

# REO Top Ten: Pies

Thanksgiving may primarily be about a heart attitude, but is there any image we associate more with the day than food? And is there any food other than turkey that we think about more than dessert? And is there any dessert we love more at Thanksgiving than pie?

With that in mind, REO had another round of voting with abrasive arguments, snide comments and manhood questioning. All over pie. Here are the ten that came out on top, in reverse order:

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## 10. Apple Pie



Gowdy and I had a hard fought battle over who would write a tribute to the goodly apple pie. In the end, I slew him with my gleaming scimitar and then ate some apple pie. Kidding. I didn't slay him and I haven't had apple pie in some time.

I have never made an apple pie, but I have had the honor and privilege of being on the receiving end of masters of the art

of apple pie cookery. In my mind, there are few pies as American as apple pie. Maybe pumpkin, pecan, or cherry. For my money, though, apple pie beats out these worthy opponents as far as U.S. citizenship. The apple pie can be deserved in a variety of different and very delicious ways. I have personally had so many superb types and styles that it is difficult to say an apple pie absolutely has to be in such and such a way to be a work of art. Two things, however, I do consider crucial in all varieties of apple pie: 1) A good, substantial crust and 2) a side helping of vanilla ice cream. This second is an extremely important issue. There is no adequate substitute. Anything else is uncivilized and un-American. (Ben Plunkett)

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## 9. Key Lime Pie



I will be the first to admit that Key Lime pie is not for everyone. Unfortunately, all great people and even great foods have their detractors. After all, many are called, but few are chosen. If you like a bit of sour with all that sweet then

this is the dessert for you. That delicious graham cracker crust puts it over the top. If Key Lime pie is wrong then I don't want to be right. (Mike Lytle)

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## 8. Cherry Pie



Maybe apple pie is more “all American” but cherry pie tastes so much better that it should be the pie that represents our great nation in all international pie competitions. Nothing says THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA better than a homemade cherry pie with lattice crust cooling on the window sill of a little house out in the country. Topped with vanilla ice cream or even whipped cream cherry pie never disappoints. The awful 80s rock band Warrant named a terrible song (and album) after this great dessert but even that travesty could not ruin it for me. My only regret is that I did not fight harder to move this higher up on our list. (Mike Lytle)

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## 7. Snickers Pie



Snickers won our best candy bracket so the built-in taste of Snickers in anything is going to be gold. I didn't grow up with it in pie form so for the last few years I have had to make up for decades of no Snickers pie. I often look for Snickers flavored anything when going to a place that offers deserts and I am often rewarded. So putting the best candy with one of the best forms of a dessert is a can't miss. And it didn't miss, landing in our Top Ten. (Gowdy Cannon)

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## 6. Cheesecake



Back in 2016 I did a March Madness bracket on best dessert and cheesecake won. By a landslide. It dominated the field like the '98 Yankees. The final score of the championship was 74-43. It was like watching Reagan vs. Mondale.

I heartily concurred with the result. Candy excluded, I don't know that there is anything I enjoy more for the old sweet tooth than a well-done cheesecake. Having Eli's and the Cheesecake Factory close to my Chicago address is sublime. Heck, I'll even take the \$8.99 version from Aldi. Cheesecake is that good.

True story: one of my friends that used to live in Chicago wept the first time she saw a cheesecake at Eli's. Literally cried. I mean real tears, streaming down the face as if watching the *Friends* episode where Ross and Rachel break up. What more can you say for this dessert? (Gowdy Cannon)

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## 5. Peanut Butter Pie



I've always enjoyed Peanut Butter pie. I'm a big fan of pie and of peanut butter, so the combination of the two is right in my wheelhouse. That said, a few years ago, I was at my mother's house and she had baked a pie earlier that day from a new recipe. It was a peanut butter pie with around half the sugar as the typical peanut butter pie. My mom is a great cook but I doubted that a pie with half the sugar would be something I would enjoy. I also was pretty confident it was another of my mother's attempts to help me to do something about some of my baby fat that had proven dreadfully difficult to get rid of. [1. Side note: When baby fat hangs around for nearly 40 years, can we honestly still call it baby fat? I contend that's a bit of a gray area.] My love of pie overruled my suspicion of my mother's true motives and I ate the pie. After two pieces, I pushed away from the table with complete confidence that it was the best peanut butter pie I had ever tasted. (Phill Lytle)

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## 4. Fudge



We were unable to find a volunteer to write the blurb for Fudge Pie, even though it finished in our top five. So, in place of another well-written, witty, and intelligent blurb, we are going to peel back the curtain and let you see how the sausage is made at RE0. Here is a sampling of our discussion about who should write the blurb:

