

500 Words or Less Reviews: To Kill a Mockingbird (Film)

In 1960, Harper Lee published her masterpiece, *To Kill a Mockingbird*. It has since become one of the most beloved books of millions of readers. The movie adaptation of the book bearing the same name was released just two years after its original publication. One might have thought that since the movie was released so quickly after the book's first appearance it would be extremely good at best, but it is debatably the greatest movie adaptation of a book ever. (To be honest, there are several others that are very close contenders. Nevertheless, TKaM gets my vote.)

In the year it opened, *To Kill a Mockingbird* garnered eight nominations at the Oscar's, winning three of those. But moviegoers recognized that it was more than merely one of the best movie of the year; both critics and audiences rightly saw it as one of the greatest movies of all time. It has maintained that status.

I don't think anything made by mankind is ever perfect. Things that we do and make can always be perfected in some way. But I do admit that there are some things pretty close to perfection. This particular work of art directed by Robert Mulligan fits well in that category.

There is so much to appreciate here, from the mastery of the music, the directing, the writing, the cinematography, etc. Everything clicks, everything turns like a well-oiled movie machine, a projector, if you will. A good argument could be made that the acting is the film's most outstanding feature. This is particularly true of its three main actors: Gregory Peck (Atticus Finch), Mary Badham (Scout Finch), and Phillip Alford (Jem Finch). This is Peck at his award-winning and iconic finest, which is actually no surprise. Peck is always

so good at his profession that he could probably out-act most actors at acting while gagged, tied, and encased in a coffin—and still win an Oscar. No, the actual surprise here is the acting of Badham and Alford, neither of whom had been previously trained but who both did a superb job carrying most of the movie alone.

To Kill a Mockingbird is set in a quaint little town and looks at the world from the young vantage points of Scout and Jem. The story is a coming of age one of sorts. Along their young journey they get their first real glimpse into the adult world filled with its selfish pride, racism, death, and hatred. In the midst of this stands the pillar that is their father, Atticus, a lone bulwark of wisdom and mercy and grace and love.

Along the journey, they will adventure with their best friend Dill Harris, and encounter unforgettable characters like Boo Radley (portrayed by Robert Duvall in his debut film appearance), Tom Robinson, Calpurnia, Mayella Ewell, Bob Ewell, and many other wonderful and colorful people.

Lastly, a final shout-out to legendary composer, Elmer Bernstein, for the film's haunting, beautiful, utterly timeless soundtrack.

500WoL 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: Ready Player One

Time warps our memories of things we once loved in various ways, and when enough time goes by, the exact memories we had begin to slip away from us like sand through an hourglass. When we finally are able to come back to the thing itself, whether a good book or a Nintendo game played with a trusty NES controller, some pieces of time come shooting back up to us through the hourglass. For a moment, we are reconnected to those past memories and versions of ourselves. And yet, we have changed in that time span. Our perception of what we are

able to experience again is colored by eyes that have since matured and have felt more of the weight of the world.

I read the book version of "Ready Player One" almost two years ago, so it's fitting that enough time has gone by for me to forget key scenes or details from the plot. It's like my memory of what happened has since dissolved into fragments. During the early screening for the film, I was sitting between a close friend and a random stranger, and all three of us had read the book. We discussed a few scenes, and the plot progression started to come back to me. My anticipation started to build. Would the film deliver, or would it let me down?

When I first heard that the *Ready Player One* movie was in production, I wasn't too thrilled. The book was an ambitious and expansive imaginary romp through 80's nostalgia. "They'll never pull a movie like this off convincingly," I told myself. The trailers left a lot to be desired because it looked like they were going to change the plot significantly. And they did.

But you know what? Somehow it worked.

After the movie, the three of us sat and reflected on what we had just watched. The movie had the overall feel of an 80s adventure flick, Spielberg style. It felt like what author Ernest Cline (who was part of the creative process on the film) might have done with the plot in a parallel universe. My biggest fear going into the movie would be that it would turn out to be a heartless, piecemeal version of what I had experienced and loved while reading the book, but I was quite happy to be wrong. Yes, parts of the movie felt a bit rushed or contrived, and I was still miffed at a few parts of the book that didn't make it into the movie, but overall I was very glad to have seen it.

