



The Fall of the Family

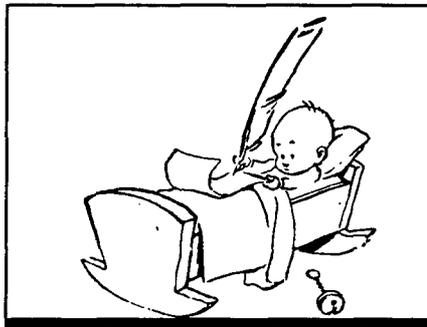
by James Bowman

Two films out this month begin with discussions between fathers and sons about loyalty. In *Striking Distance*, a policeman (Bruce Willis) laments the fact that the entire department thinks him a rat because he turned in his partner, who is also his cousin, for police brutality. His father, another policeman, reassures him by quoting the family motto: "Loyalty above all else except honor." In *A Bronx Tale*, a boy who witnesses a murder committed by a neighbor refuses to identify the culprit to the police, then says to his father (Robert DeNiro): "I didn't rat. I did a good thing, right?" The father reassures him by saying: "Yeah. You did a good thing for a bad man."

Which of these two fathers is right? If you take the view of honor promulgated by the so-called "honor codes" on certain college campuses, then the first father is. Honor means ratting when someone has broken the rules of the community. Certainly the film stacks the deck in favor of this answer, for the guy Bruce ratted on turns out to be, like so many policemen in their spare time, a psychopathic killer. Good thing he ratted on him, huh? But if you take the more traditional view of honor—as articulated by, say, General Douglas MacArthur, whose guiding principle in a famous West Point hazing case was "never lie, never tattle"—the second father is right. There can be no disjunction between honor and loyalty.

I bring the matter up because so many of the autumn spate of movies take as their theme divided loyalties and the family. In one (*The Good Son*), a mother finds herself cantilevered over a cliff edge with a son—who has tried to kill her—hanging

to one arm and a nephew—who has tried to save her—hanging to the other. Whom does she let drop? This is like the cop who is a serial killer in *Striking Distance*: a deliberately far-fetched (not to say preposterous) situation designed to undermine our natural sense of loyalty and family. In fact, what that sense most often comes into conflict with is our equally natural urge to pursue our own, individual happiness. But where that is the case, Hollywood rarely has any doubt as to



which impulse to side with, so film-makers are driven to dream up more exotic conflicts such as that in *The Good Son*.

Through this tangle of new and familiar dilemmas, a guide of the sort that William Safire used to provide to world politics might be useful: a guide to *Whom to Root for*. Herewith, then, my alphabetical tour of the multiplexes in search of true family values. Films in which they are to be found are awarded the coveted Bowman Bullet (thus: ●):

The Age of Innocence by Martin Scorsese. *Root for*: Newland Archer (Daniel Day-Lewis) and the Countess Olenska (Michelle Pfeiffer), for putting family loyalty, for once, ahead of personal happiness. Unfortunately, Scorsese only pities them, which is not the same thing at all. The very title suggests a backward look—from an even greater

