



**THE SHACK is a Second Quarter 2018 LVCA dvd donation to the Hugh Stouppé Memorial Library of the Heritage United Methodist Church of Ligonier, Pennsylvania. Below is Kino Ken's review of that dvd.**

**12 of a possible 20 points**

**\*\*\* of a possible \*\*\*\*\***

**United States / Canada 2017 color 132 minutes live action feature  
metaphysical drama Summit Entertainment / Netter Productions  
Producers: Brad Cummings, Gil Netter, Bo Shen, Arthur Spector,  
William Steinkamp, Shixing Zhou, Lani Netter**

**Key: \*indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance  
(j) designates a juvenile performer**

**Points:**

- 1 Direction: Stuart Hazeldine**
- 1 Editing: William Steinkamp**
- 1 Cinematography: Decla Quinn 2<sup>nd</sup> Unit DP: Karl Herrmann  
Splinter Unit DP: Brian Johnson  
Stills Photography: Jake Giles Netter**
- 1 Lighting: John Dekker (Gaffer), Mike Dube, Dusty Anderson,  
David Bishop Noriega, Frederic Schmidt**

**Special Visual Effects: Karl Herrmann (DP), Laurent Ben-Mimoun,  
Victor DiMichina, Eric Hamel, Martin Larrivée,  
Ray McIntyre, Jr., Alexandre Menard,  
François Poirier, Mathieu Reynault, Pascal Rigaud,  
Benoit Touchette, Marjolaine Tremblay,  
Chris Van Dyck**

**2 Screenplay: John Fusco, Andrew Lanham, Destin Daniel Cretton,  
based on the book by William Young, Wayne Jacobsen,  
and Brad Cummings**

**Script Supervision: Patti Henderson, P. R. Tooke**

**Music Supervision: Anastasia Brown**

**Music Editing Supervision: Paul Shatto**

**Music Mixing: Michael Stern**

**Music Recording: Michael Stern, Jeff Gartenbaum, Dustin Higgins,  
Ernest Lee**

**1 Music: Aaron Zigman, Eugene Mishustin**

**1 Production Design: Joseph Nemec III**

**Art Direction: Gwendolyn Margetson**

**Graphic Design: Melina Neufeld**

**Set Design: David Hadaway, Cheryl Marion, Sheila Millar**

**Set Decoration: Tracey Doyle**

**Set Dressing: Bob Carson (lead), Andy Amoroso, Guy Henriksen,  
Steven Hoffart, Grayson Hosie, Todd Keller, Mark Morgan,  
Marie-Josée Nesbit, David Parke, Mark Prior,  
Tony Scragnese, Ingrid Walther, Richard Washnock,  
Sean Whale**

**Scenic Artists: Mark Anderson, Carl Baird, Keith Esch, Christopher Hunt,  
Scott Johnson, Marlee Nygard, Dan Petruscu,  
Steve Reintjes, Michelle Sturley, Peter Syroev, Judi Varga,  
Joyce Woods**

**Props: Denise Nadredre, Jordy Wihak, Michael Aaron Keith,  
Gordon Deyell, Lynda Chapple**

**Costume Design: Stacy Caballero, Karin Nosella**

**Makeup: Connie Parker (Head), Beth Boxall (Key), Emanuela Daus,  
John Healy**

**0 Sound Design: Patrick Haskill  
Sound Effects: Dave Hibbert, Maureen Murphy  
Dialogue Editing: Gord Hillier  
Sound Mixing: Eric Batut**

