

In The Dark

by George McCartney

Accidental Heroes, Ordinary Tragedies

Last year, M. Night Shyamalan performed a minor miracle: Flouting Hollywood's policy of giving the public what it's supposed to want, he found a way to tell a morally complex tale and, at the same time, make it a huge popular success. Using—at times strategically bending—the conventions of the traditional ghost story, he gave us *The Sixth Sense*, an uncommonly honest narrative about a boy and a man helping one another face their mortal losses. He even dared to invoke the austere vision of classical tragedy that counsels us to come to terms with our mortal condition by choosing to accept it. Only this, the Greeks believed, can release us from death's terrors. Shyamalan further suggested that such acceptance can be more than stoic: It can be Christian as well, for it enables us to recognize that the best way to deal with our own losses is to help others face theirs.

Executives in our popular-entertainment industry generally deem such notions insufficiently sunny. Shyamalan broke their one commandment—"Thou shalt not upset your audience"—with splendid results. And he did so without resorting to special effects, save the one he used to draw a genuinely intelligent and touching performance from his star, the usually insufferable Bruce Willis.

It's against Shyamalan's remarkable achievement that I want to discuss his new film, *Unbreakable*, which is, I am afraid, a remarkable failure. Returning with Willis once more, he has taken on even bigger game: nothing less daunting than the problem of evil theologically considered. (In a world created by an infinitely merciful, all-powerful God, how are we to explain infant leukemia, Joseph Stalin, and Nicaraguan mudslides?) To make his theology more palatable to the general audience he so clearly wants to reach, Shyamalan has chosen to dramatize this metaphysical issue within the conventions of superhero comic books. Unfortunately, his gambit seems wholly misconceived. At best, superhero stories offer little more than a cut-rate, Manichean universe of frozen either-or ab-

Unbreakable

*Produced by Touchstone and
Blinding Edge Pictures
Written and directed by
M. Night Shyamalan
Released by Buena Vista Pictures*

You Can Count on Me

*Produced by Cappa Production and
The Shooting Gallery
Written and Directed by Ken Lonergan
Released by Paramount Classics*

stractions. Rendered in cartoon line drawings, their portraits of virtue and villainy merely gesture toward the subtle interplay of good and evil in our daily lives. It's simply not the arena for a tumble with the problem of evil.

The narrative begins with an accident that brings together two men who have little in common but their biblically derived names. One is Elijah, played by a simmering Samuel L. Jackson. From birth, he has suffered from a condition that leaves his bones so brittle they break on the slightest impact. Having spent his childhood alternating between immobilizing plaster-casts and painful physical therapy, he has become obsessed with invulnerable superheroes. As an adult, he makes his living running a gallery selling the work of comic-book illustrators. He doesn't deal in the mass-produced comics themselves but the artists' original pencil-and-pen drawings. The other man is David Dunn, an unassuming security guard played by Bruce Willis with the brooding bafflement of a decent man who has yet to find his life's purpose. Elijah seeks him out when he learns he has survived a catastrophic train wreck. Though all the other passengers were critically maimed or killed, David has emerged unscathed. Elijah becomes convinced that David has special powers, the kind he believes somehow inspire the intuitive imaginations of comic-book artists. As he explains, he's been "looking for someone at the other end of the spectrum" from his all-too-vulnerable self, "a

person put here to protect the rest of us." In other words, a superhero. Not surprisingly, David initially rejects Elijah's notion. He assumes the art dealer is either delusional or trying to scam him. But Elijah pierces his skepticism when he asks him if he's ever been sick or injured. David can't remember. He asks his boss and then his wife. Neither recalls him ever taking a single sick day. (This is one of the film's many annoying implausibilities. I don't mean the superpowers. For the story's sake, I'm fully ready to believe in such gifts. But a man who cannot recall whether he has ever broken his radius ulna or come down with the flu? Please. We might forget what we ordered at the restaurant three months ago, but not if it gave us food poisoning.)

Step by step, David becomes aware that he is different after all. His adoring son, Joe (Spencer Treat Clark), becomes convinced even sooner. Without letting David know, Joe loads up his father's barbell with far more weight than he's used to. David only discovers this as he successfully bench-presses the bar. Surprised by his strength, he has the boy add more and more weight. To his amazement, he soon finds he's pressing 350 pounds. (Another implausibility. Would a responsible father such as David permit his ten-year-old to load a barbell, especially one resting precariously on a weight bench? Would he lift it without checking the weight?)

Such gaffes mar the film again and again, undermining our willingness to suspend our disbelief. In his rush to grapple with his theme, Shyamalan has neglected the basic principles of storytelling: The stranger your premise, the more convincing your details must be.

As for his theme, the problem of evil, Shyamalan has seriously overreached himself. Many artists have foundered on the same rock, of course, including those working in forms far more congenial to theological reflection than film. Think of Milton's struggle to put Satan in perspective.