**Mike Lytle:** *I like fudge pie alright but not enough to write a blurb for it. Who was pushing it during the bracket?*

**Ben Plunkett:** *Good question. I don't even remember ever eating it.*

**Phill Lytle:** *Fudge beat out:*

*Banana Cream (1st round)*

*Strawberry (2nd round)*

*Peanut Butter (3rd round)*

*It lost to Pecan in the Final Four.*

*I'm pretty sure I voted for it in the first two rounds as I don't like those other pies. I know I voted for Peanut Butter over it. (I was the only one evidently as PB lost 1-5 against Fudge in the elite 8.)*

**Ben Plunkett:** *What in the world was I thinking? Not only haven't I tried Fudge Pie, I love Peanut Butter Pie.*

after a few minutes of doing a bit more research on how the  
vote went down...

**Phill Lytle:** *I was wrong. I voted for Fudge. I know why. At that time, I hadn't tasted my mom's Peanut Butter pie – which is far superior to any Fudge pie I have ever had. Ben, you voted for PB over fudge. You were the lone PB supporter.*

**Nathan Patton:** *FWIW (I don't know if it's already been mentioned, but I'm too lazy to check) today is National Peanut Butter Fudge Day... also National Absurdity Day, though that's not as relevant... though maybe it is...*

And there's your blurb for Fudge Pie.

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### 3. Chess Pie





Chess pie is above all the tired and mealy-mouthed protestations made by foodies, elitists, and health conscious. They decry its simplicity. They denounce its unashamed reliance on ingredients we have been told are no longer acceptable to a refined and mature palate. Chess pie hears their high-pitched, meddlesome squawking and rises above the fray. Chess pie hears the noise and responds with silence. Chess pie is itself the answer. Before its face questions die away. What other answer would suffice?

Check mate. (Phill Lytle)

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## 2. Pumpkin Pie



This remains by far my favorite kind of pie. My love affair with this slice of lusciousness began with my mom's masterpieces. These have yet to be beat in mine eyes. However, (and this an incredibly strong "however.") there is something about any pumpkin pie when capably done that earns it this elite place on our list. That flawless blend of pumpkin and spices. That sweet, sweet ooze in the mouth. That harnessing in pie form of the fall and Thanksgiving spirit. Perfection. (Ben Plunkett)

## **1. Pecan Pie**



A great pecan pie can be difficult to make. Actually, I don't know this to be true from first-hand experience. I've learned it's best to only be involved in the of eating of pies and not the process of making pies. Which is fortunate for me because I get to reap the delicious rewards from excellent bakers like my wife and mother. It's also fortunate for the world because they are not subjected to my pitiful culinary creations. Some of my baking attempts ended up as twisted monstrosities. I've yet to see masses brandishing pitchforks and torches gathered outside my house, though the sight wouldn't surprise me. But I digress! My taste buds tell me that not all pies are created equal. Some varieties are better than others. And even among a specific variety like pecan, some turn out superior to others. They also inform me that when a pecan pie has just the right balance of taste, consistency, and sweetness then it's the pie which all others look up to in envy! Like so many things in life balance is the key. "I am one with the Pie and the Pie is with me." "May the Pie be with you... always." (Mark Sass)

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# Five Reasons “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer” is the Worst Christmas Movie Ever

I cannot begin to imagine what was going through the minds of the writer, director, and studio back in 1964 when they created this monstrosity. By the way, I’m working on the assumption that everyone reading this has seen the stop motion movie. After all, it’s considered a classic. Television networks show it multiple times each year around the holidays. Everyone is familiar with Rudolph, Hermey, Yukon Cornelius and the rest of the heartwarming and uplifting cast of characters that populate the film. The problem is, there is nothing heartwarming or uplifting about the film. In fact, it is the complete opposite. It is ugly, mean, small-souled stuff that should only be watched to learn how not to behave and live. Here are five of the virtually innumerable reasons that *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* is just the worst.

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## 1. The stop motion is awful.

Stop motion can be a beautiful and mesmerizing film technique. Just see films like *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Coraline*, or *The Fantastic Mr. Fox* for examples of stop motion done right. *Rudolph* is ugly. It’s twitchy. It’s cheap and lazy. I’m sure this reason alone is not enough to persuade those that are still clinging to a nostalgic view of the film. You think you love it because it’s always been there. It feels safe and Christmasy to you. Trust me, its lack of artistic creativity is only the tip of the iceberg. Its failures are many and will be dealt with in turn.

