Hollywood in Review

Part 2 of 2: A Review of The Good Lie
with Darrell L. Bock and Naima Lett
Release Date: April 2015
Darrell Bock: Well, let's turn our attention to the one movie we did wanna talk about, and before we – one of the dangers of talking about a film is you could spoil it for people who haven't seen it. And I want to start here, because in my view, this is a good movie. It's very different than what Hollywood normally does.

Naima Lett: That's true.

Darrell Bock: But it's a very good, well-done movie. It has not done very well in the box office, which is, I think, disappointing in many ways. And I'm not sure why that is.

Naima Lett: I think it's a marketing thing. I'm not sure that it was marketed in a way that we actually understood what the movie was about, because when I first saw it, I've got to be honest – right, 'cause you know I'm honest at this point. All y'all know I'm candid. That's why I'm here. When I first saw it, it almost looked like a Blind Side 2 kind of deal, where –

Darrell Bock: Yes. Well, that was certainly how it was promoted.

Naima Lett: And with it being a vehicle for Reese Witherspoon, Academy Award winner Reese Witherspoon. And from an African American standpoint particularly, we get a little nervous. You almost hold your breath and go, "Okay, is this going to be another one of those 'We're going to save the Africans' kind of like –" and what does that do? And so there was a bit of a pause, and I even know, in my own conversations with educated black folk, it was kinda like a "Oh, no." Like, "Is this gonna be what it's gonna be?" So they missed an entire kind of population –

Darrell Bock: Audience.

Naima Lett: – audience in the way that it was marketed. The story is not a Reese Witherspoon story.

Darrell Bock: No, not at all.

Naima Lett: It is not, and so when I went, I was surprised. But I mean, I'm bawling through the film. I mean, I was so caught off guard. It is an emotional and moving experience.
Darrell Bock

Exactly correct.

Naima Lett

To me it is what filmmaking is about. Now, is it the most excellent film that I've ever seen? Give or take. It is a good film and is a moving film and is a well-made film with a great story. And I want to see that, and I want my friends to see that. So I think the – I'm not sure if they knew exactly how to market it.

Darrell Bock

That's a very interesting observation.

Naima Lett

Does that make sense?

Darrell Bock

Yeah. Again, I'm back to this conversation I had with the screenwriter about this movie, and what I said to her was, "You've promoted it as kind of about the Lost Boys of the Sudan." That's what I saw coming in. I said, "But this really is a film about immigration and a cross-cultural experience in spades."

Naima Lett

Yes.

Darrell Bock

What is it to actually change worlds, to have your life lived in one environment with one set of reality all around you all the time, and all of a sudden be thrust into another environment –

Naima Lett

Completely different environment.

Darrell Bock

– for which you have not been prepared at all? And the scene where they're trying to figure out what a telephone is. I mean, it's so vividly portrayed what it is to be in a cross-cultural environment and what that person goes through who is – I think it has a location, but they're completely dislocated.

Naima Lett

Ooh, that's good. Exactly. Exactly.
Darrell Bock: And so you watch this happen and you go, "Whoa." And so I said to her, "I think there's a whole immigration line to this movie about the portrayal of what immigration means for the immigrant, that was totally missing in any of the promotion." And I said, "That seems to me to be a second line that would be very, very valuable." I tell anyone who thinks about what does it mean for someone to come to America out of a cultural context that's completely different than the modern Western world. Boy, do you see that very clearly portrayed. Subtly – it's not in your face. It's just such a part of the story that you can't miss it.

Naima Lett: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. And it is about family and heritage, and I was fascinated and exuberant that they included how much lineage – how important that is in African and then for us –

Darrell Bock: It's a Roots experience.

Naima Lett: It really is. Their identity was shaped around their heritage, and they never lost that. And that formed their worldview in addition to them having such this strong kind of faith line running, because the boys had so – they were just –

Darrell Bock: It was all they had to hold on to.

Naima Lett: It was all they had to hold on to, and it was so prevalent. So yeah, I think it is disappointing as well 'cause, literally, I'm not sure if it even stayed in the theater in L.A. for more than three weeks, because when I went to go see it, it had moved. Like, the only theater that it was left playing was, like, in Torrance, which was like 45 minutes away. I literally had to –

Darrell Bock: You had to take your passport to go to the movies.