While I applaud Shyamalan's desire to justify the ways of God to man, he needs to find a better vehicle than the comic book to do it, especially given his predilection for the somber, deliberate

style that worked so well within the ghost-story conventions of *The Sixth Sense*. Applied to superhero antics, this approach can't help but seem leadenly pretentious. In an early scene, Elijah refuses to sell an original hand-drawn portrait of a superhero to a customer who intends to give it to his ten-year-old as a gift. With offended dignity, he angrily points out that, although such drawings are made to be translated into the cheaply colored panels of comic books, they themselves are nevertheless genuine works of art. At first, Shyamalan seems to be using the incident to reveal Elijah's obsessive nature. On reflection, however, I suspect the episode is his way of cordoning off his film from other superhero movies. *Batman*, we are to understand, is a vulgar live-action cartoon, while his film is genuine art. Such highmindedness is the flaw of a young man, and I hope the 30-year-old Shyamalan will outgrow it. There's nothing more aesthetically fatal.

If *Unbreakable* reveals Shyamalan's callowness, it also displays his ambition. How many other directors would dare to take on the issues he has? On these grounds alone, his film is worth viewing, despite its faults. Frankly, I'm hoping it's a commercial success. He deserves more turns at bat, but he may not get them if this film doesn't make money. Ideally, it will turn a modest profit, just enough to encourage his backers to fund another project on a smaller budget. Given the excesses on display in *Unbreakable*, I suspect he may need the discipline of a lean budget, which will force him to forgo special effects and rely on his ability to use the medium's own resources inventively. And knowing his script will appear before the world undisguised by big-budget frills, he'll be motivated to take more pains with his writing.

The low-budget independent film *You Can Count on Me* proves the point. Like *Unbreakable*, it also begins with a fatal accident; this one, however, leads to a far more compelling drama, without a special effect in sight. The film opens with a husband and wife driving home at night. Suddenly, their car swerves and collides with a truck, instantly orphaning their two young children. The film then jumps ahead 18 years to pick up the lives of the siblings as young adults.

Both have grown up profoundly marked by their loss, but like orphans everywhere, they are unwilling or unable to talk about it, even to each other. Their silence serves to reveal how profoundly

their parents' deaths have haunted them every day of their lives. It's as though they have been knocked permanently off balance, perpetually unable to find the floor beneath their feet—a condition that has led them to make one ill-advised choice after another.

Now in her early 30's, Sammy (Laura Linney), the sister, has chosen an outwardly conventional life. She lives in her parents' house and works in the local bank in a small New York village. But all is not well. Her husband has left her, and she is rearing their eight-year-old son on her own. Her brother Terry (Mark Ruffalo), now in his late 20's, has become a drifter, picking up day labor from Alaska to Florida and getting himself arrested for brawling in bars. He doesn't help his case by smoking pot regularly and vegging out whenever there's a television to watch.

Despite their evident differences, these siblings are much more alike in their pain and uncertainty than either realizes.

Sammy strives for order and respectability but carries on in quite a disorderly—not to say disreputable—fashion. Although she has an intimate relationship with Bob (Jon Tenney), who loves and wants to marry her, she starts an affair with her new boss, Brian (Matthew Broderick), an insecure martinet with a very pregnant wife. Realizing her behavior is less than appropriate, she visits her minister, Ron (played with marvelously comic sobriety by writer-director Ken Lonergan). What, she wants to know, is the Church's current position on fornication and adultery? He answers with measured hesitance: "Well, it's a sin; but we don't focus on that aspect of it." He then asks about the "context" of her behavior, but she tells him she would prefer he chastise her. Ron refuses to bite. Seeing no alternative, she explains what prompts her liaisons with the two fellows. "I feel sorry for them; isn't that ridiculous?" Yes, it is; but it also makes sense in light of an earlier moment. Feeling restless one evening, she had called Bob. When he answered, she asked—without introducing herself—"What are you wearing?" Although she meant the question to be seductive, Bob heard it quite differently. After a perplexed pause, he ventured "Mom?" This is more than a joke; it reveals Sammy's need to mother men, especially sufferers and losers. Her own loss has left her preternaturally alert to pain in others, and she feels compelled to

remedy it in any way she can.

This is why she is so disappointed with Terry when he comes home from his wanderings. After she's spent days preparing for his return—cleaning, cooking, and reminiscing—he rejects her mothering. He would prefer cash instead. He's gotten a girl pregnant and needs to "fix" the situation. As we watch him reluctantly reveal this, we shrink from the spectacle of Sammy's discomfiture. As things turn out, however, Terry does submit to a good deal of mothering after all. In his absence, his girlfriend attempts suicide, and her father makes it forcefully clear that he's no longer welcome. At Sammy's insistence, he agrees to move back into their parents' home with her until he can regain his composure.

At this point, we would expect a half-dozen emotional showdowns followed by a cleansing resolution of lifelong tensions, but this is not Lonergan's way. Instead, he has chosen to show these people in all their ordinariness, including their confusion and inarticulateness. They lack the heroic force for mold-breaking catharsis. What they do have is the mystery of their love for one another, however inexpressible and thwarted it may be.

Lonergan's film features fine performances by all, especially Linney, Ruffalo, and Tenney. With an unforced, all-too-believable narrative, he poignantly reminds us of life's remorseless consequences.