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## **2. Santa Claus is a complete jerk.**

There is no way to get around this. He reacts like a giant buffoon when he first meets baby Rudolph. Santa sees the big red nose and freaks out. He rejects Rudolph outright and shames the entire Donner family. But that's not the worst of it. He also treats the elves like garbage. They work hard to please him and even write and sing a song just for him. And how does he respond? He is bored and dismissive. He says it still needs work. He is condescending to Mrs. Claus—who frankly, is a complete saint for putting up with him. And the ultimate expression of his self-centered pigheadedness comes at the point of the film that is supposed to be the emotional and thematic climax—the moment he fully accepts Rudolph for what he is. But that's not what happens. The only reason he accepts Rudolph is because Rudolph's glowing nose can help him. It's a completely utilitarian view of Rudolph and I reject it in the most passionate manner I can.

This is not my Santa. This is not a Santa to be admired or respected. He is a fool and should be left to his folly.

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## **3. The adult males in the film are mean, condescending bigots.**

I've dealt with Santa but he is not alone in this. Donner is a tool. He is ashamed of his son. He is embarrassed that his son is different. He treats his wife—aptly named “Mrs. Donner” because the filmmakers think women are weak and less-than—with virtually no regard. He doesn't listen to anyone, except the worst people you could listen to: Santa and Comet. And don't get me started on Comet. He is the trainer and coach for the young bucks and he might be the worst of the whole bunch. He is the reason Rudolph cannot play any reindeer games. My only hope is that when Rudolph becomes the lead reindeer to pull

Santa's sleigh, he bans Comet to barn cleanup duty. And I hope the Abominable Snowman lives in the barn and has digestive issues.

Nearly every adult male is sexist, bigoted, and abusive. They are horrible examples for our children, which is exactly what the filmmakers wanted because they were probably communist.

There are two exceptions to this and I will deal with them next.

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#### **4. Too many drugs.**

Bear with me on this one. Yukon Cornelius is pretty great but makes absolutely no sense. He is psychotic – as is evidenced by his tackling the Abominable Snowman off the side of a cliff. He talks and acts as if he is on drugs. The constant yelling, gyrating, sniffing, and licking of his pickaxe indicate a troubled and unstable mind. But he's not the only one on drugs...

I can think of no other explanation for King Moonracer. It had to be drugs, right? It's a Christmas movie about a reindeer. There is snow, Santa, elves, snowmen, and a FLYING LION? And this flying lion is a king and he runs the Island of Misfit Toys. He "cares" for them until they can find a new home. Except he has no plan to find them new homes. He gets absurdly lucky that Rudolph and company show up and end up telling Santa about the island. And how does he care for them? They all live outside in the snow and cold while benevolent King Moonracer lives in a giant, warm castle. He sits on his comfortable throne, in his comfortable throne room, in the comfortable castle while his subjects sleep outside in the frigid winter air.

So we have another adult male that is just terrible. And makes absolutely no sense. How did the writer even pitch this idea

to the studio? Answer: Copious amounts of drugs for all involved.

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### **5. Our heroes, Rudolph and Hermey, are whiny little brats.**

I get it. They are bullied by friends and family alike. But do they have to be so whiny about it. I mean for crying out loud, buck up boys! Rudolph had the love of his mother and the prettiest doe in the North Pole – Clarice. He also was already a pretty good flyer. He didn't need to apologize for anything. If the other bucks didn't want to play with him, fine. He would just fly circles around them while blinding them with his red nose. They would come around eventually when they saw how useful that thing was.

And Hermey didn't need to run away. What good was that going to do? How was he going to become a dentist in the middle of nowhere. No. He should have stayed in the North Pole and set up his own dental practice. I'm sure the elves needed a dentist. It would have been difficult at first, but they would have come around as soon as they realized how much he could help them. And based on the typical elf diet of candy, candy canes, candy corn and syrup, they were going to need him desperately.

Like I said. These are only a few of the reasons this Christmas film is awful. Perhaps you disagree. Fine. Let me know why this a good Christmas film in the comment section below.

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# The Winter Journey

## Day 1 – Departure.

The wind whipped with an urgency that had been absent the past few weeks. The cold worked its way through the air, seeking any exposed skin it could find. The winter had been long and surprisingly fierce, bringing with it a yardstick of snow. School had been out for what felt like months, giving the small town of Anson Cove a seemingly permanent air of celebration. As the breeze stirred a final, powerful gust, the tall traveler turned and gazed sadly at the small town that had been his home. Away in the distance, the enthusiastic voices of children ebbed and flowed in song. They were singing to him. It was their goodbye – their farewell and well wishes for his journey north. He hesitated, attempting to convince himself that he did not have to go. Pushing those thoughts aside, he put his back to the voices and began to walk.

