

500 Words or Less Reviews: Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald

This review will be spoiler-free.

One of the biggest complaints I heard about the original *Fantastic Beasts* movie was that it was so far removed from the original series, it didn't feel like a *Harry Potter* story. To me, it still had a good plot and great characters and is worth rewatching, but I sympathize with that complaint.

Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald gives us much more of the original canon in subtle and overt ways, but still does a fine job of keeping the narrative separate from Harry's era at Hogwarts so that it can stand on its own legs and tell a fresh story without the weight of massive book scrutiny.

Eddie Redmayne is back as the peculiar Newt Scamander, who another character aptly describes as a man who doesn't care for power or prestige but for what is right. Scamander may not ever rise to the level of characters like Hagrid and McGonagall in my mind but he is a welcome addition to the *Harry Potter* universe.

They chose Newt's book to be the title of these films and while the films themselves are not truly about the beasts that he loves so much, they do play a significant role in plot development. And Newt unleashes a new, wondrous, Jim Henson-esque creature that steals some scenes.

Johnny Depp is surprisingly quite modest in his titular, antagonist role. For a man who has made a living off of being magnificently weird as unique characters, he doesn't try to do

too much here. I suppose the backstory from the original series, the characters "look" and the script are enough and he doesn't have to be outrageous to bring Grindelwald to life. If anything, I thought he was too subdued.

Jude Law is as brilliant as you would expect and Dan Fogler reprising his role as Jacob is even funnier and more sympathetic than the first go round. The rest of the cast is a mixture of decent to bland.

There are twists galore in this movie but I must see the rest of the series before I can judge them.

On that note, without revealing anything, I will conclude by saying the ending will have people talking until the third part is released. And my only comment in this review is to say that it is imperative to me that they do not make the same mistakes that were made with *The Cursed Child*. As mentioned, a significant part of what makes these movies work so far to me is that they are separated from the seven-book/eight movie story enough that they can let these movies breathe without fear of them clashing with the original. They may be nearing dangerous waters.

The *Harry Potter* brand is clearly at a crossroads. The crucial plot decisions of these next three movies will swing the post-book series material either into the "It was nearly all terrible" or "Fantastic Beasts was fantastic and we barely remember *The Cursed Child*." I'm eager to see the result.

Three stars out of five.

Three Things I Love About Audiobooks (And Three I Don't)

As a man who went from farm boy in Tookeydoo, SC to pastor in inner-city Chicago, I do not mind change. Not even in small things. Except when it comes to reading. I have never for one second read a book from a Kindle or any similar device and do not plan to. I just can't do it. Not having a physical paper book in my hands is about as comfortable as trying to write with my left hand.

Until recently, I had felt similarly about audiobooks. I've listened patiently as friends like Josh Crowe have informed me that listening to works like the *Harry Potter* series is an amazing experience. I nod politely but think, "Nope. Never gonna do it."

Yet one day this April I had an epiphany: a huge reason I hate driving in Chicago's bumper to bumper traffic is that I feel like I'm wasting time. If I'm going 70 MPH at least I feel like I'm doing something. When I'm going 0 MPH, I go from calm to irrationally angry in about six seconds. Music helps a lot of people, but not me. No, I needed something else. And so I purchased an Audible account on Amazon, a website I adore about like I adore Chick-fil-a.

In the last three months or so, I have listened to about 16 audiobooks. I've listened to everything from a two-hour long self-help book in Spanish to a 27-hour Steve Jobs biography. And I've listened enough to start forming opinions about this medium. Here are are a few things I consider advantages to audiobooks over actually reading a book:

1. The Voices

The very first audiobook I listened to was *As You Wish: Inconceivable Tales from the Making of The Princess Bride*, written and narrated by Carey Elwes. Elwes was already high up on my list of cool people, but his reading of this work was just enthralling. His accent is exquisite. He did impressions of people like Andre the Giant that were sublime. I would guess he made the book twice as entertaining with his voice than it would have been had I read it.

Later I listened to *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. The narrator's voice was rustic and pitch-perfect, especially when he read the dialogue of the father and the son. The writing is already packed with emotion but the reader really brought it to life.

Another notable one was Gabriel Wyner reading his work, *Fluent Forever: How to Learn Any Language Fast and Never Forget It*. Not only was the material incredible and effective but Wyner, who is an opera singer, conveys an enthusiasm through the reading that can be felt in his timbre and inflections. He reads with joy and I can even see him gesturing in my mind's eye several times in the book. Extremely well done.