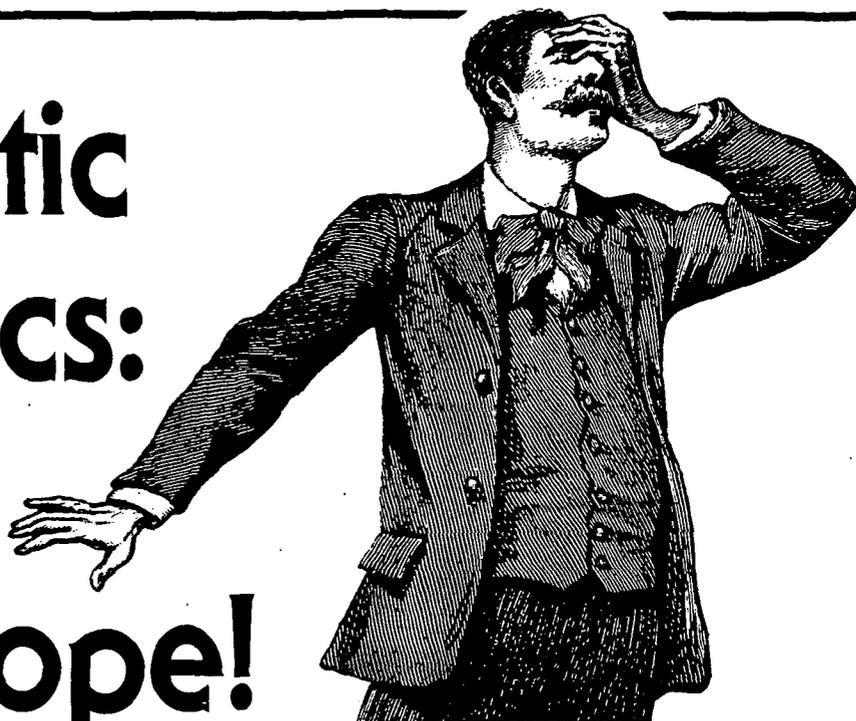
distance than Edith Wharton's original backward look—at primitives too naive to share our modern, sophisticated understanding of the importance of personal fulfillment. Their old-fashioned ideas are re-created in the same spirit as the lavish costumes and sets (and meals!) of the 1870s—that is, as museum pieces. Because the lovers' dilemma is not really a live issue either to Scorsese or to most of his audience, this is basically a designer movie.

The Ballad of Little Jo by Maggie Greenwald. *Root for*: Medical science. A sex-change operation is obviously the only thing for Josephine Monaghan (Suzy Amis), who for thirty years or so passes for a man in the Old West. It's true that unmarried girls who got pregnant in the nineteenth century were sometimes thrown out into the streets and that life in a western mining camp would have been extremely hazardous, at the least, for an unprotected young woman. But what I wonder is why she decided to leave the East, where there were places and situations, however arduous or insalubrious, to which she could have retreated in safety, and go instead to a bubbling cauldron of testosterone like a mining camp. Come on, Maggie: What's her motivation? I think there must have been something funny about this gal from the start.

Betty by Claude Chabrol. *Root for*: Laure, the widow played by Stéphane Audran. She takes Betty (Marie Trintignant) under her wing when the latter's husband, having caught her with a saxophone player on the living room sofa, throws her out. I love Chabrol, but he has a fatal weakness for psychologizing. Having delved into her childhood and found the trauma at the root of her sexual promiscuity, he thinks he can make us root for Betty. Then he cuts the ground from under us by making her

James Bowman, The American Spectator's film critic, is American editor of the Times Literary Supplement.

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betray her benefactress too. Doesn't work. We don't forget as easily as he does what the creature is capable of.

Bopha! by Morgan Freeman. *Root for:* Micah, the South African policeman played by Danny Glover. Freeman pushes a good story too far when he tries to enlist our sympathies on behalf of Micah's son, Zweli (Maynard Eziashi), simply because he demonstrates against apartheid. Call me old-fashioned, but I don't believe that any but a bad political cause would require a son to humiliate his father in public and put his life and career at risk. The final scene in which Zweli shouts slogans about his so-called brothers and sisters being killed by the evil system while his real father is being killed by his so-called brothers and sisters is hair-raising in its monstrosity, but the dynamics of Freeman's direction work against the irony and in favor of the slogans.

Boxing Helena by Jennifer Chambers Lynch. *Root for:* Miss Lynch (daughter of David) to get married, settle down, give birth to quintuplets, and never, ever make another movie.

• **A Bronx Tale** by Robert DeNiro (director) and Chazz Palminteri (writer). *Root for:* Sonny, the gangster, played by Mr. Palminteri. So what if he killed a guy? It was war—or as good as. To his own people, and especially to DeNiro's young son who didn't rat on him, he is wise, generous, and compassionate, a natural leader whom the boy would be a fool not to look up to. The authors are understandably ambivalent about him and balance him with DeNiro's character, a decent but rather stiff bus driver given to spouting solemn platitudes about the superiority of "the working man" to guys like Sonny. But we don't believe it any more than the boy does; any more than the bus driver himself does. Paradoxically, the unmarried, unchilded Sonny more than anyone else in the film stands for the loyalties that sustain families and communities. DeNiro's coming to pay his respects to him in the final scene suggests that the authors recognize this.