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## Day 2 – A new beginning.

The first day had been hard. Every step had been a battle. He knew it was the right decision. He knew he really had no other choice. That knowledge didn't make it any easier though.

After a full day of walking, he rose early and had put many miles behind him before the sun had made its bright and happy appearance. The day had dawned golden and clear. The air was still cold, but that was no problem. In truth, he loved the cold and could have lived in this chill forever. Today would be better, he thought. He lowered the bill of his hat to shield his eyes from the wind, and plowed ahead through the mounds of snow that lay before him.



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### **Day 6 – Music in the night.**

Winter's end was imminent. He could feel the warmth working through his limbs as he made his way along the forest path. Even now, in the dead of night, the cold was less than it had been a few days ago in the full heat of the sun. His options were few. He had no choice but to press on and make it north. He had no choice but to keep going. He sang that night, trying to push away the fears and the doubts that filled his mind. His friends from Anson Cove had taught him a beautiful song, so he sang it loud. His lonely voice filling the woods with melody.

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### **Day 14 – The harsh truth.**

Winter was dead. He knew that could only mean one thing. The realization that he would not make it north filled him with a sadness so deep he struggled to keep moving. As far as his eyes could see, the snow was melting. Little green shoots of grass poked their way through the blanket of white, reaching desperately for the sun. The forest animals were busy now. They flitted and crawled, jumped and chattered in, around, and on the trees. It was everything he could do to keep moving. He felt tired and weak. His hat kept sliding down his head, moving with the moisture on his brow. This trip had taken its toll and he had lost so much weight. Desperate for rest and shade from the sun, he crawled beneath the canopy of a giant, weathered oak tree. The bark was rough against his back, but the sun did not reach him here and for that he was thankful.

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### **Day 22 – Despair.**

It was over. His trip, which had begun with so much hope and

promise, was nearing its end. He would never make it north. The last week had been the most difficult of his life. He was deathly thin and pale beyond words. His face was white; whiter than the snow that sat in small little clumps that dotted the landscape around him. The plan had been a good one: Head north. Stay ahead of the spring. He had hoped the winter would last a few weeks longer than usual, seeing how strong it had been. Instead, the seasons had changed early this year, and that had made the journey north impossibly difficult. He had never planned a trip such as this and mistakes had been made from the very beginning. His friends in Anson Cove had done all they could to encourage him. Especially the children. But it had all been in vain. These would be his final days. He knew the truth of that deep down. With a final, stubborn surge of energy, he quickened his pace.

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### **Day 23 – The end.**

He had found a small outcrop of rocks the previous night that offered a cool respite from the heat. The view from his final resting place was breathtaking. The leaves on the trees were a brighter shade of green he had ever seen. The birds, in joyful abandon, chirped out to everyone who could hear. The grass swayed playfully in the gentle southern wind. The sun, in all its life-giving glory, beamed warmth and light in every direction. If this was the end, it was as good of an ending as he could imagine. That made him smile.

His body was spent and wasting away. It would not be long now. He sensed the final moments peeking around the corner, yet he was at peace, knowing that he had been blessed with a good life. He had made so many friends during his days in Anson Cove. Those children had welcomed him into their lives completely. He was their friend. Their tears as he had said his goodbyes broke his heart yet filled him with such courage and strength. He would miss them all terribly.

He could feel the tug of death and knew he had only moments left. He chose to greet it with a song. A song he had learned from the children who were his dearest friends in the world. A song they had written about him. Summoning the last stores of willpower he possessed, he raised his head and sang with all the joy and love he could muster, "Frosty the snowman was a jolly happy soul!"

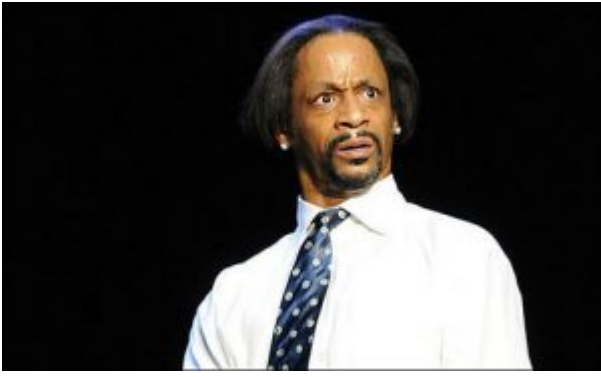
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## **Five Reasons Why Die Hard and Gremlins Will Never Be Christmas Movies**

I thought it was a joke.