**2 Acting**

**2 Creativity**

**12 total points**

**Cast: Sam Worthington\* (Mack Phillips), Octavia Spencer\* (Female Papa),  
Tim McGraw (Willie), Radha Mitchell (Nan Phillips, Mack's wife),  
Megan Charpentier (j) (Kate Phillips, elder daughter of Mack and Nan),  
Gage Munroe (j) (Josh Phillips, son of Mack and Nan), Amélie Eve (j)  
(Missy Phillips, younger daughter of Mack and Nan), Avraham Aviv Alush  
(Jesus), Sumire Matsubara (Sarayu), Alice Braga\* (Sophia), Graham Greene\*  
(Male Papa), Ryan Robbins (Emil Ducette), Jordyn Ashley Olsen (j)  
(Emily Ducette, daughter of Emil and Vicki), Laura Mackillop  
(Amber Ducette, daughter of Emil and Vicki), Emily Holmes  
(Vicki Ducette, wife of Emil), Derek Hamilton (Mack's dad), Tanya Hubbard  
(Mack's mom), Carson Reaume (j) (Young Mack Phillips), David MacKay  
(Preacher), Chris Britton (Church Deacon), Lane Edwards (Officer Dalton),  
Kendall Cross (Special Agent Wikowski), Jay Brazeau (Tony),  
Greta Makena Gibson (Teenage girl), David Longworth (Older camper),  
Ty Olsson (Mack's grandpa in the 1950s), Nicholas Holmes  
(Young Mack's dad in the 1950s), Kayla Fielding (Ally), Leena Manro  
(Nurse), Grace Netter (Girl on Bridge), Rob Compton (Murderer), others**

**When William Paul Young first created a Xeroxed™ faith story for friends and relatives, he didn't intend a ride on the bestseller wagon. That happened later, after three major rewrites with considerable input from two former pastors: Brad Cummings of Malibu Vineyard Church and Wayne Jacobsen from Valley Christian Center in Fresno, California. It is significant that Young's two writing**

collaborators hail from California and its famous progressive intellectual liberalism.

A child of missionary parents, born in Canada but spending preschool years in tribal New Guinea, Young honestly comes by evangelical leanings. Like many operating in the missionary field, where accommodation of book theology to local cultural customs is usually obligatory, he rejected strict literal interpretation of Holy Writ. That didn't fit well with either his life experiences or bedrock beliefs. It was out of those maturing, independently derived concepts THE SHACK's narrative developed.

Viewers need to understand three key underlying ideas in this film adaptation.

One: God intends ultimate universal salvation. Viewers are free to agree or disagree with that notion. No lesser figures than Anne Bronte, George MacDonald, Charles Dickens, Joseph Priestley, Origen, Anne Bradstreet, Clara Barton, Florence Nightingale, Maria Mitchell, Herman Melville, Daniel Pinkham, Beatrix Potter, Robert Millikan, Ray Bradbury, Charles Steinmetz, Horace Greeley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Arthur Schlesinger, N. C. Wyeth, Linus Pauling, Frank Lloyd Wright, David Ricardo, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Abigail Adams, Rod Serling, William Law, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Gregory of Nyssa, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Abraham Lincoln inclined to, or accepted that thesis as an article of faith.

Two: Because of man's free will, harmful and evil situations are created. These God doesn't foresee. Yet he transforms them to produce good outcomes. A doctrine having little or no Biblical support.

Three: The Hound of Heaven is inescapable and undeniable. God wants to love you. No one can frustrate his wish to have a warm relationship with each human. Nothing you do can possibly permanently damage your connection to God. True or false?

How filmgoers react to these axioms will determine likely responses to situations depicted in THE SHACK.

Two tautly reasoned negative critiques of author Young's theology are recommended to interested readers of this review: one by Tim Challies titled "What Does the Shack Really Teach?" and one by Dr. David Steele called

**“Unshackled: The God of Wm. Paul Young.” Each is readily accessible on the Internet.**

**As for the film itself, it stays true to book origins in every significant way, without, for reasons of timing, probing complexities behind Trinitarian explanations.**

**After initial exposure to future crime scene, during which the protagonist’s best friend offers voiceover introduction to Mackenzie Allen Phillips’ life, a few overriding childhood crises occur.**

**The young point-of-view character lives in an abusive situation where alcoholic father and passive, non-interfering mother make formative years far from happy ones. Though comforted by a compassionate female neighbor after beatings of Mother he’s powerless to stop and sometimes similar applications to his own body, young Mackenzie fails to find active intercession by church members. Even when he confesses to a pastor what has been happening at his house. That is due to Dad’s influential position within the church as a deacon.**

