



# The Sweet Hereafter

*Russell Banks*

Download now

Read Online ➞

# The Sweet Hereafter

*Russell Banks*

## **The Sweet Hereafter** Russell Banks

When fourteen children from the small town of Sam Dent are lost in a tragic accident, its citizens are confronted with one of life's most difficult and disturbing questions: When the worst happens, whom do you blame, and how do you cope? Masterfully written, it is a large-hearted novel that brings to life a cast of unforgettable small-town characters and illuminates the mysteries and realities of love as well as grief.

## **The Sweet Hereafter Details**

Date : Published September 25th 1997 (first published 1991)

ISBN : 9780099268802

Author : Russell Banks

Format : 416 pages

Genre : Fiction, Novels, Contemporary

 [Download The Sweet Hereafter ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Sweet Hereafter ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Sweet Hereafter Russell Banks**

---

# From Reader Review The Sweet Hereafter for online ebook

## Jenny says

Huh. This book reminded me of the movie "Crash" --- it had that same feel of being a moving and at times heart squashing view of different people's lives and the way they come together to misunderstand each other. At the same time, it's very different than Crash because the central conflict or story is this bus accident and how people grapple with it.

The writing was good, and at times the words were profound and very insightful. On the whole, I liked the book and I'm glad I read it. I wouldn't read it again and I recommend it with reservation (plenty of swearing and gritty material). At the same time, I wish I could discuss it with someone.

### SPOILER ALERT:

So the dust jacket says the following: "This is a large-hearted novel whose telling is, despite all, often warm and humorous and ends in a remarkably orchestrated redemption."

The best thing I can say about the book is that the characters are so real. The four people who tell the story are very different from each other. Delores, the bus driver, I loved. The lawyer I liked too- though his angry attitude and vocation (ultra aggressive litigation lawyer) disturbed me. He was disturbing, but also very intelligent, at times entertaining, and so understandable throughout. The other two narrators I could take or leave, but the sexual details of Billy's affair and Nichole being molested- those I could've done without.

I think it's interesting that modern adult literature considers itself more honest if it talks about sex. Certainly, it can play a big role in some stories, especially ones with romance, but in this one it seemed to be a gritty accessory rather than something necessary. Maybe, after a couple centuries of people feeling they couldn't mention words like "erection" in literature, maybe now we're going to the other extreme in an effort to compensate.

To me, the story doesn't have much redemption at the end. The end was sort of a "I'll be my own individual and not give a #\$%! about what other people think" resolution. Individualism is all good and fine, and in the book the bus driver's moment of clarity that she exists independent of the others is beautiful to read, but I suppose I was hoping for the redemption and resolution of the community--- yes, one girl lying and saying that the bus driver was speeding saved the community from years of lawsuits, yes, it was satisfying to see that the lawyer didn't get to nail someone's head to the wall just to satisfy his anger (never realizing that he was tearing apart a community to do it).

But what about the big lie, incriminating the bus driver that everyone had initially felt was as much a victim as the dead and crippled children? When she left her home town and community at the end of the book, it didn't seem like she was running away from prejudice, she was leaving because she felt she didn't belong- but she didn't belong anywhere- she and the children in the bus accident were "solitaries living in a sweet hereafter... absolutely alone... and even [their] shared aloneness did not modify the simple fact of it."

The other parents we saw intimately- their lives more or less fell apart after they lost their children. And the town- the community- it comes together in the closing scene of the book- but it comes together in a fickle way, making me feel that community isn't worth much at all if it can act with such callousness and then be so transient in its opinions and feelings.

So, for me as a reader, this was not a story of redemption. But it was interesting and profound.

---

## **Tfitoby says**

### **A remarkable and remarkably simple piece of literature that spawned a remarkable movie.**

Russell Banks, Russell Banks, Russell Banks. If I write his name enough it might conjure a complete sentence from my mind, as though his name alone might rub some of his magic off on me and I could explain this novel to you. Russell Banks. It's not working.

I just read Affliction which a truly incredible movie was adapted from, adapted so well that it seemed to make the novel a non-event for me, yet I knew that Banks had something special, a skill, a voice that could create something wonderful from mere words on paper and being completely unsatisfied I plunged straight in to his other novel that was adapted in to an award winning movie, naturally. It could have been a mistake but I believe my decision was vindicated by just how urgently I devoured this one.

