

Ryan
Gosling

Emily
Mortimer

Paul
Schneider

Kelli
Garner

Patricia
Clarkson

The search for true love begins outside the box



METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYERS PICTURES and
SONEY KIMMEL ENTERTAINMENT PRESENT
A JOHN CAMERON / SARAH AUBREY PRODUCTION
A SHAG GILLESPE FILM RYAN GOSLING "LARS AND THE REAL GIRL"
EMILY MORTIMER PAUL SCHNEIDER KELLI GARNER
AND PATRICIA CLARKSON COSTUME DESIGNER DAVID RUBIN, CSA AND RICHARD HECKS, CSA
WITH SPRING ASPERS BY DAVID TURN COSTUME DESIGNER KRISTIN MANN
TITLE DESIGNER TATIANA S. REESE, A.C.E. EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANDREW GREENAL PRODUCED BY ADAM KIMMEL
PRODUCED BY WILLIAM HERRBERG BRUCE TOLL PETER BERG
PRODUCED BY SONEY KIMMEL JOHN CAMERON SARAH AUBREY
WRITTEN BY NANCY OLIVER PRODUCED BY SHAG GILLESPE

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AND THE

REAL
GIRL

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IN THEATRES THIS FALL

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INTRODUCTION

Lars and the Real Girl is a postmodern parable about childlike faith and love. It is a sweet, heartfelt portrait of the kingdom of God in action. This faith-affirming dramedy contains the rarest of cinematic treasures—emotional honesty.

The premise seems ripe for exploitation and cheap jokes. Lars Lindstrom is so lonely that he purchases a life-size, anatomically correct doll. Yet, his love for “Bianca” remains remarkably pure. Lying on his back in a tree, Lars sings Nat “King” Cole’s classic song “L-O-V-E” to Bianca with innocence and joy. The entire community is challenged to adopt Lars’ childlike approach to life and love. The results are both comedic and touching.

Ryan Gosling delivers one of the most original, unaffected performances in years as the damaged Lars. He creates an inspiring portrait of goodness. Too often, onscreen goodness comes off as syrupy, maudlin or easy. Director Craig Gillespie takes all the clichés of relationship films—painful breakups, jealousies, tragedies, but re-humanizes them—through a Real Doll. *Lars* demonstrates the power of love to heal the most painful memories.

This study guide will look at three transformational aspects of *Lars and the Real Girl*. Lars’ initial **loneliness** is overcome by the **neighborliness** of family and friends. While tempted to dismiss Lars’ delusion as **foolishness**, the community comes to recognize it as genuine **goodness**. While Lars’ fixation upon a blow up doll could be seen as **childishness**, by the conclusion of the film, Lars is heralded for his **childlikeness**. *Lars and the Real Girl* reminds us of Jesus’ challenging words, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”



The film could have been dark, twisted and awful. Yet, *Lars and the Real Girl* upholds goodness and light. Screenwriter Nancy Oliver explains her aspirations, “It seemed to me there were a lot of movies that were dark, edgy, sarcastic and sometimes mean-spirited. I wanted to write something about compassion and goodness, something that was sincere, because I wasn’t seeing that anywhere.” Like Bianca, *Lars and the Real Girl* is delivered as an unexpected gift.

LONELINESS or NEIGHBORLINESS

The film opens with **Lars Lindstrom** in his cold Midwestern apartment. He is lonely, isolated, clinging to a security blanket. Lars has a mundane, nondescript job. His only consistent social solace is the local church. Reverend Bock delivers a sermon on the church's "only one law"—"love one another." He concludes, "Love is God in action."

Lars lives in the garage behind his family's house. His sister-in-law, **Karin**, knocks on his door, inviting him to breakfast. But Lars resists her attempts to be neighborly. Karin's efforts to reach out to Lars are so persistent that she jumps in front of his car. A pregnant Karin tackles him, dragging him to dinner for salmon and cherry pie.

Over dinner, Lars' older brother Gus says, "Karen thinks you've got a problem because you spend so much time by yourself." She's worried about whether he is too isolated. What about Lars' need for companionship and community?

How does Lars combat loneliness? He tells Gus and Karin, "I have a visitor and she's not from here. I met her on the Internet. She's in a wheelchair." Lars bought an anatomically correct, made-to-order Real-Doll. He introduces her as "Bianca", a half-Brazilian, half-Danish missionary on sabbatical. Gus and Karin's shock and horror offers plenty of comic relief to an awkward situation.