2. The ability to "read" while walking and driving

I started this to have something to make me feel productive while driving, as I said above. But then I realized that I spend nearly an hour a day walking to and from work. And while I often use that time to listen to Polish, I could also use it to listen to books. Before 2017 I was about a 15-20 book a year guy. Last year I read 50 without a conscious effort to up the normal count. This year I decided to read every free second I can get and I've read a lot more. And it was

beginning to annoy me that I was losing precious time doing things where reading is impossible. Now that has been solved.

3. Zero shipping and storage issues

I love Amazon Prime in part because I can see a book I love and have it in my hands in two days. Now, with Audible, I don't have to wait but a few seconds. Also, occasionally, with physical books, I will get the wrong book or my order will be lost or late. Not an issue with audiobooks. And then there's the storage issue. I love bookshelves and having a reading room, but every time I've moved, the boxes of books have created extra work. And I don't have infinite space in my house. Now I have a way to add to my library without taking space from my home. Admittedly this is an advantage to a Kindle but this was never enough motivation in and of itself.

And here are three things I don't love:

1. It's easy to lose focus

If I'm driving and a car in front of me swerves then it will take me a few seconds to be able to refocus back to the book I'm listening to. Audible has a 30-second rewind feature, but it's unwise to manipulate while driving. Also, even when I'm walking sometimes a loud motorcycle will go by and I will miss some of the book and I'm too lazy to rewind. Plus, in general, I just have an easier time getting distracted and letting my mind wander when listening than when reading. Admittedly, this is a character flaw more than a book flaw. Audiobook from Amazon has thought of very easy ways to combat a lot of this.

2. I lose my place sometimes

This is a problem more with my phone than with the medium, but it happens sometimes that if my phone gets bumped then the place will skip and I won't be able to remember exactly where I was. And it takes a while to figure it out. That is frustrating but does not happen very often.

3. Selection is limited

The selection is not terrible, but I can find just about anything on Amazon books. On Audible, this is not the case. That's just the nature of it. Not every book has been recorded to hear or will be recorded. But to be honest, Audible is a supplement to my regular reading, not the main source. So this is a minor complaint as well.

One final thought on price...I didn't include this as a positive or a negative because it depends. I have found books on Audible for \$5.95 often but I also can't find books I want for under \$25 sometimes. Audible does run sales though where you can get 3 "credits" for \$35 and then buy any three books you want (one a month for three months), which is often cheaper than the physical copy of books. So Amazon is still finding ways to eliminate potential complaints.

Overall I am quite pleased with Audible and I plan to use it until I die. Some may think audiobooks don't count as real reading and that is fine. But my soul needs them to keep myself sane at times.

Questions or comments? Please tell us below.

Review: “Won’t You Be My Neighbor?”

“Everyone longs to be loved. And the greatest thing we can do is to let people know that they are loved and capable of loving.” – Fred Rogers

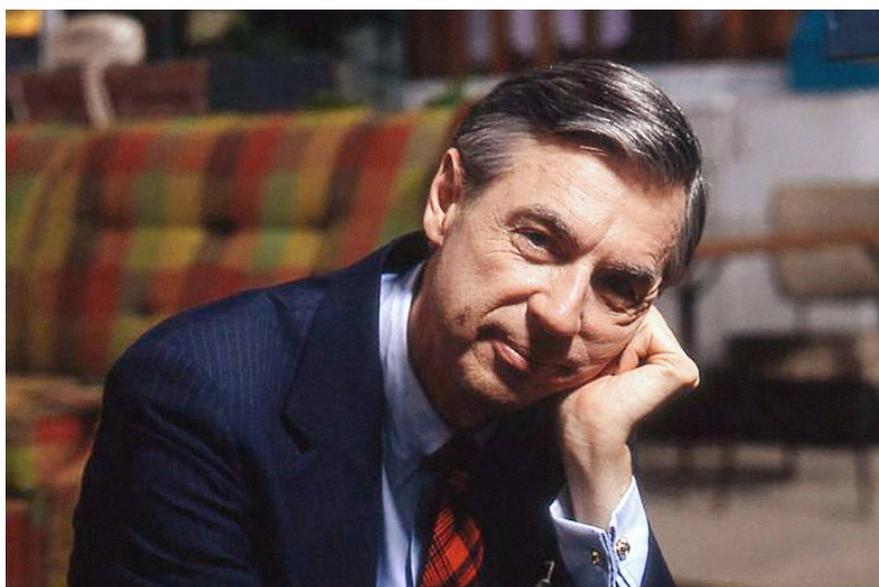
The Mr. Rogers I remember was a TV personality that had a warm and welcoming opening song and changed his jacket for a sweater and played with a trolley. He did voices in the Land of Make Believe and spoke gently and kindly to his audience and was good friends with people like Mr. McFeely. Thanks to him, I have known what a duckbill platypus is since I was five.