Told in five parts in the first person by four of the major characters in the aftermath of the tragic crash of a school bus Banks slowly creates a multi-layered understanding of the event and the way people cope with tragedy. To tell you much more than that would be to act as a spoiler and I'd hate to ruin this for you. The four people you meet are Dolores the bus driver, Billy a bereaved parent, Mitchell the big city lawyer and Nichole a child survivor. It's loosely based on true events, a school bus did crash in Texas in the late 1980s and the townsfolk went crazy with litigation.

I have seen and enjoyed the Atom Egoyan movie several times and never found it lacking in anything but in this instance the novel really does add an extra power and understanding to the film. From the opening paragraph as we meet Dolores I was hooked, the distinct voice of this chatterbox shone through loud and clear and she is the perfect set of eyes and ears to learn about the tragedy that will unfold and be retold in the following 250 pages. The distinct voice of Dolores is then added to by three more quite distinct characters and this is apparent from the opening paragraphs of each subsequent section. The most important literary trick that Banks pulls off in this novel is that at no point are you confused over which character is narrating which section AND on top of that you are led towards sympathising with each of the characters despite their conflicting emotions and intentions with a subtlety that cinema will always struggle to match.

There's only one reason for the lack of full marks in this case and that was the disappointing final section, it felt like an unnecessary addition to the story and a way to moralise at the reader rather than let them take from the story what they will. I don't like being told the answer to these problems by an author and to have one attempt to do so simply highlights the conceit of the literary fiction writer.

But don't let that stop you from reading this book or seeing the movie, both are splendid and worth your time.

---

## **Lylah says**

"Newtown" (which as well as now being synonymous with a horrible tragedy, is also the name of a sleepy, quaint 300 year old New England town a few miles from where I went to high school) got me thinking about

this book. I read it many years ago, but it affected me deeply at the time. After I saw the film (which is one of those rare adaptations that may almost eclipse the novel), I read the book and could not stop thinking about either for days. I had the book group I was running at the time read it - mostly moms and grandmas, they hated it. The novel asks, what happens to you when the worst thing in the world, something that seems unimaginable to you, becomes your reality? Are you compelled to pinpoint, quantify and assign blame? What does that do to you? Does it help you or hurt you? Does it help or harm a community? While the "worst thing in the world" in the novel differs in some significant ways from the unimaginable in Newtown, I still think this book may be timely reading for anyone currently contemplating those types of questions.

---

## **Ami says**

Four narrators describe life before and after a tragedy in their small Adirondack town. Dolores Driscoll, a straightforward woman who is the breadwinner & caretaker of her husband, was driving the school bus when it went over the cliff. Billy Ansel, a respected Vietnam veteran, local businessman, and father of two, is driving behind the bus as he waves goodbye to his children inside. Mitchell Stevens is a lawyer from New York City who comes up to try to "help" the parents of the town sue the "people with the deep pockets", in some twisted attempt to sort out his anger at life, and at having an estranged addict daughter. Lastly, Nichole Burnell is a teenage survivor of the crash, and also a survivor of sexual abuse by her father who uses her deposition (or lack thereof) to exact revenge. It is fascinating how everyone describes each other, and how their own self-portrayals are often so very at odds with their "public" faces. There is a movie based on this novel, and both are very good. However, the movie is set in Canada, while the book has local appeal. The best part of the movie, aside from the enchanting flute-heavy soundtrack, is the pied piper framework which is totally absent in the book. But the book also has a lot going for it--the depth that narration provides, and the surprising climax.

I didn't expect it at all (because it was completely different from the movie, which I watched first), but the ending takes place with Dolores once again narrating, as she did at the beginning of the novel. Almost a year has passed, and she and her husband have laid low since the accident. They decide to rejoin town life at the summer county fair, at the demolition derby. The description of the derby was gripping, and the flavor was so real and true to upstate New York, and it really brought the book together.

One thing that really bugged me was the...quality of narration, I guess you would call it? It was almost like some weird middle ground between the formality of the written word and the casualness of the spoken word, and in some places it was totally distracting & didn't work for me. And Mitchell Stephen's addict daughter is a completely unbelievable character for me. She was unbelievable in the movie, and she was unbelievable in the book, with much of the same forced dialogue. These are the reason I can only give it two, maybe two and a half stars.

---

## **Evie Hemphill says**

Couldn't put it down--an exploration of grief and how different individuals and the impacted community respond to and attempt to make sense of a terrible tragedy. Loved the way Banks tells it from four connected perspectives.

---

## **AC says**

This is a terribly moving, insightful, and masterfully written novel, the best of the several I have read by Banks -- who is a superb writer.