Yet Lars insists upon treating Bianca with dignity and respect. He announces, "She's really religious," so she needs to stay in the house, rather than with Lars in the garage. He is preserving the virtue of a blow-up doll.

Actor Ryan Gosling says, "I admire Lars. Even though he is a very lonely person, he doesn't make a choice to be loved; he makes a choice to love something....It doesn't necessarily have to love you back. It doesn't need to be a transaction. You can just give."

REFLECTION:

Lev. 19:18

Luke 10:25-37

Matthew 22:34-40

Romans 13:9-10

The theme of *Lars and the Real Girl* is announced in the priest's homily, "Love one another." Consider the variety of biblical texts which reinforce this commandment.

Leviticus 19:18 challenges us to "Love your neighbor as yourself." In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10), Jesus answered the question, "Who is my neighbor?" He expands our definition behind the people next door. Neighborliness must extend to anyone who is hungry, hurting, downtrodden, or abused.



Jesus gathers all of the Law and the prophets in two commandments—"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all mind" and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Matthew 22:34-40) St. Paul reiterates this resounding theme, calling "Love the fulfillment of the law." The only debt we owe is "the continuing debt to love one another." (Romans 13:8-10) Lars is brought of his isolation by the love of others: his family and his girlfriend, Bianca.

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you know people who are isolated and alone like Lars? Who is your neighbor?
2. What kind of hospitality and neighborliness can you practice? A call, a visit, an invitation to a meal?
3. How far would you go, (even tackling a person like Lars!), to be a good neighbor?

FOOLISHNESS or GOODNESS

As Lars continues to speak for Bianca, talking to her as if she was a real person, his brother and sister-in-law grow worried. How should they respond to such crazy behavior? They make an appointment with the local doctor, Dagmar (played by Patricia Clarkson with a calm resolve).

Dagmar takes Bianca's blood pressure, treating her with the same protocol as any real patient. She watches Lars with a casual attention, diagnosing him as delusional. Her advice to Gus and Karin--respond to Bianca the same way as Lars does, as a real girl.

Dagmar encourages them to be patient, "Bianca's in town for a reason."

Yet, Gus rejects this diagnosis, "What will people think? We'll look foolish."

Karin insists, "We can't worry about that." She alerts a small group from church about Lars' girlfriend (and his condition).

While the church community debates Lars' sanity, Mrs. Gruner reminds them of the skeletons inhabiting all their closets. Doesn't everyone have an embarrassing or challenging relative in their family tree? Reverend Bock asks a simple question, "What would Jesus do?" The church, led by Mrs. Gruner, extends love and grace to Bianca (and an appreciative Lars).

Their non-judgmental attitude becomes a model for the rest of the community to follow.

Screenwriter Nancy Oliver explains her intentions, "A question I have often asked myself is, 'If there are so many desperate people walking around with mental illness, what would happen if we treated their illnesses and their delusions with compassion, acceptance and tolerance instead of this medieval shunning thing that we do.'"

REFLECTION:

I Corinthians 3:18-19

Matt 11:25

Matthew 7:1-5

Romans 2:1



Gus and Karin struggle with the public's perception of Lars. Gus doesn't want to appear foolish by treating Bianca and Lars as 'normal'. They are challenged to adopt a counter-cultural biblical attitude.

St. Paul explains the upside down thinking of God's kingdom in I Corinthians 3:18-19. "If any one of you think he is wise by the standards of this age, he should become a "fool" so that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this

world is foolishness

in God's sight." What seems "crazy" or "foolish" to Gus, may have a definite value in the divine perspective. Jesus talked about how God hid things from the wise and learned, revealing them to little children (Matthew 11:25).

Gus is challenged to suspend judgment of his brother's behavior. Jesus offered plenty of warnings against the blindness that accompanies judging others. St. Paul provided an extensive list of sins in Romans 1. Yet, it was simply to prepare us for his main point in Romans 2:1, "At whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things."

Before Gus dismisses Lars, he must examine his own actions. Gus is snapped back to years earlier, when he left Lars behind with their grieving father. Gus admits, "It's all my fault. I left here as fast as I could. I never thought about him."