**Looking for
a good film?**

**Check out
George
McCartney's
reviews from
our back issues
online at**

www.chroniclesmagazine.org

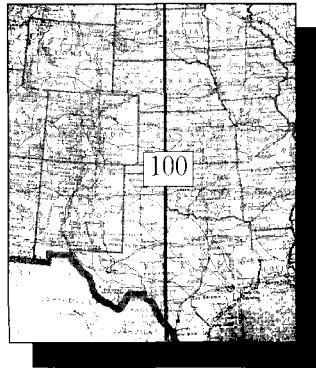
The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Democracy and the Art of Handloading

Swish . . . creak—*chunk*. Swish . . . creak—*chunk*. At the top of the press stroke the lubricated brass shell rises into the top of the press frame where it is engaged by the sizing die, screwed down and secured by the locking nut. On the downstroke it catches momentarily in the die before the expanding ball does its work and the shell pulls free with a wrenching sound, the force straining my arm and the 3/8-inch bolts securing the press to the table. Swish . . . creak—*chunk*. On the table behind the press are a couple of wooden trays drilled with 50 holes, ten rows of five each. The nearest tray is already nearly filled with decapped and resized .270 cartridges waiting to be primed and charged. No more American way to spend a snowy Wyoming morning than listening to Rush Limbaugh while handloading ammunition. "Is it *legal*?" a lady friend from Manchester, England, asked when I showed her my workbench. Well yes, it is—for now anyway, despite last year's presidential election, which was not just the worst thing to happen to the country since the Civil War, but amounts in fact to a second civil war, this one fought ignobly in the courts rather than on the field of battle.

From the vantage point of America Deserta, the vast red continent stretching between two thin blue littorals, the 2000 election looms larger than the electoral equivalent of the *Titanic* disaster, which produced a more sweeping reform of maritime administrative and procedural law than had ever occurred before or has since. The famous *USA Today* map starkly portrayed a nation comprising two majorities, geographically segregated from one other and having far less in common between them politically, philosophically, metaphysically, culturally, and racially speaking than the United and Confederate States of America shared. For the historical moment, these majorities stand evenly poised in influence and numbers: the Old America in a Mexican standoff with the New. One step beyond that moment—it is now



plain to both sides—and it will no longer make any difference that (as Ralph Raico observed) you can drive across America by almost any route without passing through a single county that had given its vote to Vice President Gore. One step off the balance, and the Old America will be tied down like Gulliver by the New, partly in accordance with the Democrats' Golden Rule (he who makes the rules gets the gold). And the votes. And the Western public lands. And plenty of other things, including the guns, of course.

Establishment commentators have chosen to interpret the closeness of the vote as a sign that the American people really aren't that far apart on the larger public issues. So far as I can tell, the truth is exactly opposite. George Bush and Al Gore, in spite of their Tweedledum and Tweedledee campaigns, stood—or at least, they came to stand—for the Old and the New America respectively, which explains the impressive voter turnout in certain areas as voters ran to the polls (or were driven there by mortuary limousines, etc.) to enlist as foot soldiers in the army of their choice. A reason, in fact, why so little of substance was debated during the fall campaign is that so little needed to be made explicit by either candidate: The voters knew instinctively what each of these men stood for in the broad ideological sense, where their sympathies lay, and whether they represented, not Democrat or Republican, but Friend or Enemy. As a result, last year's presidential election, beneath a veneer of civility, in reality was an emotionally charged battle—as I inferred from the obvious reluctance of people in the university town of Laramie to bring up the subject in public. When driven back (explicitly or implicitly) upon fundamental

assumptions, politics becomes essentially a religious debate, it finds itself subject to the rules that, respecting religion, have governed polite society almost since the end of the Christian consensus.

Election 2000 will come to be recognized in a variety of ways as a watershed event. The first is its stunning demonstration that we really *are*—to an extent that John Dos Passos couldn't have imagined—two countries. The fundamental differentiation is between the New America and the Old. The Old America is the relaxed America, more or less comfortable and at peace with itself while prepared to make a few improvements and to add a few conveniences to its abundantly inconvenienced life. It is content to worship the Christian God, follow in the traditional folkways, observe the old forms, encounter the same faces on the street every day, and maintain the existing social and political structures, as well as the existing population. As far as government at every level goes, the Old America finally wants to be left alone by it—after rendering to Caesar what is due him—and get on with living its life on the terms it has been dealt, which it finds mostly satisfactory and for which it is happy to give thanks. It doesn't want to make itself over, or the world, and it believes that its fate—like the world's—is ultimately in God's hands. The mobilized America, on the other hand, has no place for God in its thinking and believes man's fate is of his own making. Assured that life finds meaning and significance in the public, not the personal, sphere, it treats every aspect of human experience as political and relegates everything political to the authority of the central state. Convinced that man is perfectible in this world rather than the next, and that perfectibility is a necessary function of time, it envisions a glorious future whose realization is the highest moral imperative. In the mobilized society, nothing is taken for granted, nothing assured, nothing sacred, or even safe. Instead, everything existing is suspect, everything provisional, nothing of absolute value, nothing secure, and nothing unchanging, except change. On behalf of change, society is endlessly exhorted and closely regimented where opinion and personal behavior