The Mr. Rogers of *Won’t You Be My Neighbor* I did not recall. And for that reason, among many others, this story needs to be told. God communicates to us so clearly through narrative. Our Bible is chock full of them. Biographies teach us things that ‘How To’ books never could. We need lives—real, heroic, inspirational lives—to help us make sense of this corrupt world. Fred Rogers is the modern example par excellence as to why.

Thanks to this documentary we get to see how big a visionary he was, seeing TV as the future before it was even the present. We get to see him fight for funding for it, using meekness to speak boldly and change the circumstances. We get to see him provide entertainment for kids that was wholesome and countercultural. We get to see him talk to children in a courageous, competent and congenial way about things like assassination, low self-esteem and anger. Things that seem

daunting to talk about in private, much less in front of an audience. He taught against racism in as innocuous yet powerful a way as possible, in a time where it was terribly needed. He taught that it was OK to be sad without being patronizing. He talked through issues about emotions in an emotionally intelligent way, to such a level that my educated and experienced teacher wife was blown away. She could not believe how much he knew about how to talk to children, especially since it was 40 years ago before a lot of modern research was popular. Mr. Rogers was ahead of his time and in many ways a genius.

Most of that was surprising to me. But the stories went deeper. Mr. Rogers was known for dealing with children, but he worked with adults. And he proved that you can speak the truth to someone about a very hard subject and still make that person feel deeply in their soul that you love them so much they see you as a surrogate father. We in the U.S., even in Christianity, haven't all figured this out. For this reason as much as any, I adore Fred Rogers. And until I watched this film, I had no idea.



If you have noticed that this documentary is rated P-13, I want to be clear that the previous paragraph is a part of why. The heaviness of real-world issues and interpersonal

relationships isn't always for general audiences. Yet there are other things that cause it to be rated as it is. Though Mr. Rogers lived a mostly G-rated life, his story is told by others. And as such, there were a few profane words in the interviews and a reference to a prank on set that is not something I would expect parent readers of REO would want small children to see. Also, Fred Rogers got angry at times about issues facing children in the US, especially when it came to what was on TV. And this documentary shows some of what Mr. Rogers hated.

My criticisms of this work are minor. I loved the music from the trailer and wish they had used it more. The transitions from story to story seemed a bit awkward at times to me, but another review I read said they were perfect so perhaps that is something I do not understand about documentaries. And finally, the cursing in the film is something at least at this point that has me torn. I suppose the point of this is for teenagers and adults to be inspired and to tell his story without many filters. Yet considering what his life stood for, I wish it were appropriate for kids. I suppose the kids still have his 1700+ TV episodes to watch.

Mr. Rogers talked a lot about love in his life. But he proved that while talking is easy and living is hard, it must be done if we want to make a difference. Love is unapologetically inconvenient. Mr. Rogers practiced it both in public and private, as valiantly and humbly as he could. At least according to those who knew him best.

I recommend this documentary to everyone who has been touched by Fred Rogers in any way, which would be millions of people all over the world, even nearly 15 years after his death.

Four stars out of five.

500 Words or Less Reviews: “Tyndale, The Man Who Gave God An English Voice”

“And the Lyght shyneth in the darkness, but the darkness comprehended it not.” (*John 4:5, William Tyndale New Testament*)

I’m coming up on 40 years of life this Summer and it has me all self-reflective and evaluative. One thing I absolutely need to change is that I need to read more biographies. As someone who has championed fantasy-fiction as reading that captures the imagination, I have woefully underestimated how real flesh and blood human beings with real lives can accomplish the same thing. And in some ways, in a deeper sense, since they are actual history.

Enter this book, written in 2012 by David Teems. It is cleverly written, packed with history down to the small players in Tyndale’s life and absolutely edifies the English-speaking Christian reader with a life worth dissecting.

I confess that Tyndale’s life is fascinating to me on the big story arcs because I am a pastor of a bilingual ministry, an ESL teacher and a subscriber to *Voice of the Martyrs*. Translation is my life’s work, though not nearly to the significance that his was and to the cost that his gave. Persecution and martyrdom are horrific in a human sense, yet biblically we can see how God exalts it. William Tyndale literally gave his life to give people of my native tongue one of the most precious gifts there is, the readable Word of God.

Christian history is indebted to countless people for the Bibles we have today, many of them nameless and faceless, like the Masoretics of the Old Testament and the often maligned scribes and copyists of the New Testament. Tyndale thankfully is a name we can know and celebrate. He wasn't just a translator. He was a noble man, an educated yet humble man, and a great man. He is a hero. All of us who hold a KJV, or NASB, or NIV in our hands should know his name and his story.

