

## Finding Our Own *White Bird* - Movie Review

Kathy Winings  
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A film still from "*White Bird*" (courtesy Lionsgate).

If you are a parent, a grandparent, or have taught school, you may have heard of or witnessed instances of bullying.



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Society has experienced its fair share of bullies for decades. Recent statistics show that one out of four students, ages 9-17, or 20-22%, have experienced some form of bullying. Generally, more boys than girls have been bullied. One out of five "tweens" (ages 9-12) have experienced cyberbullying and 46% of bullied students have reported the bullying to adults in the school.

Bullying can be verbal, physical, emotional or a combination of these forms. The reasons for bullying are equally widespread from physical disabilities to racial/ethnic, religious or economic differences. Such statistics have challenged school boards to look for effective ways of dealing with this significant problem. This has led to programs emphasizing conflict resolution and kindness initiatives.

While there have been books and films on the topic, a new film, "[White Bird](#)", released this autumn, takes a unique vantage point of bullying. The film takes up where the 2017 film "[Wonder](#)" ended. What makes it unique is that instead of looking at bullying from the victim's viewpoint, it looks at the bully.

"Wonder" presented the story of 10-year-old August "Auggie" Pullman, a young boy with a facial deformity that marked him as a target for the class bully. The twist is that instead of following Auggie, it follows the bully after his expulsion from the one school and now beginning life in a new school where he does not know a soul. No longer the center of attention, Julian Albans (Bryce Gheisar) is anxious to put the expulsion behind him and quietly fit in with his new surroundings.

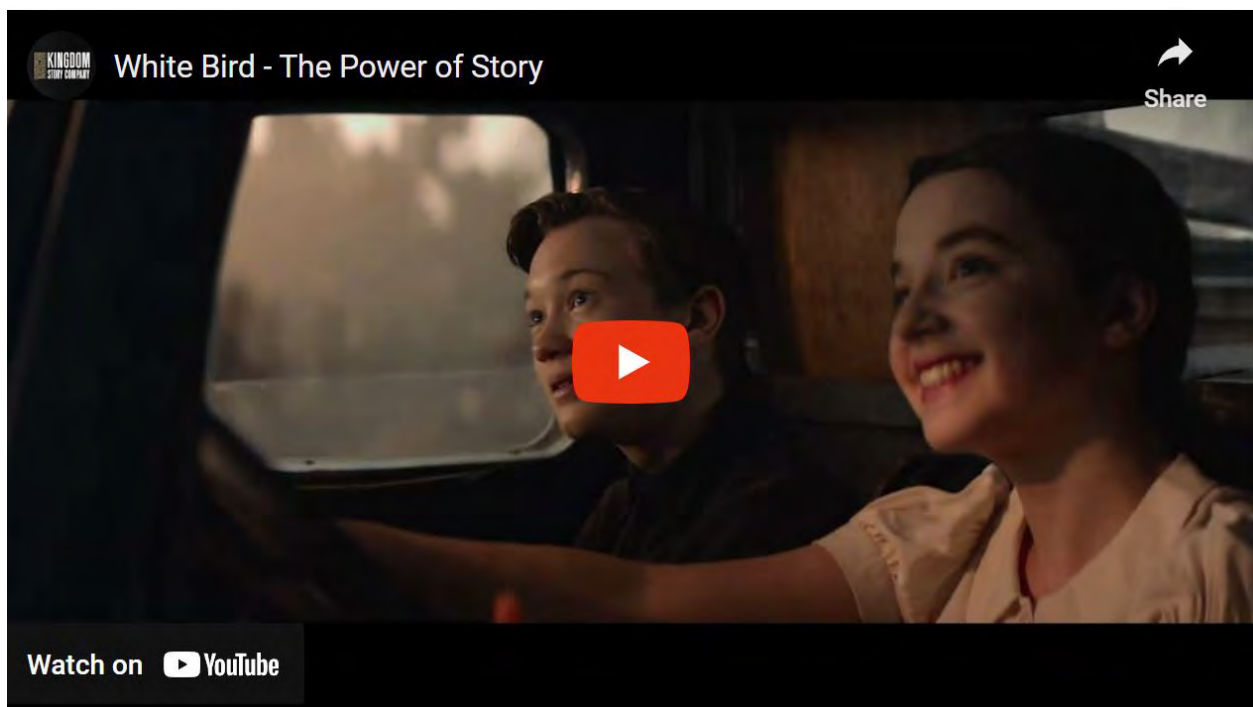
On his first day at school, he finds himself sitting alone during lunch, hoping to become invisible, wanting just to fit in with the right people when a young girl befriends him, welcoming him to the school and inviting him to a club meeting later in the week. Another student walks by, stops to greet Julian and promptly lets him know that he can introduce Julian to the "right" sort of people who can help him fit in. He further lets Julian know that it is a kiss of death socially to sit at this table and to be seen talking to a certain group of students. Julian immediately feels trapped. On the one hand, he wants to desperately fit in. But on the other, he doesn't want to commit the same mistake twice.