QUESTIONS:

1. *What makes you feel foolish? Whose opinions do you fear?*

2. *Who have you pre-judged in your community? What would Jesus do?*

3. *What personal failings do you need to address rather than projecting them onto others?*

CHILDISHNESS or CHILDLIKENESS

As Bianca (and Lars) continue their weekly checkups with the doctor, the depths of Lars' problems begin to surface. He must overcome tremendous psychological scars from childhood. Lars reveals to Dagmar how painfully he experiences human contact. It burns him.

We come to understand how the blankness of a blow up doll meets Lars' need for distance. Bianca never judges anyone, whether 'reading' to children, 'volunteering' at the hospital, or getting her hair done. In a competitive and driven world, Bianca's quiet presence is a rare comfort. Lars marvels, "That's why God made her—to help people."

As Lars goes deeper in therapy, he becomes more possessive towards Bianca. He doesn't want to share her with the community. Lars tells his sister-in-law he doesn't want to have to consult Bianca's busy schedule. Karin points out all the sacrifices made by friends and family for Lars and Bianca, "We dress her. It is not easy, but we do it. Don't tell me we don't care."



Lars also grows jealous of his co-worker, Margo's new boyfriend. He had taken her affection for granted. As Lars becomes more adult in his feelings, he also grows frustrated. Is he ready for a relationship with Margo? Rather than looking childlike, Lars starts to behave childishly. Reverend Bock preaches a sermon in church from I Corinthians 13, "When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me."

Lars asks his brother, Gus, "How did you know that you were a man?" Gus weighs his answer carefully, "When you decide to do what's right, even when it hurts." As Lars' struggles with his future with Bianca, Mrs. Gruner and her sewing circle bring him dinner. The church ladies offer a comforting presence, "We came over to sit. That's what people do when tragedy strikes." The loving support of the local community is a tangible demonstration of faith in action. They understand the timeless truth that, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35)

Producer John Cameron summarizes *Lars and the Real Girl*, "It's about a damaged, sweet, shy young man coming to terms with a trauma from his past. And beyond that, it's a movie about community, how his family and the folks around him come together to help."

REFLECTION:

Mark 10:14-15

Matthew 18:1-6

I Corinthians 13:11

Acts 20:35

Due to a painful past, Lars struggles with human touch. He is locked into a childlike state. Yet, Jesus demonstrated a special burden towards children. He told his disciples to "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14). Jesus turned childlikeness into a virtue, declaring, "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:15).

Lars carries out a chaste and pure relationship with Bianca. While the community may be tempted to judge him, Lars emerges beyond reproach. Jesus celebrates such innocence, challenging his disciples, "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Yet childlikeness doesn't mean we can act childish. St. Paul shows that love requires a combination of innocence and maturity. We must put away childish ways, putting others interests before our own. Lars must learn how to let go of Bianca, to seek her best interests. Such self-sacrifice is the mark of a deeper love—both innocent and knowing, informed and transformed. Lars and his local community put into practice Jesus' enduring words, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

QUESTIONS:

1. *What painful aspects of your upbringing make you leery of human contact or close relationships? Ask God to heal those areas and perhaps seek professional help like Dr. Dagmar offers in Lars and the Real Girl.*

2. *Like Lars, in what ways are you still childish, being jealous of others or possessive of relationships? Who might you need to free up to serve others? What rites of passage can help you attain maturity in Christ? Like Lars, how can you connect with a Christian community that can nurture you? Where can you give back to your local (or global!) community?*

CONCLUSION

Lars and the Real Girl is a cinematic delight. Like Lars Lindstrom, it is rare, refreshing and deserving of special attention. The movie needs to be savored and nurtured. At first it may appear off-putting, but patient viewers will be rewarded with a sweet satisfaction. *Lars and the Real Girl* sneaks up on audiences, building towards a hard-fought, satisfying conclusion. It wrings genuine laughter and honest tears from an absurd situation. In a world of cynical manipulation, *Lars and the Real Girl* feels authentic, full of lived-religion. From the winter locations to the heartfelt performances through the nuanced script, *Lars and the Real Girl* restores my faith in the movies and in God's people. Make a memorable date with Lars. And figure out how you can give back to your community.

STUDY NOTES:



Craig Detweiler is an author, screenwriter, and professor at Fuller Theological Seminary. His cultural commentary has been featured in The New York Times, on CNN, and National Public Radio. His next film in the feature documentary, *Purple State of Mind*, about the religious and political divide in America. See the trailer and read his blog at www.purplestateofmind.com.