Nearly 10 years ago on a public forum of about ten guys talking mostly sports, the subject of Christmas movies came up. And someone mentioned *Die Hard*. "Ha!" I thought. What a jokester!

Boy was that an underreaction. He was serious! For days, maybe weeks, and for dozens, maybe hundreds, of posts we argued about whether this film was in fact a "Christmas movie". During which time I think I had this facial expression:



Or maybe this one:



Or maybe this one:



In the intervening years, I've seen people try to pass off *Gremlins* the same way. I can almost even begin to consider to

*Gremlins*, but I'm not there yet. I probably never will be. I will never, ever agree to *Die Hard*. Here are Five Reasons why:

## **1. Technicalities do not equal reality.**

"It happened during Christmas!" "There were Christmas trees in one scene!" "There was snow on the ground!"

Who cares?!?

If someone from Maine comes down South and wants "an SEC game day experience" during football season and I take them to a 2014 Vanderbilt game vs. Middle Tennessee State, I have done what they asked. But did I really? If it's December 4th in Chicago and it's 12 degrees with inches of snow on the ground, am I going to say, "It's not Winter!" because of some lame solstice reasoning? Does anyone really consider Miami a part of "The South"? NO!

Same for this. Reality trumps everything.

## **2. Horror, Violence, Extreme Language, etc. are all contrary to both religious and secular imagery of "Christmas"**

*"Siiiiilent Night..."*

[McCaine drops a C-4 that causes an explosion and death.]

*"Hooooollly Night..."*

[Stripe boils in a fountain after Gizmo kills him with sunlight.]

*"All is caaaaalm. Aaaalll is bright..."*

[HIPPIY KI YI YAY \$%\*#@\$!!!!]

*"Sleeeeeeep in Heavenly pea-eace..."*

See? It just doesn't fit. It assaults my sensibilities to include R-rated culture as a part of Christmas. I get that

Christmas is a rough time for some people, but I would imagine that we have entertainment in part to get away from that.

### **3. Christmas has a spirit and it is easily recognizable.**

US Supreme Court justice Potter Stewart said years ago that he could not define pornography but knew it when he saw it. I think the same is true for a lot of topics, including what is and isn't a Christmas movie. Christmas, both secular and religious, has a certain "goodness" to it that these movies lack. As a friend of mine stated once, "If you have to think about it, it probably isn't a Christmas movie."

*It's A Wonderful Life*, *Elf*, *A Christmas Story*, etc. don't have this problem and never will.

### **4. Beyond the idea of "spirit" idea, Christmas movies have Christmas themes that drive the plot.**

"Ernest Saves Christmas." "The Grinch Steals Christmas." "Regular Joe has to become Santa Clause during Christmas." Somehow "Hans Gruber takes hostages, shoots people and tries to steal \$640 million dollars" and "Mutant green monsters terrorize a small town with a tractor plow" don't have the same effect.

### **5. Accepting *Die Hard* and *Gremlins* opens up Pandora's Box**

*Rambo: First Blood* happens around Christmas and the town is all decorated. Christmas movie! *Iron Man 3* occurs near Christmas. Christmas movie! *The Godfather* has Christmas in it. Christmas movie! Are we really going to say that any movie with ANYTHING related to Christmas is a Christmas movie? We may as well consider Seth McFarlane's *Ted* because

it has a teddy bear and teddy bears are often children's gifts and we give gifts at Christmas. CHRISTMAS MOVIE!!!!!!

I think Bruce Willis is an All-American action-adventure legend and I probably would shake in my boots if I ever met him. I will love Alan Rickman til I die for his immaculate portrayal of Severus Snape. *Gremlins* was the first movie I saw in the theater and I own original 1984 Gremlins books with records included because I love that movie so much. These are movies I appreciate and respect.


But they are NOT Christmas movies. And they never will be. No matter how much people argue it on forums and other social media.

Disagree? Comment below!

### **Die Hard and Gremlins: What is their Christmas movie status?**

- Both are Christmas movies.
- Neither are Christmas movies.
- Die Hard is a Christmas movie but Gremlins is not.
- Gremlins is a Christmas movie but Die Hard is not.