**Over the course of some half-dozen years or so, a passion to strike back takes possession of the child. Following particularly brutal paternal flagellation triggered by his blabbing domestic secrets, he schemes to poison its perpetrator by furtively mixing some form of rodent poison with his papa’s customary drink. Mack doesn’t stick around to see the results. The narrator infers they aren’t particularly pretty, if less than fatal.**

**Left mostly adrift on his own as a teenager, he distrusts clergy and parishioners. He apparently returns to social worship through the prodding of a girl who becomes his wife. Nan believes in grace and redemption, has never seemingly strayed from active congregational participation. She makes certain the couple’s eventual children become regular pew warmers.**

**However, no amount of spousal sympathy and compassion can expel nightmares haunting her husband, souvenirs from a violent past that won’t stay suppressed.**

**Tranquil lives of the Phillips clan then take an unforeseen turn, as might be predicted. On a vacation trip to an Oregon state park, Mack’s distraction while saving the endangered life of his son exposes younger daughter Missy to abduction by undetected child molester prowling their campground. Pleasure**

and joyful thanksgiving turn immediately to anxiety. Repeated searches through encircling woods yield no success in recovering the girl. Hours pass, police join the hunt, tension mounts. Negligent dad looks to become unintentional dupe.

When authorities finally do locate Missy, it's in a place and condition completely destructive of any shred of hope Mackenzie may have been nursing for their happy reunion.

Since the victim's brother and older sister had set in motion a series of actions that left her unguarded, they, too, feel stricken with remorse. Missy may have beaten them to heavenly bliss. Neither sibling obtains cheer or consolation from that possibility.

Mom bears the guilt of not being present at a most critical hour of offspring need.

Dad, self-proclaimed guardian of the family, fails to deliver security when put to the test. He perceives a familiar pattern repeating itself despite his best efforts at avoidance.

In the deepest recesses of Mack's heart, he holds a grudge against the loving omnipotent God Nan calls Papa. Why would such a Good Shepherd not prevent a foreseen outrage committed upon one of his flock? What benefit comes out of regular appearances at Sunday morning worship, prayers for defense against evil, entreaties to show mercy? Where is God hiding when malevolence strikes unchecked?

Questions witnesses to these events also ask.

THE SHACK'S screenplay attempts to identify answers by resort to the three affirmations enumerated earlier in this review.

Some unseen entity deposits a mysterious invitation in Mack's mailbox months after Missy's disappearance. That missive asks a grieving, vengeful dad to revisit some place he would rather wish out of existence. A location where agonized questioner can present his case against divine omissions and injustice in a kind of open tribunal, with plaintiff doubling as judge. The defendant will be God the Father, Jesus, and The Holy Spirit, treated as a single Being.

God takes the form of whatever is friendliest to Mack at any given moment: Mama Chef, Water-walking Fisherman, organic Gardener. All offer unconditional friendship and refuse, courteously, to leave. How can God depart

anyway, since He / She / It is omnipresent? Represented by Octavia Spencer in early stages of Mack's gradual enlightenment about life and by Graham Greene when the sterner task of reconciliation with tormenting disciplinarian is broached, God is not about to relieve errant earthly son of necessary duties. God will allow him to choose his own time, words, and behavior in performing the essential task of forgiveness.

However, this difficult pardoning isn't physically extended to a murderer and child molester. Is that to keep onlookers empathizing staunchly with Mack? Or is there a piece of Young's own theology in a state of flux, unsettled, not yet ready for communication?

For surely the harsher trial – though more restorative of inner peace – would be for conflicted, wrathful, bereft parent to show grace towards someone deserving severe chastisement.

Perhaps such a confrontation is being reserved for a sequel?

Screenwriters elect not to maintain God aggressively in the dock, as C. S. Lewis might have done. Instead, God shifts the focus again and again back to Mack, asserting he must heal himself before a final resolution can come from any divine source. God can help with the process of readjustment required, but Man must begin it voluntarily. Because the breakage was instigated on the mortal side, not God's. Willful acts of humans precipitate crimes and allow criminals to go legally unchecked. Justice, Mama asserts, will come in a time, way, and place of God's own choosing. No man can understand its operation. That's God's concern. Not Mack's. Or should be.

