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October 29, 2008

Movie Review: Dear Zachary

Posted by [CoolerKing](#) in [Movie Reviews](#), [Features](#)



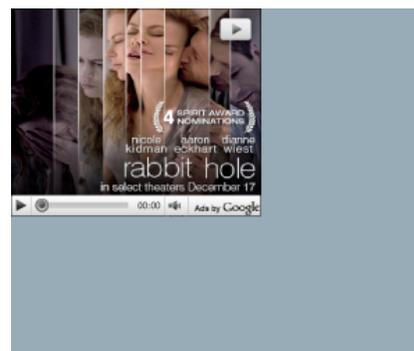
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Critics constantly overuse phrases like "gut-wrenching" and "heartbreaking" when it comes to writing about emotionally devastating films, almost to the point where those words don't even mean much anymore. They certainly only begin to capture what you feel when you're stuck trying to review a movie that honestly did leave you emotionally shattered. Here's the best way I can put it - I was lucky enough to see *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* on a screener in the comfort of my own home and, at one point, I had to do something, as a critic, that I've never had to do before. I had to stop the movie and gather my emotions because I was so upset. I had to literally scream out loud. It's a rare, rare film that can shake as cynical a critic as me. But don't misunderstand - *Dear Zachary* is not just about audience abuse. It's not an emotional ringer without any other purpose than just pushing your buttons. That's too easy. The reason Kurt Kuenne's stunning documentary stands as the best of the year is that it provides a complete range of human emotions. What starts as a relatively simple story becomes something much, much deeper - a perfect cinematic example of the capability of men and women for both immeasurable good and unspeakable evil. When Kuenne picked up his camera and set out to make a love letter to a tragically lost friend, he had no idea what he would find. With *Dear Zachary*, he found the best documentary of the year.

Dear Zachary starts as a tribute to the filmmaker's best friend, Andrew Bagby, a 28-year-old who was executed by a crazed, *Fatal Attraction*-esque stalker named Shirley Turner in November of 2001. It turns out that, while Shirley drove cross-country to kill her former lover, she was pregnant with Andrew's child, a boy who would be named Zachary. When Kurt and Andrew were children, they used to shoot home movies all the time, so Kurt uses his skill behind the camera to address a cinematic letter to the child that his best friend will never get to meet. Kurt picks up his stuff and travels around the country to interview the people that Andrew had an impact on, in the hope of teaching Zachary something about the father he will never know. Not knowing what movie he would make, *Dear Zachary* evolves into so much more than a series of talking heads sharing their feelings of loss and love for

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Andrew. While Kuenne travels the country, the film becomes a true-crime story and a scathing indictment of a justice system that allows horrendous tragedies to slip through its cracks. A masterpiece of editing, *Dear Zachary* is constantly shifting and changing into at least three fully-formed films - a eulogy for a man who died far too young, a lesson about the power of healing, and a profile of a deeply disturbed young woman and how little her government knew how to handle her. And over all three of those stories is the document of a filmmaker trying to find closure after the loss of a friend and discovering so much during his own moviemaking process.

Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father is as emotionally exhausting as anything I've seen in years. While the story that developed while Kuenne was travelling is certainly cinematic, how this excellent filmmaker then crafted his experiences into a feature film is the truly remarkable thing about the final product. Kuenne produced, directed, wrote, and edited *Dear Zachary*, and you could give a hundred different people the same material and have a hundred inferior films to this one. The true story of *Dear Zachary* is incredibly powerful, but it's made immensely more so by Kuenne's ability to turn his quest into more than just a long episode of *48 Hours Mystery*. There's an inherent emotional power in what happened to Andrew Bagby, Zachary, Shirley Turner, and everyone else they impacted, but it takes an immensely talented filmmaker to weave it into a film this powerful. I can't imagine how *Dear Zachary* could possibly be more effective or powerful than it is under the expert guidance of Kuenne. *Dear Zachary* is the rarest of rare films, a movie that can be emotionally devastating and unspeakably inspiring all at the same time.

Rating: FOUR BONES

Reviewed by Brian Tallerico (MovieRetriever.com Film Critic)

Release Date: October 31st, 2008 (in New York), November 7th, 2008 (in L.A. & Chicago), the film will also play at the San Francisco Documentary Festival on 11/2, Orlando Film Festival on 11/7 and 11/8, and St. Louis International Film Festival on 11/15

Rating: R

Director: Kurt Kuenne
Writer: Kurt Kuenne

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