

Culture and Family Institute @ Work . . .

# CFIReport

## Good Flicks Beat Bad Flicks

Is Hollywood slowly learning that  
morality can pay off at the box office?

By Robert Knight

"Are there more family movies around or is it my imagination?" asked the mother of two teens while waiting in line at a movie complex in Virginia.

The answer is a qualified "yes."

Although Hollywood is still churning out R-rated disappointments like *Queen of the Damned* and *American Pie 2*, the major studios are increasing their production of G, PG, and sex-free PG-13 movies. The result has been a record-breaking box office end of year for 2001 and a projected record-breaking year in 2002. Aside from ever-higher ticket prices, what explains the upsurge in movie revenue?

### Morality Matters

"They started to put the mix of God and country in there," said Ted Baehr, president of the Christian Film and Television Commission and publisher of *Movieguide*. Recent films with Christian content, such as *The Rookie*

(G, \$65 million) and *The Count of Monte Cristo* (PG-13, \$53 million) did well. Movies with moral themes, such as *Shrek* (PG, \$250 million), *Monsters, Inc.* (G, \$120 million), *A Beautiful Mind* (PG-13, \$150 million) and *Ice Age* (PG, \$200 million and counting) were outright box-office smashes. *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (PG-13), with no sex or profanity but quite a bit of violence and "scary images," has earned more than \$300 million and is due out on video on August 8.

All of these movies contain elements that some will find objectionable, but movies with a broad moral element are doing well. While this does not mean that parents can let down their guard, there are encouraging trends toward positive themes, particularly patriotism.

Dick Rolfe, chairman of the Dove Foundation, which promotes family-friendly films, does not think the

**Disclaimer: Even movies with positive elements are subject to legitimate Bible-based concern. This article is not an endorsement of any movie; it uses movies, good and bad, to show a general trend in Hollywood.**

upsurge in pride in America following the terrorist attacks in September had anything to do with a recent outpouring of patriotic or religion-friendly films. These include *Spiderman* (PG-13), *Blackhawk Down* (R), *We Were Soldiers* (R), or even the upcoming *Gods and Generals* (not yet rated).

"It takes 12 months to two years from concept to release, so I don't think 9-11 was a factor," Rolfe said.

The search for profit is a better explanation. Since 1996, Hollywood executives have been alarmed by an annual average decrease of 6 percent in theater attendance. In the 1960s, before the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system took effect, Hollywood sold nearly 2 billion tickets a year. In 2001, about 1.4 million tickets were sold.

The drop is due to many factors, including the availability of the Internet, satellite TV, and pay-per-view. Audiences are tired of trashy fare, and although 14- to 24-year-olds are the most frequent moviegoers, they are a niche market that cannot sustain the entire industry. "It's caused Hollywood to look elsewhere for an audience," Rolfe said.

### The Christian Element

This is good news for families, and it is reflected in the latest releases. The major studios release about 250 films annually. "Last year, 98 films had Christian content," Baehr said. "This year, every week, one or two are released that have Christian content."

Sometimes the Christian content is explicit, as in *Joshua* (G) or *The Count of Monte Cristo* or implicit, as in *The Rookie* and *Spiderman*, Baehr noted.

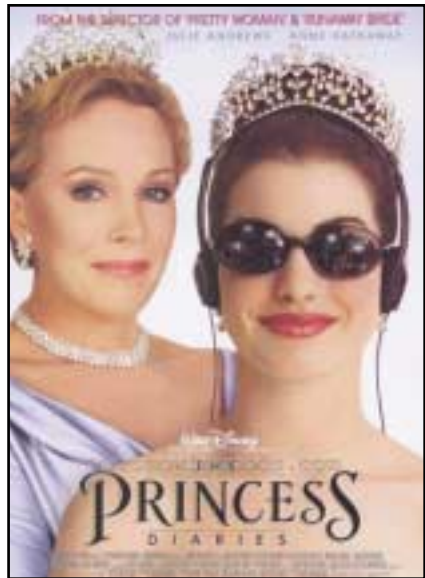


Photo: Walt Disney

**People of all ages flock to see The Princess Diaries.**

"My theory is that people want good to triumph over evil, but more than that, they want someone else to do it for them," Baehr said. "Many movie heroes are archetypes of Jesus, who conquered sin for all of us."

Typically, if a film has Christian content and artistic merit, it will make about \$46 million. A film with moral content will make at least \$36 million, and films that are blatantly immoral bring in only \$18 million, Baehr said. Year after year, Baehr's annual report on the movie industry has demonstrated that family-friendly films are financial powerhouses.

In fact, when you look at the earnings gap between a typical PG movie and ones rated R, it might seem surprising that the majority of films still carry an R rating. If Hollywood is worried only about the bottom line, why not make lots more G and PG films?

Michael Medved, a former PBS



**The Rookie is based on the true story of a high school coach who successfully returns to the major leagues.**

film critic who is now a syndicated radio talk-show host, thinks he has the answer: "The Hollywood community wants respect even more than it wants riches," he wrote in his 1992 best-selling book *Hollywood vs. America*. "Above all, its members crave acceptance and recognition as serious artists. Money is not the main motivation for their current madness."

However, when a film comes along that combines morality with first-rate production values, Hollywood is forced to take notice. *Chariots of Fire* won the Best Picture award in 1981, and has been held up as an example of the axiom that quality can overcome Hollywood's cynicism. More recently, even though *Lord of the Rings* snared "only" four Academy Awards, it was the talk of the town.

Still packing some theaters as late as May, *Lord of the Rings* is not overtly

Christian, and portrays intense, violent conflicts with demons and other evil forces. Still, according to Baehr, "It's got good theological themes, but you have to unpack it. When the nature of reality and the nature of man are all taken together, you have an extremely Christian allegory."