[View Results](#)

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# No, Mary Did NOT Know (Probably), So Give the Song a Break

By now you have likely seen this meme:



And perhaps you have read articles from all sorts of Christian denominations that chide Mark Lowry's now 25-year-old contribution to the pantheon of Christmas songs with deep, contemplative biblical lyrics, *Mary Did You Know?* (you can find examples [here](#) and [here](#))

**We can't let anything be popular in the U.S. without being overly critical...**

All of a sudden in the last few years, it seems, it has become hip to take shots (and in Batman's case, a slap) at this song that was celebrated for two decades as a modern classic Christmas hymn. And it's the same every time: "Of course Mary knew! What were you thinking, Mark? Haven't you read Luke and all the prophecies and the Magnificat?"

Well, for all sorts of reason, I disagree. I think it is very



unlikely Mary knew most of what Lowry pens in question form in this song.

I'm not going to break down the song line by line but the gist is that the song asks if Mary knew that Jesus was God incarnate, if he was going to be a Savior and if he was going to perform several amazing miracles. I'll start with the God angle: I do not think it was likely that a 14-year old Jewish girl in the first century, even after having been told that her child was the fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, had a clear knowledge that this meant he was Deity. Could she have gathered from the angel's words to Joseph and from Simeon's prophecy that he was the Messiah? Yes. But that is not the same thing as being divine. Jews in the first century didn't believe the coming Messiah was going to be God, I don't think.

### **What did Mary treasure in her heart?**

Yet Mary was very pensive. I can believe she did know that the child she was about to deliver would one day deliver her, but even then, that lyric is so poetically stated I still think it makes for wonderful Christmas music.

I am much less sure if she knew she was kissing the face of God. There is simply nothing in Luke or any Gospel that makes that clear. The Magnificat is marvelous and profound, but in reading it I don't come away thinking, "Yes! Mary knew everything Mark Lowry wrote about!"

### **I Will Always Say, "I May Be Wrong"**

But let's say I'm wrong about all of this. I really don't know if she knew he was God or not. But let's say she did know she was giving birth to the unique, sole God-man in human history. I still think the song works for two reasons. One, the song asks some very specific things about his future life that would be brilliant to ask her in hindsight. Even if she knew

he was God, did she know he was going to walk on water? That's a good question.

Also, as REO Contributor David Lytle shared with me, even if she did know it works on the level of a news reporter asking her for a firsthand account of what was going on in her heart and mind as the most incredible thing ever was happening to her. It was also similar to a time when my father, my brothers and I went to the 2013 Outback Bowl and Jadaveon Clowney hit a guy so hard his helmet flew off, caused a fumble and produced one of the most replayed moments in College Football history. I yelled as loudly as I could after the play "DID YOU SEE THAT? WHO WAS THAT GUY?" All 70,000 people there saw 'that' and knew who it was that did it. But the questions reflect the awe of the moment and of the event.

Even if I am absolutely wrong about what Mary knew, I still think the song works as a genuine longing to know what was going on mentally and emotionally with a young unmarried virgin likely experiencing some sort of overwhelming cognitive dissonance from an avalanche of incredible things being told to her at the same time. I think it would be entirely appropriate to write a song to the disciples asking "Did you see him that first Easter morning?" Questions do not mean doubt or assume a negative. They start conversations and cause us to think deeply.

But I remain convinced that we do not know what Mary knew and the song works in the most majestic and beautiful way possible. It captures a profound wondering that we need more of in our faith.

So this Christmas, I plead with you to leave Mark Lowry alone. Enough with the Batman meme. By doing this we can all focus all of our energies on vanquishing the true Christmas song villain of our era, *Christmas Shoes*.

Merry Christmas from REO!

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# A Beginner's Guide to Creating Your Own Christmas Movie Watch List

In my home, we love movies. (My wife is not as big of a film fan as the rest of us, but let's not get hung up on technicalities.) There are very few things in the world that I enjoy more than sitting down and watching a good film by myself, with friends, or with my family. In light of that, it should come as no surprise that Christmas movies get a lot of play around the house this time of year. Instead of just channel surfing and hoping to find a good Christmas movie to watch, I carefully select which movies we will watch each year, taking some input from my family. A few family favorites make the cut most years. There are a few films reserved for only the adults...that sounds weird but don't make it creepy. You know what I mean. And I do my best to introduce new Christmas films to the kids each year. A few suggestions when putting together your own list:

- Try to include one or two films that are part of your yearly tradition. I don't really care what movies you choose, just find a few that will be part of the rotation every year. Family traditions are important and movies you watch every year can play a role in those traditions.
- Look for new movies to introduce to your family, or to yourself. And they don't have to be "new" films. Perhaps it's an old film you have never seen. Perhaps it's something you saw when you were a kid and remember very little about it. Perhaps it's a film that your kids are now old enough to appreciate. Stretch yourself a little.