Whether or not this production succeeds in vindicating the ways of God to man, it assuredly succeeds in generating audience involvement with main characters and their dilemmas. Much credit must go to a fine cast and temperate usage of special visual effects, insuring the latter are no more memorable than performances or script. Balance among film elements is obvious throughout, the director intent on capturing verbal and pictorial nuances suggested or explicit in the book.

Each counselor who meets with Mack has a unique perspective to share, something honored by individual performers, no two being simply mirrors or extensions of each other. Authorial bias, though present in a subtle form, leaves

listeners adequate freedom to adopt or ignore each suggestion. Commands are omitted, proposals floated. Young decries bullying. Rightly so.

Octavia Spencer's feminine Papa luminously reveals warmth, tolerance, love, humor, and kindness. Graham Greene's Papa, the only agent imposing imperatives, seasons firmness with allowances for personal choice in timing, verbal expression, and accompanying body language when Mack pardons his childhood persecutor. Sophia, a wisdom demi-goddess injected presumably to placate feminists, employs Socratic dialogue to impart insight about fairness and contradictory claims made by individual supplicants. Played with objective assurance by Alice Braga, a former child actress hailing from Brazil, Sophia reverses prosecutorial positions with an accusatory Mackenzie, never losing sight of wounded male pride and fear of failure. Convincing Mack what occurred in Oregon was not attributable to any fault of his own, she defuses self-defensive anger blinding him to feelings of other household members, similarly hurting, equally intent on sidestepping potentials for conflict and recrimination.

Josh, defying fatherly control and lying about it, is trying to hide a plea for openness and understanding.

Daughter Kate's retreat is too complete for Mackenzie to address satisfactorily on his own. She has entombed herself behind a wall of silent grief assuming blame for everything that transpired after her urging Mack to rescue choking Josh.

Alone, Mack cannot reach out to her, doesn't know how to remove the girl's vulnerability and shatter their estrangement. Australian Sam Worthington's multifaceted turn as her much-buffed mortal father, shifting from naivete through lifelong loser and grumpy housemate to fellow sufferer and reconciler, is fascinating to observe and artfully executed. He should also receive congratulations for extinguishing most traces of habitual Ozzie accent.

Transparent, colloquial, tolerant in tone and philosophical in mood, THE SHACK'S script walks without stumbling a tightrope between theological obscurity and oversimplification of enigmatic commonplaces. No easy task.

Editing eliminates miscues that could create confusion or downright blasphemies, simultaneously enhancing suspense and dramatic impact.

Too low a standard is set for music, country western style being a current fad with Christian filmmakers despite sparse evidence it contains sufficient piety of tone.

Lighting and sound are adequate, as is cinematography that flattens out what should be natural charm and beauty of Oregonian countryside. Of course, filming many scenes instead on British Columbia soil may also have led to some scenic loss.

THE SHACK is wholly inappropriate for teen and preteen audiences, asking far too much of minors with few life experiences to match its plot.

NOTE: The dvd copy in the Hugh Stoupe Memorial Library collection does have a defective director audio commentary which will not play through intelligibly. All other bonuses and the feature film itself should be fine.

Bonuses on this Lionsgate dvd include "Touched by God: A Writer's Journey," an incisive ten-minute interview with author William Young about inspiration and motivation for his story. "God's Heart for Humanity" is a cogent nine-minute exploration of THE SHACK movie's themes. Another extra titled "Heaven Knows: The Power of Song with Hillsong" adds no lustre to the packaging, being but a six-minute overlong colorless rockabilly ballad. Much meatier is "Something Bigger Than Ourselves: The Making of THE SHACK," thirteen minutes of informative clips about the film production itself. There are also a mercifully deleted one-minute campfire scene and a delightfully upbeat eighteen minutes of "Premiere Night: A Blessed Evening" involving interview clips in which cast members report motivations for participation.

THE SHACK film is outstanding drama for all adult viewers of spiritual inclination, though its theological positions will never square with those held by a sizable percentage of them. It can still be thoroughly intriguing for even opponents of admittedly liberal spiritual views.