The movie left me feeling a bit bizarre because it was like

what I had once experienced, yet it was different altogether. It's akin to playing a favorite game from your childhood that is now radically different in form, yet still retains the original essence of what you had enjoyed in the past.

8/10

(Parental content advisory: There are a few strong curse words throughout the PG-13 rated film.)

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.

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.

500 + 63 Words or Less

Reviews: The Deathly Hallows

It took me almost a year, but I have finally finished my first reading of the 7-book Harry Potter series and it has been quite the ride, one of the best literary adventures of my life. Over the course of my journey I have met wizards, witches, goblins, ghouls, werewolves, house elves, talking portraits, merpeople, centaurs, giants, dragons, and dementors. And this is only a portion of the beings Harry Potter has introduced me to.

While I still consider *The Half Blood Prince* the best book in the series for a variety of reasons, the *Deathly Hallows* is not far behind. It came across to me as the most realistic of the entire lot with its depiction of what a storybook "adventure" would probably be like. There would likely be a lot of wandering about and being unsure as to what to do. People would get irritated with each other, they would get bored with all the wandering around looking for something, and everyone involved would get disillusioned with the whole shebang in varying degrees and forms. Much like the adventure of life itself.

It was also a much different animal in that most of it did not take place in Hogwarts but on the aforementioned climactic adventure. In my opinion, the personal drama that goes on between the three adventurers while the adventure slowly got going is not remotely detracting. In fact, this personal drama made up some of the best parts of the book. There was a heaping helping of meaty characterization to be had there by all three of them.

And there is the other big character of the book who wasn't even around for the vast majority of it. Although he died in *The Half Blood Prince*, Dumbledore's presence is huge in the *Deathly Hollows*. In much of the book it is as though he were symbolic of the God of Scripture with Harry constantly

questioning him and why he didn't explain this or that while he was alive. Whether or not Rowling really meant for this to be the case when she wrote it, I don't know, but the likeness is strong.

We also learn a lot about Dumbledore's personal backstory and that he wasn't perfect after all. Like everyone else, he had baggage, baggage that for him directed the course of the rest of his life. It is brilliant characterization of a character that had already left the world of our story.

The Deathly Hallows is a fitting culmination of all the preceding acts. And we take many a sad farewell (for the present) of Hermione, Ron, the other Weasleys, Lupin, Tonks, Mad Dog Moody, Luna, Neville, Hagrid, McGonagall, and many other unforgettable characters that have left on us a lasting impact. Oddly, though, the departure the most emotional to me, was the farewell of the Dursleys. Those Muggliest of all Muggles who treated Harry like so much trash for so long somehow managed to worm their way into my heart. I'll miss them.

That is the end of my 500WoL. Here is my personal ranking of the seven books:

1. *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*
 2. *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*
 3. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*
 4. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*
 5. *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*
 6. *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*
 7. *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*
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500 Words or Less Reviews: Hammock – *Mysterium*

I have long loved the music of *Hammock*, the band comprised of guitarists and sound-scapers, Marc Byrd and Andrew Thompson. Perhaps one day I will write a detailed exploration of their entire discography. For now, I will say this: I love the mood and energy they create with their particular brand of post-rock ambient music. They craft sound and emotion by using guitars, pedals, piano, cello, and various other tools. For the uninitiated, their music floats and sinks; built around droning guitars. You will not hear them on your local radio station. I do not know enough about what goes into making an album like this, I just know that whatever they do, they do it better than most.

Mysterium, their eighth full-length album, continues *Hammock*'s mastery of their chosen art form. In some ways, it is their biggest album to date – with choral and orchestra components used to complement the already stunning melodies they play with guitar and piano. In other ways, it is their most personal and vulnerable album. They composed and dedicated the album to Clark Kern, Marc Byrd's nephew, who died in 2016 after fighting with a rare disease for his entire life. This creates an album full of arresting melodies tenderly worked into subdued and serene numbers.