- Include at least one film that contains the Gospel/Biblical reason for Christmas. I'm not one to overly spiritualize everything, but if you are going to celebrate the season, you sort of need to include the birth of Jesus in your revelry.
- Don't overthink it. Pick movies you enjoy. Don't worry if no one but your family likes a particular film. If it works for you and yours, that's all you really need.

With all of that as the backdrop, here are five of the films we will be watching this Christmas season. I'll include a brief explanation as to why each film made the cut and for those that need it, a super spiritual reason we watch.

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## Home Alone



Why we watch it: I realize there is nothing spiritual about the story of a young boy, who after getting left home alone by his family, defends his home from thieves. That's okay. Sometimes you can watch a film simply to have fun. If you have boys, this film is particularly fun to watch. My seven year old has fits of laughter when watching this film. The rest of us have fits of laughter watching him.

Super spiritual reason we watch: Not everything you watch has to have some righteous message. *Home Alone* is not without merits in that regard. The main child learns how important family is and he comes to realize that he has behaved rather selfishly towards them. Great lessons for any family member.

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## The Nativity Story

Why we watch it: I was underwhelmed with this movie the first time I saw it. I appreciated the understated nature of the film, but was disappointed with that style when it came to the big moments when grandeur and power seemed more appropriate. I have since come around to the film



completely. The subtle quality of the film is refreshing in a world full of bombast and noise. The “big” moments still have power and grandeur; they are just grounded in something more earthy and tactile. While Keisha Castle-Hughes does fine work as Mary, the standout of the film is Oscar Isaac as Joseph. Never before have I fully recognized the role that Joseph undoubtedly played in the story. His decision to believe and obey the Lord by staying with Mary is something that I have always taken for granted. This film opened my eyes to his part of the story. Plus, the film frames the actual nativity in a beautiful and memorable way. The whole family enjoys this one.

Super spiritual reason we watch: Really? Do I really need to explain why we watch a film that depicts the birth of Jesus for Christmas?

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## National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation



Why we watch it: Before you lose your minds, I want to preface this by saying that we do not watch this one with the whole family. My two oldest boys will watch it with us this year. (My eldest watched it with us last year as well.) And, I

skip a few scenes that add nothing to the story and are not helpful to the minds of teenage boys. If you have seen the film, you know what scenes I am talking about. I realize that the film is a bit crude and rough around the edges. It's

moments like these where I choose to discuss these things instead of hiding from them. I know not every parent sees it this way, and that is fine. Do what works for your family. For my kids, they are going to be exposed to coarse language and talk outside of my home, so pretending it doesn't exist won't do them any good. I would rather engage with them about it and show them a better way. While the Griswold family is a bit dysfunctional, particularly when you include the extended members, I think that is part of what makes this film so funny and enjoyable. We watch the film because it's funny and it reminds us of people in our extended family which makes it even funnier. Cousin Eddie alone makes it worth watching. If you are quietly judging me, jump down to the Super spiritual reason right now.

Super spiritual reason we watch: At the heart of the film is a man (Clark Griswold) who loves his family and wants to give them the best Christmas ever. That's actually something to celebrate.

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### **It's a Wonderful Life**

Why we watch it: This is one of my wife's favorite films of all time. We have yet to watch it with our kids. This is the year we finally take the plunge – at least with the two oldest boys. Our eldest son is 13 and our middle son is 12 so we hope they have the necessary attention span and maturity to handle an older film like this that approached pacing and style in a very different way than modern films. I truly hope they can look past the differences and see the heart of the film.



Super spiritual reason we watch: Obviously, the spiritual

stuff is hokey, but even so, it still has much to say about the importance and significance of every single human life. I'll cry at the end of the film as I always do.

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## Elf



Why we watch it: This one has become a family favorite and we watch it nearly every Christmas. It's great to have a modern film that is mostly clean and appropriate for all ages. Plus, Buddy the Elf is one of the great comedy characters ever invented. I am not a huge Will Ferrell fan, but he was perfect for this role, bringing an innocence and joy for life that makes the whole film a treat to watch.

Super spiritual reason we watch: Actually, this one has many reasons: Joy for life. Love of family. Seeing the best in other people. These are all practical lessons we should take to heart after watching *Elf*.