Naima Lett: Oh, my goodness. It took me an hour and a half. I said 45 because, of course, it's a 45-minute drive without –

Darrell Bock: Yeah, L.A.'s the place where 500,000 people are going to the same place you are. That's right.
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Naima Lett  So it took me an hour and a half to get there. But it was worth every second, because it completely caught me off guard in terms of my expectation based on what I had seen in terms of the marketing. So I wish that – and they still have time. It is definitely able to do some different things, but I do wish – 'cause it does make a difference in the theater how well it does or doesn't do. So I wish it had done a little bit better.

Darrell Bock  Yeah, I mean, this is one where I'm hoping that the life that it has after its release in the theaters is of a different sort than – and that can sometimes happen – than the situation in the theater, because I think it's a powerful story. It's powerfully told. It's got a lot of interesting values. It deals with what it means to be a war orphan in a very powerful way. It deals with the – I don't know what other word to use – the arbitrariness of how some people manage to get out and other people don't, and it plays with that theme pretty effectively. And part of the reason I think that story is told is to raise the question about how generous should we be, about how we provide opportunity for people, that kind of thing. It's raising those kinds of questions. So it really is, from that standpoint, I think, a pretty interesting film, and it's well shot, well written.

Naima Lett  That's what I said; it's well made.

Darrell Bock  The pace – I mean, when I say it's not standard Hollywood fare, the thing that struck me in watching it is, there were times when I felt like – and I should have realized this, looking at who the director was. It struck me at points as being more like a European character-study film than a Hollywood film, which Americans generally don't process so well.

Naima Lett  That's true. That's true. But the filmmaker is not American.

Darrell Bock  That's right.

Naima Lett  The filmmaker is Canadian, and his first film kind of – into the American – I mean, he was nominated for an Academy Award for Foreign Language Film with that one. But it was similar to this in that regard, and you're right. What you were picking up on is the European sensibilities and a different way of telling the story.

Darrell Bock  Yeah, that you tell the story by really developing characters.
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**Naima Lett**  The characters.

**Darrell Bock**  Yeah, and it's not the action and it's not the music and it's not everything that goes around the story. The story is really the story in those movies.

**Naima Lett**  But that's why I really got involved in it, because it was story.

**Darrell Bock**  Oh, it pulls you right in.

**Naima Lett**  I was reading an article about Emmanuel Jal, who played Paul, the younger of the boys.

**Darrell Bock**  The guy who gets caught up into drugs when he comes to the States.

**Naima Lett**  Yes. And he actually is a Sudanese refugee/survivor, and he was a child soldier. So of course – but here's what he said, and the reason why I'm bringing this up is because we were talking about story. In this particular article when he was interviewed, he said, "I believe in sharing stories. When you share stories, they create a beam of light that can be shown in darkness and the evil fades away." We're African. We like to tell stories. Coming to the Western world, working in Hollywood films, I think it's just another form of storytelling. Right?

**Darrell Bock**  Yeah.

**Naima Lett**  I connected with this film because it was a well-told story.

**Darrell Bock**  Yeah, absolutely.

**Naima Lett**  But that's what we're – the reason why I was in the program here at Dallas Seminary with media and the arts is to develop and understand story. What we do in ministry on a weekly basis is we are working with story.

**Darrell Bock**  Yeah, that's where we're expounding. Expounding "the" story.
"The" story, that's right. What we're doing in Hollywood is working with story. If we can as a Christian community – and as our fellow brothers and sisters and seminarians and all of us that have been called to tell "the" story, if we understand the power of story, then we literally – I believe God uses that to transform our world. I don't know that it is possible, and I guess anything's possible, but I don't know that it's possible to go sit through this film and completely not – just completely walk away unfazed at all. If you go on the journey of the story, you will come out in some way. You will be touched in some capacity.

Oh, yeah. Because it's operating at so many different levels. I mean, there's the scene early on – and, again, I'm sorry for getting into the story too much.

Spoiler alert. [Laughs]

Yeah. [Laughs] But there's the scene –

Go see it, go see it.

– early on where the kids are going through, trying to just simply survive and avoid being killed, and that's portrayed very, very powerfully, very, very vividly, completely different kind of scenario, and trying to – how do they survive when they walk into a job and they're just trying to figure out what a grocery store is, what a metal plant is, the different places where they've managed to be placed for jobs without really having much qualification to do what they're doing other than the generosity of the people who worked to get them placed?

I mean, the film is a constant exercise in finding locations and places where you feel very much displaced. And from that standpoint, it's dealing with the human tendency to try and survive as best one can on the basis of a very limited toolbox that they can bring for coping with what it is that they're facing, because they're constantly adjusting to all the new stuff that they're having to experience.

Can we talk about the title?

Yeah, absolutely.
Because I think the title scares Christians away.

Yeah, okay.

