

The Book of Eli: Prophecy or High Octane Action Flick?

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Jan. 15, 2010 NCR Today

Sometime in the not-too-distant future, a lone man walks the bleak, deserted roads of what was the United States. The landscape is torched and his dark glasses signal that there is no longer any natural protection from sunlight. He carries a weapon and a backpack. His name is Eli (Denzel Washington) and he is on the alert for thieves and marauders.

Eli is a post-apocalyptic warrior and he vigorously maims and destroys anyone who tries to stop him on his trek to the west or who tries to take his backpack that contains a Book. Even when a woman is being attacked, he chooses to protect his treasure instead of rescuing her and continues his journey to the west.

Eli desperately needs water. He comes to the remnants of a town and enters a saloon. He asks for water and discovers that a man named Carnegie controls access to it. There Eli encounters the disciples of Carnegie (Gary Oldman). Eli and Carnegie are old enough to remember the time before the devastation, thirty-years before. While Eli is a kind of pilgrim, Carnegie is a kingpin, a throwback to former times, who is desperately seeking a copy of the Bible. He remembers how televangelists and preachers controlled people using God's Word and he wants that kind of power for himself.

Carnegie is so desperate for a Bible that he sends his thugs out to find or steal any book they can find. They don't know what a Bible looks like and they return with a strange collection indeed.

Carnegie's wife Claudia (Jennifer Beals) is blind and her young and beautiful daughter Solara (Mila Kunis), Carnegie's stepdaughter, wants to get away, to find a place of hope. Kunis said that it was Solara's passion to live that attracted her. She was naive due to the circumstances she was in, but she perseveres and at the end starts her journey to return home, to make it a better place.

The Book of Eli was scripted by Gary Whitta, a comic book writer and graphic novelist (Death, Jr. series). He was also a video game and entertainment journalist which explains the manga feel exuded by the cinematography and set design. When asked at a recent press junket where the idea for the story originated, Whitta explained among his many inspirations were the samurai movies and the 'Man with No Name' trilogy of spaghetti westerns by director Sergio Leone. When asked about the religious nature of the film, Whitta replied that he had always been fascinated by faith and that The Book of Eli reflects this because, 'Belief in something greater than oneself is the most powerful idea in the universe.' In fact, the post-apocalyptic story line developed from this idea, he told reporters. 'This is the thinking man's action movie.'

The Book of Eli is directed by brothers Albert and Allen Hughes (Dead Presidents; Menace II Society) who wanted to make this film because it is 'about something; it's deep.' When asked about the religious nature of the film, Albert said, 'All film-going is subjective, but there is a fine line in the film regarding religion per se; we considered how much spirituality would play into it.' Allen added, 'This is not just about a 'book', it is about a book as a weapon.'

The directors explained that the film is about the idea of literature and literacy because the emphasis is on

books. Words are precious. The film kind of reflects what is happening today: the loss of the tactile feeling you get when you hold a book in your hands. In the film's universe there are very few books; this makes Eli's book all the more intriguing and important. What would the world look like without books, and the Bible in particular?

The Hughes brothers elaborated on the film's fascination with religion and how Eli, played by Denzel Washington, harkens back to the idea of the Knights Templar, someone who is on a quest.

Denzel Washington, whose son John David Washington, brought the script to him, as he did with American Gangster, Denzel took a closer look at the spiritual journey of Eli and the possibility it presented. He saw the vision the Hughes brothers brought to the film: the story of a guy who heard the voice of God. It as a spiritual journey and it is a journey to the promised land. The primal comes up a lot, Washington explained, and it suggests that we consider what we need to do as humanity. The film shows how the Word of God can be manipulated and what can happen when mankind gets a hold of the Word and uses to control people. One reporter asked Denzel what the film means to him and he replied, I am still processing that.

And so am I.

The world (well, the United States) of the film has been destroyed because religion had been politicized. This in turn created conflict that ended in almost total nuclear disaster and destruction. Carnegie now wants the authority that the political power that possessing the Bible and interpreting it's meaning would give him. Then Eli walks in.

Eli, the chosen one, is brutally violent as are the other male characters in the film. It is shocking when he chooses to protect the Bible over the woman who is being raped. But what saves the film from being a derivative of a hundred other post-apocalyptic films from the Mad Max trilogy to most recently The Road, and the comic book science fiction cliché that presents life as a black and white, good vs. evil scenario, is Eli's transformation. A person can still grow in understanding God's word and change. It becomes clear that just because he possesses a hard copy of the Bible, he is not finished yet. He has an epiphany; he understands and regrets not rescuing the woman he passed on the road. He learns that living the Word is more important than possessing it. He begins as a powerful man on a mission; he ends up as a human being.

I had issues with the perpetration of the idea of manifest destiny or entitlement, the portrayal of women as relatively helpless in the film, as well as locating yet another disaster film in the United States, as if America is the only country that matters.

The Book of Eli is an interesting but exhausting film with few humorous moments. I laughed out loud when Carnegie's goons dumped a sack of books on the floor and The Da Vinci Code and a copy of Oprah Winfrey's O magazine tumbled out. One of the most powerful lines in the film is when Eli says to those who don't remember life before the disaster that we threw away stuff people will kill for now.

Direction is strong and the performances are as well, especially by Denzel Washington who did almost all the stunts and action sequences himself. Ultimately it is a guy's film. I like the religious and philosophical questions and ideas but they are packaged in an extreme cinematic experience. Though I can appreciate the film and the filmmakers' vision as prophetic, shocking us into thinking about the consequences of justifying violence because of religious differences, it not a film I enjoyed.

The Book of Eli is an original made up of a mix of genres and pop culture productions that came before. Gary Whitta explained the intense violence, We imagined what a world without religion would look like. It is something to consider.

The film ends on a hopeful note encouraging religious tolerance ? and the love and honor for the printed word. Though some may interpret this closing scene as all religions being equal, I saw it more as a statement that the only way we can have peace and resources to live is to understand and respect one another?s beliefs.

I was left asking the same questions that the recent documentary Oh My God asked: What is God? And where will the disagreement about religion, that has often been and continues to be the basis of wars and conflicts throughout history, ultimately lead us?

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