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## Lars and the Real Girl

**Redemptive Love**  
*The Church, Community*

**US/Canada, 2007**

**106 Minutes, Feature, Color**

**Actors:** Ryan Gosling, Patricia Clarkson, Emily  
Mortimer, Paul Schneider

**Director:** Craig Gillespie

**Screenwriter:** Nancy Oliver

**Rated:** PG-13 (some sex-related content)

The men and women who are going to be most valuable to us in spiritual formation-by-resurrection are most likely going to be people at the edge of respectability: the poor, minorities, the suffering, the rejected, poets and children.

Eugene H. Peterson, *Living the Resurrection:  
The Risen Christ in Everyday Life*

### Synopsis and Theological Reflection

Advent 2007 was a season marked by several special moments that I continue to remember. One of these came at the ever-so-familiar Christmas Eve service at our church. We had so many of our little ones dressed up as animals, shepherds, kings—the usual suspects in a Christmas pageant. As many of them made their grand entry, a voice behind us seemed to be especially excited as

she explained the characters to the person next to her. Could this have been a proud young mother sharing her enthusiasm with another mother? No, in fact, it was an older woman in our congregation who has for years given her creativity and leadership to our church in the area of the arts and worship. She was like a kid again, explaining the pageant to her husband, who at one time was a key actor in all our church's dramatic presentations. Now Gene, not so advanced in years, is living with the effects of a stroke. Together they were thoroughly enjoying the children's story as if it were the first time they had ever seen it come to life.

But this was not the end of the pageant dynamics surrounding us. For suddenly, near our seats, the angels bounded into view. They were lovely—their flowing white dresses, their feathery wings, their glittering halos. But one little angel was feeling a bit uncomfortable in her heavenly attire, so she began to disrobe right there in the midst of the angelic choir. This particular angel's mom was sitting right in front of us. She leaned back and impishly whispered to us, "We might have our first nude angel!" If there are any real angels, nude or otherwise, in our congregation, Molly is probably one of them. And Molly has Down syndrome.

That night those dear ones in our congregation made me think of an experience I had earlier during Advent. One night after grading term papers, my husband and I headed to the movies. We went to our neighborhood theater. We really hadn't thought about what movie we wanted to see; we just showed up and went to the one that was about to begin—*Lars and the Real Girl*. It was a small, low-budget US/Canadian film. There were no big Hollywood stars (at the time), no car chases, guns, or sex. Rather, it was a study of illness, treatment through caring therapy, and community.

Actually, *Lars and the Real Girl* is hilariously funny while also poignantly transparent—equal parts comedy and pathos. The premise is simple: a pathologically shy—to the point of fearing human touch—but dear young man named Lars Lindstrom (Ryan Gosling is phenomenal), whose friends and family try to encourage him to "get out more," buys a life-size sex doll on the internet and truly falls in love with it, or rather "her." He endows the anatomically correct doll with a colorful biography—her name is Bianca and she's a paraplegic (Lars takes her everywhere in a wheelchair) missionary from a Brazilian-Danish family. In one scene Lars sings Nat King Cole's classic song "L-O-V-E" to Bianca with all the joy of a love that is true:

L is for the way you look at me . . .

And of course their love is chaste—she sleeps in his brother's home, not his.

As a viewer I found myself moving from uncontrollable laughter (OK, I'll go along with the gag) to gentle tears (oh, it's not a gag). And I wasn't the only one. Lars's brother (Paul Schneider) and sister-in-law (Emily Mortimer), the town doctor (Patricia Clarkson), the local church, and finally the whole town end up going along with Lars too, as they find themselves a part of what is not only raucously ludicrous but also quietly momentous. And as the town journeys with Lars, hoping that he will be healed of his emotional problems, they are changed. They come to realize that Lars is not a "nutcase" but rather a soul in distress. Because Bianca is real to Lars, she becomes real to the community. Lars's love humanizes Bianca and a whole community. Soon Bianca is treated with the same respect and love that they hold for Lars. She is taken to the local women's book club, invited to join the volunteers at the hospital and to help out at church, and so on. Soon her "dance card" is full and we see kindness in full bloom!

