

The Lumière Reader



Letters From the Dead: *Dear Zachary*

Remembering a life after death. By JACOB POWELL.

KURT KUENNE's 2008 documentary feature **Dear Zachary** may well be the film that puts this American-indie director firmly on the international map, and though it is a work of beauty and great value, it is the story that the film relates which is actually the most compelling part of this movie experience. And how compelling a story it is! Ant 'Incredibly Strange' Timpson's comments regarding the raw emotive impact of this documentary tale are not exaggerated; the film is as wildly unpredictable and wide ranging in its emotional tone as the average New Zealand weather forecast.

Dear Zachary was intended by Kuenne as a cinematic letter to the subject's son Zachary, painting a vivid portrait of the father he will never get to meet, but the film also acts as a deeply personal memorial from the director. After hearing, post funeral, that his childhood friend, Andrew Bagby, had an avid interest in photography – a fact of which he was wholly unaware – Kuenne is inspired to set about piecing together a comprehensive picture of Andrew by investigating the person he was as in all his respective family, work, academic and social spheres. Making time and space to gather the necessary information, Kuenne journeys the length and breadth of the United States, as well to England and Canada, collecting interviews with all the people whose lives Andrew has touched.

The documentary's deceased principal subject takes centre stage much of the

time, owing to Kuenne's extensive collection of home movies that the pair and other friends made growing up (in everyone one of which Andrew stars), as well as footage of important events that Kuenne must have filmed for the Andrew and his family – such as Andrew's receipt of an Eagle-Scout award, and one the many occasions that he plays the role of best man at a friend's wedding. Bagby comes across as a vivacious, smart young guy who leads an interesting, if average, life. From a precocious teen in a loving family with a wide circle of friends, he later moves away from home to pursue the study of medicine which takes him first to New Foundland, Canada, and then around various parts of the USA, until he finally settles in Latrobe, Pennsylvania in a family practice residency.

Kuenne's clever construction helps to keep our interest growing as the story unravels to reveal more and more shocking details. Opening with a few interview snippets that slowly speed up and overlap he creates an early sense of cohesion which breaks down into splintered confusion; foreshadowing the narrative journey to come. Next the director begins to paint the picture of the Andrew who was; narrating over segments of the home movies, and intercutting interviews with family and friends before calling a break in this exposition to outline the event of Andrew's tragic death (aged 28). This segment is told from the perspective of his still grieving parents. After we have been brought up to speed, we find that the director's journey truly begins as he visits the various groups of family and friends who have significant memories to share involving their nephew, cousin, colleague and friend. Kuenne makes repetitious, and often poignant, use of particular images and pieces of footage of Andrew; underscoring points in his narrative or in the stories told by the various interviewees. This repetition serves to both cement a particular visual representation of Andrew as well as to bring home the fact of his absence and the effect that this has had on those we meet onscreen. These interviews are natural, heartfelt, and often incredibly moving, as a significant number of people – almost as if there is no camera on them – pay homage to this man who held a place of importance in their hearts and memories.

The latter part of *Dear Zachary* focuses on Andrew's parents David and Kathleen – an inspiring couple of great love and forbearance in the face of some truly terrible tribulations – who uproot their lives and move to Canada to provide support and care to their grandson Zachary (who was in-utero at the time of Andrew's death), as well as to attempt to bring Andrew's killer to justice. They are told – and only too truthfully – that the law is slow in Canada, and so they settle into the Newfoundland community for a period of years instead of the initial months they were expecting. Interviews with their lawyer, church community (the family are devout Catholics) and an array of newly made friends showcases the kind of selfless and compassionate people they are as they quickly make a strongly felt impact upon everyone their lives connect with. This makes it all the more difficult to see them bear with the trials they face in their quest for justice. This is captured ever so poignantly in a scene where, exasperated and utterly at a loss, David Bagby snaps in a fit of vehement anger in front of the camera. These are not cold saints carved of marble, but flesh and blood people shouldering a heavy burden of loss and hurt but refusing to let themselves be consumed by it.

I am not ashamed to admit that my eyes welled up watching this story unfold. That Kurt Kuenne, being as close to the film's principals as he is, persevered in the making of this film to its conclusion is a praiseworthy feat. *Dear Zachary* is at once an indictment of a political system which failed one family markedly (and by extension, as the film makes clear, several communities of connected people) as well as a fitting and moving tribute to both an individual taken too early from his friends and family, as well as to the essence of friendship and familial love.

» **Dear Zachary** [Akld/Wgtn]

Kurt Kuenne | USA | 2008 | 95 min | Featuring: Andrew Bagby, David Bagby, Kathleen Bagby, Shirley Turner, Zachary Andrew Turner, Kurt Kuenne.