Beyond the major and more well-known plot lines of his life, Teems gives other details that are equally as important. Like how much of the KJV was influenced by Tyndale and how many phrases we find in our Bible, and hence our popular culture, that can be traced back to Tyndale. Like "Am I my brother's keeper?". Tyndale used beautiful, easy-to-memorize, poetic English. And we owe our ability to recall many verses so easily to him.

Teems also speaks over several pages to how much Erasmus and Luther affected Tyndale and how much he affected them. These men were not friends, yet God used them all in their own way to greatly affect how we do church and bible study today. It is a testimony to how no one can do anything on their own. Not just without God's grace, but without Christian community. Even from a distance.

I recommend this book to all Christian teenagers and adults. It's not just an inspiring story, but an illuminating one. In 500 years, this story will still matter. Yet let us read it today.

500 Words or Less Reviews: The Secret Life of Walter Mitty

I watched *The Secret Life of Walter Mitty* in August of 2014. It was a passion project for Ben Stiller, the director and lead actor on the film. It is an adaptation of the short story by James Thurber. It is a very sincere film. If earnestness gets on your nerves then you probably won't like it. It was rejected by most filmgoers and I am unsure why.[1. The film was not well received, scoring only [51% at Rotten Tomatoes](#) and grossing only \$58 million in the US box office on a \$90 million budget.] It's not perfect and there are a few missteps along the way, but overall, I think the film accomplishes what it sets out to do.

Walter Mitty is a negative assets manager for *Life Magazine*. *Life* is in the process of publishing their final edition – and the negative that is intended to be the cover photo is lost. Walter is tasked with finding it. The film is an interesting blend of reality and whimsical, day-dream type fantasy. Walter loves his job but he yearns for his life to matter more – to be more fulfilling. As the film progresses we get to watch Walter step out of his comfort zone and start to live the life he has long lived in his dreams.

Few films have challenged me the way this one did. I wrote the following after watching it:

“I have a job that I don't love. I would rather be doing something else, though I don't know what. I am not unhappy with my current job. In fact, I am more content at work now than I probably have ever been in my adult life. Yet sometimes, I feel like I ought to be doing something more spiritually rewarding. At least, that is how I feel when I

hear Christians talk about jobs and careers.

This movie helped me take stock of my life. I don't find my identity in my career. I find it in relationships. My standing with God. My relationship with my wife, my kids, my family and my friends. I find my identity in service in my church and outside of it. But, I still feel like there is something more that I should or could be doing.

So, I am going to try to figure that out. I loved how Walter pushed himself and discovered new ways of viewing his life. I want to try to push myself in ways that might make me uncomfortable at first. How that will look is beyond me right now, but I'm going to try to figure it out. I am very comfortable and I don't think that is a place that God really wants any of us to be. So, I am going to change that, if I can."

While it was still a year before any real changes happened, this movie was the impetus to getting [Rambling Ever On](#) off the ground. It was an idea we had toyed with for some time, but this movie pushed me to make it a reality. Depending on your opinion of REO, you can thank or curse Walter Mitty.

A Book Review: Free Will Revisited

I tend to talk about Dr. Robert Picirilli in sycophantic tones. I suppose it is hard not to come across that way even though I am sincere in my praise of him and his influence in my life. I actually had him as a professor at a small school

with intimate classes. Beyond that, he has been humble enough to answer my emails about Greek long after I graduated. And then there's his published works, which have a special place on my bookshelves.

I've read all of his works at least once, and *Grace, Faith, Free Will* at least 20 times—mostly because it takes many, many readings for a man like me to absorb the fire hydrant of material. And even then I do not think I understand it all. Anytime I feel like I'm getting a little too proud of my intelligence, one chapter of that book will bring me down a notch.

So it was with great joy my Senior Pastor told me not to buy Dr. Picirilli's new book, *Free Will Revisited*, because he already had a copy for me. And despite it being a slim 135 pages, it still took me days to get through it. Because this treatment of a crucial difference between two major branches of orthodox Christianity cannot be discussed simplistically. The reasoning gets into deep waters at times. I will be rereading.

I want to say up front that yet again, just as with *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, Picirilli goes to admirable lengths to make sure he presents his opponents views accurately and fairly. Like a champ, he takes on three of the heaviest weights of the last 500 years of church history in Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. And he spends probably 35-40% of the book trying to express their views in their own words. There are no straw men being batted down. In stark contrast to the Social Media Debate Generation, Picirilli reads to understand, articulates the other position, and does not jump quickly to his responses. And by all means note the subtitle of this book is a "respectful" response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I implore all of us to take a note from Picirilli's format and approach. Listen or read carefully. Do not misrepresent your opponent's views. Be humble and respectful.

