

The Greater Belief of *The Book of Eli*

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Some movies are perfect to sit back and lose yourself in for 90 minutes. Some make you laugh; others make you cry. And some movies make you stop and think about how you live your life and all of the good in it without even trying. That contemplation could be conscious where you spend hours contemplating how you could improve things or it could be subconscious, coming in the form of dreams or other forms of revelation. In the case of *The Book of Eli*, you realize that the power of personal convictions and faith in something greater than yourself is different for everyone and it could apply to anyone in this world regardless of whether or not they believe in a particular religion – Christian, Buddhist, Judaism, Muslim, Wiccan or even atheism. The movie shows that by putting your faith in something is better than in nothing at all.

*The Book of Eli* is a post-apocalyptic movie that is considered a sci-fi drama (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011). It shows how people are attempting to survive in this world and the setting helps set the tone that shows that people can find something to believe in even if the world around them is chaotic and unforgiving. The opening scene of *The Book of Eli* is one that is filled with blood and dead people, indicating that a fight has taken place. The location is a forest and as we pan over the scene, we see someone in a breathing mask getting set to shoot a hairless cat. The lighting is such that the viewer cannot tell if it is day or night and there is something falling from the sky, presumably ash (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). Something has clearly happened to set the dark tone of the movie. The man in the mask is Eli and food is obviously scarce enough that he has resorted to eating cat. We see him walk through a desolate landscape to an old abandoned house where he settles in for the night. Because there is no dialogue in the first ten minutes of the movie, the viewer is drawn in and has to wonder why Eli is alone and what has happened. Is he the only person left alive? What keeps him going?

As the story unfolds, we learn that Eli is on a path (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010) although it is later in the movie where the path is revealed to the viewer. He repeats to himself numerous times that he must stay on the path, especially during a scene where he watches a group of biker-type survivors rape and kill a woman (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). We also see Eli with a book, one that he takes care to protect at all costs, handling reverently. When he enters a town run by a man named Carnegie to get some water, we discover that the book is an integral part of the story: it is a symbol of greater belief, one good and the other nefarious (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011). To Eli, it represents the reason for his quest and his path. To Carnegie, it represents the tool he needs to become the most powerful man on what is left of Earth (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). Eli's path, his belief in something greater than himself, eventually leads him to Alcatraz where an archivist is gathering what is left of the world's greatest treasures. The fact that Eli has memorized the Bible word for word and is able to recite it to the archivist shows his dedication and belief in something greater than himself.

What is really interesting about this book and the conflict it sets up between Eli and Carnegie is the way the scenes with the book have been edited (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011). The book represents Eli's greater belief to take it west at all costs. The viewer learns that the book is the only remaining copy of the Bible that Carnegies has been searching for. We also learn that Eli reads it every day and is a faithful man. However, this is minor compared to the larger plot surrounding the book. The book is actually written in Braille, something we do not learn until Carnegies finally obtains the book from Eli towards the end of the movie (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). Every scene in the movie that we see Eli reading from the book is edited in such a way that we do not realize he is moving his fingers to read. This editing helps keep the mystery of the book intact and makes the story more interesting.

The hero and villain in *The Book of Eli* are played by Denzel Washington and Gary Oldman respectively. Both are well known actors in the movie industry and we have seen them in some of the most dramatic roles available. Gary Oldman is known to younger fans of his work as Sirius Black in the Harry Potter films and as Commissioner Gordon in the Batman films (*Full cast and credits for "The Book of Eli."*, 2010). Denzel Washington is known for movies such as *John Q* and *Man on Fire*, both dramas where he has played a strong man of means. In this regard, Denzel Washington could be considered a way a personality actor because his characters are all very similar and potentially represent the type of man Denzel is himself (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011). Gary Oldman portrays a wide range of styles, from comedy to drama to horror, making him versatile with star potential (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011).

In *The Book of Eli*, both actors bring to life the conflict of a post-apocalyptic world and are supported by a cast that includes names such as Mila Kunis – whose character Solara takes up Eli's mantle of greater belief in something at the end of the movie – Jennifer Beals, Micheal Gambon (also of Harry Potter fame) and an uncredited Malcolm McDowell as the archivist (*Full cast and credits for "The Book of Eli."*, 2010). Even though Denzel Washington is playing a character that is very similar to previous roles, he brings the quiet, private Eli to life, showing the viewer that is a gentle man who is strong in his convictions but does not allow himself to be bullied, as we see in the scene where a group of muggers attempt to attack him only to lose their own lives in this rough society (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). He is a realistic and believable character who is not afraid to do what he needs to in order to survive, such as looting the bodies for items that he can trade for water or food. What is amazing about his portrayal and really brings home the concept of having a greater belief is that the viewer discovers that Eli is

blind (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010) through the revelation that the book Carnegie has fought so hard to get is in Braille.