---

## **Connie Mayo says**

I loved the structure of this book as well as the writing.

The story is told by four different people who are in some way connected to the accident, and there are four parts or chapters, one for each, then a final chapter. What I thought was clever was that even though they are all talking in first person about the accident, the story ends up being chronological - the bus driver describing the morning of the accident up until it just starts to happen, the father who is in a car following the bus takes us through the accident and the immediate aftermath, etc.

I also thought the writing was impressive, specifically because Banks tackles really difficult emotional subjects - grief, guilt - but it seemed to me that he did it in language that was original, that avoided cliché, expected responses, trite phrases.

My only two complaints about the book were that the lawyer's story seems to just be a loose thread at the end, and I'm also not sure I believed the voice of the 14 year old, that she could be that mature and calculating. But all in all, I was really impressed.

---

## **J. Trott says**

I first read Russell Banks because I found out that he wrote the books that two great movies are based on, "The Sweet Hereafter" and "Affliction." The first of these two is an exquisite movie.

In fact, and one doesn't often hear this, especially on Goodreads, but the movie is better than the book. In the movie, directed by Atom Egoyan, the story of a school bus in a upstate NY town going into the lake is dealt with in the aftermath. Most of the children of the town are dead, and lawyers show up, talking about lawsuits. The folktale, "The Pied Piper of Hamelin" is interwoven through this story. At the end, one does not see the folktale as a metaphor, providing one to one correspondence with the characters in the story. Instead, the possible allegorical meanings of the folktale are switched, until the folktale remains as an interpretive schema, the reverberations it provides are about the sadness of losing children, and the fierceness of those who are angry for justice.

Dolores Driscoll, the bus driver, is the Pied Piper. She drove the bus that took the children to the sweet hereafter, a place she feels she herself has reached, though she survived the accident. The lawyer from the big city is the Pied Piper of Hamelin, he promises to solve a problem for the people of the town, and also, like the Piper, he is angry. His only daughter is a heroin addict who keeps hitting him up, and he keeps paying her. Billy Ansel, the one guy in town who stands up against the idea of tearing apart the town with lawsuits, is a leader. He is also destroyed after losing his own two children. Then Nicole, the only other survivor, in a

wheel chair is the crippe kid who never made it into the happy land in the hole of the mountain. She is alone, without any friends. The shots of the snow covered hillsides and the stanzas of the Pied Piper create a haunting tale about the loss of children and the impossibility of encompassing these losses. It is not a moral tale, though it resonates as a true one.

The book is good. The story is the same as the movie. It deals with sexual abuse, a topic that I have seen Banks deal with before. It is a topic that we do not deal with enough in our culture. Banks has four different narrators. There are passages where the prose rivals the title for poesy. Dolores Driscoll explains her relationship with her wheel chair bound husband, which is in the movie word for word, is one place like this. Another is when Billy Ansel, having lost his wife and twin children, makes an honest calculation of what is left and finds that he has nothing left to live for.

The folktale gave the movie a bit of hope, though it is a dark one. The ending of that story, in which the children end up in a happy place, while the town is bereft always seems a little suspicious. Isn't this just what we tell ourselves to make it okay, to make this awful story palatable for children? But there is no Pied Piper in the book, and all the main characters do not have the glib answers that faith provides. The children are gone. The hereafter is sweet precisely because it is after here, and here is punctured by loss.

---

### **Andrew Smith says**

This book taught me more about how to write than almost any other book I've read. The last chapter is a remarkable tour de force.

---

### **Tory says**

This one seemed to have a lot of potential. The idea was good. The story was... good. Or it could have been.

I hated the way it was written. I didn't like this fellows style at all. None of the characters came off as especially likeable, or real, or endearing, or brave... or anything. There was nothing stand out of the four people in the town chosen to narrate. Their story was sad, something stand out in itself. And perhaps that was meant to be the meat, that was meant to be all that stood out. But I don't think so.

I think it was meant to be the coping with the sad story, and the stories of the survivors.

I thought that it was written in a dumbed down style that I didn't approve of.

---

### **Elizabeth says**

The goodreads blurb for this says: "Atom Egoyan's Oscar-nominated The Sweet Hereafter is a good movie, remarkably faithful to the spirit of Russell Banks's novel of the same name, but Banks's book is twice as good." It has been a while since I read the book or saw the movie, but I'd say this assessment is kind of backwards. Banks's book is good, but the movie is a masterpiece. I should revisit both soon.