As far as the content itself, there are times where Picirilli makes a more simple and straightforward argument against the writings of these three men opposing human free will. As when he notes that it is very difficult to get around teaching that God coerces us if we believe our will is completely against God prior to salvation and that God by his grace changes our will to His. Yet there are other times Picirilli shows how complex the debate can get, as on pages 86-87 when he talks about how things that are certain are not “necessary” and how God’s knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the past. He dealt with this in the early part of *Grace, Faith, Free Will* but I believe Picirilli to be a very self-aware man, knowing that many of his readers would have read that volume and in my opinion avoids rehashing that part of his previous book but instead explains it with a fresh perspective.

[In the past I have written for REO on Arminius’s own words and how much overlap there is to Calvinism and Arminianism.](#) I did so based on what my professors, like Picirilli, have taught me. Here again, he accomplishes the same goal. He does not cite Arminius yet he still makes the point plainly and necessarily that Arminians believe that man is totally depraved, that God draws us to Himself by grace, that man does zero to contribute to his salvation in a way that could be called “works” and that God is completely sovereign over all creation, including human will. The difference lies, in large part, on the focus of the book. Do Christians accept salvation like a drowning man who realizes he cannot swim and chooses to take a rope to save him or are they saved completely void of any free, self-determined choice?

Tribalism can be dangerous in politics and Christianity. I consider myself an Arminian because I think the doctrines are important. Yet I attended a Calvinist seminary, have close Calvinist friends and will gladly lock arms with them in worship and ministry any day. But I consider this topic important enough to read and write about a couple of times a

year. And I am thankful yet again to Dr. Picirilli for the impetus to think about, react to and create in the sphere of theology. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to have their mind stretched, even if it is by Jonathan Edwards more so than Robert Picirilli. Because the point of the book is to debate, not pontificate. I only wish the other three men were alive to respond.

“Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer” – A Review

In celebration of the 500th anniversary of the *Ninety-five Theses* by Martin Luther, filmmaker Stephen MacCaskell made the documentary *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer* (2017). Many scholars of the Reformation may criticize the film’s evangelical bias, but it is refreshing to see a well-executed historical documentary that celebrates the same doctrine that drove Luther. Just as Luther was dedicated to the authority of Scripture and the doctrine of Justification by Grace through Faith, so are the Reformed theologians (including R.C. Sproul) who provide consistently insightful commentary.

I write this commentary as an Arminian Christian, a historian of the Reformation era, and a High School History teacher. From an Arminian perspective, there is nothing to shy away from in this documentary. Like all forms of Reformation Christianity, Arminianism fully agrees that salvation is the work of God and not a product of works. This film should serve as a catalyst for the discussion of many foundational

theological truths.

An hour and a half is not sufficient to do justice to the life and influence of the “monk who changed the world.” The film was certainly made more for a congregation than for historians. Even so, the film is historically accurate and doesn’t avoid difficult issues. One section deals with Luther’s temper, untamed tonged, and his “Jewish Problem” (anti-Semitism). Many may find the film’s treatment of the “Jewish Problem” as unsatisfactory, but I am impressed that a short celebratory film took the time to point out Luther’s significant flaws. It even uses the words of Scripture and John Calvin to do so.[1. See [this article](#) for a good discussion]

This treatment of the Reformation follows a typical Protestant, specifically Reformed, approach. Late Medieval Religion is understood to be works based and pervasively corrupt. Corrupt Popes, such as Julius II, and greedy clergy members like John Tezel, are portrayed as normative. While I don’t disagree with this general narrative (examples of corruption abound), I was disappointed that the film didn’t make any attempt to discuss examples of late medieval Catholic reformers like the fiery preacher Savonarola, the mystic Thomas a Kempis, or the humanist scholar Erasmus. Rather than complicate the story with a richer view of late medieval piety, the film simply discussed the condemned pre-reformers, John Wycliffe and Jan Hus and their impact on Luther. While a simplified narrative is easier on its audience, from a historical point of view, it’s unsatisfying.

I teach 9th grade World History. Aside from being a little slow for an audience with the attention span of a poodle, one of the significant flaws of *Luther* is that it assumes far too much knowledge of theology and history. While it may be a great resource for a theologically educated congregation, 9th graders, even at a Christian school, lack the previous

knowledge to make this video a good use of time for a classroom. This, of course, can be addressed as long as the teacher uses the video to reinforce what they have already learned of Luther and the Reformation and not to introduce it. This approach might also help the teacher facilitate a discussion of the film's historical interpretation that could also help to mitigate some of its shortcomings.

Overall, I recommend *Luther: The Life and Legacy of the German Reformer*. It is well made, which is rare for Christian films of any kind. It makes effective use of some simple computer animation as well as crisp on-location footage. Although its interpretation of the Reformation is too simplistic to satisfy the historian and too advanced for the high school student; it can be a great resource for the man or woman in the pew. Hopefully, this film will only be the beginning of a deeper exploration into the Reformation.

