

Can You Believe What 'USA Today' Is Saying About 'Heaven Is for Real'?

A wide-eyed 4-year-old makes a fairly convincing case for the existence of an afterlife in *Heaven Is for Real*. But it's Greg Kinnear, with his characteristic affability, who just about seals the deal.

Humor infuses the film (2 1/2 stars out of 4; rated PG), which opened nationwide Wednesday and is based on the best-selling book. By focusing on the bond between father and son, the movie avoids being heavy-handed or preachy, a wise choice for a film that asserts heaven exists, based on the earnest insistence of a precocious preschooler.

Kinnear plays Todd Burpo, a likable minister in a small Nebraska town. His devoted wife, Sonja (Kelly Reilly), leads the church choir. They have two young children.

When little Colton (adorable 6-year-old actor Connor Corum) becomes critically ill with a ruptured appendix, all signs point to tragedy. Fortunately, the little boy pulls through. Soon afterward he speaks matter-of-factly about spending time with Jesus and angels who sang to him while his body was in surgery.

Though Todd is a man of faith, he is taken aback by his son's assertions. But he questions Colton and the boy provides vivid details, including encounters with dead relatives whom he had never met.

Todd researches near-death experiences and speaks to a psychologist at a local college in his quest to understand his son.

When he tells his congregation about his son's experience, he's peppered with questions. The revelation deeply disturbs a key member of the church council (Margo Martindale), who says it makes their church a curiosity. She's also uncomfortable with the specter of hell that it raises. Herein lies one of the film's more intriguing subplots: Not every church member is willing to accept unquestioningly that a little boy has seen heaven. Unfortunately, the screenplay raises the issue of tension within congregations, then glosses over it too easily.

The movie may fail to convince skeptics, but it takes a position in a manner digestible for the masses. The desire for an afterlife is almost universal, and its existence is something most people have considered.

Sidestepping denominational details, the story focuses on an empathetic couple that worries over finances and grapples with adversity. In a sermon, Todd posits that heaven may manifest itself in more recognizable guises than celestial choirs of angels: "Haven't we already had a glimpse of something? In the cry of a baby, the courage of a friend, the love of a mother or a father?"

Kinnear is the linchpin that makes the movie work. Had anyone else played Todd, the story might come off as holier-than-thou. But Kinnear brings an appealing Everyman quality to the role. Casting is key to this film's accessibility. Martindale grounds the film with her down-to-earth performance as a mom who lost her serviceman son. Thomas Haden Church is appealingly low-key as a local banker, and young Corum is strikingly natural.

Set amid scenic Midwestern farm country, the cinematography by Oscar-winning Dean Semler is stunning.

Are there sentimental, corny moments? Yes, a few. And Todd's investigation of his son's claims is cursory at best.

But the veracity of a sweet little boy's claims is not

entirely the point. The film effectively raises an issue rarely tackled in mainstream studio movies with bankable actors. And it does so with a light touch, resulting in a well-acted, family-friendly and timely movie for Easter audiences that is just as much about appreciating life on Earth as it is about what comes after.