The editing and cinematography styles used to tell the story in *The Book of Eli* is straightforward with numerous close up and a panning shots. However, the viewer who watches this movie for a second time will notice things about Eli indicating that his blind that are not apparent right away in the first viewing. This is actually a common aspect in movies by The Hughes Brothers, who are known for filming movies with a dark undertone, such as Johnny Depp's *From Hell*, another movie that reveals things about the characters in subsequent viewings that the viewer may not catch right away (*Full cast and credits for "The Book of Eli."*, 2010). In the scene where Eli spends the night and enjoys his feast of cat, you notice that he bumps into a table. While this may seem innocent enough in the first viewing as he is attempting to cover his face from something he smells, it makes more sense in the second viewing (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). Another telltale scene is the mugging scene. Before Eli defends himself, he steps backwards underneath an overpass, presumably to use his sense of hearing to hear his attacker (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010).

When you combine the cinematography, the editing and the soundtrack together with the fact that Eli is blind, the viewer is able to understand why his journey is so much more than a simple trip to get a book to an archive. The soundtrack to *The Book of Eli* swells with the movie, uplifting the viewer as needed to help tell Eli's story as well as providing clues to the fact that he is blind. As the viewer watches the movie, they can tell by certain sections of the music that get slightly more pronounced indication that Eli is using his other senses to help him reach his goal (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2010). In addition to the musical score, the viewer will notice other things that are pertinent to portray the hardship in this post-apocalyptic world in the sound

effects (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011). A good example takes us back to the opening scene of the movie. The forest is eerily quiet, the only sounds that are heard being that of the cat meowing as it moves (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). You do not hear leaves crunching under the cat's feet, which helps establish that ash is falling from the sky quieting the cat's steps.

Another scene where the sound effects are very pertinent to the story is the scene in the house where Eli spends the night (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). When Eli wakes in the morning, he turns his face to the sun and in the background the viewer hears the noise locusts make. This is a realistic sound that is believable in this story considering locusts and cicadas hibernate underground and could easily withstand the devastation brought on by a nuclear event such as the one portrayed in this movie (Goodykoontz & Jacobs, 2011). It is a sound that symbolizes hope that anyone can survive this type of world if they believe in themselves and in something that will make the world a better place to live in.

*The Book of Eli* covers two topics that are important in today's society: the threat and devastation of a nuclear war; and the fanaticism of religion. Even though the Cold War is over, there is still the threat that a nuclear war or even a nuclear event that could devastate the world could happen. We are constantly hearing about countries that are developing their own nuclear armaments or about a nuclear power plant that has had a meltdown, such as the Fukushima plant in Japan. The movie brings home the devastation and hardship that comes with a nuclear event. We see people struggling to survive, people who are blinded by 'the flash' (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010) – Eli in particular – and people who have been scarred by radiation or burns (once again, Eli). The movie makes the viewer stop and think about how they would react in a case such as this and if they could find something greater themselves to believe in.

The movie also shows hope. As we see Eli move through the desolation of what is presumably the southwest United States towards San Francisco and Alcatraz, we see the landscape change, going from a barren wasteland where there is little to no living vegetation to rolling hills that have recovered and are green again (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). These rolling hills are symbolic of Eli's path that is greater than himself, showing that he is almost at the end of his quest and his belief guided him to someplace better where a rebuilding could occur (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010).

*The Book of Eli*, unfortunately, shows what fanatical beliefs can do, as in the case of Carnegie. Carnegie wants the book for "its words (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010)" in an effort to bind the people to him, to follow him, and to bring together other survivors under his control. He knows that the book has power and in this way it brings to light what a fanatical belief in any religion can do in a negative way. Carnegie wants to use the book for his own gain whereas Eli, a man who believed in God, sees it as something that must be taken somewhere to be used for good or simply as a record of what the world once was (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010).

The book, as we know it is the Bible, is blamed for the nuclear war/event in the movie and all of them were destroyed, Eli's being the only one remaining (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). History is filled with religious wars of all types, and this movie shows just how far things could potentially be taken if another powerful religious war was to happen.

*The Book of Eli* is a movie that explores how a person's greater belief in something can help them accomplish anything they set their minds and hearts to even if the conditions surrounding it seem impossible. It shows that a person's faith does not have to be religious. Eli believed that he was given the task to take the book, the Bible, west, although he truly didn't

understand what he would find when he arrived at his destination. He simply believed that this was what he was meant to do (Zanuck & The Hughes Brothers, 2010). The movie is a symbol of hope and that the human spirit is greater than anything that is thrown at it as long as a person simply believes in something bigger than themselves, religious or otherwise.

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