The Good Son by Joseph Ruben (director) and Ian McEwan (writer). *Root for:* Whatever spaceship Ruben and McEwan are traveling on to go the way of the Mars probe. They have set their drama on some other planet that looks exactly like this one but where there is

no presumption of the existence of family loyalty, where it is plausible to depict a 10-year-old boy (Macaulay Culkin) from a loving home willfully murdering or attempting to murder his siblings and parents. To us earthlings this is just absurd.

• **Into the West** by Mike Newell. *Root for:* The two Irish gypsy boys played by Ciaran Fitzgerald and Ruaidhri Conroy and their magic horse (as if it were possible to root for anyone else). Here the boys' defiance of their father (Gabriel Byrne) extracts him from the soulless isolation and drunkenness into which he has sunk after his wife's death. "The old ways is dead," he tells his father-in-law, but, by bringing him back to the ties of family and community that he has forsaken, his sons unwittingly show him that they are not. An utterly charming family film about families.

The Joy Luck Club by Wayne Wang. *Root for:* The Stepford husbands. Those blockheaded, smiling young men at the family dinners need to speak up instead of standing around beaming at their newly empowered wives. To Wang and Amy Tan, the author of the book and co-author of the screenplay, men who are not bastards are not interesting, whereas the women are all paragons of suffering virtue with nothing more to reproach themselves with than lack of self-esteem. This is a chick flick to leave *Sleepless in Seattle* in the dust and to give even *Fried Green Tomatoes* a run for its money. It is not as bad as *FGT*, but its emphasis on personal happiness over family, tradition, and the old Chinese ways makes it deeply subversive of family values. Besides, I don't believe that these women could have gone through all they did in China only to resurface in California mouthing a pidgin version of California therapy-speak. Maybe women in old country not know own worth, but they knew a lot more important things.

• **Money for Nothing** by Ramon Menendez. *Root for:* Joey Coyle (John Cusack). Oh, all right, root for his brother and his mother, who know that he's found \$1.2 million in the street and ask him to give it back but who don't turn him in when he doesn't. The family should come first in such a case, and the mother and brother are the admirable family members. But you've got to love Joey Coyle, as Menendez does. The guy is too stupid to realize that he can't get

away with keeping the money, and of course he does everything wrong in the attempt to keep it. But his foolhardiness in taking his best (and probably only) shot at worldly riches for himself and his family makes him a hero of a sort.

The Remains of the Day by Ismail Merchant and James Ivory. *Root for:* Stevens, the buttoned-up butler played by Anthony Hopkins, to remain a bachelor and a butler. This is another designer movie (see *The Age of Innocence* above) that patronizes the past—and, incidentally, badly oversimplifies its politics. We should defy the determined attempts of Merchant and Ivory to make Stevens's loyalty to his employer seem merely quaint, if not tragic, and to wring our hearts over the poor man's inability to show his feelings for Emma Thompson. Thus do we strike a blow against designer movies and promote the worthy cause of getting and keeping good servants.

Striking Distance by Rowdy Herrington. *Root for:* The corpses. Their sense of loyalty and family is unimpeachable and they do the best acting in the film.

• **The Wedding Banquet** by Ang Lee. *Root for:* The parents, played by Sihung Lung and Ah-Leh Gua. This is another film that explores the subject of family loyalties by creating a clash between modern, secular American culture and a traditional culture, only this time the traditional culture and its values are shown some respect. The parents of a Chinese-American yuppie, Wai Tung (Winston Chao), arrive in New York from Taiwan to attend his wedding. In fact, he is gay. Unwilling to tell them so, he arranges to fob them off with a marriage of convenience to a Chinese acquaintance (the beautiful May Chin) who is in need of a green card. Although the parents soon divine their son's secret, they allow him to proceed with the charade. After a hilarious series of misadventures at the traditional wedding banquet, Wai Tung actually impregnates his new wife. Out of hearing of his son, the old father comments: "If I didn't let them lie to me, I would never have gotten my grandchild." And so too, if we didn't have this peculiar system of lies and loyalties that is the family, humanity would become extinct. That is a very hard fact to face for devout believers in the yuppie ethos of personal autonomy, but it is heartening to know that from time to time, even in Hollywood, it is faced. □

When the train carrying Tennessee's delegation to the 1868 Democratic National Convention in New York stopped at a small Northern town (its name long forgotten), a gang of toughs gathered outside. Its leader, a supposedly undefeated brawler, challenged one of the delegates to emerge from his coach so that he could "thrash" him. The delegate's name was Nathan Bedford Forrest.

