NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

'Starbuck' the hilarious tale of moral dilemmas and unintended consequences

Sr. Rose Pacatte | Mar. 25, 2013 NCR Today

Hanoverhill Starbuck (1979-1998) was a Canadian bull that sired 200,000 daughters around the world -- just under 37,000 in Canada alone. He also sired 209 proven sons, all through artificial insemination. 685,000 doses of his semen was sold in 45 countries globally, earning almost $25 million.

David Wozniak (Patrick Huard) is a 42-year old loveable ne'er do well whose code name was "Starbuck" at the Montreal fertility clinic where he was a habitual donor 20 years ago -- and with good reason. The owner of the clinic illegally used his semen so often that 140 of his more than 500 children are suing him so they can know who he really is. David earned more than $28,000 for his sperm donations over a few short months.

He consults his wannabe lawyer friend (Antoine Bertrand) when he is slapped with the subpoena. The lawyer (nameless in the film) is a dad with four children, who come outside to sleep in the sandbox in the middle of the night as the men talk. He begs David not to procreate. But it is too late: In addition to David's anonymous children, his police officer girlfriend Valerie (Julie LeBreton) is pregnant. She is reluctant to accept his marriage proposal because he never takes responsibility for anything. Right now, he is in debt for $80,000 to the mob who come and rough him up every so often to get their money back.

Wozniak and his two married brothers work for their widowed dad (Igor Ovadis) in the family butcher shop. Their father came to Canada from Poland and built the family business from nothing. A Catholic family, they were crushed when their beloved wife and mother died years before. A crucifix and the image of Pope John Paul II hang in their home.

David's lawyer friend urges him not to read the biographies of the plaintiffs, but he does anyway. The first one is a national soccer star, and David cannot stay away. The next one is an aspiring actor; the next, a drug addict. Raphael has cerebral palsy and is in a home. David begins to look them up and enmeshes himself in their lives without revealing his identity.

One of his "sons" picks the lock of David's apartment and confronts his "dad," saying: "We are here. We are alive. And we are not going away." It's as if he is saying, "It's not our fault we were born via a petri dish and we had no father or don't know who our biological father is. We demand to be recognized!" This is as close as it gets to any serious consideration of the consequences of sperm donation.

"Starbuck" is an extremely funny movie, and the only part that might annoy people is the simulated masturbation scene in the beginning -- but even that is rather hilarious, knowing the analogy. This is also a heartwarming yet highly problematic film if taken from an ethical point of view.

From here on out there are spoilers, so click away if you do not wish to read them.

The list of moral and ethical problems about artificial reproduction is very long. At first, the filmmakers, director Ken Scott (who co-wrote the film with Martin Petit) and producer Andre Rouleau, thought no one

would believe the story until a New York *Times* story [1] revealed that "super dads" do exist. The idea that one man could be the father of more than 500 children within one large city became plausible. The chances of some of the children meeting and marrying are very high, and their children would be more likely to have birth defects.

Then there is the question of the embryos created and what happens to those that are not implanted. Do people deserve to have children no matter the cost to personal relationships, intimacy, marriage and the holistic well-being of many children who will never discover who their father is? Then the owner of the fertility clinic did not regulate the use of David's sperm, and though David and his lawyer file suit against him, this could happen anytime, anywhere.

The 1987 Vatican document "Instruction on Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation [2]" could answer many of the questions that arise from the film "Starbuck."

Perhaps the biggest problem with the film is that it ends with the children (all around 20 years old) and David/Starbuck getting together. The children are cool with him because now they know who their father is (we never meet any of the supposed single mothers, nor do they tell us why only 140 banned together in the class action after discovering his code name), and David is happy because he took responsibility for his actions. Something good came from what could have been a really sad situation, and he and his soon-to-be wife have 140 potential baby-sitters. Leave it to David Wozniak to think on the bright side.

The other aspect is the reason why David donated sperm so often in such a short period of time 20 years previously. The reason seems so good that the consequences don't seem to matter. I won't give this one away, but it is so heartfelt that even if you don't agree with sperm donation and banking and the resulting unforeseen consequences, you're willing to give this "super dad" a pass.

Finally, it is so genuinely funny that your feelings end up siding with David. Although your moral judgment may take a pass on this story, do engage your moral imagination to think about the multiple human and ethical issues that stem (no pun intended) from artificial reproduction and the real damage to human dignity that occurs despite good intentions.

Rights for an English-language version have been sold to DreamWorks for this award-winning film, which is in French with English subtitles.

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