

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 14, 2009 at 8:49am

The real September issue

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

Friday, the anniversary of 9/11, I went to see "The September Issue", a documentary about Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue* magazine, and the lead-up to the magazine's largest issue ever.

Why did I choose this film? One, because I review movies for two Catholic periodicals, two, because of how much I enjoyed "The Devil Wears Prada" (In that 2006 film, Meryl Streep's deliciously fiendish fashion czarina character was supposedly based on Anna Wintour.); and three, because of the themes of identity, the definition of beauty, meaning and purpose of one's life, and the image industry that the story explored through the adventures of the Anne Hathaway character in "The Devil Wears Prada". I wanted to see how the films compared.

Although I don't give a hoot about fashion for its own sake (obviously), 13 million women who bought the U.S. *Vogue's* September 2007 issue -- the biggest ever -- certainly do care. So I do think the film deserves our consideration because it is about a universe that is alien to most pastoral people; we dismiss it as superficial. Indeed, some of the people in the film and the industry think their work is superficial. Anna Wintour's own daughter resists becoming a fashion editor; she respects her mother's work but says in the film that she wants to go to law school.

Before I continue, I would like to mention that Grace Coddington, *Vogue's* creative director, makes the film worth viewing; she is an artist, with all the sensibilities of an artist. She seems to be more prominent in the film than Anna Wintour -- she is certainly more likeable. Her name is "Grace" and she is grace for her work. She humanizes *Vogue* -- and the film. She suffers for her art. The cameraman, whose name is Patrick I think, does exceptional work in the film; he uses close-ups of both Anna and Grace's face and captures all the emotional range of ice (Anna) and heart (Grace). Ice in its natural setting is fascinating, strong, rough, dangerous, beautiful -- so I think the comparison is fair.

As many of my readers know, when I go to films I don't wear my veil so not as to distract people or call attention to myself. I have also found that this incognito approach lets me be a "fly on the wall" in the ladies' room after movies. I hear comments and conversations about a film just experienced. Sometimes while waiting in line I might ask, "Did you just come from such-and-such a film? What did you think?"

As I and several other women approached the restroom after the movie today, we turned back because the line was so long. I muttered to the lady next to me, "Must be everyone coming from the *Vogue* movie." She laughed as she agreed and I asked, "What did you think?" She brought up the superficiality dimension right away; I said I went to see it because of "The Devil Wears Prada" connection. After a couple of minutes I told her I was a nun and that I thought issues of beauty and body image were important to talk about with young people. She agreed and then said that in the scheme of things, fashion didn't matter -- just as Anna Wintour admits in the film when she talks about the meaningful things her own siblings do to make the world a better place and how they think what she does is silly.

And then my new friend Phyllis told me this wonderful story.

"You know, my parents died a long time ago. As I raised my children, I would always take them out for a treat or buy them a little gift on my parents' birthdays; I think they would want me to do this. Sept. 8 was my mother's birthday. I went to the mall to maybe buy myself something, but I didn't find anything I wanted or needed. So I bought a frozen yogurt and drove home.

"As I parked in the alley to unload the groceries I had bought earlier, I saw a homeless-looking man walking away. I thought to myself, 'Oh thank goodness he is walking away and I don't have to deal with him.' And then I heard, "Ma'am?"

"I turned around and he asked, 'Could you spare 25 cents, a quarter?' I said, 'Excuse me?' 'Yes, just 25 cents. I want to buy something at the 99 cent store but if there is tax I won't have enough to pay for it.'

"So I reached in my wallet and pulled out two dollars that were tightly rolled together. He thanked me and walked away.

"He had only gone a few steps when he unrolled the money. He turned to me and said, "Ma'am, thank you. You have saved my life.'

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Phyllis and I were both moved by this point. Then she said, "This was a gift from my mother; this is what she would want me to do. This is what gives meaning to life."

We stood among the movie-goers in the busy thoroughfare from ticket office to concessions and savored the moment. I thanked her for her story and asked if I could write it in my blog about grace -- and she gracefully gave her consent.

"The September Issue" means something completely different to me now; it means that on the September day remembered as tragedy in our national consciousness, the anniversary of 9/11, the real issue is grace -- and grace is alive and well prompting us, whoever we are, to do something meaningful for another person. Grace is six billion kindnesses, each person in the world making a difference in the life another. In the scheme of things, this is what matters.

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