

What *October Baby* Could Have Been

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October Baby, a movie with a blatantly pro-life theme, deserves support and its makers praise for their courage and vision. That said, I give *October Baby* a "B minus" grade. But this movie could have been an "A."

Why did this admirable effort fall short of being a much better film? First of all, if I say *October Baby* deserves at least a "B minus" grade, this means the movie, in some important respects, worked very well. Rachel Hendrix's performance as Hannah, the anguished late-term abortion survivor, was strong and believable. Her boyfriend Jason, played by Jason Burkey, was an engaging and sympathetic character.

Several pivotal scenes in the movie are played to perfection. In one, Hannah tracks down the ex-abortion clinic nurse who assisted in her botched abortion. Hannah is told the details of the abortion and learns for the first time that she is a twin—the brother having died as a result of the abortion attempt. The nurse gives Hannah the hospital wristband that she wore when she was born. The nurse had saved it all this time. *Boston Globe* reviewer Mark Feeney said of Jasmine Guy's intense performance as the remorseful nurse: "she seems to have wandered in from another, much better movie." I understand the comment—this is the first scene, already halfway into the film, that achieves the deep, quiet, stirring intensity essential to the movie's serious subject matter.

The scene also achieves an emotional depth in Hannah's compelling reaction to the tragedy of her abortion and the news about her dead brother. When she leaves the nurse's apartment she slides down the wall in the dark, shabby hallway and, overcome with terrible grief, collapses into a pile on the floor.

Another great scene is when Hannah arrives in Mobile, Alabama, to confront her biological mother, now an upper-class attorney career woman. Credit for the success of this episode in the film goes to actress Shari Rigby. With her past literally come back to haunt her—Rigby played the cool, aloof biological mother to a tee. Having rejected Hannah when she was unborn, now, with total composure, she rejects Hannah again. When her mother's husband suddenly arrives and asks of Hannah: "Who is this?" the mother simply responds with an unexpected: "I have no idea." That Hannah would be left so unacknowledged is shocking.

Hannah leaves the building and sees her biological mother standing near the family car holding a blond, angelic two-year-old daughter. Hannah looks at her half sister—and the child waves at her. It is a lovely, beautifully conceived irony—that the little girl should, in a sense, see Hannah—when the mother does not. Even if Hannah's mother is unable to admit that they are connected, somehow the sisters know that they are. The very truth of human connectedness that abortion seeks to undo—cannot really be denied.

In the film's climax—Hannah has decided to revisit her biological mother. The mother has arrived for work at her office. When she enters the empty room she sees a note on the desk. With the note is the hospital wristband that Hannah wore as a newborn following the botched abortion. The camera closes in and we see written on the note the simple words "I forgive you." With all control and composure gone, the mother with note in hand leans against the wall, slides down it, and like Hannah in the hallway after learning the details of her botched abortion, collapses on the floor in terrible grief. It is a powerful moment, beautifully acted.

So with these great scenes, what's wrong with *October Baby*? Let's begin with the film's score, dominated by emotionally-laden pop vocals. Except for perhaps the opening song, the music simply signals that this is a movie made for believers and I can see why hard-nosed, secular-minded reviewers would be instantly turned off by such thin sentimental accompaniment. The music gave the movie a made-for-TV sheen.

A major flaw in *October Baby* occurs in the conversation between Hannah and a priest. The episode starts out promisingly when Hannah tells the priest her life is a lie, the circumstances of her birth, and the guilt she bears for having survived an abortion while her brother did not—all this beautifully played by Hendrix.

Here is where less truly would have been more. Without much introduction, the priest verbally and neatly supplies the answer to Hannah's trouble. He quotes St. Paul, chapter and verse, and thus the answer of forgiveness arrives in literally 'preachy' delivery. The priest is a kind of *deus ex machina*—artificially and conveniently dropped in from above to provide the film's thematic resolution. This scene would have been infinitely more effective if the priest had simply imparted a subtle message about reconciliation. This is a movie—show, don't tell!

Unfortunately, many reviewers, blinded by their personal commitment to a "woman's right to choose," simply were incapable of providing *October Baby* with a fair critique. Indeed, some critics didn't even try to hide their ideological and political hatred for all things pro-life—notably Andrew O'Hehir of *Salon* and Jeannette Catsoulis of the *New York Times*.

And I must confess: Something inside me hesitates to publish this critique of a pro-life movie. Please forgive me if I am breaking ranks. But I believe we need to be objective about any film's aesthetic value and strive to perfect our message so that we can reach beyond the usual crowd. If we are really interested in winning the war for life and triumphing in the marketplace of ideas, Christian filmmakers will need to package their message in a more cinematically sophisticated manner. I would never urge Christian artists to hold back—just to make their films better.

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