When he got home after his first day in the new school, it was evident to his grandmother, Sara Blum (Helen Mirren), that it was a tough day for her grandson. When Julian tells Sara about the challenges of transferring to a new school, she promptly reminds him that it wasn't a simple transfer, but he had been

expelled for bullying a fellow student and that he needed to come to terms with that essential point. She then decides that the best way to help her grandson understand how horrible bullying can be and how kindness is the better path is to share her story about living in occupied France as a young Jewish girl. The film then goes back in time as she recounts her story.

The movie then traces the pivotal year that dramatically changed her life. The year in which she was separated from her family and friends and had to go into hiding because of her Jewish heritage. She paints for her grandson the different levels of bullying and ill-treatment that she witnessed and experienced. The first experience of bullying that she witnessed was that of the class bullies who mistreated a fellow student with a paralyzed leg from a congenital case of polio on a seemingly daily basis. Painfully, she admitted that she had not spoken up for him or offered to help him.

She then begins recounting her own painful experience of bullying at the hands of the Gestapo and the class bullies. She talks about the day that the Gestapo came to round up all of the Jewish students, but that through the quick action and kindness of the Monsignor who was the school's principal, Sara was spirited out of the school. Unfortunately, she was spotted running away. She successfully eludes the soldiers, hiding in an unused section of the school - the sewer tunnels.



*The official trailer for "White Bird" (courtesy Lionsgate).*

That is where she runs into the disabled student who she did not speak up to help when he was being bullied. This was the second major act of kindness that would end up saving her life. The boy, Julien Beaumier (Orlando Schwerdt), guided her through the sewer system and led her to his family's farm. This became her home for the next year. It is not lost on Sara that her life has been saved by the boy who was the outcast, "the other", the one who was the brunt of bullying and the same person she did not herself come forward to protect.

We see Sara's heart change. Her awareness of what is important in life, her outlook on those who are "other" and her realization that kindness overcomes the pain of hatred and ill-treatment. Through it all is Sara's sadness over the fate of her parents. Not knowing what happened to them, she comes to assume that either they were taken to the camps or that they are now dead.

What comforts her during these moments of sadness, though, is the sight of a small white bird who Sara has come to believe is the spirit of her mother, there to guide and comfort her. Ultimately the real world invades the peace and calm that Sara and Julien have created. For the sake of not spoiling the ending, suffice it to say, the next year of Sara's refuge continues but the circumstances are greatly altered.

Through it all, Sara is hoping that her young grandson understands the inner meaning of her testimony. Having seen the harshest form of bullying, she desperately wants to see his heart profoundly changed so that he can be more like his namesake - Julien - and live a life of kindness and giving back to people.

As mentioned in the beginning, while the film is set in Vichy France with World War II as the context and backdrop, it is about so much more. The war fades into the background as we are challenged to look closely at how we treat "the other," examining our ability or inability to love and respect those who are different from us and the role simple kindness can play in creating a better world. This film could be set in any modern context and any time period as this has been a recurring issue and challenge for humanity.

The value of this film is that it makes the problem and issue of bullying stand out in stark relief. The multiple levels of hatred, intolerance, distrust, love and respect for the other are both subtle and obvious so that the viewer is challenged to develop insights that one can apply in their own context. The fact that the two main characters of the film are young teens, with one named after the other, makes the story more poignant.

Powerful and highly relevant questions are raised: How do we treat those with disabilities? Why do we fear those with different religious beliefs and habits? What responsibility do we have when we witness injustice and ill treatment of another? What are our children and youth learning from their parents and significant adults in their lives? How can we end the hatred, name calling and labels that divide us? How can we become better human beings?

This relatively young cast did a superb job of bringing these important issues to life and in presenting a meaningful conversation. The film was particularly creative in its interplay with the earlier movie, "Wonder." Moving from the original victim, Auggie, to the victimizer who is now the outcast in "White Bird" worked well in generating strong insight. It also made me want to go back to R.J. Palacio's books from which both movies were adapted.

At the end of the day, the final word by Sara, now a wiser woman, inspires and motivates us when she concludes that, "Hope will carry us home." I hope that "White Bird" will carry each one of us to a home of beauty, love and respect.

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### ["White Bird"](#)

Director: Marc Forster

Running time: 121 minutes

Currently in theaters and soon available for streaming

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