(Editor's note: You can rent or buy the movie at Amazon by clicking [this](#) link.)

My Post-Binge Review of Stranger Things 2

Yes, my wife and I have finished with Season 2 of Stranger Things already.

Actually, we've been finished for over 36 hours. We are obsessed with this show and we didn't waste much time blowing right through it in two nights.

I'm going to divide this review into two parts. The first part will be spoiler free and then I will get into spoilers. That

way those who haven't watched or finished can enjoy and those that have finished can have some fun dialoguing about the whole thing without fear of saying the wrong thing.

SPOILER FREE COMMENTS

Right off the bat I will say this sequel is, to me, as entertaining as it gets. I have almost zero true complaints and there was definitely no letdown after the massive build up. Which is rare in my experience. I'd give it an A for all the key categories: acting, storytelling, character development, use of music, conflict, intensity, special effects, etc. I feel like this is as well as TV can be done and we are truly fortunate to live in a time when the Duffer brothers used inspiration from all the best sources (it goes way beyond obvious 80's movies), their own special talent and incredible unknown actors to bring to life a story I can't get over. There was a moment in episode 8 where I was literally shaking with excitement and anxiousness.

I enjoyed all of the cast additions to varying levels, and especially Sean Astin. The character as written and his acting wheelhouse were a perfect fit. He is nearly impossible not to adore and in a town with so much drama and stress, he brings the levity. And what a Mount Rushmore of big roles for him now with *The Goonies*, *Rudy*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Stranger Things*. And join me in appreciating how those four works span four decades.

I will say this season seems to focus more on action than mystery, which I would have guessed would have disappointed me but it didn't. Because they use allusions to my absolute favorite action movies. There is also less development for some characters and more for others but the shoulders they had to stand on from Season 1 in this regard are so tall that it wasn't as essential to me that we learn more about the past to

appreciate the lead roles. This season is not in competition with Season 1 to me at all. It is a beautiful continuation and they work together with a cohesive synergy that I have never seen in a TV show before. So if you want to know if it is better than Season 1, I am the wrong person to ask.

This season is by design bigger, scarier, more intense and more adult (without a bunch of gore or sex, but there is a lot of language), even though it was all of those things before. And it works. On every level, in every way, it works. The only drama that has ever captured my attention like this was *Lost* and they are so different I won't compare them otherwise. Perhaps the biggest compliment I can give it is that after we finished it Saturday I didn't want to continue our Halloween marathon on Sunday. I just wanted to reflect on what I saw the previous two nights. Anything else would have been lame. I am thrilled to have these 17 gifts of entertainment to watch over and over again. They're even better than all those He-man men I got for Christmas in 1983.

SPOILER COMMENTS (You have been warned!)

Let's jump right in...

Episode 8 rocked my world. It reminded me so much of *Jurassic Park*, one of my 10 favorite movies ever. Notably, the scenes with the demo-dogs reminded me of the uber-intense face off with JP's velociraptors. With Bob playing a cross between Samuel L. Jackson and Laura Dern. I am sure all my vital signs read like I was the one in danger that whole episode. I loved every millisecond of it.

And speaking of Bob, I am quite torn on his death. He was such an impacting addition to the cast. He was great as a role model for the science-loving kids. He was utterly lovable. He

was a man of integrity and as safe a love interest as possible for the mother who had been through the fire, literally and figuratively.

Yet if you don't kill off important characters, I think you lose something in suspense. If they had killed off a Season 1 holdover, the fanbase would have rioted. If they killed off Steve I would have jerked my TV out of my wall and thrown it out the window. So someone really needed to be the hero who sacrificed it all. And Bob the Superhero was a great choice. He died because he knew how to do something that mega-testosterone Hopper didn't. He died because he loved others more than himself. He died in truly one of the great heroic acts in TV lore and left a legacy for those kids. I would love more Bob, but the payoff was worth it.

The other casts additions were fine to me. Paul Reiser was his usual charming self and as an old man, he still can still bring it. Max, if nothing else, allowed us to see more of Lucas and Dustin and I hope Eleven is eventually able to get over her jealousy and welcome Max into the party. As far as Billy...wow. I don't know what to think. I can only guess there is more where they are waiting to unleash in Season 3. But man what a complicated villain. A victim of abuse who clearly needs a new way to get therapy.

The scenes with Hopper and Eleven were epic. "A clash of the Titans," I heard one of the shows producers say and a perfect match for a man in need of a daughter with a girl in need of a parent. And a perfect contrast of a man who needs to protect and a girl who needs to rebel. I loved the fights as much as the apologies. But is there anything more tear-jerking than Hopper humbling himself to say he's sorry? I can't wait for more of the two brightest stars of the show interacting as a family.