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Many other films have made appearances in our Christmas film rotation: *Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *The Polar Express*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *A Christmas Story*, *The Santa Clause*, and many others.

There really is no wrong answer here, unless of course you watch *The Christmas Shoes*. Just talk to your kids, or if you have no kids, talk to your spouse, and if you are without a spouse, talk to yourself. Figure out what you want to watch, why you want to watch it, and get started. You only have 23 more days until Christmas after all.

I would love to know if you do this sort of thing as well and what films you will be watching this year with your family or friends. Please tell us about it in the comment section below.

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## **In the beginning...**

Does the first sentence of a story matter? Are those first words necessary to set the stage or establish the tone? Some of the best stories humanity has written would indicate that yes, the first words do matter:

“In a hole in the ground there lived a Hobbit.”

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...”

“A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.”

If you have enjoyed these stories, those words are magic. They move you. They tell you, “get ready...this is going to be good.” They make you sit up and pay attention.

So, yeah, words matter. The first words in a story make a difference.

If words matter, what do the first words of the greatest story ever told tell us?

“In the beginning was the Word.” (John 1:1)

In the beginning, Christ was there. In the beginning, Jesus was. He existed. This amazing story that is about to unfold would not be possible without the Word. Without Jesus.

“In the beginning was the Word. And the Word was with God.”

Jesus was there before anything else. He was there with God.



Equal stature. Equal prominence. He did not come later. He was there, with God, at the beginning of this grand story.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”

Jesus was, is, and forever will be God. He was there with God. He was God. He did not appear on the scene as a baby in a manger. God did not look down on the world, in all of our sin and shame, and conjure up a solution. That solution was there, from the beginning. He was with God and He was God. In the beginning.

This story, the story of redemption, cannot exist without Jesus. Without the Word who was God. God's grand, epic love story can only be written with its central character being present from the beginning. Jesus is so much more than the baby we sing about at Christmas. He is so much more than a carpenter's son who taught the people. Who healed the sick. Who fed the hungry. Who suffered and died on a cross. He is more than the Messiah, who rose again on the third day. He was and is the author and finisher of our faith. He is the Word, who was with God and was God. He is the creator of all. There is nothing that exists outside of His purview. Outside of His control. He was there. He was with God. He is God.

On this Christmas, rejoice in the coming of Christ. Sing songs, tell the story when it came to pass. Remember the moment, when Christ took on flesh and became a man. Celebrate Christmas for all that it is and all that it signifies. But remember, this baby whose birth we celebrate is the very Lord of all. He is the Light and Life of men. This is His story. We miss the true power of this story if we reduce Jesus to a newborn in a manger. That was not the beginning of His story. His is the story of eternity. His is the story of the redemption of mankind, which began before the foundation of the world. He stepped into our part of the story at the fullness of time. To make us His own. But that was His part of

the story from the beginning.

The first words of a story matter. Fortunately for us, our story, the story of our salvation, has the best first Word. The Word who was with God, the Word who was God..

“In the beginning.”

Merry Christmas from the Rambling Ever On team.

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## Sehnsucht – The Art of Christmas



The inner turmoil of Joseph.

What comes to your mind when you think about Christmas art? Santa checking his list? A cozy cottage in the snow? Or maybe you are quick to give the right answer – baby Jesus lying in a manger of course!

I asked myself this question and did a little research. I

found art regarding the birth of Jesus is all very similar in style. It's just a variation of a nativity scene. There are the standard pieces: a baby in a manger, Joseph and Mary, some farm animals, and sometimes shepherds or even wise men.

Not that there is anything wrong with that, but I wondered why we don't have more unique expressions about this event. So I decided to create some art pieces about Christmas without recreating something that has already been done.



Mary pondering her newborn son.

When I imagine the birth of Jesus, it gives me the sense of what C.S. Lewis called "sehnsucht." He calls it "the inconsolable longing in the heart for we know not what." I get that longing and aching feeling when I hear the line from the song Mary Did You Know: "Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?" I envision Mary looking up at the moon and stars in the darkness of Bethlehem and taking this all in, awestruck her little baby somehow made all this.



Simeon meets the Messiah.

When I think about Christmas it gives me that same feeling of wonder and awe. Then I start to connect all the dots of God's great plan through the ages and how he came to earth in the form of a man. It creates in me that longing or aching for the completion of God's story.

So in this Christmas series of artwork, my goal is to capture that feeling of awe and wonder at the improbable story of the creator being born in an animal shelter in the middle of nowhere. My hope is that it joins in with this story that God has been telling.