

quiet members of the post-pioneer generations, the ones who worked harder to settle America than anyone has before or since, and who have been repaid by our popular culture with mockery and endless recriminations for robbing oh-so-many would-be Sister Carries of the satisfying careers and sex lives they so richly deserved. No matter. They're just about all gone now, and so is he.

By our unofficial family count, a thousand people showed up for the viewing, held over two days just a few hundred yards away from his biggest field. The line extended for hours outside the door of the funeral home on a characteristically raw and blustery late October day. Ruby and her family were there, along with concentric circles of relations, church members, and friends from the community—the vast majority of them still persisting, quietly, on a land that their own German-speaking grandfathers and great-grandfathers once settled with thousands of large families and small farms.

It was joyful to re-enter this little bit of near medieval *gemeinschaft* that somehow has survived into the 21st century. But after we buried him, after the traditional big lunch at the church's fellowship hall, the drive back past his house was filled with evidence of that older world's rapid decay. Nearly all the fences have been ripped out. Barns sag. Menacing semis rather than plodding tractors roar down the road. Litter lies in the ditches. The once settled, prosperous land has been emptied of big families and is continually losing its most able sons and daughters. It is being transformed into a giant meth lab, an agricultural industrial park, a rural slum, a place for losers. Another chapter in the unsettling of America. I am happy that he won't be around to read it. ■

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### **One important ally is not enthusiastic about the change of administration in Washington.**

Turkey's leaders are extremely concerned about the impending Obama presidency, so much so that they have alerted their embassies to prepare their press officers and media contacts to counter possible disturbing developments coming out of Washington. The Turks fear an Armenian genocide resolution, as was nearly passed by Congress in October. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who refers to the "incidents of 1915" to describe the Armenian massacres, spoke directly to the Obama transition team during his recent G-20 visit to Washington, expressing concern that the resolution will be revived in 2009 with presidential support. In a letter to the Armenian National Committee of America in May 2008, Obama reportedly wrote, "I share your view that the United States must recognize the events of 1915 to 1923, carried out by the Ottoman Empire as genocide..." He called the Bush administration's failure to identify it as such "inexcusable." The Turks also believe the increase in Democrats in the House and Senate will probably mean more votes in support of the resolution. While there is little doubt that there was systematic mass killing of Armenians during World War I, good relations with Turkey are far more important than appeasing a domestic lobby with a longstanding grievance about wrongs committed by people long dead and serving a government that no longer exists.



### **Confidential intelligence assessments relating to Afghanistan are increasingly grim.**

The CIA is predicting that the Taliban will have a sustainable presence in 75 percent of the countryside within a year and will effectively control all the access roads into Kabul from the south and east. The Agency believes that President Hamid Karzai will move to cut a deal with the Taliban to save his own extremely unpopular and incompetent administration, though the Taliban will probably make demands that are unacceptable to Karzai's Western backers, including complete amnesty, legalization as a political party, and key cabinet positions. The U.S. will surge as many as 40,000 troops into Afghanistan in the next year as part of a last-ditch effort to stabilize the country, but the increase in manpower will largely be offset by the departure of many European contingents.



### **Where is Ben-Ami Kadish?**

The New Jersey resident who was part of the Jonathan Pollard spy network was arrested last April 22 for spying for Israel. He was released that same day on \$300,000 bail and was due to return to court on May 22. But he did not reappear. No one in the media seems interested in the case. The Federal Court for the Southern District of New York website is supposed to include all past and pending court cases, but if you search for Kadish, you come up with nothing. If you call them to find out the status of the case, they promise to call you back but do not do so. The same happens when you call the Department of Justice. Perhaps someone should file a missing person's report.

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# Arts & Letters

## FILM

[Doubt]

### Through a Glass Darkly

By Steve Sailer

LIKE A GREAT baseball player's career, Meryl Streep's three decades in the movies can be depicted in a few statistics: 14 Oscar nominations, four children, one husband, zero rehabs. Her new role as Sister Aloysius, the fearsome Mother Superior of a 1964 parochial school in the film version of John Patrick Shanley's drama "Doubt," would seem like the perfect outlet for her theatricality.

After all, it's a charismatic job. When I entered St. Francis de Sales in 1964, all the big kids in the second grade explained that I might not survive being sent to the principal because before Sister Adrian entered the convent she had been a lady professional wrestler.

Unfortunately, Streep's performance never quite harmonizes with Shanley's somber adaptation of his Pulitzer-winning drama about the knuckle-rapping principal's quick conjecture that a likable progressive priest is molesting a 14-year-old altar boy. Streep's hamming up Sister Aloysius as the Wicked Witch of the Bronx sounds entertaining, but she runs out of invention, perhaps due to her deprived upbringing as an affluent Presbyterian.

As a film, "Doubt" is a tidy he-said-she-said play (imagine "Sleuth" with

four characters instead of two) by the Oscar-winning screenwriter of 1987's "Moonstruck."

Philip Seymour Hoffman (an Oscar winner himself for "Capote") plays Father Flynn, the newly arrived priest who is the state-of-the-art Vatican II cleric: progressive, genial, even cool. The priest is particularly solicitous of the feelings of the grade school's first black student, a lonely eighth-grade boy.

Hoffman radiates so much acting technique that he's a bit miscast as the guiltily cringing molester: you keep expecting the expert thespian to turn on his reality distortion field and bluff his way out of the jam his character is in, but he never does.

Sister Aloysius is deeply suspicious of this trendy liberal, so she instructs a kindly novice teacher to be on the lookout for any funny stuff. Young Sister James is portrayed by Hollywood's perpetual ingénue, Amy Adams of the Disney musical "Enchanted." Once again, the casting seems a bit off. If the Mother Superior in "The Sound of Music" could recognize that Julie Andrews wasn't cut out to be a nun, surely the even girlier Amy Adams is a little doubtful?

Setting the play in 1964 allowed Shanley, who was born in the Bronx in 1950, to get the period details right—Sister Aloysius bans all ballpoint pens because pressing too hard ruins penmanship—but undermines a plot that should have been set 20 years later. The institutional crisis in the Catholic church in 1960s was less homosexuality among priests than rampant heterosexuality: the Father Flynn's and Sister Jameses were falling in love, leaving holy orders, and getting married. The admittedly anecdotal evidence suggests that declining numbers of straight priests allowed the gay element

in the clergy to reach a critical mass, enabling what had been a chronic but limited problem to metastasize.

By naming his play "Doubt," Shanley pulled a fast one on the many critics who assume Sister Aloysius is the villainess as quickly as she assumes the worst about Father Flynn.

Programmed to praise doubt and denounce dogma, the pundits salivated on cue when Shanley launched a media campaign to spin his sturdy little play as an attack on religious fundamentalism. In the *New York Times*, for instance, Christopher Isherwood asserted that "Doubt" delivers "a broader commentary on the state of the cultural and political discourse in America, and indeed on the dangerous human tendency to take refuge in certainty..." Surely, though, the church's homosexual molestation scandal is a case of tolerance run amok, just as Father Flynn's guilt is beyond doubt?

Shanley's actual text has a much less hackneyed point to make via the movie's best performance. Viola Davis plays the victim's mother, who, to Sister Aloysius's shock, explains that she is at least relieved that her son's latest admirer is a kind gentleman. After all, she took him out of public school to keep him from getting beaten up by other boys so much.

Shanley himself is struck by the duality he has witnessed in homosexual priests. A child in his extended family was molested, but a similar man "saw something in me, and educated me; gave me a great classical education. But he was a predator, and in my case he did nothing about it, but in other cases he did do something about it." ■

Rated PG-13 for thematic material