---

## K says

I meant to pick up "The Reading Group" for a light change of pace after "Nickel and Dimed," but I had to take Naava to the pediatrician who often discusses literary fiction with me (he reads a lot of the same books I do, but in Hebrew translation) and I was embarrassed to come in with a fluff book. What can I tell you; we all indulge our vanity where we can. Meanwhile, after a 1.5 hour wait in the waiting room I'm too into the book to put it down now. "The Reading Group" will have to wait.

Update -- Ok, I finished it. Wow. Very interesting and provocative, if somewhat tragic and depressing. Great for a book club. It reminded me of "Seven Types of Ambiguity" with its multiple unreliable narrators. I was impressed with many things about this book. First, I thought the author really captured the "voices" of his different narrators in a very authentic way -- they were really all different people, as opposed to books like "My Sister's Keeper" where they all sounded the same. Second, I was particularly impressed with the chapter that was written from the point of view of the ambulance chasing lawyer. The author actually made you second-guess whether an ambulance chaser could possibly have a morally upright, or at least sympathetic, motive. He did a wonderful job of making the ambulance chasing lawyer both sleazy and sympathetic, a truly complex character, as opposed to being all one or the other, or worse, unrealistically switching between the two. In general, the writing was excellent and I thought this was a wonderful exploration of both the aftermath of a tragedy and the limits of perspective.

---

## K.D. Absolutely says

When is lying acceptable? Or even an act of heroism? Banks answers: when it is for the common good.

Writing-wise, there is nothing special in this book. The prose is simple, readable and sometimes even boring. There are a few meaningful verses but none that can be gleamed as original or hits you really hard. However, what's lacking in verse is adequately augmented by the thought-provoking questions that this book opens to the reader and in the end, offers answers as well.

When is an accident an accident? If the criminal is well-liked, does the community have the right not to push charges? Do lawyers really mean it when they say that "you have to file a case because it can also happen to other people" or they are just after their commission? If you made a wrong choice in marrying someone, do you have the right to commit adultery? If you are a sex abuse victim, do you have the right to remain silent? How do you comfort yourself if you caused the death of many people especially if they are innocent children?

This is a story of a quiet, laid-back town in Upstate New York. One January morning, a school bus tumbled down in a sandpit full of cold icy water. Aboard the school bus were 44 schoolchildren. Fourteen of those at the back, wearing their seat belts, drowned. The driver, **Dolores Driscoll**, a late middle-age black woman survives. Among those children who also survived was **Nichole Burnell** and she was just sitting right at the back of Dolores and she now claims that she was looking at the speedometer when the accident happened.

The story is told by 4 narrators: (1) Dolores Driscoll tells what happened in that tragic morning including the family background of the 14 dead schoolchildren; (2) **Billy Ansel**, an ex-Vietnam soldier who is



currently running an auto repair. He is a single father of twins who also perished in the accident. He was driving his pickup following the school bus quite closely but he was daydreaming about having sex with one of the victim's mother who he is having an illicit affair with; (3) **Mitchell Stephens** is the New York negligence lawyer. He is one of the many lawyers who rushed out to the town in order to convince the families of the victims to file mass lawsuit; and (4) Nicole Burnell who is a local teenage beauty. She survives the accident but her lower body becomes paralyzed.

According to Wiki, Banks based this on a true story that happened in Alton, Texas in 1989. A Coca-Cola truck hit a Mission school bus. 21 schoolchildren drowned and 49 were injured. The families of the victims filed a mass lawsuit due to the instigation of the many different lawyers. "Many think that the money received from the lawsuits only brought the town trouble," Wiki ends.

Easy to read. I finished this in one day. Yet the many moral questions that the book leaves the reader will stay and linger in one's mind for many years to come.

*Thank you, 501 for recommending this book to me.*

---

## **Fabian says**

The conclusion gives us an incredibly powerful image to end this, an almost impossible tale to tell. The awful tragedy in itself is not committed to the page, but the aftereffects are clear, the emotions are not hinted at but fully disclosed. I don't know if I was very much convinced that there are four DISTINCT characters, since they are so alike. I feel like a great bulk of the book was not told, not actually given to us the way it was supposed to: like evading a grand central question. Yeah, there is relief that there was no courtroom scene (the sole detriment to a classic like *Native Son* for instance), and that we were spared a gruesome scene of a multiple accidental infanticide. But where is the gamble? "The Sweet Hereafter" is so preoccupied with the entire township that when the reader's & the individual narrator's ethics are questioned, the collective thought wins out & everything becomes impersonal. I think this was a very difficult book to put together, though the approach of penetrating a group emotion by seeing the world through one of the four protagonist's mind seems a tad ineffective as it tries to be personal.