The local champion burst into the car in which the fabled Confederate cavalryman was riding, shouting, "Where's that damned butcher Forrest? I want him." Forrest, "erect and dilated, his face the color of heated bronze, his eyes flaming, blazing," arose—a giant for his time at 6 feet 1 1/2 inches and 180 pounds—and confronted his antagonist. "I am Forrest," he said. "What do you want?" When the town bully stopped cold, turned, and ran terrified from the coach, with a now roused Forrest in pursuit, he was doing only what thousands of frightened Federal soldiers had done before him.

Forrest's propensity for violence and an ability to instill fear help explain one of the most extraordinary, and most overlooked, figures in American history. A quintessential son of the South, Forrest was arguably the Civil War's most successful troop commander, and without question its most innovative tactician.

Yet the latest biography of Forrest, by *Chicago Tribune* country music columnist Jack Hurst, is one of very few. Forrest is but faintly remembered in the South and unknown elsewhere (a situation only slightly remedied by the PBS Civil War television series). He is most widely cited for a probably apocryphal military axiom—"get thar fustest with the mustest"—which is even more

Robert D. Novak is a syndicated columnist, a television commentator, and editor of the Evans and Novak Political Report.

NATHAN BEDFORD FORREST:
A BIOGRAPHY

Jack Hurst

Alfred A. Knopf/464 pages/\$30

reviewed by ROBERT D. NOVAK

improbably rendered by Hurst as "I always make it a rule to get there first with the most men." In recent years, he has been the focus of efforts to remove Forrest statues in the South, a posthumous acknowledgment of his role as a founder and the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

The Wizard of the Saddle is succinctly described by Hurst as:

an epic figure who, having risen from log cabin privation to wealth as an antebellum slave trader, became the only soldier South or North to join the military as a private and rise to the rank of lieutenant general. He was also the intrepid combatant who killed 30 Union soldiers hand to hand, had 29 horses shot from beneath him, and was so feared by even his most warlike opponents that one of them, William T. Sherman himself, pronounced him a "devil" who should be "hunted down

and killed if it costs 10,000 lives and bankrupts the treasury."

Sherman later called him "the most remarkable man" produced by the war, an assessment shared by Confederate Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, who said Forrest would have been the conflict's "great central figure" had he been educated.

Not just that Forrest lacked formal military training. Six months' schooling in his lifetime left him semi-literate at best. His use of English as a written language is illustrated by his rejection of a soldier's third request for a furlough: "I told you twist [meaning "twict," lower-class Southern for twice] Goddammit Know [meaning "no"]."

For the next century, the world's sophisticated general staff schools would study this unlettered backwoodsman's use of cavalry as mounted infantry, his tactics of deception, and his concept of the constant offensive even when outnumbered. Forrest was indeed a military genius, but he was also something more: a genuine man of violence. The thirty Federal officers and men he killed in close combat were not the only victims dead at his hands. Forrest during the war killed a Confederate lieutenant with a pen knife and after the war a black-hired hand with an ax, both in self-defense. He was not to be trifled with, even by superior officers. In 1863, quarreling with his theater commander, the dyspeptic Gen. Braxton Bragg, Forrest wrote him: "You have played the part of a damned scoundrel and are a coward, and if you were any part of a man, I would slap your jaws and force you to resent it." Bragg did not dare risk the consequences of reporting this insubordination and meekly agreed to Forrest's transfer out of his command.

Forrest was the epitome of what W.J. Cash in *The Mind of the South* (1941) called "the tendency to violence which had grown up in the Southern backwoods." This tendency, Cash wrote, "reached its ultimate incarnation in the Confederate soldier," who went into bat-