Music, at its very core, is supposed to make us feel. When we listen to a song, we should sense what the artists felt when they sculpted it from air. If an artist can do that well, they will capture our imaginations and our deepest emotions. *Hammock* does that and does it in remarkable fashion. *Mysterium* is built on converging layers of grief, sadness, and hope. These mostly wordless songs speak volumes about life, death, and the struggle each of us face when we experience a profound loss. *Hammock* is so gifted at writing emotionally resonant

music they rarely need words to communicate, and on this album, they take that a step further by using silence to capture the full weight of grief and reverence.

The songs are ethereal, poignant, and sacred. At times as I listened, it felt as if the sadness of a particular song would completely overwhelm me. Then the song would introduce a new melody and the entire mood would change. What had been a grief so deep it ached became a hope so powerful it soared. I have loved *Hammock's* music from the first note I heard, mostly because their music speaks to both parts of my life – the here and now and the yet to come. *Hammock* has one hand digging deep into the soil of the human condition while the other is reaching, grasping, straining for the heavens above.

If these descriptions do not explain what their music sounds like, I am truly sorry. I do not have the skills as a writer to explain my reaction to their music. I just know I long for spiritual nourishment of this kind and *Mysterium* is a veritable feast for my soul.

Listen to the album below or click [this link](#) to buy it – [Mysterium](#).

500 Words or Less Reviews: Look What Taylor Swift Made Me Do

I am not a fan of Taylor Swift. Never have been. Her only album I have been able to tolerate is *1989*. I feel that disclaimer is necessary from the outset.

Unless you live under a rock, you probably noticed that Taylor released a new song a few days ago. It is titled, "Look What You Made Me Do." The song is awful – filled with all the poorest elements of modern pop music. However, looking beyond the melody and the beat, the song is emblematic of the very worst of our society. It is the quintessential anthem of our narcissistic and victim culture. If there was any doubt before, we can now crown Taylor Swift as the Queen Victim of our age.

The song is a list of the times Taylor feels she has been slighted, wronged, offended, judged, criticized, and blamed. It is whiny and screechy and so inwardly focused that it is difficult to take any of it seriously. There isn't a whiff of self-awareness. No trace of self-reflection. She even sees herself as a Christ figure in the music video – arms outstretched with a crucifix behind her. In Taylor's fantasy world, there are many who have lied about her and stabbed her in the back, so hers is a righteous anger. It's hard to hear all this self-pity coming from a 27-year-old woman who is worth nearly \$300 million. The end result of the song is to declare that due to all the horrible, unfair, mean stuff that has been said about or done to her, that the old Taylor Swift is dead and she has become someone else – someone angry and vengeful. The problem with that declaration is that Taylor Swift has been a "mean girl" for a long time. You only have to listen to her older albums to see the spitefulness with which she has always operated. But in her warped view, she is the put-upon victim, the innocent, the martyr. In her mind, her enemies forced her to create and release this song and now that she has taken all she can, she is ready to get down in the mud with all those "liars and dirty, dirty cheats of the world." So, we have that to look forward to...

We are a society of self-aggrandizers, self-promoters, and self-congratulators who in our minds can do no wrong, bear no responsibility for any of our actions, and are in a constant

state of victimization. Everyone is out to get us. So if no one is on our side, then we have to do everything we can to get ours. We are “me monsters” of the highest order. And society will praise us for that. Society will champion us until it has no more use for us and then it will destroy us. That is the end that is awaiting Taylor Swift. And based on the reception to her new single, it is an end that could be here sooner than she expects.

500 Words or Less Reviews: Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

It has been almost three weeks since I have finished [Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince](#). I have actually been nervous about this one and wanted to approach it with a respectable amount of honor as the most literarily well-rounded of the lot.

[Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince](#) clocks in at 652 pages, immediately setting the stage for the plot of the rest of the book during a cryptic meeting between Severus Snape and the Black sisters. It is during this encounter that Snape makes an unbreakable vow with Narcissa Malfoy in which he will be obligated to help her son, young Draco Malfoy, with a Voldemort-ordained task. The plot of the rest of the work flows from this Malfoy/Snape mission.