---

## **Bill says**

I've been meaning to read Russell Banks for a very long time. *Affliction* had been on my Goodreads to-read list since I joined in 2008. As I had snubbed it time and time again, I ultimately removed it from my list. Then, after recently listening to Nancy Pearl's *That Stack of Books* podcast, my interest was renewed with her enthusiasm for *The Sweet Hereafter*. I loved that movie. I still can't help but hear Sarah Polley's haunting version of the Tragically Hip's *Courage* whenever it's brought up. So, given what The Hip's Gord Downie is going through right now, and indeed his *Courage*, I decided that this would be the next book to read.

Well, look up there. Three measly stars. :|

I really thought I was going to love this, and for a lot of it I liked it a lot. But I had a few problems with it. Well, just one. But we'll get to that in a bit.

First the good points.

This is a story about a small upstate New York town and the aftermath of a terrible school bus accident. The story is told in five parts, each from a different person's perspective. Great structure.

The story line is very good, the dialogue excellent, the resolution pretty good.

I guess have a problem with Banks. More so, it could be I just have a problem with what is known as the "literary novel". The Sweet Hereafter is written in the first person through each of these perspectives. These people are small town blue collar types, but what comes out in the narrative is more reflective of the writer's writing chops rather than what a normal person's thoughts would sound like. If that makes sense.

Mind you, Nichole's narrative was simplified somewhat to resemble the thoughts of a 14 year old. Still, I found it odd that the school bus driver and garage owner had rather highbrow (in my opinion) turns of phrase.

Adding to this, some musings that either made no sense at all to me, or simply rang untrue, or more simply me getting annoyed at a writer's pretentiousness. Or me being stupid.

For example:

A character is reflecting on the time he and his wife forgot their daughter at the grocery store:

*The thought made me tremble with rage. And because I could not blame my wife or son for what Jessica was enduring, I had to blame myself alone, and because, as Lydia had said, I could not blame myself alone, I blamed love.*

Yes, love! Love is why you forgot your child at the store! How enlightened this observance is. 0\_0 Does this make sense to anyone?

Another:

A character talks about his estranged drug addicted daughter:

*I've told my story - it's a compulsion I guess - to friends and strangers and even to shrinks, all of whom feel sorry for me, if you can believe that, which is a way of feeling sorry for themselves, I've learned.*

Wow, clever observance. But no. NO. Really, Russell, how do you figure that?

Hey, maybe I'm just missing these curve balls and striking out. AKA I may be just too stupid for Mr Banks. But I do know what I like, and that's reading a narrative that, when musings on the human conditions are brought out, I am nodding in agreement. Not shaking my head and wondering if I read that right, over and over again. I'm not one to argue with success (okay, I am, but it seemed a nice way to start this sentence), and Russell Banks is clearly a successful storyteller, but I prefer philosophical musings on the layman's level. Give me Stephen King any day. At least he doesn't try to baffle you with bullshit.

I've harped on this much too long for what it was. It really didn't detract from my enjoyment of the story as a whole, and many of you may find the whole thing brilliant. I liked it, mostly for bringing the excellent movie into my head at a fuller level.

Oh, except for this!

(view spoiler)

Unfortunately I don't think I'll read Banks again. But I'm glad I did, to satisfy my curiosity, and at the cost of only a few days.

---

## Paul Bryant says

Recipe for Russell Bank's Sweet Hereafter

### Ingredients required

17 dead teenagers and little kids  
2 living teenagers  
1 bus  
1 bus driver (female)  
1 river  
1 road  
Twenty-five large scoops of ice and snow  
Four bags of bad weather (can be found at most supermarkets)  
1 small town  
Approx 35 parents  
Reporters (a handful will do)  
2 lawyers  
1 oz morality  
10 oz sentimentality  
1 box soapflakes  
4 boxes Kleenex

### Method

Sprinkle the ice and snow on the road. Tilt the road 25 degrees, with the edge of the road close to the edge of the river (this is called the banks). Add the teenagers and the driver to the bus and leave for 20 minutes. Set the bus at the top of the slope which by now should be fairly well covered in ice and snow. (If you have any strong wind, you can introduce that to taste). Allow the bus to roll backwards into the river. Stir. Wait for the bus and the teenagers to settle.