I'm not sure how I feel about the side plot with Kali and especially a whole episode for it. I realize it's already

polarizing but there were things to love—the opening of Episode 1 reminded me of the Dark Knight and The Strangers (two of my other 10 favorite films ever) and Eleven meeting a “sister” who helped her to come into her own was a wonderful touch. And watching Eleven refuse to descend to the abyss of morality was absolutely worth the trip to Chicago. The only complaint is that to do this episode you lose time with the other cast. We love Stranger Things for the ensemble cast as much as anything. But this episode was a risk worth taking, especially if they explore “008” more in the future.

It was in one of the trailers, but I love, love, LOVED the scene where the four boys have “Dart” trapped in the Ghostbusters toy containment unit and they step away from it as it bounces around, just as you see in Ghostbusters. The hat tips to the 80s are sometimes subtle but other times very obvious and they are all magnificent.

The pairing of Steve and Dustin was just magical, and it seems to have happened by accident according to the Duffers. Both characters really had nothing else to connect them to the other characters and the main plot so viola! Put them together and let the good times roll. So much laughter. So much enjoyment.

And on that note, I’ll give my five favorite characters through two seasons. After Season One here was my rankings and comments:

1. Hopper – The Alpha Dog, the Man, the tough guy many men long to be...and his past trauma just cinches the title of best character
2. Eleven – So few complete sentences and yet so much depth
3. Jonathan – Every show and movie seems to have someone I relate to and the awkward guy is usually him, but he is an inspiration in this series
4. Mike – a true hero, willing to do anything for his friends

5. Steve – Yes, you want to hate him and love him at the same time...what a performance

After Season 2, here are my rankings:

1. Hopper – winner and still champ...in Episodes 8 and 9 just about every time Hopper did something incredible, my wife would shout “G.O.A.T!” (Greatest of All Time) as I do when watching sports
2. Steve – When he tells Dustin how he does his hair...he vaulted to nearly the top of this list
3. Eleven – her growth in this season was a huge part of why it was endearing...when she comes in and saves the day at the end of Episode 8, there was major applause in my house
4. Jonathan – not quite as big a role to me this time but he’s still the anti-social hero who gets the girl so I’m still on board
5. Will – he didn’t get as much screen time the first season but that set him up to shine this time around and he did. The kid can act and this was an extremely difficult role to pull off. He tasered it out of the park.

I know some will clamor for Dustin’s inclusion and he is great. It’s very hard to find room for all the greatness.

So, what did you think? If you have spoiler comments, please say so up front in your post below!

500WoL Reviews: 12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You

There are two types of information that cause me realize where my weaknesses lie and convict me into wanting to change: well-researched statistics and well-reasoned arguments from the Bible.

So, being a confessed smartphone addict (which I have written about [here](#)) Tony Reinke's new book *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You* really impacted me through the use of both.

I had seen it recommended on Twitter several times by people I consider to be wise. And I read it quickly yet carefully. I will probably read it regularly. That is how badly I need the material.

The book is written clearly and unashamedly from a Christian worldview. And as such is able to tie numerical data and Bible together. Reinke doesn't just tell you that people check their smartphones every 4.3 minutes of their waking lives, but also that 73% of smartphone users do so before they do their spiritual disciplines. As someone who believes time with God is important yet still feels deep temptation to check my phone constantly, this speaks to me. The author weaves dozens of Scripture references throughout his profound points about how smartphones affect behavior and thinking. I do not want to think through this issue without theology because I am convinced Christians cannot truly compartmentalize their lives. Reinke makes sure Truth is the main goal and not secular thought on how we change and control our habits through goodness and effort.

The smartphone phenomenon is so new (about 10 years old now) that this book is groundbreaking to me. The smartphone addiction snuck up on me so quickly and subtly. I was not

ready for it. As with all major cultural changes, Christian leaders need to be on the front lines, thinking and researching and communicating their findings. This is definitely that.

This book is peer reviewed; the foreword is by John Piper and has endorsements by people like Russell Moore and Jackie Hill Perry. So you can be assured that even if you do not agree with it all, people who get the Bible and are on the front lines of technology and social media have expressed their appreciation for what Reinke has written.

I have made conscious decisions about how to deal with my addiction as a result of this book and you can read them in the article I linked above. I am very thankful for the inspiration to repent.

If you have a smartphone, and especially if you check it constantly, I strongly recommend this book. Every culture has their sinful vices that are so common that we basically ignore them and I am convinced that time-wasting and narcissism are legitimate threats of the social media and smartphone movements. Yet they are so common they can become invisible, much like the “gossip” prayer request.

Thanks to Tony Reinke for causing people like me to see this issue for the first time.

