

Secular Movie Unashamedly Promotes Matthew 22:39

If the new film *Wonder*, releasing this weekend and starring Julia Roberts, Owen Wilson and Jacob Tremblay, sparks positive change in its viewers, it's definitely by design, according to co-producer Todd Lieberman.

"If anything can make people feel better and have them act better toward other people, that's a good thing," he said on the eve of the film's red-carpet premiere in Los Angeles.

Based on the bestselling 2012 novel of the same name by R. J. Palacio, the film follows Auggie Pullman, a boy with facial deformities, and his family as he enters public school for the first time.

A central theme in the film is acceptance and not just for the lead character but also through the backstories of supporting characters. Even characters who would typically seem unsympathetic get a fair treatment as the audience discovers the pain they face in their own lives.

Lieberman, who produced the film under the Mandeville Films banner with business partner David Hoberman, believes the film will speak to faith-based audiences because the message of "loving your neighbor" is well represented.

"The tenets of what the Bible talks about and the teachings of kindness, acceptance, helping your neighbor, those are things that someone can come away from this movie feeling," he said.

He also likened the deeper meaning of looking beyond appearances and even actions as similar to removing physical and emotional masks.

"While (Auggie's) is a physical manifestation of a mask, it

also represents every person having some version of a mask," Lieberman said. "What the book does so brilliantly, and we emulated, is shifting perspectives so that you do get behind each behind each person's masks and see that everybody, even the bully, is dealing with something."

Along with heavier subjects, such as bullying and social fear, the film follows the author's talent of inserting humor and light-hearted moments. That "roadmap," along with the casting of Roberts, Wilson and Tremblay, and the direction of Stephen Chbosky, are what Lieberman credits for "not veering too far into sentimentality."

Palacio's 2012 novel received many awards, including the Mark Twain Award and Junior Young Reader's Choice Awards, and has even been introduced as curriculum in schools. Early word on the film is positive from both audiences and critics, giving Lieberman hope that the film will also continue to expand a movement of love and understanding.

"Not to put too much weight on one film, but I know I felt better as a person after having finished reading the book, and hey, if we can accomplish even a sliver of that for people who see the movie, then we will have done something," he said.

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