The Good Lie. What good Christian [laughs] wants to go see a film called The Good Lie?

Yeah, and unfortunately – I think that's a good point. It's a good point about The Good Lie. Of course, in the midst of the film, they explain where the expression comes from, out of Mark Twain, and there's this – it would almost be the way to say it is, there's an irony here. That's really what the film is about –

That's what it's saying, yeah.

– is there's an irony here that what you have at the surface is not really what's going on at the depth.

Underneath, mm-hmm.

And so as strange as it sounds, the phrase "the good lie" is actually – when you see the story, it is a good metaphor for what's going on.

For what is going on in the story.

But it's so capable of being misunderstood –

Misunderstood.

– at the initial level that you go, "Why?"

Yeah. So I think if we look at and deconstruct so many different barriers that could come to getting the film to the actual audience who would love the film, I think there were some barriers in the way.

So you've got an ethnic barrier; you've got a foreign barrier; you've got a style movie barrier; you've got a title barrier. [Laughs]
Naima Lett  Yeah, the title barrier.

Darrell Bock  Beating the movie to death.

Naima Lett  It is what it is. But it's sad because I do believe that it is a film that we as a faith family would really be able to identify with, and, again, it surprised me. So at the first moment when I started bawling, it wasn't even like a – you know, like the one tear comes down. I mean, I'm in the theater, like, ugly-cry bawling, and I'm like, "Pull it together."

Darrell Bock  No, I didn't get through the film either.

Naima Lett  You know, like, "Pull it together." I'm thinking to myself, "Pull it together, Naima, pull it together." But I am bawling, and I'm like – and then I'm surprised that I'm bawling, because it came up. It came up, and then it was just like, "Whoa, what just happened?"

But it's an incredibly human experience, and as fellow human beings, it is so – it's hard to watch the wages of war and not feel the impact of it, particularly when it affects our children. And if there's any feeling for children whatsoever in that depth – if we're free enough, meaning we're, in and of ourselves, free enough to experience and go on that journey – but that wasn't the first time. It happened several times during the film, and maybe I'm just a little bit more touchy. I mean, we are artists. We're a bit more touchy than others. I'm not saying that you're going to go and cry through the whole movie. But several times that happened where it caught me by surprise and then I'm bawling. And I think one – not to spoil it, but when one of the events happened, the scripture that came to my mind was "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

Darrell Bock  Okay, I know exactly what scene you're talking about. Go ahead.

Naima Lett  And that scripture was embodied, and it was – that's love. That is God's – that's the Gospel. What just happened right there, that's the Gospel. And I'm bawling. One, at what had happened; and then, two, at the sheer understanding of this is what God was willing to do, this is what Jesus was willing to do: give his life in exchange for us, for me. And I just wept.
So I think the movie in and of itself – I hope that some of the clout can push it along, and particularly during awards season, because there are some surprises that come up. I mean, truthfully, the Academy is still just 6,000 people, so it's still a very small community of people that's actually deciding. So depending on their Academy campaign and how much resources they have – because a lot of people don't know that, either. Academy movies are usually won by the amount of resources you have for your Academy Award campaign to those 6,000 people. So depending on whatever resources the studio has left, if they are able to get it into the hands of the people who could genuinely have those experiences, then I think it'll have another life after.

**Darrell Bock**

It'll have another life, yeah.

**Naima Lett**

Because there are several films that have life after the awards season because they did so well during the awards season. And because the director is already an Academy Award nominee for his first film, then that could add to it. And of course, with Reese and Ron Howard and all of those, it could. It could possibly add to it, so we'll see. We'll see. But needless to say, I am telling my friends, after that experience, because my husband, he's like, "Well, how was it?" and I'm like [dramatizes sobbing sounds and incoherent verbalizing].

**Darrell Bock**

And in your – it wasn't that it was that bad.

**Naima Lett**

No. I was wonderfully surprised by this, and it's really made like an independent film. You're right, it's not made with the huge kind of glitz and glam. It's made as a character journey in the life of these boys and their sister and – man.

**Darrell Bock**

Well, it's an interesting film, and it certainly is revealing – and I think you're right, it has tons of hurdles. Actually, one of the questions I was gonna ask you you've already alluded to, and that is – one of the things that is difficult for this movie is it's about a subject that most Americans don't think about at all, which is it's about a war in Africa, and Africans coming to the United States. I mean, that's a formula for box-office success. [Laughter]
So here was the question – you did allude to this – is that for African Americans to watch this film, what is that like? I mean, is that a dimension of the way some segments of our community would respond to the film?