**“Reclaiming the Lost Art of
Biblical Meditation”: A**

Review

“I wish I could single-handedly revive the art of Scripture memorization in our homes and our churches. There’s no greater legacy to bequeath to our children than a storehouse of memory verses to draw upon their whole lives through.” (Robert J. Morgan)

The Title Made Me Feel Bad (In a Good Way)

I can’t recall a time in my life when a book title convicted me like this one did. If there is one thing I know I should do but don’t do often enough, it’s biblical meditation. So I got this book as quickly as I could and read it carefully.

I’ll go ahead and abandon any pretense that this “review” will offer any substantial critique of what Dr. Morgan writes here. I think it is dangerous to put people on pedestals where they cannot be critiqued, but my main goal here is to try to influence people to read this book because the content is so important. Any criticisms I have are extremely superficial and will succumb to the weight of the Dr. Morgan’s central message.

Evangelical Crusades and Hannibal Lector Bring it Home

The content portion of the book is a tidy 123 pages and I knocked it out in a couple of days in probably less than three hours total. It reads simply enough that I would think an average 9-year old could understand it. But that is not an insult because it’s chock full of extremely helpful advice, Scripture references and practical illustrations that I hope not only inspire me but also guide me at 39 years old to make Scripture meditation a bigger part of my life. I’ve been a

pastor for 15 years. I have attended two exceptional Bible Colleges. I have memorized and meditated on Scripture before. But as I alluded to above, I have never made it a habit and such an integral part of my life as you can tell Dr. Morgan has.

Anyone who knows Dr. Morgan or has sat under his preaching knows that you can count on two things with everything he teaches: First, he will incorporate a ton of Bible. I remember once when I was at a service at Donelson, Dr. Morgan's church in Nashville, his ministry cohort Jeff Nichols joked from the stage that when he takes notes on Rob's sermons he can count on there being like 17 well thought-out Scripture references in support of each point. Secondly, he will show you how diversely read he is by citing an insane amount of biographical information and quotes from people from centuries ago and people from today. Just look at the footnotes in the back of this book and marvel not only of his use of Billy Graham and J.I. Packer, but also Anthony Hopkins and Stephen King. And also his use of people I do not know but that he knows personally and had invaluable wisdom to offer for this book.

And what he does by quoting the sacred and the secular is build a very simple yet very powerful case for how valuable meditation is for learning and behavior. The amount of times the Bible refers to meditation, even if it doesn't use that word, is legion. Old Testament, New Testament, historical books, psalms, prophets, gospels, letters...every section has significant contributions here and that makes this material impossible to ignore.

We Don't Meditate Because We Are Good; We Meditate **Because We're Not**

I confess I appreciate as well how Dr. Morgan weaves in at

times his own personal weaknesses and struggles that have led him to be a better meditator. It is easy for someone like me to look at his lengthy pastoral and preaching ministry and to idealize it. But he does not allow for that. He no doubt practices biblical meditation as well as anyone I know and has earned the right to write this book, but he allows us to see that meditation exists in large part because we are so flawed and weak. We must meditate because we know God so poorly on our own. Our minds are so bent to evil and darkness, worry and anxiety, that meditation is as much like medicine for the sinful soul as it is exercise for the mind. I daresay that is what separates Christian meditation from things like Zen Buddhism. The book is definitely written humbly and not haughtily and I am positive that when a person meditates constantly on the Bible, teaching others to do well will likely be from a place of humility. That's how the Bible works in teaching us about how we relate to God.

The 'tips' interspersed are so practical, yet not often practiced. At least by me. I am praying that will change. Sticky notes will be easy. Sharing my meditation with people I come across during the day will be hard. But I will try both, and many other things he advises.

Dr. Morgan lists several times we should meditate—when we wake up in the morning, when we wake up in the middle of the night, when we are lonely, when we are on a plane, when we drive, etc. Basically, we can mediate constantly. At that point the conviction of the book title came and hit me full in the face. I meditate so infrequently. I am too easily distracted. I have little doubt the content of the book, notably the Scriptures within, will change my course on this. I pray that it lasts til I die and is not a short lived emotional response.

Buy It. Read It. Do It.

I hope this book helps millions as it has helped my thinking (and, in theory, my behavior). I am challenged to put the phone down more and to focus my thoughts on Scripture and the nature of God more often. I know that Biblical meditation is not a quick fix to all anxiety and depression and crises. But it is a way to know God better and to allow him to change us even if he does not change our circumstances. These things will always be better for us than having everything “fixed”. If we are to know him in the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his suffering and if we are to take every thought captive, we must meditate. Dr. Morgan’s book is an extremely beneficial resource to challenge and guide even older Christians in this discipline.

Buy the book by clicking the picture below:

