

Flickhead

Where the shadows run from themselves

Dear Zachary: a letter to a son about his father

A film by Kurt Kuenne. 95 minutes, released in 2008.

Film review by Ray Young

As of this writing, *Dear Zachary: A Letter to a Son About His Father* has been a cause célèbre on the festival circuit, sending audiences through the emotional wringer while reducing several critics to tears. Most of the reviews have thankfully stopped short of revealing pertinent story details that could foster distracting preconceptions or expectations among those who have yet to see it. More than anything I've seen lately, this is a movie best viewed cold.

After a sleepy run of modest early efforts—*Scrapbook* (1999), *Drive-in Movie Memories* (2001) and a handful of shorts—filmmaker Kurt Kuenne, incensed by the murder of his friend, has mounted a heartfelt and persuasive case against the killer, judicial incompetence and quack psychiatry. Unlike the recent wave of polarized (and polarizing) films about Iraq and corporate American politics, *Dear Zachary* taps into personal areas than can and should affect us universally.

At the start, Kuenne set out to make a video scrapbook dedicated to Andrew Bagby, a buddy who appeared in some of his early amateur movies. A twenty-seven-year-old doctor just establishing his practice, Bagby is described as a positive influence by a large circle of family, friends and colleagues who share about his humor, compassion and infectious nature. At the same time there's the Dr. Bagby whose low self esteem led him to an ill-fated relationship with a disturbed woman twelve years his senior.

Which brings us to the point where it's preferable to see the picture to find out what happened next. Circumstances unravel around Kuenne at a dizzying pace, with Bagby's murder kicking off a vicious cycle that systematically devastated everyone who knew him. As the story tumbles out through grief stricken voices, the filmmaker stitches together a shell-shocked patchwork of sorrow, anger and fear.

Subjective and emotionally driven, it travels to dark areas beyond the imagination.

Cold hearts and callous minds could level charges of manipulation against Kuenne—*Dear Zachary* isn't "politically correct." Working from the gut, punching his perspective across through jackhammer editing and overlapping audio, Kuenne's passion overrides clinical objectivity to paint Bagby's killer into something truly monstrous. Considering the vicious nature of the crimes and the flawed legal system supporting her, it's useless to argue the point. Humbled by the human wreckage in her wake, our sympathies are guided to where they're warranted. Pity for her psychological and social dysfunction is in short supply, especially when the evidence favors one person's charge of her being the incarnation of Lucifer.

Rarely have I been reduced to a raw nerve by a film. Over the years, various moments have blown me away—the infant tossed from the bridge in Eisenstein's *Strike* (1925), the dog luring the old man from death in De Sica's *Umberto D.* (1952), the fate of the martyred donkey in Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), the musician's poignant legacy in Tavernier's *'Round Midnight* (1986). But the 95-minute catharsis of *Dear Zachary* is distinct and raw. There is no comprehending the pain suffered by Bagby's parents, no rationalizing a woman's actions against her own flesh and blood. As it's said, truth is stranger than fiction...and, in this case, more penetrating. There isn't one false emotion in *Dear Zachary*, no moment of doubt. Equal parts horror and epiphany, it is a masterpiece that draws its power from the best and worst within us.

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