*Naima Lett*  One, I think that – well, oh, that's loaded.

*Darrell Bock*  Yeah, that's why I –

*Naima Lett*  That's loaded. There's such division between, lots of times, Africans and African Americans, that sometimes there is – it takes a lot to get us on the same page. So would it be a scenario where, if the filmmakers decided to market it to African Americans off the bat, African Americans would go, "Oh, we need to see this film about our African brothers and sisters"? That might be a hurdle, but that's just because we still have a long way to go in terms of reconciliation in our own communities.

But I think what I believe actually does work is the highlight of the – I'll go back to what I originally said – heritage. The parts of our stories that are common and that mean the most to us – if those are highlighted, we wanna see that film, because I don't know any one of my friends that is not pouring into their children heritage and who isn't willing and-or excited about a film that pushes forth the importance of heritage. That is a value in our community, and one that we are grieved about when it is not present.

So we will go back and tie a lot of the disparity and a lot of the things that are still kind of reeling out of control – we can tie a lot of that to heritage and not knowing who you are and not knowing that you have some value and some place in society when we don't have that knowledge. I mean, it's just a free-for-all.

But this particular story, heritage is so important to the family and how they identify one another. Even when they are trying to get back together again, the reason why they know who they are is because of heritage and the act of heritage, and that is crucial in my family. It's crucial in the lives of my peers, and we all relate to that.
The reason why The Cosby Show was number one in the nation when it was on television for almost eight seasons – the reason why is because, one, it was universal enough that everybody could relate; but two, there was so much heritage poured into those 22 minutes – at the time it was 24; now it's 22, 'cause we got more commercials.

*Darrell Bock* There you go. [Laughter]

*Naima Lett* But there was so much heritage packed into those 24 minutes. And we as African Americans celebrated it because Cosby celebrated our heroes in such a way that brought them out of the shadows into the light. So you're looking at living legends that a lot of people would never know. And it just did something for you. It does something for you. And I'm not saying that there's pride or anything – that's not it at all. It's just, this is how we are, and we haven't –

*Darrell Bock* It's affirmation.

*Naima Lett* It's affirmation, yes. So to answer your question – that is a loaded question, but the way that I can go to it or to answer it has more to do with, if they had highlighted the heritage piece, because that is a core value in our community, I believe there would've been – there could be – more of a common ground of being able to share that, because that's core whether you're African or African American. That is just the core of who we are. We want to know who we are, and our heritage means a lot to us.

*Darrell Bock* Well, as you can tell, there's a lot about this film. It's hard to talk about a film without being able to tell the story.

*Naima Lett* I know, I know.
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But anyway. But this is a film that, if you get the chance to see it, I think without a blink of an eye I would say do take advantage of it. It's one of those films where you not only feel for what the people are going through, but you actually learn something, in watching the film, about a certain kind of experience that people have gone through, many people have gone through. It is based – and I think this is important to say. It is based on a true set of experiences that many people had. They went to a lot of trouble to get actors who came out of the context and heritage that is being portrayed. So this was done with a lot of thought, and I think you see that. It's not your normal thing. If you go to the movies primarily to be entertained and to escape, it's not an escape movie. You're escaping nothing if you go see this.


Darrell Bock | But it is a film that will make you reflect on how people should treat one another. And so from that standpoint it's very, very valuable. Well, Naima, I thank you again for coming in and talking with us –

Naima Lett | You are welcome.

Darrell Bock | – about kind of the latest of what's going on in faith and film, and we'll be keeping at this, apparently. I think you've been hired on. And keep us posted. We trust that your doctoral studies goes well and that you can hit the stop button, that means you've ended, and hit the go button. [Laughs]

Naima Lett | The go button – Absolutely. Absolutely. So we're pressing to May. That is the speculated graduation date, so, prayerfully, May of 2015 I will be walking across that – or doing cartwheels. If you turn on the recording and you see [laughs] –

Darrell Bock | That whoosh that you feel. [Laughs]

Naima Lett | And you see somebody, like, do a cartwheel across the stage, that might be me. I just got to figure out a way to keep the hat on.

Darrell Bock | Yeah, I wouldn't worry about it. [Laughs] Just let it go.
Naima Lett

Just let it go. I love it. I love it. But thank you so much for having me again. I love being able to dialogue, and this is always good, and what you guys are doing here with the podcast and with the center, we applaud and say "Great job." Thank you.

Darrell Bock

Well, thank you. Well, thank you again. I really appreciate it, and we thank you for being a part of The Table, and we look forward to having you back with us again.