thing.

CWR: Thanks Paul. And by the way, let's all watch for Paul's cameo in the movie!

PAUL: Oh yeah! I'm in a two-second cameo! And you know what . . . film really does make you look fatter! ☐



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