Add the morality, the sentimentality and the soapflakes. Beat with wooden spoon for a while.

Now add parents and lawyers to the mix. Wait for them to settle. This may take a while.

---

## Alessandro Pontorno says

Russell Banks è un eccellente scrittore e questo "Il dolce domani" -pur senza brillare- conferma appieno le sue qualità.

Al di là dei tragici eventi narrati in questo romanzo a più voci, la riflessione che a mio avviso emerge con maggiore forza è la peculiarità della vita, dei comportamenti, del senso di comunità e giustizia di coloro che scelgono di vivere ai margini della società moderna così come noi la conosciamo.

Piccoli paesi in cui tutti si conoscono e nei quali i rari turisti sono visti con sospetto, comunità che vivono costantemente sotto la minaccia di condizioni climatiche proibitive, uomini e donne che scelgono di vivere le loro vite con riservata dignità, di affrontare le difficoltà chiusi nel loro dolore, sprezzanti nei confronti delle offerte d'aiuto dei forestieri che semplicemente non hanno le chiavi per entrare in un mondo radicalmente

differente.

Ci si aspetta un racconto pieno di sdegno e di disperate grida di protesta per la tragica scomparsa di molti bambini (e quindi del futuro) di una comunità, si assapora un finale da tesissimo *legal thriller*, e invece ci si trova tra le mani un libro che ha il carattere degli uomini di montagna: fiero, diffidente, solido come una quercia, e molto poco disposto a mettere in piazza il proprio dolore.

---

### **Buggy says**

This book blew me away with its beautiful writing, many layers of story and the credible tension that Russell Banks was able to create out of such a simple premise, in fact it almost reads like a mystery. Banks writes in such a way that he opens up the small town of Sam Dent and deposits you right in the middle of it leaving you feeling as if you personally know all the characters or might have once lived there yourself. It is also an interesting character study and from my experience realistic in the way each person here deals differently with grief; Some self-destruct while others find new strength, all want to lay blame somewhere and everyone in this once innocent town is irreversibly changed. Banks manages to show all sides of these ordinary characters, even the negative and because this was written from 4 different perspectives almost anyone will be able to find a piece of themselves in one of them. Ultimately it will leave you looking at yourself and those around you differently because every town has its secrets.

As I said the story is simple; One snowy morning a school bus goes off the road and into the frozen waters of a small American town, 14 children are lost in the accident and its citizens are confronted with life's most disturbing question when the worst happens who do you blame and how do you cope? We then enter surviving school bus driver Deloris Driscoll's head as she recalls the morning of the accident and introduces us to the town and its members while making stops along the bus route.

We then switch to widower and war veteran Billy Ansel who is following the bus on his way to work, his story is heartbreaking and full of secrets. The narration then turns to New York lawyer and pariah Mitchell Stevens who has come to Sam Dent like all the other lawyers and media to try and make a buck off the tragedy, surprisingly I really enjoyed his view as you can't always judge a book (lawyer) by its cover. We also hear from 14 year old Nicole Burnell, who before the accident was a cheerleader and the town princess and is now confined to a wheelchair, her part in the story shocked me.

I highly recommend this and hope to now see if the movie can live up to this amazing book.

---

### **Georgiana says**

"Cand li se naruie visele, unii oameni devin superstitiosi din nevoia de a gasi o explicatie la ce li s-a intamplat"

---

### **Joseph says**

Whenever I read this book, I find myself wishing I'd read it before seeing the movie. No matter how hard I try, I find that I just can't shake those visuals, and I'd like to try to read the book on its own terms.

Having said that, I love both the book and the movie, for reasons I'm not sure I can explain. The movie was actually one of the first DVDs I ever bought, at a time when DVDs were still kind of magical, and I watched it backwards and forwards. I listened to the commentary tracks; I watched the documentaries. Nowadays, who has time for that kind of investment in a flimsy plastic disc?

But the book. Four different narrators, each distinct and fully realized. The back of the book describes it as a "morality play," but the book lacks the obviousness suggested by such a label. Morality, of course, is an issue in the book, but it's not presented in stark right-or-wrong terms. My judgements of each of the characters changes with each read. Is Mitchell Stephens a crusader or a lawyer? Is Nicholl courageous or naive? Is Billy capable of seeing the world clearly, or are his decisions invalidated by the grief which has destroyed him?

All in all, it's a lovely book, translated into an equally lovely movie. I can't recommend either highly enough, and I wish I could find the eloquence to explain why.

---