*Lord of the Rings* was also a welcome antidote to the occultic *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, which also made over \$300 million but was released on more screens and had a bigger advertising budget.

## G-Rated Fun

*Movieguide's* annual analysis of the movie industry revealed that in 2001, G-rated movies made an average of \$50 million, or 195 percent more than the average of \$17 million made by R-rated films.

For years, Hollywood had shunned live-action, G-rated films, relegating that label to the animated realm. But Disney's *The Princess Diaries* and *The Rookie* proved that studios could make G movies that appeal to a wide audience.

Like its real-life protagonist, *The Rookie* had staying power. In six weeks, the movie about Texas chemistry teacher Jim Morris' triumphal return as a major league pitcher took in an impressive \$65 million. Since the film cost less than \$20 million to produce, and still stands to generate more money in overseas and video distribution, Disney is making a tidy profit.

*The Princess Diaries*, a \$98 million hit in theatrical release, was making even more money in video sales.

In 2001, only nine G movies were released, but they represented a 62 percent increase in box office receipts

for that category over the previous year.

Both Baehr and Rolfe caution parents not to rely solely on the MPAA rating system when making choices. Baehr said the “semantic elements alone – language, sex and violence” are not enough to determine a film’s worth. Rolfe wrote in the *Dr. Laura Perspective* magazine:

“It is deceptive to assume that all G-rated films contain virtuous themes. It is equally erroneous to categorically dismiss all R-rated movies as evil. The prevailing message in a film can be destructive even if it is devoid of any profanity or nudity. Likewise, R-rated *Amistad*, *Schindler’s List* and *Saving Private Ryan* each presents a moral imperative against a backdrop of tragic violence and humiliating immorality ... not unlike many stories in the Bible.”

### Disney Dilemma

One dilemma facing Christian parents is the ongoing boycott of the Walt Disney Company by the Southern Baptists, the American Family Association (AFA), Concerned Women for America (CWA) and many other Christian groups and denominations. AFA’s president, Don Wildmon, who has led the boycott, told *Family Voice* that he believes the boycott has caused Disney to do some things differently, but he is not quite ready to call a truce. Likewise, CWA continues to honor the boycott.

Media have largely ignored the drop in profits in Disney’s consumer products division and the ongoing woes of the Disney stores in the nation’s malls. But media also ignored the long-term Christian boycott of Kmart, which recently declared bankruptcy. Competition from Wal-Mart certainly



Photo: Columbia Pictures/Marvel Comics

**Spiderman weaves a web of success as the comic book hero makes the leap to the big screen.**

figured in Kmart’s demise, but many Christian customers never went back to Kmart for moral reasons.

As for Disney, “They’ve gone through some financially troubling times,” Wildmon said. Since it is so diversified, Disney was never expected to go bankrupt over the boycott, just sustain enough damage to get the company to change its ways. Wildmon said he has seen some progress, but not enough to justify lifting the boycott.

Asked what Christian parents should do when Disney makes films like *The Princess Diaries* and *The Rookie*, Wildmon said, “You can thank them for these good films, but the problem is that whatever money they make from the good movies, they use to subsidize the bad movies.”

Baehr said that Disney under Chairman Michael Eisner “still is a combination of the good, the bad and the indifferent.” *Movieguide* named *The*

## For Christian previews of film content, parents can turn to:

### The Dove Foundation

[www.dove.org](http://www.dove.org)

4521 Broadmoor SE  
Grand Rapids, MI 49512  
800-968-8437

### Christian Film & TV Commission

[www.movieguide.org](http://www.movieguide.org)

2510-G Las Posas Rd. #502  
Camarillo, CA 93010  
805-383-2000

### Movie Morality Ministries

[www.previewonline.org](http://www.previewonline.org)

P.O. Box 832567  
Richardson, TX 75083  
800-807-8071

*Princess Diaries* as its Top Family Film for the year, but Disney also released *Bubble Boy* (PG-13), which Baehr called “the most virulently, explicitly anti-Christian film I’ve ever seen.” *Bubble Boy* bombed at the box office, as do virtually all such films.

More recently, *Spiderman*, which set a record \$115 million opening weekend gross, includes several positive mentions of God. The violent *We Were Soldiers* has star Mel Gibson praying with his children and with his recruits. *Gods and Generals*, which opens in November, tells the story of outspokenly Christian general Stonewall Jackson.

“It’s very faithful to Stonewall Jackson and it’s chock-full of prayers to Jesus Christ,” Baehr said.

This summer and later this year, moviegoers will be greeted by the “Attack of the Sequels,” with studios serving up the latest incarnations of *Star Wars*, *The Matrix*, *Men in Black*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *Harry Potter*.

The overall picture is this: Some people in Hollywood appear to be getting it, and are making more films with moral content as a reaction to recent drops in attendance. They would make even more of them if profit were their only motive. As it stands, we can

celebrate the good but we should remain wary.

Parents: Fasten your seat belts and read the reviews. **FV**

*Robert Knight, a former Media Fellow at the Hoover Institution and news editor and writer for the Los Angeles Times, is director of CWA’s Culture and Family Institute. Find out more at [www.cultureandfamily.org](http://www.cultureandfamily.org).*

*Robert Knight is the respected author of The Age of Consent, which traces the origins and growth of moral relativism in American culture, and provides a blueprint for a way back to moral sanity. \$20. Call 800-223-2200 to order your copy, or use the coupon on page 38.*

### HOW YOU CAN HELP

- PRAY** for more Christians to make uplifting films.
- PRAISE** God that more movie-makers are choosing to make moral films!
- ACT** Check out movies before you see them, using reputable resources for parents.