In the film, the local pastor preaches a sermon on the church's "only one law"—"love one another." He ends by proclaiming that "love is God in action." In a time and space filled with cynical manipulation, *Lars and the Real Girl* shows us a picture of lived religion. It is like the medieval miracle and morality plays. These portrayals of biblical stories and ethical tales were staples of village life in preliterate Europe and the Middle East. Believers and nonbelievers alike saw biblical parables and miraculous events reenacted before their very eyes by traveling minstrels and actors. These plays spread the teachings of the Bible far and wide, often serving as sparks or catalysts for experiences of religious and spiritual conversion.

*Lars and the Real Girl* functioned similarly for me, helping me to see ever more clearly what we as the body of Christ are called to be. For in our midst are Lars, Gene, Molly, and others, calling us to be a community that extends the loving arms of God.

## Dialogue Texts

If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the LORD your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor.

Deuteronomy 15:7

Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. Again, if two lie together, they keep warm; but

how can one keep warm alone? And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

John 13:34–35

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:24–25

For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. . . . We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

1 John 3:11, 16–17

### Discussion Questions and Clip Conversations

All clips are available for viewing at [ReelSpirituality.com/Books/God-In-The-Movies](http://ReelSpirituality.com/Books/God-In-The-Movies). We have also listed the timestamp range of the scenes for your reference.

1. “The One True Law—Love One Another” [03:40–05:30]. The opening frames of the film show Lars through a paned window. What does that visual remind you of? Then we see him awkwardly interact with his sister-in-law, Karin. Now think about Reverend Bock’s sermon. How do these opening moments of the film frame what this story/film is about?
2. “What Would Jesus Do?” [36:25–39:48]. After a hilarious introduction of Bianca to Lars’s family and after word spreads to the townspeople, we find ourselves in the church council meeting. What strikes you about members’ responses to Lars and Bianca? How would you answer Reverend Bock’s question in this case?
3. “Is Love Delusional?” [42:35–49:50]. In this sequence we see Lars expressing his love for Bianca—taking her to the lake where he played as

a child, telling her about his childhood, singing her a love song. What is true and deep about his “delusional” love for Bianca? And how is Bianca helping him learn to love himself and others?

4. “We Love You; We Do It for You” [1:04:24–1:08:52]. Lars has had his first fight with Bianca and feels abandoned as she is often off doing things with townsfolk. He makes the comment that nobody cares about him, to which Karin responds that they spend time with Bianca because they love him. How do you show love to those you care about? Could you do what the townsfolk in the film are doing? Why or why not?
5. “A Lesson in Love” [1:38:31–1:40:05]. After learning that Bianca is dying, we the viewers are given a beautiful and poignant look [1:28:20–1:34:42] at how the whole town is mourning with Lars (from paramedics to nurses to church members to work colleagues to local merchants). At the funeral, Reverend Bock says that Bianca was a lesson in courage and that she loved everyone, but especially Lars (note that the film is bookended with sermons). How is Bianca also a lesson in love? How have Lars, his family, and the townspeople been transformed? What lessons about love is the film speaking to you, the viewer?

### Bonus Material

*Lars and the Real Girl* didn’t do well at the box office (maybe too many people were put off by the conceit), but it was critically acclaimed. The film received an Academy Award nomination for Best Writing (Original Screenplay), while Ryan Gosling received two nominations—for a Golden Globe (Best Actor in a Motion Picture Comedy) and a Screen Actors Guild Award (Outstanding Performance by a Male Actor in a Leading Role).

Like Bianca in the film, the real doll was treated like an actual person on set to help Ryan Gosling stay in character. She had her own trailer with wardrobe, and she was present only for her scenes. The real doll had nine unique faces, which were used to show a sort of development of the character. She started with a face with heavy makeup, but then later had a face without makeup. Finally, the doll’s face becomes slightly green to reflect her “failing health.”

Ryan Gosling improvised several scenes, including when Lars and Bianca are outside the party and when he performed CPR on Margo’s teddy bear. In the scene where Lars is reading to Bianca, he is reading from *Don Quixote*—Cervantes’s story of an ingenious, chivalrous man with great delusions, who wants to undo wrongs and bring justice to the world.

**Selected Additional Resources**

Check out Roger Ebert's review (October 18, 2007) at <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/lars-and-the-real-girl-2007>.

While I love Ryan Gosling's rendition of the song "L-O-V-E" in the film, try listening to Nat King Cole's original version from 1965 (<https://youtu.be/qJBgQfnRFus>). It was composed by Bert Kaempfert, with lyrics by Milt Gabler.

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