In essence, the book is really about Snape himself. This fact makes the mysterious naming of the book itself especially ingenious. If you have read this far into the article, you are passionate enough about the franchise to already be familiar

with the story. Assuming that is the case, it is in no way a SPOILER to say that Malfoy and Snape accomplish their mission, with Snape ending Dumbledore's life in the lightning-struck tower.

One of the very best and most fascinating characterizations in the entire franchise has been embodied in the person of the relatively rarely seen Dumbledore. But Rowling makes up for that rarity here and with much magnificence. There are too many amazing Dumbledore scenes to name. And then he goes out in high style with one of the best funerals of all time with even the merpeople and the centaurs showing up to pay him homage.

The central theme of this work was very clear and extremely well exemplified: love. Love is everywhere: Tonks and Lupin, Bill and Fleur, Ron and Hermione, Harry and Ginny, and, um, Ron's passing "thing" with Lavender Brown. Ron also has an unfortunate encounter with some love potion. To cap it all off, Dumbledore talks more deeply in *Half-Blood Prince* than in previous books concerning Voldemort's one true weakness, which is his inability to love, a "fault" that would be his undoing.

Although they have been present in every book, I have found that Rowling is getting better at the long stretches of "information relation." At this point, they feel like very natural points of the dialogue instead of contrived and stilted manifestos. It worked better than ever in *HBP*. In fact, I would say that the dialogue as a whole was one of the book's most winning points. The humor was especially strong. I don't think Rowling has given me as many belly laughs in any previous work. Although the examples are legion, the best humor, in my opinion, probably came by way of the person of Luna Lovegood.

The dialogue, the honed prose, the final glories of Dumbledore, the humor, the love, etc., etc., etc, and so forth. For these reasons, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood*

Prince has taken first place in the HP house of my heart.

500WoL: Homecoming

Spider-Man:

Spider-Man is back on the big screen. It seems like just yesterday that Andrew Garfield donned the red and blue Spidey suit in two Spider-Man films. And only a short time before that Tobey Maguire filled the role for his own trilogy. Surely there haven't been three different iterations of this character in the last 16 years?

Let's get the bad stuff out of the way first. Yes, Spider-Man has been booted, rebooted, and re-rebooted too many times. Sony knows how popular the character is and they desperately made the *Amazing Spider-Man* films in an effort to not lose the rights. (This is all technical and boring, but they would have lost the rights for the character had they not made the Garfield film.) So, we have seen too many origin stories. We have seen too many versions of the character: the middle-aged barely out of high school, mopey, Maguire version. The too cool for school, overly complicated Garfield version. And now we have the Tom Holland, first seen in *Captain America: Civil War*, version. You would think audiences would be tired of Spidey, Peter Parker, and all the rest. You would think filmmakers would have run out of good ideas for the character.

You would be wrong. While *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is not a perfect film, it is fun, exciting, and smart. It is tonally the most consistent and appropriate Spider-Man film yet. Peter Parker is a high school student. He is a nerd. Things just never go exactly right for him and this film captures all of

those things perfectly. Tom Holland is the first actor to get both Parker and Spidey right. Both Maguire and Garfield got certain things right but were both off on other aspects of the character. Holland plays both the excitement and energy of a 15 year old Spider-Man as well as the awkwardness and insecurities of a high school aged Peter Parker.

The film does suffer from some good but not great set pieces, and the music is mostly forgettable. The action sequences are good but lack enough clarity and overall vision to really make them excel.

While there are shortcomings, the film earns its keep with the characters, the relationships, and the humor. The supporting cast is given plenty of great material to work with and everyone makes the most of it. The villain is well rounded and given enough personality and motivation to work. And including Tony Stark and Happy Hogan at strategic moments serves the film well and adds a much needed dimension to the story.

The end result is a good film. A fun film. The groundwork is there for a great film and hopefully the team that made this will tighten the few areas that need work and hone those areas where they already impressed. We are in good hands with the character moving forward. *Spider-Man: Homecoming* is a worthy addition to the Marvel roster and well worth your time.

Stay through all the credits. You can thank me later